Neighbors - with Benefits

by TheQueensBlade

Summary

Aida Trevelyen loved everything about her new condo in a sleek modern high rise - except, the walls were awfully thin - especially the wall between her bedroom - and Cullen Rutherford's next door.

Author's note: This fic starts out grounded in reality (and smut) and then ROCKETS into telenovelas crazy-pants territory (and smut) - but every word of it is pure Cullen X Trevelyen OTP mega-ship.
(Early chapters will be set up and then I promise I will put you on the first plane to Cullen Smutville, population: YOU)
Aida followed the realtor into the third condo she was being shown today, sensing she was testing the woman's patience now. The first unit presented to her faced a busy boulevard and was only four floors up. The second residence had windows overlooking the parking lot of the building next door. Aida held her breath as the realtor unlocked the third unit.

"I think you'll love this space. It will cost you more than the other two units as it's much bigger - but wait till you see the view."

The two women entered the light and airy space and Aida gasped. This condo had a perfect view of the snow-capped Frostbacks nearby.

"Oh Maker. I could spend the rest of my life painting those mountains."

"Miss Trevelyan, are you an artist? I admit we don't get many creative types in this building, It's been my experience that bohemians live on the east side of town."

Aida ignored the condescension in her remark, getting lost in the details of the grand mountain and the subtle colors of the sky. She thought of her inspirations - Monet and Cezanne - and how they could paint the same subjects over and over again. Her sometimes erratic schedule at the hospital meant she could paint these peaks at sunrise, midday, at sunset.

"I'm a healer mage at Haven General, in the ER. Part of my reason to wanting to move into this building was to be closer to work. But now you have given me a new reason. I'll take it!"

The realtor clapped her hands together merrily. "That was the easiest sale I've made all month! Shall I show you around?"

"That won't be necessary. When can I move in?"
"Tomorrow, if you wish!"

Aida took a deep, relaxed breath in what was to be her new living room.

"Can I step outside for a bit?"

The realtor's phone buzzed from inside her purse and she gave her a gesture telling her it was fine as she turned to answer the call.

Aida slid the patio door open, stepping onto her new balcony. The air was crisp and refreshing and she stretched her arms out in pleasure. The balcony was big, she could entertain a handful of friends out here too. She smiled to herself, hoping this condo was the start of a new life - one without her family dictating what she should do, a sanctuary from her stressful work at the hospital - and most importantly, a place where she could paint.

An amiable Woof! broke her reverie. She looked to her left and saw a big, sweet Mabari panting at her, his two paws on the ledge of the balcony next door.

"Well hello to you too! I'm going to be your new neighbor!"

He opened his mouth in a wide smile, panting with enthusiasm. The gap between her balcony and her neighbors was all of a foot wide, she could easily walk up to the dog and scratch him behind the ears. She looked at the balcony the dog stood on - there was one comfortable patio chair and a potted
plant but nothing else.

"And what's your name, hmm?"

She checked the name tag around his neck. "Barkley? That's cute, if not a little obvious. I hope you don't bark too much."

The dog slobbered all over her hand, until he heard something behind him. With trained obedience, he turned to go back inside.

Aida left the balcony and went to go wash her hand in the kitchen sink. The realtor had finished up her call just in time.

"Who lives next door, do you know? They have a sweet dog."

The woman's eyes lit up and a coy smile curled on her lips.

"Are you married Miss Trevelyan?"

"I don't see what that has to do with my question?"

"Only that your next door neighbor is - notably handsome. Ex-military I think, by the way he holds himself..."

Aida raised an eyebrow at this remark. "No kids though, right? I'd prefer a little more silence than havoc. I get plenty of that at work."

"No kids, no wife - or husband - and he seems to keep to himself. I've not seen him since I sold him the unit. Shall we sign the papers? I can put the keys in your hands before you leave today."

She followed the realtor to the door, listening to her prattle on about the fully-equipped gym on the bottom floor and the pool on the roof. They stepped out into the small nave and for the first time Aida realized how close her neighbor's door was to hers. The realtor seemed to read her mind and gave her another sly smile.

"Yes, I know. Hopefully you won't be coming and going at the same time of course - unless you wanted to bump into him."

Aida looked at the peep hole in the door, getting the distinct feeling her neighbor was right behind that door, peering at her. A few thoughts skipped through her head in succession.

He's handsome huh?
Doesn't matter. He better not be crazy. Or nosy.
He better be quiet.

No drama. I don't need it.

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Three days later Aida moved in, marveling how her furniture fit into this new space, as though she were destined to live here. She set up her easel on the balcony, with a side table where she could rest her palette and her ashtray.

Aida was in the middle of putting her clothes away when she realized something crucial about her new condo she had not noticed during her walk-through the other day.
She could hear *him* next door.

It wasn't that he had a heavy footstep necessarily - it was that the walls seemed particularly thin. Aida stopped hanging up her nurse scrubs and listened to her mystery neighbor. Maker's breath, she could even hear him clearing his throat. She was spending how much on this place and it seemed like the walls were made out of paper?

Aida headed toward the wall that she shared with the unit next door and tilted her head closer to it. She could hear him opening a drawer and closing it, and the sound of Barkley's claws on the hardwood floors as he followed his owner around. She sat down on the bed with a huff, knowing she'd feel self-conscious about this for a while. Is he going to snore too? She flopped back on the bed and then heard the creak of *his* bed springs. Were they going to also be sleeping right next to each other? *Incredible.*

She pouted to herself, wondering if she should just get it over with and go introduce herself to Barkley's owner. It would be the friendly thing to do, right? She shook her head. No, never mind. She didn't want to come off as the chatty neighbor to be avoided type. *We'll meet when we meet and that's it.*

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Cullen came home at midnight, exhausted. It was not easy work, being on the Mayor's security team, not while the city lay under constant threat of another violent terrorist attack. His black suit jacket thrown over his shoulder, Cullen approached his front door and paused - his new neighbor had put out a doormat, now sitting at an angle next to his. He looked down at the object with curiosity. It had three letters on it: *SUP.* It made him smile to himself, even as tired as he was.

He unlocked his front door and headed straight for the bathroom for a hot shower, after which he would pop an Ambien or two or three and drift off to sleep, nightmare-free, if he was lucky. Tomorrow he had the day to himself, he could sit on the patio and read and relax with Barkley and stare out at the mountains - not the most thrilling Saturday, but he looked forward to it.

The pills worked - Cullen awoke 10 hours later, feeling refreshed. He stretched and got up, walking through the living room in his boxers, whistling for Barkley. He was surprised the dog had not tried to rouse him hours earlier to get his food bowl refilled. Cullen dropped some kibble into his dish and then spotted the Mabari sitting in the morning sun on the patio, a content look on his face. He was big and smart enough to know how to nudge open the patio door when he wanted a little fresh air, so Cullen was not surprised to see him out there. He pulled the door open wider and stepped out onto his balcony -

"Hey Barks, what's -"

A SHRIEK of surprise interrupted him.

"Oh, you startled me!"

Cullen took his first look at his new neighbor. She was wearing a paint-stained men's shirt, a size too big for her with the sleeves rolled up, her bare brown legs showing underneath. Her long black hair was braided behind her and she held an artist's palette in one hand and a large paintbrush in the other. Despite his shock he absorbed the other details about her - the two chocolate-brown pools of her eyes, the graceful arc of her upper lip, the way her chest rose and fell as she tried to catch her breath and especially the two points of her erect nipples standing out against the cotton fabric.
He was staring.

Then he remembered, he was in nothing but his underwear!

He watched her observant eyes sweep over his body before she swallowed and cleared her throat, putting down her brush and paints. She stepped to the edge of her balcony, hand extended.

"I'm Aida, I - well, obviously, I live next door."

He took a few steps forward but then paused, half turning to go back inside.

"I should go put a shirt on."

Aida made a sound almost like a disappointed squeak.

"No, you - you needn't. Not that, I don't want you to put on a shirt, I, I - oh shut UP, Aida. Please just come shake my hand now that I've utterly ruined the moment."

Cullen gave her a crooked smile, and held out his hand across the small gap between their balconies.

"Cullen Rutherford. Unit 1201."
"Aida Trevelyan, 1202. Very nice to meet you."

Her small hand disappeared into his, but she had a good grip.

"Trevelyan. I know that name from somewhere, don't I?"

The openness that had been in her eyes a moment ago disappeared and her tone grew more veiled as she pulled her hand away.

"Don't mind me, Mr. Rutherford. I won't bother you. I'll just be painting."
"And please, don't call me that, call me Cullen."

She gave him a very small smile before turning to head back to her easel. From Cullen's viewpoint, he could not quite see what her painting looked like, and as she sat down, she tilted it away from him more so he had less of a chance to look. He ran a hand through his hair, feeling like he had blown yet another interaction with a woman. He looked down at Barkley, who was giving him a bit of a woeful look.

"Come on, boy. Let's go for a walk, hmm?"

From her stool, brush in hand, Aida called after him. "Bye Barkley, have a nice walk!"

_She likes my dog more than me. What else is new?_

Cullen walked Barkley to the dog park for some companionship. While the Mabari was chasing a tiny terrier in circles, he took out his phone and searched for Aida Trevelyan. According to a few newspaper hits, she was the fourth child of Bann Trevelyan - who had built half of Haven. No wonder her last name was familiar - it was on the side of every construction site in the city. With that sort of money he was surprised she did not live in an even nicer building. Combing her father's website, he could find no mention of her though, only her two brothers and sister, who were all board members of the multi-national company. For now, Aida remained a mystery - one with curves and soft lips and presumably softer thighs. Cullen rubbed his face, trying to get a hold of himself. _Maker, you were in her presence for all of a minute. You need to get out more, get laid - be normal._

He laughed at his own inner voice. _Yeah right, like that's going to happen._ There was nothing
normal about his past and nothing normal about his present. Most men didn't need to take double the
dose of sleeping pills to forget about the uprising in Kirkwall, nor did their hands sometime tremble
from lyrium withdrawal. Regular guys who walk up to women in bars didn't spend their days
waiting to take a bullet for the Nightingale, his shifty, always plotting boss.

Cullen knew he was the kind of man destined to be alone - his cute new neighbor was only an
impossible temptation.
Who's Meredith?

Chapter Notes

Please note: I boosted this piece from a Mature rating to Explicit, and I've added the 'non-consensual voyeurism' tag to this chapter due to what unfolds within - although it's more like non-consensual eavesdropping. If this upsets you you should consider skipping at least the ending of this chapter.

It took two weeks for Aida to regret buying unit 1202, and she found those regrets were felt strongest at night - when her neighbor on the other side of her bedroom wall was suffering the most.

He mumbled. He spoke in his sleep, sometimes it felt like he was engaged in entire conversations. He argued with a woman named Meredith and his nightmares often climaxed in something so terrible it yanked him from his sleep with a scream of terror. And then he would pace. She wished he'd pace in his living room - she could tell by the amount of steps the poor man was simply walking around his own bed. Sometimes she would hear Barkley's helpless whimpers punctuating his tortured ritual.

She didn't know what to do about it: Cullen Rutherford, a complete stranger - albeit one tall, broad-shouldered, covered in muscle, and unfairly handsome - was keeping her up at night. They had rarely crossed paths after that moment on their balconies. Their schedules were different, but anywhere from the hours of midnight until 6 am, Cullen's anxieties and traumas were keeping them both from restful slumber.

It didn't take long for the lack of sleep to catch up with Aida, professionally. One day in the ER she was not fast enough dealing with a red lyrium-addled patient and the man managed to sink his teeth into the flesh of her arm. As her boss Vivienne painstakingly pulled the tiny shards of dangerous crystal out of the wound, she chastised her a bit.

"It's very unlike you to be so - slow - Aida. I've never known you to get injured on the job - my dear, what is going on?"

"It's my new place, Doctor de Fer. I spent a veritable bloody heap of coin on the place and guess what - I can hear the guy next door almost every night, right through the damn walls. He has trouble sleeping, and it's starting to get to me, I guess."

"Well, do something about it. We can't have inattentive nurses here in the most stressful department in the hospital. Unless you want to be transferred to the maternity ward? Be around babies all the time, I know you'd love that."

Aida wrinkled her nose at the idea of cooing at fetuses and nervous mothers all day - and then winced, as Vivienne had to dig deep to pull out a nasty piece of red lyrium. "That's the last of it, thank the Maker I was available or we'd have to have you fully quarantined."

Vivienne took off her surgical mask and looked at Aida square in the eyes. "Do something about the man next door. You're an adult, he's an adult. Either just move to another unit or - have a chat with him. Maybe he doesn't even know he's having this effect on you."

Aida stammered at those last words. "H-He's not having an effect on me."
Vivienne raised an aristocratic eyebrow. "Oh he isn't? Why is it every time you say his name you blush a little?"

That night after work, Aida cajoled her best friends to come to her place for a drink. She rounded up Sera, an anesthesiologist in the ICU, and her cousin Dorian, who was Vivienne's right hand man in the ER - which is why he already knew Aida had been spoken to about the dark circles under her eyes and her diminished work performance.

The friends were deep into the last third of their third bottle of wine when Dorian was teasing her about being talked to by one of the most formidable doctors in the entire hospital.

"Dorian, stop exaggerating, she wasn't mad at me, just concerned!"

"Trust me, she'll find 10 more ways to bring up how disappointed she was in you, it's like having an extra mom - a work mom! A scary work mom. Who can fire you!"

Sera wiggled her wine glass at Aida, beckoning for a refill. "Forget about her for a second, what's the deal with Mr. Next Door Neighbor? Do you want to shag his brains out or wot?"

Aida shushed her so hard she practically spat a little. "No shut up, he'll hear. The walls are made of - nothing, apparently. I can hear him at night."

Sera did not modulate her voice further. "Can you hear him 'avin' a wank? Does it get your motor going too, yeah? So that's why you can't sleep at night! Too busy wankin' off with your neighbor!"

Sera sang a few lines of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood's theme song - "Would you be mine, could you be mine? Won't you be my neighbor?" and she and Dorian devolved into terrible, loud, childish laughter. Aida begged them, drunkenly, down on her knees, to shut up and be quiet, he could probably hear everything they were saying even though they were in the living room.

"Please. Stop. Stop it. I think I'm going to have to move. I want a corner unit, maybe a floor up. I could move to the unit above him - and take up clog-dancing."

They were guffawing about this idea when there was a stern knock at the door. Everyone froze, staring at Aida.

"Miss Trevelyan, could you and your friends please keep it down."

He filled her door frame, he was more than a head taller than her and he was all rippling lats and biceps and pecs. She heard Dorian and Sera tittering behind her in a hushed tone, and she knew right
then and there that she was going to be teased relentlessly about this man.

That initial wave of total lust she always felt taking the smallest glance at him subsided, and the indignation inside of her arose. It was his fault her boss saw her under-perform at work today.

"You know what, Rutherford of 1201, we will decidedly not keep it down. You've kept me up at night ever since I moved in here, and today, I got into trouble at work over it! I work in the ER at Haven General, Ser. When I fuck something up at work, someone could die, do you understand?"

She watched his face soften and grow thoughtful. During their first interaction, she had not told him what she did for a living.

"My boss is like - the most proper aristo Orlesian bitch too. I hate disappointing her, considering she holds the power to give me a raise or pass me over or worse yet - dump me into the maternity ward where she knows I will be bored and miserable."

Cullen dragged a hand through his hair, nervous and penitent now. "I'm sorry, Aida, I - I didn't know I was - my...insomnia, was - "

"Pardon my language but - cut the shit. That's not insomnia - it's something worse. Who's Meredith, your ex-wife or something? And it's always Kirkwall, the Gallows, the prisoners, demons - torture. I can hear every word you say out loud in your sleep. You have PTSD, Rutherford, and you need to deal with it. Let me guess - are you taking great big handfuls of Ambien at night and you have to take more and more to sleep? You're heading toward an even bigger problem than you have already - because it's a tiny step from Ambien to Oxycotin, Ser."

Dorian spoke up from behind her. "Cousin, you're being -"

"No, Dorian, he needs to hear it. Because if he doesn't deal with whatever's bothering him - I'm going to lose my job. Now, if you'll excuse us, Mister Rutherford - quiet hours in this building start at 11 PM on Saturdays, which means we have one more hour to cackle and drink and do as we like."

Aida looked over her shoulder in time to see Dorian pouring the beginning of bottle number four into Sera's wine glass - and then she was surprised to hear Sera go soft on the situation. "Go on, Aida, ask the poor bloke in for a drink. I think you've berated him enough."

Aida looked back at Cullen, who had a hand resting on her door frame, leaning a little bit, as though hearing the truth from her had winded him a bit. His sad, golden brown eyes looked right into hers and Aida felt so many things for him at once - pity, mercy, forgiveness, empathy...cut with a longing she could not explain.

"Sorry, Cullen. We'll try to keep it down. Good night."

Aida shut the door in his face.

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Cullen stood a foot behind the mayor as she gave a speech about the growing amount of homeless people appearing all over the streets of downtown Haven. He didn't listen to her speech nor did it matter if he did. There was chatter in their surveillance network that the Venatori were plotting once again, so Cullen swept his observant eyes over the small crowd and listened in his ear piece for cues from the rest of his team. For now though, Varric, Blackwall and Iron Bull were trading lascivious
remarks about a few of the female news reporters in attendance. Cullen looked for the woman they were fixated on, a leggy blonde in a tight blazer holding a microphone at the front of media pack. He thought she was merely alright, but he couldn't speak back to his coworkers.

She was no Aida, with her flashing, expressive eyes.

He had spent less than fifteen minutes in her company but he knew Aida was strong and smart, artistic and brave. He thought of her shouting out orders in the ER, staunching formidable wounds, soothing patients by placing a cool palm on their foreheads. In the days since their heated discussion - although could he even call it that considering she did all the talking - Cullen had come to obsess about his neighbor. In his attempts to not keep her up at night, he stopped his pacing and lowered the dose of his the pills that sometimes made his dreams more intense. Instead he laid there, on the other side of the wall from her, listening to her moving about her apartment. He meditated while she slept, he prayed she only had sweet dreams - all this because she had showed concern about him and it had been - decades - since any woman had inquired after his health or well-being.

The Nightingale was now taking questions from the media but Cullen continued to zone out. He was concentrating on keeping his hands from shaking. The little square patch he stuck to his left shoulder every morning to dole out the right amount of lyrium into his system was not cutting it today. He knew the adjustment of his other meds were affecting his withdrawals too - but he was determined to fight. He wanted to be the kind of man who was worthy of a woman like Aida, even if she never spoke to him again.

He was thinking about what could be on those canvases of Aida's when the mayor's press conference finally wrapped up. He followed the red-head closely, a hand on the small of her back as they negotiated their way through the crowd and toward her limo at the curb. Varric was behind the wheel already, with Bull and Blackwall in the SUV that would follow. Cullen held open the door for Leliana before sliding into the seat across from hers, with his back to Varric in the driver's seat.

"You're looking a little peaky, Cullen."
"I'm fine, you worry about the road."

Leliana texted with her chief of staff but kept a curious eye on Cullen as their conversation continued.

"You didn't say much about Blondie."
"If I had been able to, I would have said she wasn't my type. I prefer them a bit more - ah, cerebral."

Cullen heard Bull and Blackwall laughing from the other car via his ear piece.

Varric snorted - "Cerebral! That's a good one. But I know what you like, Rutherford. You like it when they don't like you. It's your favorite! Remember that girl back in the Emerald Graves, on our third tour of duty, what was her name?"

Iron Bull chimed in over the com device. "Lavellan! Oh, she hated you! Hated your guts!"

Cullen laughed, remembering the way the girl would hurl her insults at him even in the middle of battle and it was true, it only made him love her more. He lowered his voice to answer their accusations, as the Mayor took a phone call.

"Perhaps you're right, I do like it when they have spirit. But I'll say this much, boys - I don't like it when they throw themselves at you. Utterly ruins it for me."

The mayor looked right at him as he made this remark, even as she continued her phone call.
Cullen hoped Leliana had heard him. The arm squeezes, the casual invitations to dinner at pricey, darkly-lit restaurants, the late night calls about prowlers downstairs - he wasn’t into any of it.

At the next PR stop, Blackwall stayed at the mayor’s side while Cullen and and Varric stood guard outside the event. Cullen peeked in through the window of the classroom door to where Leliana was reading a storybook to some second graders in an improbable attempt to look like she was pro-teacher's union. She was wrapped up in her duties so Cullen and Varric could converse without interruption.

"I'm worried though. This girl next door, the one I told you about - she must have a boyfriend, right?"
"Don't you think he would have come for a visit by now?"
"I'm not always home when she's home. Maybe he's come and gone more than a few times."

Varric gave his friend a sideways glance. "If it upsets you this much, you should do something about it. Just talk to her, you idiot. Go tell her how you're doing because she yelled at you and you found it arousing."

Cullen clenched his jaw and steadied his hands by sweeping them down his lapels. He'd think about it.

* * * * *

Cullen wouldn’t get that chance to talk to Aida that night, but he finally found out whether Aida had a boyfriend or not.

He cleaned himself up after work, shaving carefully despite the shake in his hands, trying to look tidy and presentable. He stood on his doorstop for a while, thinking about how he'd begin the conversation with her - and then he heard her voice coming from around the corner. He turned just in time to see Aida walking hand in hand with - a man he could only describe as an insufferable hipster douchebag.

Cullen fidgeted with his keys, acting as though he were coming home himself. He shut the door before she could address him although he did get a glance at her face before he disappeared. Something in her eyes looked a little anguished, but he could not be sure. He watched her unlock her front door through his peep hole - the guy had his hand in her back pocket and was trying to kiss her as she fumbled with her keys. He noted with some satisfaction that she tilted her head away from him and wasn't exactly welcoming all of his drunk affection, but as soon as she got the door open they stumbled into her condo, arms wrapped around each other.

Cullen headed toward his room as though he were sleep-walking. He knew he shouldn't do what he was about to do. He knew it was something a former serviceman should not do, or any man with a code of honor, but he could not help himself. He laid on his bed, listening to Aida and her boyfriend next door, right on the other side of the wall.

Her moans cut right into his body and hearing them did not make him want her any less. It was sheer torture, the creak of her bed, the pauses in their lovemaking presumably to disrobe. Her breathy sighs went straight to his cock, especially as her bed began to knock against the wall in a steady rhythm. Cullen pulled off his pants and his boxers and began stroking himself, imagining it was him lying between her thighs, drawing one of her nipples into her mouth and then the other. It was him in there, gripping her behind a knee and opening her legs wide, lowering his head to find out how
sweet she tasted. Had he been the lucky man in her bed he would flick at her hot center with the tip of his tongue, drawing circles around her clit, devouring her pussy. He'd be sure make her come first before even thinking about his own pleasure. He would kiss her on the neck as she arched her back and pressed her head into the pillow as he slid into her sheath, inch by inch, making her take every bit of him - and then he'd begin to thrust, rolling his hips into hers as -

Cullen stopped in the middle of his fantasy. He heard Aida's lover cry out - and then there was silence. *That idiot bastard, he was done already?* He couldn't help himself - he laughed a deep, satisfying laugh. And then stopped abruptly - since she could probably hear that.

He kept pleasuring himself, working himself the way he wished Aida would, if she with him at the moment and with not some ungrateful twat who looked like he was in 3 different bands and writing 4 different screenplays. He imagined her astride him, biting her lip, undulating on top of his cock. He knew her hair would be silky soft, slipping through his rough fingers, her ass soft and angelic and heavenly as he gripped her flesh. He wanted to pull her closer, feel her tits against his chest, envelope her in his arms as he thrusted into her. He'd then surprise her by flipping her onto the mattress under him, pinning her down by the wrists and kissing her deeply as he rutted her hard. She'd wrap her legs around him, holding him tight, her heels digging into his lower back, panting and groaning, begging - begging him with little whispered prayers - *Please. Please Cullen.*

He squinted his eyes shut, getting closer to his release. Cullen imagined Aida looking up at him, sweat on her brow, her eyes pleading and heavy with lust as she asked him once again, "Cullen, *please* make me come."

Cullen's orgasm went rocketing through every nerve ending in his body. He came hard, still fantasizing he was deep inside her, filling her up with his seed. He dreamed he could lay his head on her bosom, and listen to her heartbeat - her racing pulse slowing down, as she pressed her sweet lips to his forehead.

He laid there, almost stunned by how powerful the pleasure had felt just thinking of her, only a few feet away. He felt wicked too, an interloper in her night with her proper boyfriend. He swore right then and there he would never do this again. If that blighted fool came over again, he would leave his apartment and go for a walk.

Although he wouldn't have to be gone for too long, Cullen remembered with a sarcastic smile.

He was cleaning himself off when he heard the sounds of Aida's boyfriend making a hasty retreat. So he was not only a quick lover, but the sort to make a quick exit too.

She did not beg him to stay though. He had something to hang on to.
Aida went to work the next day unable to mask her disappointment about how her night had gone. She knew Dorian would take one look at her and go -

"And how was your 'booty call'? How's - what's his name again?"
"Samson. You know it's Sam, don't...don't fuck with me today, I am in a shitty mood."
"Spoken like a woman who had 8 orgasms last night. Was it 8?"

Aida squinted harder at the clipboard in her hands. "Dorian. Don't make me stab you."

"Let me guess, he found a way to make you pay for dinner - what was it this time? Forget his wallet back in his apartment? Left it in a different jacket? At a different woman's house?"

Aida turned on her heel, pacing down the ER hallway back to the reception area.

"And did he order three cocktails, expensive ones too - "
"Dorian."

"Aida, I'm only picking on you because you make terrible life decisions! Why do you always keep him around? He's - dreadful."

Dorian trailed behind her to the smoking terrace, where she lit a cigarette - annoyed that he had followed her out there.

"He - believes in my art. He's supportive."
"Oh please, that costs him nothing, to say the right things and never do them."
"Dorian, he's been my - sort-of - barely - boyfriend for the last 5 years. How much more committed do we need to be?"

At this Dorian made a choking motion in the air in front of him. He then looked her in the eye.

"Guess what. I'm. Telling Sera."
Aida stood up from the bench she had been sitting on, her hands outstretched in a pleading gesture.

"Oh, Maker, no, Please. Dorian. I'll do anything. I'll take you to dinner, where do you want to go? That lovely Italian place downtown? The expensive one? We can get two bottles of wine, I promise!"

Dorian took his phone out of his pocket and began texting - ominously, before turning away and heading back into the ER.

Aida sat back down on the bench with a huff. Her friends never approved of Samson and called it "self-destructive" behavior to allow him to act as he pleased with no repercussions. But they never understood that when he felt like giving her his attention, it was amazing. He was fun to be around, he loved all the same things she did, he liked to laugh and enjoy himself - it just never went any deeper than that with him. In fact, her relationship with him was a bit of a mess. He didn't call back when he felt like it. She knew he had other girlfriends. Dorian was right about everything.

So why did she keep chasing Samson? Why keep inviting him in?

A day or two later, a deeply intoxicated Aida found herself answering that very question for a pissed off Sera, while lying on her back in her living room. "Stop yelling at me, Sera! I keep Samson
around... because I think it's what I deserve, alright? Are you happy now?"

"Of course I'm not happy, yeah? You're not happy - and don't justify being unhappy especially when it's your choice, you, you - silly bitch!"

Sera and Aida got painfully drunk that night. Aida's charges in the ER that day included a child whose parents had died in the car crash and he was the only survivor. That was the sort of thing Aida called "the hard shit", the stuff that should roll off her back as a nurse, but every suffering innocent that crossed her path did mark her. She knew she was supposed to have thick skin, but tragedy after tragedy passing under her nose - it has to touch you somewhere. Aida let Sera refill her glass that night countless times until she was numb.

Sera tip-toed out after midnight, leaving Aida passed out on her own rug, pushing a pillow under her head and covering her with a throw blanket.

She left Aida a note, stuck to her fridge door. "Be kinder to yourself, love. See you at work - xo Sera."

* * * * *

Aida woke up on the rug, utterly hung over, dry-mouthed and sweaty. Blue moonlight shone in through the patio door and she had no idea what time it was. She rolled over and looked toward the clock on the wall - 3:30 am. She had to be up in four hours, bugger and balls.

She sat up in pain, clutching her head. Why must Sera always insist on drinking the cheapest wine she could find? She was rubbing her brow when she heard the first crash - a mighty thud, followed by glass shattering. It shook the walls of her unit and put her in a state of high alert.

She scrambled to her feet - the clamor was coming from next door. Aida headed toward her bedroom, knowing the sounds would grow louder. She walked up to the wall between her room and Cullen's and spoke in a normal tone of voice - "Cullen? Are you alright?"

She peered around the corner and found him clutching the edges of the bathroom sink, the mirror in

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The crashes and thuds continued and Aida was beginning to worry he was fighting off an intruder. She picked up her cell phone, plugged in near her bed - but something made her stop. Something made her head out to the balcony and look across the small gap to his. She could not see much of his condo, only that it was dark inside. She pulled one of her patio chairs closer to the ledge and carefully crossed the gap between their property. His patio door was open and she stepped into his living room.

His unit was the mirror of hers, she was able to find the kitchen light right away. She still didn't know what the situation was, so she slid open a few drawers in his kitchen, looking for a knife.

"Cullen? Are you alright?"

She inched down the hallway - his spare bedroom was empty. She made her way to the master bedroom and inched a hand along the wall, feeling for the light. She switched it on and looked upon the wreckage of his room - it was utterly destroyed, the contents of every drawer pulled out, the mirror above his dresser shattered. It looked like the light was on in his bathroom so she stepped closer, trying to avoid the broken glass littering the floor.

"Cullen! Is everything OK?"

She peered around the corner and found him clutching the edges of the bathroom sink, the mirror in
front of him broken as well, his medicine cabinet in shambles. His knuckles were bleeding and his complexion grey. He saw her in what was left of his mirror and spun around.

"Aida - how...what are you doing here?"
"It sounded like you were fighting off four men."
"Why did you not call 911?"

Aida shook her head, unsure of the answer, looking at the kitchen knife in her hand. "I had a feeling it was - something else."

Cullen shocked her by taking two steps forward, clutching at her arms with his bloody hands. "Aida, you must help me. I need lyrium. I got hooked on it during the service and - please. I need it. I've gone too long without it. Do you have any? You're a nurse, surely, surely you must - "

Her heart broke for him, even as he pressed her against the bathroom wall, looking beyond desperate.

"Cullen, I don't - I'm sorry. And even if I had it - I'd ask you to stop for a moment and think of what you'd be giving up - what you'd be ruining - by..."

Aida looked up at him and saw him searching her face, waiting for the ax of her words to fall. "- by succumbing to your addiction."

Cullen let go of her, looking at his hands, covered in drying blood.

"Aida, please. I can pay you back, is that what this is about? I have the money - I, I - work for the Mayor's office. I can't go to work like this today. You must help me."

"Cullen, I will help you, but, I won't give you what you want."

Cullen looked at her, his face scanning hers. She could tell he gave up on the lyrium at that very moment, his resolve set again.

"Now, can I look at your cuts? If they're serious, I can drive you to the ER and - "

"No, please - I don't want to go to the hospital. My boss will find out. She knows everything and I'd rather her not know about - any of this."

Aida nodded at him, gesturing to his hands. He laid them palm up against her palms in a gentle, surrendering gesture.

"Well, you don't need stitches, but you'll need cleaning up and bandages. I have supplies back in my bathroom, I'll just - "
"You'll come back?"
"I promise."

As she passed through his living room, Barkley emerged from behind the couch from where he had been hiding. He trotted up to her, nudging her thigh with his sturdy head.

"I'll be right back, Barkley. Go stay with your master, he needs you."

She hopped back onto her patio, grabbing her spare medical kit in the bathroom. She took a quick stop in her bedroom to grab a carved wooden box off her dresser she'd had since high school and a bottle of whiskey from her bar cart. She scrambled back to his patio, but this time, he was waiting for her.
I'd rather you not do that again, it's 12 stories down."
"Nonsense, I'm fine."

Cullen took two steps forward and took the box and bottle of whiskey from her, tucking them under his arm. She was about to hop down off the ledge when he held his other hand out to her, helping her down off the ledge with a gallant gesture. Aida hid her blush as she swept past him.

"Come along. Let me clean you up, and we'll have a bit of a drink. Glasses?"

Cullen had already sat down and made a motion to stand back up again but she urged him to stay where he was with one hand on his shoulder. "Just tell me, I can figure it out."

"Cabinet near the sink, on the left."
"Where I keep them too, what a coincidence."

She put two highball glasses on the table in front of him and poured them each a little whiskey. He held his glass out to hers, a shy look on his face.

"To what or whom should we toast to?"

Aida thought for a second, her glass hovering near his.

"Well, I thought I was having a bad day but you seem to be having a worse one. So..."

She looked around the mess of his condo. The only thing that seemed untouched by everything was Barkley, panting at them both.

"To Barkley."

The smile that grew across Cullen's face made Aida think of warm spring sunshine. She clinked her glass against his before gulping down the liquor, hoping it would calm her nerves around him as she began cleaning his wounds. With her head bowed, she did not see how intently he watched her.

"How long have you been off the lyrium, Cullen."
"Two years. It hasn't gotten any easier, as you can see."
"You should be proud of two years, Mr. Rutherford."
"I am not proud. You have seen me at particularly low moment."

Aida turned one of hands over, looking at a small cut on it. He already had a bad scar on there from a previous injury. She rubbed a thumb over it before switching to bandaging his right hand.

Cullen refilled their glasses for them. Aida had another burning question on her mind. "Cullen, what happened in Kirkwall?"

He downed his drink in one go. "Rather not talk about it tonight. What's in the box?"

She finished weaving a bandage around his right hand. "A natural remedy for what's been troubling you."

Aida flipped open the lid of her box and the tell-tale smell of marijuana hit his nostrils.

"Really, Trevelyan? This is what you're going to give me instead of lyrium?"

She rolled some of the skunky herb into a nice neat joint. "People are always dismissive of the medical uses of marijuana. I think you will find it will ease some of your anxiety and perhaps help
you sleep at night."

Aida held the joint out to him, but he gestured for her to go first.

"I haven't done this since - college?"
"How nice for you, you're going to get good and high then."

She took a little hit and held it as she passed him the joint. Cullen inhaled - and inhaled - and Aida had to dart a hand out to stop him.

"Careful there, soldier. That's strong stuff, and you haven't - "

He exhaled a gigantic cloud of smoke at her, coughing hard, doubled over. Aida couldn't help it, she started snickering. "You idiot, you're going to be so baked."

She took his whiskey glass to the sink to pour him a glass of water. When she had returned, he had caught his breath. She sat down across from him, taking the J from him. His eyes were watering but his face looked more relaxed already. Aida hit the J and tilted her chair back to exhale - and then Cullen started doing something she had hoped he would do. He started giggling.

"What's so funny?"

Cullen began to laugh, hard - tears streaming from his eyes. It made her laugh too - the man barely seemed to ever smile and now here he was - guffawing!

"What! Tell me!"

She had to wait more than a few minutes for him to collect himself. While he continued laughing, she played a quick round of tug of war with Barkley, who nearly pulled her off her chair. When he finally caught his breath, he told her - "You have - I don't know what to call it - a wine mustache? Two marks here, on the corners of your lips. You just look - funny, is all."

Aida pouted at him before standing up and heading toward the kitchen, looking for a shiny surface to use as a mirror. She picked up a butter knife and rubbed the two marks off her face before returning to sit down across from him.

"Like I told you earlier, before you laughed at me for twenty straight minutes - I had a bad day too, I was - passed out on the rug, hung over, when you started flipping out in here."

Cullen's face grew serious. "I'm sorry I've disturbed you again, Aida, truly I am."
"No apologies necessary, Cullen. I'm a nurse, helping people is what I do."

Aida detected a tiny ping of disappointment at her answer but she didn't understand what she had said to generate it. Cullen tried to smoke the last bit of the joint but it had gone out. She gestured to him to pass it back to her but she dropped the lighter.

"Let me get it for you, clumsy."

Cullen bent down to look for the lighter and while he was under the table he saw a nasty gash on Aida's foot. He sat up with a gasp, almost hitting his head on the bottom of the table.

"Aida, you're bleeding!"

She stretched out her leg, looking at the cut. "Hmmph, must have stepped on some glass. I hadn't even felt it. Adrenaline rush I suppose. That and being drunk. And now stoned."
Cullen reached out a tentative hand, cupping her under the ankle.

"You must let me clean it, Aida."
She peered at her own foot again. "Oh come on, it's not that bad."

He gently placed her foot on his knee and opened up her medical kit, getting started. Now it was her turn to study him as he worked. He was too attractive, he had a heady masculine energy that filled the room. She re-lit the joint while he worked, looking at his powerful arms and shoulders. She glanced around his living room, thinking of him pulling down the bookshelves - an act of destruction, a desperate attempt to gain power over his circumstances.

Something drew her attention back to Cullen. Aida felt the lightest caress travel up her ankle, just a few inches up her leg. His eyes shot to her face, expecting her to say something.

Aida had to make a decision, right now. Make things easy? Or make things complicated?

She exhaled her smoke at a sharp angle away from her, staring into his eyes, her foot still resting on his knee - daring him to touch her again.

When she did not rebuff him, he grew bolder, sweeping the back of one of his uninjured knuckles up her shin.

"You're so soft."

Aida said nothing. His hand skimmed up farther and landed on her knee, giving it a squeeze. His eyes locked on hers and something in the air changed.

"Are you - soft all over, Aida?"

She swallowed. "Cullen. I have a boyfriend..."

His thumb made little circles on the inside of her knee and she began to feel a warm buzzing inside her.

"I know you do. I heard you with him the other night."

Aida became very aware at that very moment that she wasn't wearing a bra under her t-shirt. She licked her lips, feeling very cotton-mouthed now.

"You listened to us?"
"I didn't want to. I wanted to sleep."
"Did we keep you up?"

His hand crept up one inch, his calloused fingertips gracing across her bare thigh, making her skin burn with longing.

"No. Not for long. But then again, you should know. You were there."

His comment on Samson's stamina made her widen her eyes at him in surprise. This audacious man. He was not as quiet and broken as he appeared. Under all the brooding and battle scars and trauma was - someone with spirit.

He caressed her thigh one more time and then said something even more surprising than his previous remark.

"It's getting pretty late. I should - clean up. And you should get some rest." He gave her thigh one
last light squeeze before he put her foot down on the ground.

Aida stood up in a daze as he handed her her medical kit, exhaling as though she had been holding her breath during their exchange. "Yes, of course. I - need to be at work in. Wow, two hours."

Cullen put a hand on the little wooden box she had brought him. "No, keep it for now, use what you need. Just, keep the box safe. I've had it a long time. Keep the whiskey too. Return them when you see fit."

Aida turned to head back to his patio, but she held a hand up when he took a step forward. "I can see my way home, don't worry."

She crossed over the ledge on his patio and back to her condo, dropping the kit on her dining table and walking back to her bedroom. She paced around her bed, frustrated beyond belief. His rough fingers, sliding up her leg...

*She couldn't go to work like this.*

Aida yanked her shorts and t-shirt off and laid down on her bed, one hand tweaking a nipple, the other parting her folds and finding herself wet already. She rubbed her clit in a circle wishing she could look down and see her neighbor's golden curls between her thighs, those bourbon-warm eyes looking back up at her as she writhed and gushed under his tongue. She imagined the exquisite pleasure he would send searing through her body as he sucked her clit into his mouth, kissing it, pursing his lips against it - before changing his technique, reaching his tongue out to swipe at her pearl left to right, back and forth. As she got wetter and wetter, he'd pause for a moment to slide two fingers deep inside her.

She wanted to see that scar at the corner of his mouth tilt with a rakish grin as he told her, "Aida - you're so tight."

She moaned out loud, hoping he could hear her again next door. It made her head swim to think of him listening to her the night Samson was over. It was easy to remove Samson from that night, remove the wall between their bedrooms. She imagined Cullen between her knees, his thick cock in hand as he guided himself into her. She whimpered, thinking of him stretching her, filling her, as he grabbed her by the hips and pulled her closer, impaling her deeper.

"How's that, my Aida, do you like that?"

Aida groaned louder. In her fantasy she answered him - "You feel so good, Cullen. Give it to me. Fuck me hard." She moved her fingers faster, getting closer to her end. Aida imagined putting her hands on his muscled chest as he pushed her knees back so she was wide open to his gaze and he could see his cock diving into her, over and over - faster. Aida dug her nails into his shoulders, making him hiss and furrow his brow - but still he did not slow his hips. He drove her into the mattress, making the bed rock beneath them, the sound of his balls smacking against her ass filling the air. She dangled on the edge of her release, until the Cullen in her dream lowered his head to draw a nipple into his warm, wet mouth.

Aida's orgasm burst and spread all over her, warm honey filling her veins.

She said one word out loud to herself, touching the sweat on her brow. "Fuck."
Aida stood in the shower, letting the hot water wash away the long day. She tried to not think about Samson in the living room, pawing through her little wine fridge, helping himself to one of the bottles she was saving. Maybe earlier in their relationship, she'd stomp out there and tell him that if he was going to open one, he'd have to replace it - but she knew there was no chastising a man like him, or trying to teach him anything. She knew he was only a taker. He had been waiting on her doorstop when she got home, smoking a cigarette, lean and confident and seductive, his long black hair falling across his eyes. How could she say no, after he grabbed her for a deep, long kiss followed by his whispering in her ear "Aida, I miss you"?

Aida sighed, finishing her shower and drying off. It didn't matter. She'd never be able to tell him no. She heard Dorian's teasing voice in her mind. "What would he have to do to get you to permanently dump him? Commit war atrocities?"

She headed out to the living room in a bathrobe. The first thing she saw was not Samson with his boots up on her coffee table, but what was sitting on the dining table - her carved wooden box she kept her weed in, and a new bottle of her favorite whiskey, a small bow tied around its neck. She walked up to the objects and reached a hand out to feel the soft velvet of the blue ribbon. Samson looked over his shoulder at her - suspicion in his eyes.

"Guy next door brought that stuff over."
"Did he - say anything?"
"Just that he was returning your things and thank you. He left before I could ask him why he had my girlfriend's weed stash."

Aida's fingers skimmed the intricate design on the box's lid. "I'm...not your girlfriend."

She looked up at him and he was turned toward her, an expression of blank shock on his face.

"I'm sorry, excuse me?"

Aida shook off his reaction and headed for the wine bottle he had opened, waiting for her on the kitchen counter.

"I've had dinner with your parents how many times now, and each time you introduced me as 'an old friend' and once, your 'best friend' - which somehow, is more offensive than not being called your girlfriend at all. Best friend insinuates a level of emotional intimacy you are incapable of."

Aida poured herself a big glass of wine, steadying her hands. She had not planned on speaking her mind tonight. She figured they'd go out to dinner where she'd pay for everything, come back to her apartment for Samson's particular brand of unsophisticated love-making and then he'd leave like he always did.
"Aida, is this how you feel? That I am not... We are not...?"
"Sam, must we get into this right now? Don't you want to eat? You can pick the restaurant."
"No, I want to talk about this. You are my girlfriend."

"I am your girlfriend - tonight - yes, definitely."

She could tell by the look on his face she was not making the situation better. There was a part of her that was glad she was making him feel terrible for once, and not the other way around.

"So, what do you want to eat? Am I dressing up or down?"

He drained his wine glass, a dissatisfied sneer curling the corner of his lips. "I'm not sure I want to go out anymore. I don't like the way you've been speaking to me."

Aida snorted now, rolling her eyes. "Alright, Samson, you can go if you want. You did just show up here unannounced. I was going to stay in tonight."

She watched him try to figure out what he had done to derail his own plans for the night.

"Aida, you're being very - difficult."

For some reason, this last word felt like a spark lighting tinder.

"Samson, do you really want to know why I'm being difficult? Fine, I'll tell you. I know about you and the girl from work, the red-head. I know you're still seeing the bartender too, that tawdry, big-titted blonde who works at the dive bar. I know about that over-dramatic poet girl you met at the coffee shop. I know about the one who rides the little teal blue Vespa. I actually saw you with that one about four months ago, you were eating on the patio at Dolce Vita. She seems nice. I don't really mind her. Level-headed? Looks like an accountant? Not really your type but it's pretty obvious you don't have just one type. Now, it's getting late. If you want Mexican, we should go now, remember they close early during the week."

Samson stood up, his mouth open a little. She had landed a devastating blow.

"Aida - those...those other girls. They're - they're just friends."

"Oh, full circle. We're back to my original point! If they are just friends, then so am I, which is why I told you earlier to not call me your girlfriend. It is an incredible distortion of the truth, is it not?"

Samson looked panicked now. "I am not fucking those other women, Aida!"

Aida stepped up to him, grabbing the wine glass out of his hand, spilling some of it in the process. "Get out. You just lied right to my face. Get out. And don't call me - ever again."

He went from panic to begging faster than she expected. "Aida, please don't do this!"

"GET. OUT."

She grabbed him by the t-shirt, pulling him toward the door. Samson struggled against her now, trying to wrap her up in his arms. "Babe, please, calm down, you're just stressed out, you don't mean it -"

Aida opened her door, a hand on his chest, trying to simply push him out of her condo. She got him onto her doormat before shoving his jacket at him.
"Don't call me - for a long time, Samson. And if you feel like calling me, make sure you don't call anyone else that day."

She slammed the door hard, shaking the entire condo all over. Samson wasn't giving up though, he pounded on the door between them.

"Aida, please! Don't do this! I love you - those other chicks..."

She peered at him through the peep hole. He did look actually anguished for once. He pressed his forehead to the door, his tone low and mournful now.

"Aida, you're the only one I love. You're the only one who understands me."

Aida took a big slug of her wine, fully enjoying this now. She spoke loud enough so he could hear her through the door. "Go fuck yourself, Samson."

At this, Samson's temper took over. He banged on her door with both fists, kicking it too, making as much of a scene as he could. She'd seen him do things like this a few times before, usually when he did not get his way. Aida was about to swing open the door to tell him to leave or she'd call the cops but Cullen's door opened first. Aida's heart began pounding and she pressed herself closer to the door, watching the proceedings through the peep hole.

"Hey, can I help you, buddy?"

She watched Samson tilt his head to look up at Cullen towering over him.

"Uh, no. Just - lover's quarrel. Women, right? She's going to let me back in any second now and we're going to dinner, right Aida?"

Cullen glanced at the peep hole but Aida kept quiet. When she didn't respond Samson banged on the door again - until Cullen stepped closer, edging himself between him and the door.

"I think you should go home. Cool your heels for tonight. Call her later."

Cullen put a hand on her door, his face calm and unperturbed. Aida could not help but remember this had been the hand that skimmed up her leg. Samson looked at him, sizing him up, his previous suspicions about the man next door returning. They stood there like that, each man wondering how much he'd have to do for Aida at that moment. Samson surrendered though, slipping his jacket back on.

"Yeah, yeah sounds good. Besides, looks like I don't have much of a choice. I may have lost the battle but I shall win the war, isn't that what they say?"

She could not see Cullen's face when he answered him but she heard his words. "I was a Templar for more than 15 years. We never said anything like that."

Samson and Cullen stared at each other for a long time until Samson laughed nervously. "Right. Of course. I'll just get going now." Sam half turned toward her door, addressing her, knowing she was there on the other side.

"Good night, Aida."

The defeated look on his face made Aida feel a momentary burst of regret. There was always that part of her that was soft on Samson - but that part of her went silent when Cullen shot a smoldering glance at her peep hole. She took a step back from the door with a little gasp, returning to the kitchen.
for another glass of wine before heading out to the patio for some air.

Aida smiled to herself.

She did it. She got rid of him. She did the thing Dorian and Sera thought she could never do. She felt light and free.

Cullen's patio door slid open and she heard Barkley's claws scratching on the concrete. His owner stepped out after him. Aida did not look over at him right away, choosing to light a cigarette instead.

"Aida... Are you alright?"
"Yes, and thank you. Your well-timed entrance saved me from having to call the cops."

She glanced at him and saw him rubbing the back of his neck, his eyes fixed on the mountains in front of them. "I just want to let you know - when I'm home, you won't ever have to call the cops."

Aida approached Barkley who had his paws up on the ledge and was whimpering in her direction. "Thank you Cullen. I appreciate that." She rubbed the Mabari's velvet-soft ears as the dog looked up at her in total adoration. "You're a sweet boy, aren't you."

She looked up at Cullen who was staring at her with a little alarm - which switched to amusement after a while. "Oh, you were talking to the dog. I thought you had just called me a sweet boy."

Aida laughed, coughing on her smoke a little. "I'd hardly call you a boy, Cullen."

At this, they both stopped laughing. The next words slipped out of Aida's mouth before she could think about them. "Would you come and have a drink with me?"

"Right now?"
"Yes. We could just walk down to - what's that place on the corner?"
"O'Hara's. Doesn't seem like your kind of bar."
"A bar's a bar. Will you step out with me or not, Ser?"

Cullen put a hand up quickly, bidding her to slow down. "Can I just get my jacket first?"

* * * * *

Cullen went back into his condo, in a state of total alertness. He changed his shirt, fusssed with his hair - changed his shirt again, brushed his teeth and then stared at three different jackets. He wondered if he should call Varric, ask for some advice - what should he talk about, should I pay for her drinks, should they -

He didn't have time to panic, Aida was at his door, knocking on it in a jaunty rhythm. "Come on, Cullen, I need a drink. I want a margaritaaaaa."

Cullen opened the door and there was Aida, beaming at him. Getting rid of that loser made her glow from the inside, and now she wanted to have a drink with him.

"What were you doing? Choosing a jacket? We're just going down the street, come on."

He stood there, still holding the two jackets he had been trying to decide on. She tapped the green military jacket and took the other one from him, throwing it on the sofa nearby.
"There. I picked for you. Let's go."

Fifteen minutes later they were tucked into a booth in the Irish pub down the block from their condo, a gritty anomaly in their swanky downtown neighborhood. They had three margaritas each in the span of the next hour, when Aida suggested they "forgo the lime juice" and switch to straight tequila shots. It took Cullen aback, how hard she could drink and how easy it was for her. It felt like being with one of his friends from the Templar order - which made sense. She told him, somewhere between shot number two and number three, "The ER is like a war zone every day. Haven may tell the rest of Thedas it is a center of trade and culture but I see a different face of the city, every day."

"I understand. Where I work is not exactly a place all about justice and transparency."

Aida was about to gesture for the waitress again but Cullen let her have his shot for now. She gave him a coy, tipsy smile. "So, I'm sure every woman you talk to asks you this at some point - but, would you really take a bullet for the mayor, if you had to?"

She was right, when he did manage to get a conversation going with a woman somewhere, they did always ask him that, and he had enough experience now to know how to answer.

He looked her squarely in the eye. "Yes."

What Cullen always thought was interesting was how they responded to his answer. Aida threw her head back and laughed with a snort.

"What's so funny?"
"If you think about it, it's sort of a strange job. You - have to get shot for someone."

Cullen didn't know how to take it. Usually they either fawned over him or expressed worry for him. They never laughed right in his face. The idea of death did not seem to provoke a rush of emotions for her. By the time he was done processing this fact, he had another shot of tequila in front of him.

"Aida, I'm drunk already."
"We walked here, come on!"
"I have to go to work tomorrow."
"So do I. Everyone does. Come on, Cullen, if you want to be my friend, you have to keep up with me."

The threat of her thinking he wasn't cool hung in the air. He wasn't going to screw this up. He picked up the shot and downed it, making Aida clap her hands together like a pleased child.

"Good, good, good. I was worried about you for a second, Rutherford. You're always so serious."

Cullen lost count of how many more shots she took, but he guessed at least three. He had two more. They stumbled through the intersection at closing time, Aida leaning on his arm, the mountain wind blowing her hair back from her face and giving her cheeks a rosy glow. Then everything began to happen so fast - they were laughing hysterically in the elevator, then dashing down the hallway to their corner of the building. She was digging in her purse for her keys, growing more flustered when she couldn't find them. He was letting them into his condo, she was kicking off her boots and pulling off her jacket, she was spilling the contents of her purse all over his coffee table, he was next to her on the couch trying to help...

Then she was in his lap, straddling his thighs, hands on his shoulders, kissing him deeply. His tongue responded, weaving around hers, while he threaded his fingers through her hair at the nape of her
neck. She went from being the drunk girl from next door to a live wire in his arms, he actually felt her skin grow hotter as she rolled her hips against him. Aida pulled back, panting, her lips still against his.

"I knew you were going to be a good kisser," she groaned as she kissed him again. Cullen held on to her waist before letting his hands wander lower, to cup that curvy ass he had thought about almost every night since he saw her.

Something else was tapping at the corner of his consciousness though - that inner voice of his that was eternally honor-bound. He pulled back from her lips.

"Aida, stop, we...we shouldn't."
"We should. I want you, you want me-"

He let her kiss him a few more times because Cullen knew he was gambling here. If he rebuffed her tonight because she was drunk, she might feel ashamed about all of this later, and never want to even look at him again. He imagined her avoiding him in the hallways, taking the stairs if she saw him in the elevator, looking away from him on her balcony. But he could not violate his own code - pleasing himself to the idea of her on the other side of the wall was one thing, taking advantage of her after she drank what felt like most of a bottle of tequila was another.

"You are right - I do want you, Aida."

She tried to kiss him again but he stopped him, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"You must understand- all I do is think of you. And I know I have no right to. I know we barely know each other. But - you were so kind to me that night. Still, I will not have you this way, on the night you broke up with your boyfriend -"

"He wasn't! He wasn't my boyfriend, Cullen - that's what all of that was about!"

"Then I will not have you on the night you had to throw a man out of your condo, while you are extremely intoxicated."
"I am not! I'm not. Cullen - what if, I give you permission to fuck my brains out? Will that help?"

She listed backward, losing her balance on his lap a bit. He had to grab her to keep her from toppling over completely.

"See, look at you. You could have slipped and cracked your skull open on my coffee table."

Aida was about to pass out. He gently slid her off his lap and onto her back on the couch next to him. He got up to find a blanket for her and by the time he got back she was snoring. Cullen tucked the cashmere blanket over her as Barkley trotted closer.

"Looks like we have a guest tonight, mister. You gonna stay out here and watch her?"

He walked up and sniffed Aida's hand resting on the couch next to her before giving his master an obedient look.

"Good boy."

Cullen put a glass of water on the coffee table close enough for her to reach out touch it. He gave her one last long look. Her tight white tank top showed off the top of her tan breasts, her black hair tumbling everywhere. She was the most charismatic, appealing woman who ever let him touch her, and he turned her down tonight.
Cullen knew he would regret this, but he knew it was right.

* * * * *

Aida woke up with a start, very disoriented. It felt like she had passed out in her own living room, but the furniture was all wrong, and there was a dog breathing on her face. She sat up, a dreadful, heavy hangover spreading across her body.

There was something else to be puzzled about. She expected to wake up in a bed, naked - next to a man - a man who was currently standing over her, wearing a sharp black dress suit with skinny black tie, his blonde hair slicked back. He had two cups of coffee in his hands, one of which he placed in front of her on the table nearby.

"Aida, I'm sorry, I must get to work."
"I'm the one who should be apologizing. I - "

Aida looked at her phone, lying in the pile of stuff she had dumped out of her purse last night. There were 14 texts from Samson, and he had tried to call her 8 times, once every 30 minutes. Everything came flooding back to her in a rush, pushing Sam onto her doorstep, holding Cullen's hand as they ran through the nearby intersection - and then, the sloppy, drunk kissing.

Oh Andraste, she had made a fool of herself again.

"I didn't throw up on you, did I?"
"No, you didn't."

She looked up at him and he had only a gentle, bemused smile on his face.

"Let me just grab my stuff real quick, I don't want to hold you up, further."
"No, it's okay. You can lock the bottom lock for now, my dog walker is coming to get this guy in about an hour and he'll make sure everything's locked up tight. You take your time. Have some water, some coffee - go back to sleep if you want to - and leave when you want to leave."

Aida stood up, approaching him. "Cullen - thank you, for everything last night."

She wanted to give him a hug, but he was so much taller than her, and also standing there rather stiffly. She gave him a funny look before holding her hand out for a hand shake.

"What's this for?"
"You're too tall to hug. So hand shake it is."

Cullen took her hand, turned it and bowed over it, before giving her knuckles a little kiss. Aida shook her head in disbelief.

"No you did not just do that."
"Should I not have?"

"No, it's just - who are you, Cullen Rutherford? Where did you come from?"

He let go of her hand and gave her a crooked smile before turning to leave.

* * * * *
Aida drank the water he had left her, and the cup of coffee, looking around at his place. *He did say I could stay as long as I wanted. He didn't specifically say - don't look at my stuff.*

Aida decided to snoop.

She started in the kitchen. He had a bachelor's fridge, there were only jars of mustard and mayo, a few beers, an unopened pack of American cheese. Despite his lack of food, he kept his knives sharp.

She checked his bar cart - nice stuff. She wondered if he made cocktails for girls if they followed him up here. Aida imagined they were posher than her, women with long legs and high heels. She moved his bottle St. Germain to the side and found the whiskey she had brought over the night she helped him. He had finished it, but had kept the bottle. Seeing this made her heart flutter a little.

Aida headed for his bookshelves next, this was where she always felt she could learn the most about a man - starting with whether he owned any books to begin with. Cullen's shelves lined the living room walls and there were a few in the hallway too. He seemed to be an omnivorous reader, there was historical fiction and non-fiction, spy novels, books about the kings of Fereldan, slim volumes of poetry, tomes full of beautiful illustrations of wild flowers and birds. Her fingers swept across the spines and then came to a halt - he had a few books about art history.

Her pulse quickened again. Francis Bacon. Toulouse Lautrec. Frida Kahlo. Abstract expressionism? Georgia O'Keeffe. David Hockney. Edouard Manet. The Manet book had the most wear on the spine so she pulled it down and opened it. A picture fluttered to the floor and she had to catch up to it as it slid on his hardwood floor.

She flipped it over and the picture immediately made her smile. It was a Cullen from many, many years ago - digging a ditch somewhere in the Western Approach, with a few other soldiers. They were all giving the cameraman a rude gesture and Cullen was shirtless, his hair closely-cropped but still golden in the sun. Aida made a quick decision. She walked back to the living room and slipped the picture into her purse. She had to have it. Considering it was tucked into one book out of hundreds, he may have forgotten where he had put it.

Aida headed back down the hall to his bedroom. The man had made his bed before he left the house. Aida had never known a single man to make his own bed in the morning. She stared down at his king-sized mattress. It looked so comfortable and she was feeling tired again.

Aida began to strip. She had wanted to wake up naked in this bed - and she had just enough time for a decent nap.

* * * * *

Cullen and Varric were escorting the mayor to another photo-op when he got a strange text from his dog walker.

"*Hey bro there's a naked chick sleeping in your bed right now. Hope you know her?*"

Cullen had to bite back the smile nipping at the corners of his lips. He passed his phone to Varric in the driver's seat, who burst out laughing. Leliana shot them both a sharp look.

"And what's this about, boys?"
"Nothing, boss. Cullen thought he blew it last night with a special lady, but it looks like - "
Cullen smacked his shoulder before he could continue. When he turned around to face the Nightingale, she was looking at him with something he could only call *a quiet rage*. In the last few months while she kept one eye on that open seat in the Senate, she had kept the other on him. Cullen hoped Varric's half-remark wouldn't spur her on to more action. He only wanted to figure out how to get Aida back into his bed - he didn't need the shadowy double threats of Samson returning and his boss's hungry glances to distract him.
Cullen felt like a fish on the hook, being steadily pulled in to his doom. Leliana was declaring her intention to run for Senate, and Cullen and his security team were going to have a lot more responsibilities in the months to come. Should she win, she would gain more national prominence and need even more handling. He had never liked this job much, having to tail after this devious, power-hungry woman. Sometimes he envied his own dog walker, and his free-wheeling insouciance. Even though Aida worked in the ER, she had a bit of that spirit too. He could not imagine her ever being gloomy - or demanding - unless she couldn't get her bartender's attention. Cullen smiled to himself thinking of her slamming those tequila shot glasses down on the table between them.

"Is something funny, Cullen?"

Leliana's chief of staff, Cassandra, was squinting at him - in fact, the entire meeting had come to a halt. Cullen sat up straighter.

"Nothing at all, Seeker. Just..."

Varric cocked an eyebrow at him. Making up stories was sort of his forte and he and Cullen did not have a telepathic connection.

"...thinking about all the marvelous team work we're going to have to accomplish together to get the Nightingale to the Senate."

Iron Bull nearly choked on his bottle of water and Blackwall rolled his eyes. They were going to give him hell for that line later.

After enduring more details and demands from Leliana's chief of staff, the security team headed straight for their corner of city hall's courtyard, a tucked away area behind some potted plants where Blackwall could have a smoke and the rest of them could relax.

"Cullen, you fool, that was - the stupidest thing you have ever said to Cassandra in at least two years," Varric scoffed at him.

"I'm sorry! My mind was elsewhere."

Blackwall exhaled with a chuckle. "Girl next door, am I right?"

Iron Bull was texting someone with a lascivious smirk on his face when he added, "Cullen, you are something else. You can only meet women when they're right under your nose. Dating at work, dating the friends of your friends, dating your neighbor. You need to cast a wider net - get one of these apps."

Varric chimed in with a noise of approval while Blackwall looked thoughtful. He was a married man, he didn't need to worry about such things but apparently he still had an opinion about it. "He's right, Rutherford. These young ladies today - they're up for a bit of it and then they never want to see you again. Pretty good set up for the likes of you."

Iron Bull received a picture on his phone that made him open his eyes wide. "As an example, I've got a hot date tonight - and he's from Tevinter."
The guys all did phony coos of excitement for Bull. "I'm meeting him at the club around the corner. Guys, you should come with, have a drink, put the app on your phone - and in one swipe maybe you'll be as lucky as me tonight."

Cullen pulled a face of distaste. "That - terrible place on 23rd? The one that always has a line outside? You want me to go in there and - do what now?"

"We'll bypass the line. And you need to stop thinking so much and just walk over there. We'll let you leave - eventually." Iron Bull had a twinkle in his eye that did not make Cullen feel better. He pinched the bridge of his nose. *Andraste tests me every day.*

* * * * *

"No, Dorian, I don't want to go out tonight, I'm *not* going out tonight. I want to go home and get baked and paint until I pass out."

"That's all you've been doing since you kicked Samson to the curb. You should be out and about - swinging that ass of yours around and attracting a new mate."

Aida watched Dorian preening before his date, smoothing his mustache into place.

"You're such a fucking hipster with that thing, when are you going to get rid of it?"

"Have you gone mad, woman? It only enhances my beauty. Plus - the Qun likes it. He told me so."

Aida took a big slug of merlot out of the pint glass Dorian had given her. "It sounds like you'll be fine without me, Dorian."

Dorian spun around, grasping her by the shoulders.

"Listen, I know you call it artistic process but I call it moping. You have to occasionally go somewhere else between home and your easel, please, for the sake of being normal."

"Dorian, I have nothing to wear."

"We'll stop off at your condo and I'll be the judge of that. Now finish your juice like a big girl and let's get going."

* * * * *

Iron Bull lead Cullen and Varric down an alley to the back of The Arlessa, past the line of impatient club kids where a friend of his swung a door open and let them in. A few twists and turns through the bar's stock room and they emerged into the night club, where the pulsing lights and deafening music utterly overwhelmed Cullen.

"Varric, I won't last ten minutes!" Cullen had to lean down and yell into the dwarf's ear to be heard. "Come on, let's find a table and a waitress, you'll be fine!"

Iron Bull broke off from them, looking for his date somewhere in the morass of the dance floor. Cullen sighed, cracking his knuckles nervously as he followed Varric through the dense crowd. They managed to find a place to sit and Cullen pushed himself into the darkest corner of the booth. Varric flagged down a waitress and ordered a bottle of vodka for the table.
"You have to order a whole bottle?"
"They won't let you sit down if you don't - so this is going on your bill my friend."
"Fuck."

Now he was out a hundred bucks and for what. Varric grabbed Cullen's phone out of his blazer pocket before he could react.

"Alright, let's get you set up, loverboy."

The waitress brought them two glasses of ice for their over-priced vodka and Cullen quickly drained a glass while Varric installed an app onto his phone.

"What's it called?"
"**Inquisitr.**"
"What's that supposed to mean?"
"Who even knows. I guess GetLaidr doesn't have the same ring to it."

Cullen watched with a dull sort of acceptance as Varric set up his account in just a few clicks, uploading a picture of him posing with Barkley.

"Now we sit back and wait. Any girl in this building who likes the look of you is going to swipe on your picture and then you can meet up and take it from there. Watch and see. You don't know how charming you are, Curly."

Varric put his phone face up on the table between them. Almost immediately it buzzed - Cullen rotated the phone toward him so he could see the girl's picture. She was doing "duck lips" in her picture, she had a fake tan and too-white teeth. He spun the phone around toward Varric again so he could see.

"That's a no."
"Well, that's just the first one, don't be so impatient."

As soon as Varric poured them a second round, Cullen's phone began to buzz every thirty seconds or so, sometimes more. It was making Varric laugh harder and harder - the girls were all copies of each other: beautiful, sexually-adventurous nympha whose private messages to him were full of promising profanities about what they'd like to do to him, how **big** they knew he was, how they were ready to go - all he had to do was swipe back.

"Varric, these girls are all terrible. Is there some way I can - ah, review the ranks - and do some swiping of my own?"

Varric took the phone from him and squinted at it. "I admit I'm not totally sure I know how to use this thing, but yeah, there's gotta be a way so you can be in charge. There. Check that out. That's - every girl in this building. Shall we get to work?"

"Let's do it quickly. Because we look like two jerks in a bar using an app to hit on girls."
"Curly, that is exactly what we are."

Cullen let Varric do the swiping, giving him a terse 'no' about 25 times in a row.

"Terrible. My suspicions about being alone forever have been confirmed once again."

"Oh yeah, who's this then? It's only the famous Miss Aida Trevelyan. Well, well, Curly. She is - quite lovely actually."
Aida T.  
Haven, Fereldan.  
ER nurse at Haven General.  
34 years old.  

"Si vis amari, ama."

Cullen studied all the details of her picture on his tiny phone screen, she was in her usual over-sized men's shirt she used an artist's smock - this time, with a few tantalizing buttons undone. She looked like she was in her studio, a canvas behind her, wielding her paintbrush at the camera like it was a magic wand. She had a two swipes of black on her cheeks, like war paint.

"Does this means she's in the club with us right now?"

"It sure does. That's Latin, isn't it? I guess you weren't lying when you said you liked them cerebral."

Before Cullen could react, Varric leaned over and swiped a finger across her picture.

"What did you just do?"

"What do you think I just did?"

Panic. Sheer panic.

Cullen had sensed they had both been avoiding each other since the night Aida drunkenly crawled into his lap. Using something as - un-romantic - as a hook-up app to make contact with her again was not the way he wanted to get back into her life. He wasn't sure she wanted him anyhow, more than once they had sat on their respective balconies enjoying the view but not saying a word to each other.

"Varric. For that - I am sticking you with the bill for the vodka and I am getting out of here."

"You can't leave now! You coward! What kind of soldier sounds the retreat after a minute!"

Cullen grabbed his phone and slid out of the booth, ignoring the rest of Varric's petulant feedback. He had to get out of here. Maybe if he was lucky and she ever confronted him about this errant-swipe-of-a-finger he could say it wasn't him, or it was an accident, his phone was in his pocket? Both excuses sounded terrible but one of them would have to do.

* * * * *

Aida was sitting at the corner of the bar, watching Dorian and Iron Bull grinding on each the shamelessly on the dance floor. Dorian kept trying to flag her down to join them on but she shook her head and raised her martini glass to them. She was about to slip the bartender a twenty for a fresh cocktail when she noticed her phone inside her clutch had lit up with a notification. She pulled it out, thinking it could be an emergency text from the hospital.

It was that silly app Dorian had encouraged her to download a few days ago. The pop-up read, "You've made a match - and he's nearby!"

At first, Aida was tempted to ignore it. This was not the kind of bar where she expected to meet the kind of man she normally preferred. But maybe Dorian was right, maybe she should open herself up to some new experiences. Five years in the purgatory of a relationship with Samson - maybe she deserved a change of scenery. A guy with a yacht - or a fast car - a man who paid for dinner, or had court-side tickets for the Haven Great Bears. She knew these were shallow things but maybe tonight
she could try something - someone - different.

She opened the app and gasped. It wasn't someone different, rather someone awfully familiar to her - someone she had been having trouble not thinking about during her quieter moments at work, or as he stood on his balcony as she painted on hers, brooding at the nearby mountains.

Aida hopped off her bar stool and pushed her way onto the dance floor to Dorian's side.

"Look! Look who swiped on me!"

Dorian broke away from a sloppy Qunari kiss to look at her phone.

"Oh, Aida, how exciting!" Dorian's face fell when he realized who it was. "Never mind. I was specifically hoping it wasn't him. I've heard enough about this man!"

Bull looked over his shoulder at her screen. "Hey! I know that guy, he's Cullen, he's my boss! Wait a second, Aida... You're the neighbor aren't you?"

Aida blinked up at him in total surprise. "The...neighbor? He - has he, said something about me?"

Dorian and Aida both stared at Iron Bull as he answered. "Something? More than just a few somethings, I'd say."

Aida looked down at her phone and his picture had disappeared. Nearby dancers admonished her to get off the dance floor if she wasn't going to shake it so she made her way to the exit, finding her jacket first before stepping out into the night.

She fiddled with her phone a little more - where did his profile go? Had he deleted it only a few moments after he swiped on her?

Aida lit a cigarette and walked away from the hectic scene, trying to calm herself. Maybe she had imagined him, it had been someone else. Cullen did not look like the kind who swiped on girls. He was a reader, a thinker - someone haunted by something but remained kindhearted, gentlemanly, a soldier, a -

Aida looked across the street and there was the man himself, in the middle of the crosswalk, and walking rather fast.

"Cullen!" she yelled across the traffic, using her clearest, most commanding ER room voice. He did not look over his shoulder, but continued weaving his way through the crowds on the sidewalk.

_Oh come on, is he going to make me chase him?_

"Cullen, hey wait!"

Aida had to wait for the light to change before she could cross the street and he was getting farther and farther away. She couldn't tell where he was heading but it felt like he might be headed toward City Hall. Aida took a crafty short cut diagonally through a little park, knowing she could come swinging around a corner and right into his path.

"Hey Rutherford, where do you think you're going?"

Cullen gasped, she had really blindsided him.

"Aida, you scared the shit out of me! What are you doing in downtown Haven - dressed like that?"
Aida looked down at her clothes. Tight black dress, her big fake fur coat that made her feel like a mafia wife, high heels, her hair down and falling about her shoulders. She pulled the coat around her tighter, suddenly self-conscious.

"My cousin dragged me out tonight. Apparently he knows one of your coworkers? Big fella, with the horns?"
"So your cousin is the Vint is he?"
"Yes, and apparently I am - the neighbor. Do you talk about me at work, Cullen?"

Cullen swallowed and kept walking, at a much slower pace than before.

"Only after you helped me. And then - maybe a bit after I helped you."

They strolled side by side, next to the park that lead toward city hall.

"Where are we going?"
"I walked over to the club, left my car at work. Do you need a lift?"
"Depends. I wasn't really ready to go home quite yet. Especially since I thought someone had swiped on my picture in Inquisitr, asking for a date. But apparently I was wrong, can't find his profile anymore. He - chickened out, I guess."

Cullen kept walking, looking straight ahead. Aida put a hand on his sleeve, stopping him.

"Cullen, did you swipe on my profile?"

She could not see his face too clearly in the shadows of the park's trees. "I didn't - my friend did."

Aida hoped the hurt did not show on her face, but before she could worry about it, she felt his hand cupping her face. "I wanted to. He had to do it for me though, that's all."

She leaned forward a little, teetering on her high heels, her face tilted up toward him. "How am I supposed to know you wanted to do it if you just admitted someone else had to do it for you?"

Cullen scooped her closer with one arm under her coat, wrapping it easily around her waist, pulling her to him. She moaned a little when she felt his lips on hers, parting them, kissing her so gently she felt her knees actually wobble.

When he pulled back she was breathless in his arms. "I hope that proves it to you. So, are you hungry? Shall we get something to eat?"

"S-something to eat?" Aida stammered, still recovering.
"A moment ago you said you were expecting a date, so...shall we?" Cullen prompted her.

She smiled at him shyly, weaving her arm through his.

They meandered toward City Hall, where his car was parked in the employee lot. Cullen lead her to a black Corvette Stingray, all curves and sleek lines.

"Are you kidding me? This is your car? I've wondered who it belonged to in the garage at the condo."

Cullen opened her door for her. "Your carriage awaits."

Aida couldn't help but remember that Samson's car had been a disappointing ancient sedan from his college days that smelled constantly like a wet ashtray, with a backseat that functioned as as his laundry basket and also recycling bin. Cullen's Corvette was immaculate - and undeniably manly.
She rubbed a hand on the leather seat beneath her as he crossed around the back of the car to the driver's side. He slipped in next to her.

"So, what do you want to eat?"
"I get to pick?"

He nodded at her while he pulled on his driving gloves.
"You wear driving gloves?"

He nodded again, amused.
"Italian."

* * * * *

Aida looked at the exterior of the posh restaurant he had chosen for them. It was a place not too far from the hospital and sometimes when she walked past it on her way to get a coffee, the waiters were inside setting the elegant tables for dinner service. She had never eaten there because reservations were hard to come by - and she never took Samson there, it was a little too formal for him.

"Cullen, we can't go in here."
"And why not?"
"Pretty sure you need a reservation. And - I'm not dressed right."

Cullen handed the keys to the valet and turned to escort her inside. "You think too much, Trevelyan, and that's coming from a guy who is accused of thinking too much about twenty times a day."

Aida kept her hands in the pockets of her faux-leopard print coat and drew the collar up higher as they stepped into the restaurant. Cullen exchanged a handshake and a laugh with the maitre'd and then they were lead to a candlelit table in the corner. Cullen helped her slip off her jacket and helped her with her chair before sitting down across from her.

Aida touched the choker at her neck. It was studded, punk-style, looking a lot like a dog collar. "I really wish Dorian hadn't put me in all this nonsense."

Cullen looked at the menu while he responded with a wry smile. "Barkley will love it."

Aida picked up her menu too. "Oh, am I seeing Barkley later?"

She delighted in the flush she brought to his cheeks. He had acted so suave before on the drive over, revving the engine and taking the turns in a slightly dramatic fashion, but here he was blushing at the mere mention of what could happen tonight.

"Cullen, there are no prices on the menu, that seems like a bad sign."
"If you make one more objection to this place, I will take you to the sports bar two blocks down."
"Sorry, sorry - I'll be good. Let me pick the wine as a sign of good faith."

Cullen was nothing but a gentleman all night. He let her taste the wine when the sommelier came to the table, even though it was offered to him first. He always let her have the last bite of food if they were sharing a plate. He let her talk about herself. Aida felt a little high on the attention. When Cullen got up to go to the bathroom, she took the opportunity to pull his chair closer to hers. When he came back and sat down, he was now close enough to touch.
"Hello."
"Welcome back."

She put a hand on his knee under the table and smiled at him as the blush came back to his cheeks again.

"Are we getting another bottle of wine, Aida?"
"No, I don't want to get turned down again tonight."

Aida watched his eyes move from her lips down to the leather choker around her neck. She was now very glad to be wearing it.

"Dessert then?"
"Here? Or back at your place?"

Cullen flagged the waiter down, snapping his fingers at him to get his attention. Aida reached out to pull his arm down with a giggle. "Don't snap, Cullen! So rude."

He leaned forward, her hand still in his, seeking a kiss - but someone clearing their throat stopped the moment. Cullen's head jerked up - and his chair jerked back from hers.

"Leliana!"
"I thought I saw you crossing the restaurant, Cullen, but I couldn't be sure. You don't go out much in general, correct?"

Aida sat up straighter in the mayor's presence, tugging on her dress and smoothing her hair down. Cullen started to stand up but she signaled to him to skip the gesture.

"And who is this lovely young lady?"

Aida held her hand out to the intimidating woman with the smooth Orlesian accent. She was wearing a real fur coat, and looked as glamorous as a 1940s movie star. "Aida Trevelyan. So very pleased to meet you, Mayor."

She watched the Nightingale's face change as she heard her last name. "Oh, are you the Bann's youngest daughter? Why haven't I seen you at the country club with the other Trevelyans?"

Aida noticed the other diners were all staring at their table now. "I don't go to the club very much any more, I'm sorry."

"Well, you should. And you could bring Cullen with you. He never goes anywhere I ask him to go - unless it's during work hours. Isn't that right, Cullen?"

Nobody moved or said a word. Aida looked at a smear of red sauce on her plate rather than make eye contact with this woman who seemed to loathe her only minutes after meeting her. The waiter showed up with the bill in time to break the tension.

"I'll leave you to finish up your business here. Don't stay up too late. See you early tomorrow morning, Cullen."
"Yes, Mayor."

Aida watched her head toward the valet. Cullen perused the bill before dropping his credit card on top of it and flagging down the waiter again. Aida put a hand on his sleeve.

"Are you alright?"
Cullen looked up in time to see her limo pulling away from the curb. He relaxed again, putting a hand on top of hers. "Better now."

As they waited at the valet, Aida fretted about how the magic of their night seemed to be interrupted by his boss's surprise arrival. She wanted to get it back, get the furrow out of his brow.

They got into his Corvette and Cullen started to head to their condo building. Aida began to find the rhythm of his right hand changing the car's gears rather arousing, so she put her hand over his lightly, feeling him control the car. He shot her a lust-heavy look, which got more intense when her other hand let the hemline of her dress slide up so he could see the top of her garter belt.

"Is there any way to make this thing go faster?", she asked, while letting the coat slip from her left shoulder.

Cullen revved the engine, rocketing them home - he was a man on a mission.

Chapter End Notes

Cullen in a classic black Corvette taking you to a fine-ass Italian restaurant and picking up the bill. Let that be your meditation for the day.
Cullen had trouble keeping his eyes on the road.

Every burning look he exchanged with Aida in the car made him want to pull over and ravage her in the front seat of his Corvette, but he did not want his first time with her to be awkward or cramped or interrupted by a nosy police officer on patrol.

They hadn't said a word since Aida urged him on to drive faster. Once in the garage, he opened her door for her and held her hand as they approached the elevator. Once they were in, she pressed the button for the 12th floor and turned to him.

"So, what should we - "

He silenced her quickly with a deep kiss, one hand on the back of her head, pressing her against the railing.

Aida tasted better than the wine they had at dinner, better than his long-ago last taste of lyrium. She felt so small and delicate in his arms, but he could feel the powerful magic pulsing within her. Every time she darted her tongue against his, it was exciting and electric - but also soothing and sweet.

He pulled back from the kiss, catching his breath. She looked up at him, holding on to his lapels.

"Cullen?"

Without moving his hips from where they were locked against hers, Cullen's fist hit the red emergency button at the bottom of the elevator's panel. Aida gasped as the elevator jerked to a stop.

Cullen went back to kissing her, his hands growing hungrier now. He let them skim down her body to the hem of her dress, which he pulled up, wanting to hold on to her ass as he plundered her mouth.

She broke away from his lips for a moment, making him switch to pressing his kisses on her neck.

"Cullen, won't one of the building's security guards come check on the elevator?"

"He's probably watching us, Aida. There's a camera in the elevator."

Aida glanced at the ceiling of the elevator, to the small black dome attached to a corner.

"Cullen..." she whined, feeling self-conscious, squirming in his arms.

He palmed one of her breasts, slipping the strap of her dress off her other shoulder.

"So what if he's watching, Aida. Let him."

He pulled aside the lace of her bra and exposed one of her brown nipples and immediately drew it into his mouth. She cried out, dropping her head against the elevator wall as she carded her fingers...
through his hair. He freed her other breast, lavishing attention on it too.

"Cullen, please..."
He kept a hand on her breast, pinching her nipple as he returned to her lips. "Please - what?"

He felt her lift a knee, trying to draw him closer. He held that knee up with one hand as he reached under the hem of her dress with the other, pushing aside her thong and finding her hot and wet. He rubbed two calloused fingers against her sensitive pearl, making her groan louder.

"Fuck, you're driving me crazy."
"I've only started."

Cullen kept kissing her as he played with her pussy, sliding a finger into what he intended to claim later. This made her gasp, so he followed it with a second finger, pushing them in as far as he could. Aida was holding on to him now, desperately, her eyes begging him for more - anything more.

Cullen took the cue and dropped to his knees, biting one of Aida's thighs right at the top of her garter belt. Cullen's hands moved higher, looking for the straps of her panties. After a little fumbling, he located them and began to pull them down. He lifted one of her legs, removing the lacy garment and tucking it into his blazer pocket.

Cullen looked up at her, she was biting her lip in anticipation. He lifted the hem of her dress higher and leaned forward, and just breathed on her. Aida whimpered. He pressed his lips against her mound, kissing her there, but still not using his tongue. She whimpered louder. He parted her womanhood and then licked a perfect path right around her clit.

Aida shuddered so hard he had to steady her by grabbing on to one of her legs. He hooked that knee over his shoulder and resumed feasting on her pussy, trying every tactic he could think of, licking at her pearl side to side, up and down, in more torturous little circles, using only the tip of his tongue, using all of his tongue and his lips at the same time. The sounds he was coaxing from her was going straight to his cock, making him rock hard.

Aida grew wetter and wetter, filling his mouth with her arousal as he began to lick at her as fast as he could. He paused for a moment, switching back to his fingers while he glanced at her. Aida's eyes were squinted shut, her hands gripping the elevator railing hard, swearing under her breath.

"Aida, tell me you've thought about this as much as I have."
"I have. Maybe not in the elevator though."

She giggled - but then stopped as he smiled at her and licked his fingers before returning to her pussy. She groaned, grinding against his face. Every frantic swipe of his tongue pushed her closer to her release, making her legs shake, until he felt her twitch hard, grabbing him roughly by the hair as her orgasm surged through her body.

Aida exhaled with a helpless, sated sound. "Wow. Just... Wow."

Cullen wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stood up. He savored the deep blush on her cheeks and the dreaminess of her expression.

Aida glanced at him - and then lowered her head shyly.

"I can't even look at you after what you just did."

He turned with a sexy grin and hit the emergency button again, making the elevator come back to life again, ascending to the 12th floor. Aida pulled up the top of her dress and smoothed down the skirt
of her dress - just in time for the elevator to stop at the 10th floor, the doors sliding open.

A security guard whose name-tag read JIM was standing there, looking befuddled, flashlight in hand.

"Hey there folks, did you get stuck in the elevator a second ago?"

Aida pulled her coat closed, her eyes wide with shock. Cullen stepped behind her so the hapless guard could not see how hard he still was from what he had just been doing to Aida.

"It stopped for just a moment, Jim. I think everything's fine now."

He took a step forward. "Can I get a quick look at - "

Cullen held an authoritative hand out.

"Look later, pal. My lady and I are in a hurry to get home - to finish some... stuff we started."

Jim looked at the blush on Aida's cheeks and took a step back. The doors began to close on their own and as soon as they shut she turned to press her face against Cullen's chest.

"Oh Maker, do you think - he knew? Or was watching?"

He wrapped his arms around her tight and whispered in her ear, "Probably."

Aida laughed and squeezed him back.

* * * * *

A few moments later Aida was pushing Cullen into his condo, devouring his mouth hungrily. They shrugged off their jackets, letting them land where they fell, never ceasing their kissing. Cullen scooped her up, holding her under the knees and carrying her to his bedroom where they began helping each other undress in a hurry. Her fingers worked at his buttons of his shirt while he nudged aside the arms of her dress off her shoulders, she undid his belt while he flung her bra away. Garter straps were unhooked, her stockings slipped off, joining his club tie in a pile on the floor.

Aida was about to take off her studded leather choker when she felt Cullen's hand on hers.

"No. Keep that on. Only that."

Now naked save her necklace, she smiled at him indulgently as she put a hand on his chest, making him sit down on the edge of his bed and then lie back. Aida's hands travelled down the ripples of his abs until she got to the waistband of his pants, pulling them off for him.

"I've - never - been - with a guy who looks like you before. You'll have to forgive me but - "

Aida moved back up his body and began raining kisses and bites all over his muscles. She scratched him lightly with her fingernails, licked at his nipples, followed the paths of his battle scars with her lips, worshiping him all over until she felt Cullen tugging on her collar.

"Come here, you vixen."

Cullen pulled her up to his lips before rolling her onto her back beneath him. He stood up quickly, still needing to remove his briefs. He slid them down, freeing his cock to her gaze.

Aida sat up, biting her lip. She grasped him, giving him a squeeze, delighting in his girth and
length. She spoke in a quiet voice.

"I thought I'd be nervous - the first time after my break up, with a new man."

Cullen waited to hear what she said next, not wanting to go further if she was unsure. She saw his face change and added quickly, "Oh, but I'm not nervous, I'm - ready."

She scrambled back farther on the bed, legs wide now, beckoning him to her. He positioned himself over her but paused, reaching out to look for something in his nightstand. Aida put a hand on his wrist, stopping him.

"No need, I take my own precautions."

Aida guided that hand to her breast. "Please, Cullen. I - want you."

Her gentle begging lit a fire in his eyes. Cullen knelt between her knees and began to ease himself into her, inch by inch. He went slowly despite the starving look on Aida's face, even when she propped herself up on an elbow and grabbed him by one of his ass cheeks, trying to get him to move forward. Cullen stayed disciplined, edging forward until his balls were pressed against her ass.

"Fuck. You're so tight, Aida."

Cullen had no idea he had said these words to her so many times in her fantasies when Aida touched herself. She lifted a leg and pressed it to his torso, where Cullen gave her foot a little kiss, right on the scar she received when she came to help him the night of his lyrium withdrawals. Before she could urge him on further, he began thrusting.

Aida filled the air with little whispered words - please, more, faster, more, yes, perfect - and he rutted her harder to hear more of them tumble from her lips - Cullen, don't stop, oh Maker. He watched her, feeling intoxicated, as she told him "you're so fucking good" as she cupped her own breasts.

Cullen made her gasp by scooping her up off the mattress, supporting her with his arms, kissing her deeply until she was breathless. He leaned back on his hands so she could be free to ride him now and Aida began to buck wildly on his cock. She practically went feral with lust on top of him and Cullen felt like he was watching a wildfire burn. She erased all other thoughts from his mind except for the cliff they were both racing toward. He wanted to jump with her off that cliff.

They spoke at the same time:

"Cullen, make me come!" "I'm so close, Aida-"

Cullen yanked on her collar roughly, pulling her close so they could kiss once again while he thrusted his hips up and into her. He held her there, their foreheads pressed together, as they came at the same time, Aida quivering and moaning against his lips, her sheath pulsing around him as his seed spurted into her. Cullen held on to her collar until he was done - and when he let go, she flopped back on the bed with a contented sigh. He curled himself around her, wanting to look at her profile.

"How was that, my lady."

"Pretty good for an Inquisitr date. They don't usually end this well."

"I wouldn't know. This is my first - and my last one."

"Oh, are you telling me you're done with me now, Ser?"

Aida rolled over and looked at him and was surprised to see a serious look on Cullen's face.
"Aida, do you know how special you are? From the other women in Haven? You..."

She put a hand on his cheek, his golden brown eyes were so sweet, so sincere. She hated to have to say what she was about to say.

"Cullen, we should talk."

"Oh."

He sat up against his pillows and looked straight ahead. He seemed to be expecting the worst.

"I - Cullen, for five years I was in a possibly abusive relationship. Samson never laid a hand on me, but he hurt me in other ways. He neglected me. He made me beg for his attention. He made me chase him. He did not make me feel good about myself."

Cullen kept his gaze steady, on some invisible spot on his bedroom wall. "He's a cunt."

"He is. But I loved him. And maybe there's a part of me that still misses him. I know it makes no sense. My friends think - I'm mentally ill. Seriously, they do. And they're probably right."

He still did not look at her. "Why are you telling me all of this?"

Aida grabbed his hand. "Because I do not want to hurt you, Cullen. You seem to have enough hurt in your life without me. Perhaps inviting me into your life would invite only more."

"Shouldn't I have a choice in the matter? Or have you decided already for both of us?"

He finally made eye contact with her and Aida knew she was done for. She would need to have him again, taste him again, be with him again. But there was that loud, irrational part of her that was telling her to flee. Now. Tonight.

"I should go."

She slipped out of bed and started picking her clothes up off the ground. Cullen chuckled in a dark way to himself.

"You claimed you did not want to hurt me and yet with those simple words you have already wounded me."

She stopped in her task and looked at him but he only clenched his jaw and would not meet her eyes. Aida's eyes travelled to the side of the bed she had abandoned next to him - and then as soon as she had her dress on and the rest of her clothes bundled up in her jacket she escaped back to her condo.

Aida locked her front door behind her and leaned against it. In her haste she had left her shoes behind her and maybe her knickers too but she wasn't despairing of that. She had made a stupid, fucked up decision. A single tear rolled down her face as she clapped a hand over her mouth, trying to stop herself from crying further.

Idiot, you idiot, Aida.

Her confused thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door at her back. She turned around and opened it and found Cullen standing there, in just sweat pants, an old college t-shirt, and his bare feet. He had the straps of her high heels hooked around a finger.

"Sorry - I thought maybe you'd want these back."
She took them from him and then he reached into his pocket to hand her her lacy panties. "These too."

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck shyly - and then Aida grabbed him by the t-shirt and pulled him into her condo.

"I forgot something else."
Cullen woke up with a smile on his face and feeling more refreshed than he had in a long, long time - because he woke up in her arms.

It didn't even matter that Aida was a snorer, it was endearing, and the rhythm of her breathing had lulled him to sleep the night before - after they had spent almost half an hour just making out on the couch in her living room, which lead to another round of passionate lovemaking in her bedroom. She was so responsive to his touch, he had made her come three more times before they finally passed out.

Cullen couldn't stop grinning. He had to figure out how to control his face before getting to work this morning. He could not stand behind the mayor with a "I fucked her senseless" smirk of triumph on his face while she was on camera.

He glanced at the clock, he still had a little time before he had to get down to city hall. Cullen slipped out of her arms, located his sweat pants and headed for her kitchen. He intuited Aida was going to want to talk again about where all of this was going and he wanted to tilt the odds in his favor before she could even start.

* * * * *

Aida stretched from her toes to her fingers and then laid one hand on the pillow where she expected a golden demigod of a man to be sleeping. She pouted for a second, having woken up already aroused and ready for more.

*But what's that smell?*

Coffee. Bacon.

Hunger overwhelmed her desire for more Cullen. She darted to her feet, picked up his t-shirt that laid discarded at the foot of the bed and threw it on.

In the kitchen Cullen had made a pot of coffee and set out two mugs next to a plate of crispy bacon. He was at the stove with a frying pan in his hand.

"And what's this about?"
"Breakfast. You know, first meal of day? Considered to be the most important one."

Aida grinned at him with enthusiasm while picking up a piece of bacon which she ate it in two bites. He nudged the omelette he was working on with a spatula, rolling it up with an expert's flair.

"You didn't have enough eggs for me to make two, so we'll have to share."
He put the omelette on a plate on the kitchen island, between two stools. He sat down on one and pulled the other closer to him before gesturing to her to join him. Aida regarded him with suspicion before heading for the fridge for some hot sauce before sitting down next to him. Cullen held out a forkful egg to her and she allowed him to feed it to her.

"Mister Rutherford. I know what you're up to."

He put a hand on her thigh as she dug in with her own fork.

"And what would that be?"
"Buttering me up so that I will agree to see you again."

Cullen paused in eating his half of the omelette. He brushed the hair off her shoulder and turned her by the chin to look at him.

"Aida. I won't hide my feelings. Of course, I want to see you again. Over and over - and over - again. But I understand if you do not feel the same way about me. You can't fault a man for - using a little strategy."

The two ate in awkward silence until the omelette was gone and Cullen stood up to clear the plate. Aida put a hand out to stop him.

"I do want to see you again, Cullen. I just - can't promise you anything. My job - and my art - keep me busy. I might keep using Inquisitr, I might not. I'm not even sure which day it is right now."

"Tuesday."

"Good. That means I don't have to work until 3."

He gave her a halfhearted, defeated smile and took their plate to the sink. Cullen rinsed it and stared out her kitchen window for a moment. "I better get going."

Aida got up and crossed the room to his side, turning him toward her by touching his arm.

"Don't be so discouraged, Cullen. Didn't I just say I wanted to see you again?"

She saw the light come back into his eyes as a smile quirked about the scar at the corner of his mouth.

"That's better. But can we make a deal? I take your cell number, but for now, you don't get mine."

Cullen made a gesture of frustration. "Come on Aida, how is that fair?"

"It isn't fair at all, I know. I just need to feel like I have some space, some control - after my last relationship, I -""nHe cut her off by raising a hand. He looked at her fridge where there was a dry erase board for her shopping list and wrote his number on the last line, right below "green onions".

"Call me when you want, Trevelyan. But please, don't keep me waiting too long."

Her hand danced up his arm to sweep over his bicep before moving to land on one of his pecs.

"You can't call in sick? Or roll in late, blame car trouble?"
"You met my boss last night, lying to her is not a good idea."
“Alright, Cullen, I understand. I should give you your shirt back before you go though.”

She pulled off his t-shirt and handed it to him. She was naked underneath and now only wearing a sultry look on her face. He shook his head at her.

“You definitely don't play fair.”
"It wouldn't be any fun if I played fair."

Aida turned to walk away from him, and said to him over her shoulder in a breezy tone, "Have a wonderful day, neighbor."

Cullen stood there, glued to the spot, still thinking about it felt to be between those thighs. His reverie was broken by the sound of her singing in the shower. He had all day to figure out how he could pay her back for that little move.

* * * * *

Cullen didn't know it then, but he would have a lot of time to think about that morning in Aida's kitchen. She did not call him that night, or the next day, or by the end of that week. That silence stretched into three weeks. The elation he had felt in her company faded away. His life returned to how it was before the night Varric swiped on her picture for him.

One morning in the city hall courtyard, Varric saw Cullen sitting on a bench, brooding in his usual manner. He didn't even have to ask him what - or who - he was thinking about.

"Curly, you gotta let that one go. She just wanted a one night stand, it's pretty obvious by now, isn't it?"
"It didn't feel like a one night stand. It felt like the beginning of something."

"Get back on the app, get back out there. Forget about her, she's - "
"Right next door. I can hear her walking around her condo, specifically not calling me back."

Cullen spotted Cassandra waving at them from across the courtyard. Both men heaved a resentful sigh.

"Duty calls."

Varric didn't want Cullen to return to the Nightingale's side looking so - frustrated. She always seemed to amp up her attention to him when he looked unhappy or lost. As they headed toward her chief of staff, the dwarf tried to lighten the mood.

"How's Barkley doing?"
"He's good. He always calls me back."
"That's good. Little victories, Cullen. You gotta cling to 'em."

They laughed together as they headed back to work.

* * * * *

Aida was lying on the rug in her living room with all the lights off looking at her phone. She had been painting for a few hours but was feeling restless - a bad time to get an email invite to see Samson and his band playing a gig in a bar up the street.
It wasn't that she particularly wanted to see Samson - she wanted to see which one of his girlfriends he defaulted to after her, or if more than one of them would show up at the same time. Maybe a part of her wanted to cause a little chaos by making an appearance.

She smiled to herself.

_Chaos._

It's what Samson deserves.

Aida got dressed in a hurry, not wanting to put too much effort into her appearance because that would signal to her ex that she still cared about what he thought. She pulled on her boots and headed downstairs. In a brisk walk, she'd be there in time to catch the second or third song.

After paying the cover at the door, she lucked out and found a seat at the bar. Samson was on stage, already crooning. He looked as good as he ever did so she knew he wasn't suffering from lack of her. Aida scanned the crowd, especially the women near the front. There were more of a few of them looking up at him like he was some sort of indie rock savior. She was glad to not be one of them for once.

Another voice - a lot like Dorian's - piped up in her head. "Then why did you come here, you stupid woman? Why haven't you called C-"

Aida stopped the thought by slamming her shot glass down on the bar.

She couldn't think about Cullen right now. She could not explain the intensity of her attraction to him - and that frightened her a little.

Aida was trying to get the bartender's attention again when she felt someone wedge himself between the patron next to her and her bar stool. She looked up with some annoyance at the person but realized she knew him.

"Oh, hey Mac. Thought you were a weirdo trying to talk to me."

Samson's oldest friend looked exactly the same since she saw him last, red curls, red beard and charming smile. He was an affable slacker-stoner in an old thrift store shirt and corduroy pants, the kind of guy who wore flip flops constantly, even in the snow, and who was also famous for borrowing money from you shamelessly with no hope of you ever seeing it again. His green eyes darted down to her cleavage as he spoke.

"Looking mighty fine, Trevelyan. Sam's a fool to let you go."
"Yeah, thanks. Whatever. Don't even know why I felt like coming down here tonight."
"Judging by your face - curiosity and boredom."

He rested his hand on the bar, cornering her even more against the column at her back.

"I mean it Trevelyan. You look great tonight."

They made eye contact as he drank the rest of his beer. Samson had finished up a song and was bantering for the audience before the next one. Over the din of the bar and the conversations around her, Aida heard him say, "Oh wow, my ex-girlfriend is here tonight. Wasn't expecting that!"

A few of the girls in the front booed. Aida responded by clapping slowly in a sarcastic fashion - until she felt Mac's hand on her knee.
"Hey. Fuck him. Let's get out of here. Don't you live up the street?"

The word she thought of before she left her condo that night - chaos - was joined by another: payback.

"Yeah. 10 minute walk. We can smoke a bowl or two."
"Excellent. Lead the way, my good woman."

Before she could think too clearly about what she was about to do, they were already in the elevator heading up to her place. Mac took the opportunity to kiss her somewhere near the 5th floor. The last time a man kissed her in the elevator she had ended up weak-kneed in his arms. This time, no magic happened. He tasted like the four beers he had probably sponged off of other people earlier that night.

The doors slid open and they started heading down the hall to her side of the building.

Aida's heart plummeted. Cullen was at his front door, carrying a bag of groceries and looking exhausted. She tried to slow down Mac so Cullen could get into his condo before they made it to her front door but he had to speak up in his too-loud voice.

"This is a swanky building, Aida. Can't wait to see the view."

Cullen looked over at them, keys in hand. She saw disappointment flash and burn across his face. Before Aida could speak to him he was slamming the door behind him.

Aida let them into her place and Mac whistled when he saw the mountains out her patio door.

"Man this place is nice, I could get used to this."

Aida kicked her boots off, now regretting every decision she had made leading up to this moment. She located her pot box in her bedroom and brought it back out to the living room. Mac sat on her couch, his dirty bare feet a little too close to some of the nice art books on her coffee table. Earlier, when Mac had been standing next to her in the bar, he seemed to possess a shambling, easy-going sort of charm.

But now as patted the cushion next to him, she saw him for what he was - a manboy - just like Samson.

* * * * *

Cullen sat on his bed with his back to the wall between their bedrooms. He knew it was pathetic to wait here to see if Aida was going to allow that guy into her bed but it wasn't like he had more interesting plans for the night. He sipped a little whiskey and flipped through a magazine while Barkley stared at him from the foot of the bed.

"What do you think, Barks. She gonna fuck him?"

The dog yawned and rested his head on his paws.

"I hope not too."

Barkley heard something Cullen couldn't hear and got up and padded down the hall back to the living room. Cullen followed him until he sat down near the doorway.
He heard Aida's voice from next door and took half a step closer.

"Good night, Mac. Get home safe."
"Come on, Aida. It's not even midnight, I thought we were gonna hang."
"Sorry, bud. Just got really tired all of a sudden. You enjoy that joint without me later."

Cullen couldn't help himself, after he heard the man's footsteps fade away, he raised his arms in triumph - which made Barkley a little too excited. He let out a few happy yaps before Cullen could shush him.

"Barkley, come on, be cool."

Cullen lead the Mabari back to his bedroom with a pleased grin. Little victories, like Varric had said.

* * * * *

The next morning after coffee and some dry toast, Aida grabbed her sketch pad and a pencil and went out to sit on her patio. She slid open the door, expecting to see Barkley waiting for her but what she saw instead stopped her right away.

The first thing she noticed was that even though it was before noon, it was quite warm. Haven had been going through an unusual patch of weather but today seemed to be hotter than yesterday.

The second thing she noticed was Cullen was lying face down on his deck chair, clad only in a tight pair of underpants. There was a glass of orange juice on the ground next to him and a book.

He was sunbathing.

And it was a glorious sight. He was all muscle and very little fat and had an ass as perfect as a Renaissance statue.

He was a masterpiece.

Aida heard a snap and Cullen heard it too. She had been gripping her pencil so tightly it broke in half in her right hand.

Cullen rolled over, startled, and sat up - giving Aida a moment to feast her eyes across his broad shoulders, abs and pecs.

"Well, good morning."
"Hi, Cullen. Y-you look...well."

Cullen stretched and yawned. "Were you staring, Trevelyan?"
"No, I..."

Aida could come up with no convenient lie so she just let her sentence end there. He picked up his book, seemingly ending the conversation, but Aida wasn't quite through with him yet.

"Cullen. I just want you to know that - that guy last night...that wasn't what it looked like. He's just an old friend of mine."

He raised an eyebrow, never taking his eyes off his book.
"Doesn't really matter to me, Aida."

His nonchalant tone hurt more than any words he could have chosen.

She looked at the broken pencil in her hand and went back inside to get another one. Once she was standing in her living room she decided she didn't want to sketch on the patio today. She slid her patio door closed and turned on the air conditioning instead. She'd work on her paintings in her spare room that she used as her studio - and try not to think about how terribly she had ruined things with the man next door.

Chapter End Notes

I bet you're cross with me after that ending. Come back on Monday or Tuesday and I'll make it up to you. ^_^
Cullen looked at the fancy paper dinner invitation Bull had just handed him like it was written in Avvar. "Is this some kind of joke?"

Varric slid his invite out of the envelope and gave it a curious sniff. Cullen smirked at him. "Why'd you do that?"

"I don't know, I expected it to smell like perfume. Who gets invitations printed for a dinner party except for a fancy lady?"

Cullen shot Varric a 'careful, buddy' look and Iron Bull predictably got a little sniffy with him right away. "It's Dorian's idea and I let him do it. We've been dating for six months now and he wanted to commemorate the occasion by messing up every pot in the kitchen and getting out the good silver."

Cullen cracked his knuckles. Six months. It was as long as he knew Aida, if he could even say he knew her. Save for the one pleasure-filled night they had shared together she had proved to be as hard to pin down as a wisp of smoke. His lyrium withdrawals had been particularly rough lately, but he was too proud to ask her for any more help. Cullen half-listened to Blackwall explaining how hard it was going to be to get a babysitter on a Friday night and Varric already complaining about the fussy menu until he realized no one was speaking and they were all looking at him.

"Cullen? Do you think you can come or not?"

Varric snorted. "Like he has other plans."
"I might have other plans, for all you know."
"Reading a book about siege procedures between the third and fourth Blight while Barkley stares at you - are not plans."

Cullen sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Bull, do me a favor. Can you not seat her right across from me? It's bad enough we need to be at the same table together - please don't make me have to look right at a woman who has so... profoundly rejected me. Knowing my wonderful luck she will be bringing a date with her anyhow."

Bull clapped him on the shoulder, a little too hard. "Sorry, boss. I'm not in charge of any of this. You'll sit where Dorian wants you to sit. And for all you know, you'll get seated across from Cassandra and you two can bitch about work during the entire dinner."

"Cassandra's coming?!"

Before any of them could object further, the woman in question appeared from behind a nearby
column in the courtyard. "Yes, I was invited. I am capable of being normal outside of this job, believe it or not. Thank you for the invitation, Bull."

The Qun gave her a half-bow but kept his eyes on Cullen. "You better show up, Rutherford. Dorian will be extremely cross if he spent all day long cooking only to find himself down a guest. And wear something nice. Just because Aida Trevelyan has 'profoundly rejected' you doesn't mean you have to go around looking like a slapped arse."

Cullen closed his eyes while all his coworkers had a laugh at his expense.

* * * * *

A fortnight later Aida was in the back of a taxi, stuck in traffic near the coliseum as joyous Great Bears fans poured out onto the streets. She called Dorian while her driver tried to make a difficult left hand turn into a pack of revelers.

"Dori, I'm so sorry, I'm stuck in basketball-related traffic. We should be there in twenty minutes if we're lucky."

"I don't know why I put you in charge of the wine. Now we're all sitting here with nothing to drink, staring at your empty chair." Dorian added the next bit in a lowered tone, "One of us more than the others."

Aida felt her cheeks growing warmer, knowing exactly who he was referring to. "Make cocktails, Dorian. Just don't start serving food until I get there. I have six bottles of Orlesian Sancerre and six -"

"Just hurry up please! You're ruining everything, as is your way."

Before Aida could snap back at him, he had hung up.

It took them half an hour to get to Iron Bull's home on the west side of town, where the driver helped her carry the case of wine to the front door. Aida smoothed herself down before ringing the doorbell, her hands shaking a little in nervousness. She was excited to see Cullen, even though their flirtation had come to a bit of a halt as of late. She knew it had been her fault - and Dorian did too. While the dinner party was indeed a celebration of his relationship with Bull, Aida suspected he was trying to help her out a bit by finding a less awkward way back into his life, besides a few stilted words near their mailboxes.

Bull opened the door and ushered her in, carrying the case of wine for her. "Oh look, the vino finally got here."

Aida entered the dining room and her eyes went straight to Cullen's. With some surprise she noted to herself that he was wearing black-rimmed glasses - and they only made him more handsome and distinguished than he already was.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Aida, Dorian's cousin. Sorry I'm late. But yes, I brought the wine so we can get started."

She gave Cullen a shy half-smile, kissed Sera on both cheeks, shook hands with Blackwall and his lovely Antivanian wife Josephine, and tried to shake hands with Cassandra from across the table but settled for a head nod instead. She introduced herself to Varric, who grinned at her in a rather familiar way.
"I'm Varric, the funniest one here. May I get your coat, Aida?"

Cullen shot him a dagger-sharp look while Varric helped Aida slip out of her coat. Aida watched Cullen's face as he took in the sight of her tight, white lacy dress - and the black studded punk collar she paired it with, knowing he would remember it.

Her choice of necklace had the desired affect - Cullen blushed deeply, looking away for a moment. Aida smiled to herself before joining Dorian in the kitchen.

"Do I look OK?"
"Yes, that dress is perfect. You look like a virgin and a whore at the same time. Now go out there and serve the wine, while I plate the salads please."

Aida went around the table, doling out the fine Orlesian white she had chosen. She let her hand linger on Cullen's shoulder while she leaned closer to him, hoping he could smell her perfume. Judging by how many times she had already made him blush, maybe she still had a chance. Cullen had been the last man to touch her, to set her blood on fire.

Aida knew it had been her own unfounded doubts and penchant for self-sabotage that had pushed him away, but - maybe she could lure him back to her bed one more time.

* * * * *

They were now on to the pasta course. Cullen caught a glimpse of Aida through the kitchen doorway as she helped Dorian chop some basil, that white dress only emphasized the perfection of her ample curves. He was finding it hard to look right at her tonight, she outshone everyone in the room and every time she touched him lightly on his sleeve to pass him a dish, it made his hands shake.

Cullen could not be sure, but she seemed to be signalling to him that she was interested in him again - at least for just tonight.

He was no fool, he'd take just tonight if it was offered to him.

But Varric, ever the contrarian, was not going to make it easy for him. He had been flirting up a storm with Aida since she arrived, much to the distress of Cassandra, who always seemed to have a thing for the dwarf - and it looked like Sera had misread the entire situation, thinking Cassandra had been seated across from her for a reason.

Varric made a passing reference to Aida about having drinks together some time - that's when Cullen had had enough.

"Tethras, may I have a word with you?"

The jolly dwarf did not budge. "Alright?"
"In private please?"
"What for, Rutherford? I'm enjoying my penne - and making this gorgeous girl laugh."

Aida flushed so prettily at his honeyed words that it made Cullen want to punch him from right across the table. He stood up, towering over the dinner table with a scowl on his face. "Now, dwarf. Backyard."

The two stepped out into Bull's backyard. Cullen slid the patio door closed behind him and led his
friend a few feet away from the house, near the pool.

"Exactly WHAT do you think you're doing?"
"Eating dinner, what's your problem?"
"Stop flirting with her, Varric. It's - extraordinarily annoying."
"She doesn't belong to you, she's not a goat. Plus, it's pretty obvious she likes me back."
"Varric. I am five seconds away from pushing you into the pool. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't."

The dwarf glanced back toward the dinner party. Everyone was watching them. He knew he had crossed a line and had to save his own arse from an undignified soaking.

"One, it would piss off Bull's special fella and that would piss him off too. Two, if you push me in the pool now we'll never get to the venison roast that's next, and dessert after that. Three - maybe Aida would think it very immature of you to not be able to handle a little friendly competition. Come on, Cullen. Be cool."

Cullen took a deep breath. "Fine. Let's make it interesting. 200 gold sovereigns I give her a ride home tonight."
"Come on, how is that fair? You've already got a little history going with her, I'm starting from the beginning."
"Well, if you're so confident it shouldn't matter, should it?"

Dorian opened the patio door and called out to them. "Gentlemen, we're about to move on to the next course. Could you please stop bickering about whatever you're bickering about - probably Aida - and rejoin us?"

Aida made a sound of annoyance at being blamed for their display. Varric turned back to Cullen. Sure he was tall, handsome, and charming in a bumbling sort of way but he had blown it with Aida once already. He put his hand out to take the bet.

"You're on, Rutherford. Try not to be too devastated when you're the best man at our wedding."

The two re-entered the dining room. Blackwall and Iron Bull gave their friends a round of sarcastic clapping as Blackwall explained to his patient wife, "They're like this at work too."

Josie attempted to diffuse the situation with diplomacy. "With men, there is always some sort of contest."
Sera murmured something about "dick size" to herself but got a kick under the table from Aida for it.

Cullen pulled his chair back from the table next to Aida. She looked up at him with concern.

"Is everything alright, Cullen?"
"Yes, Aida. Nothing to trouble yourself about."

When he sat down, he jostled the table a little too hard - and Cullen's glass of half-finished red wine dumped right onto her lap.

Every woman at the the table froze as Aida stood up very slowly, the wine now dribbling down her ivory dress and soaking into the lace. In a very shocked voice Aida whispered, "I just bought this dress."

Dorian darted to his feet. "Club soda! It's on the wet bar in the living room! Let me - "

A timer went off in the kitchen, interrupting him. "Oh, my roast!"
Cullen stood up now, pulling her chair back from her. "Dorian, go handle your food. I'll get the club soda, and some towels. I'll follow you, Aida."

Josie and Cassandra shouted instructions ("Dab! Don't wipe!") after them as Aida retreated from the dining room in a hurry.

Cullen had just enough time to give Varric a tiny, triumphant look. This clumsy accident could be turned to his advantage so he could spend even a little time alone with her.

* * * * *

Aida led him down a hall away from the dining room toward the guest bathroom, wine now running down one of her legs in messy rivulets. Cullen followed her in, carrying a few hand towels and a bottle of club soda. She shut the door behind him, bringing them very close together.

"I'm so, so sorry, Aida. I've never been one for - dinner parties."
"It's okay, Cullen. I'm sure we can get it out."

He poured some of the club soda onto one of the hand towels and was about to hand it to her, but she raised her hands and looked down at her dress in a gesture that let him know she wanted him to clean up the mess. Aida watched him inhale before he knelt before her, starting to dab at the growing stain, right across her right thigh.

"See, nothing to worry about, it's starting to come out."
"But if it doesn't, you must allow me to pay for a new dress. The same one. You look lovely tonight, Aida."

He stood up to pour more soda water onto the towel. Aida reached up and tapped the side of his glasses with a curious finger.

"I've never seen you wear these before."
"I must be having a particularly clumsy night as I dropped one of my contacts and was unable to find it."
"I like them, you look cute. The Clark Kent version of Cullen Rutherford."

He gave her a coy smile before sitting down on the closed lid of the toilet behind her, turning her to face him so he could continue working on the stain. Aida was starting to feel warm, the effect of the glasses of wine she had consumed joined with the proximity of this big, Fereldan male. He swiped up some of the wine that had trickled down her leg, the cool towel giving her gooseflesh. Cullen continued to pat away the red wine, but kept his other hand on the back of her other thigh, high up her leg, his thumb nearly touching the bottom of her ass.

Aida's mouth ran dry when she saw the outline of his cock straining against the fabric of his pants. The people waiting for them in the dining room melted away as she let the hem of her dress scoop up an inch. Cullen ignored her display at first, trying to get the last of the red wine out - until she pulled up her dress a fraction more. He dropped the towel in the sink nearby.

"Aida. You're not wearing any underwear."
"Is that so? I hadn't noticed."

He slid two rough palms up the back of her thighs to hold on to her buttocks. He pressed his head to her stomach with a moan.

"You feel like heaven, Aida. Just like I remembered."
She grabbed him roughly by his shirt, yanking him to his feet, devouring his mouth. Aida broke the kiss and turned around, putting two hands on the sink in front of her, leaning forward. She looked at him via the mirror in front of her.

"Fuck me, Cullen."
"Right now?"
"Yes, now. Before Dorian interrupts."

Cullen undid his belt and yanked down his pants and boxers. He pushed her forward even more, her face almost against the mirror as he pulled up her dress, baring her ass and pussy to him, making him hiss with desire. One rough thrust forward and he was balls-deep inside her, one hand pressed against her mouth so she would not cry out too loudly. Cullen pinned her to him, the other hand sliding down the front of her dress to cup her breast. His breath was hot against her ear.

"Like this?"

Cullen let go of her mouth and pressed that hand to her neck, squeezing her windpipe, feral and possessive. Aida pressed back against him with a hungry moan, now on her tip toes and arching her back deeply, trying to take as much of him as possible.

"Oh Maker, you're so - thick. You fill me up."

Cullen watched in the mirror as Aida turned her head as much as she could, seeking his lips. "Take me", she whispered in a command.

He held on to one of her shoulders now, rutted her hard, pulling back so he could watch his cock thrusting in and out of her. From down the hall, Aida could hear the dinner party discussion continuing and the idea that they were clueless about what he was doing to her made her even wetter. She pulled her dress up farther, grabbing the hand that had been kneading one of her breasts and moving it to her swollen clit.

"Faster - harder - please."

Her fingers mingled with his, slick with her arousal. He shook that hand pressed to her and delighted as the eyes rolled back in her head and she bit her full lower lip. She moaned louder and he shushed her, making them giggle together. Cullen fucked her with with sharp, little thrusts, making her entire body jerk with every slap of his hips against her ass.

"Oh fuck, Cullen, come inside me - claim me."

Cullen couldn't hold on any more, her words were like a spell that made his orgasm burn through him like a lightning bolt. The two did not muffle the sounds of their pleasure as he felt her pussy clench around him in response when he filled her with his seed. He pressed a gentle kiss to her neck as she went limp in his arms.

A knock on the door right behind him made both of them issue sounds of shock and surprise. Iron Bull's voice addressed them from the hallway.

"Are you two done yet? Your food is growing cold and one of your hosts is a few moments away from throwing a full-blown hissy fit."
Aida straightened herself out and smoothed her hair down while Cullen tucked himself back into his boxers and pulled his pants up. "Uh, just a moment Bull. It was - a particularly hard stain."

"Yeah, it sounded like it. You know your elf friend was grinning ear to ear the entire time. She has crazy good hearing."

Aida couldn't respond, Cullen was kissing her, tender now, while she tucked his shirt back into his pants. He broke the kiss and called out to Bull, "We're on our way."

Before they left the bathroom, Cullen cupped her face with one hand, rubbing a thumb over her kiss-swollen bottom lip. "Can I give you a ride home tonight? Can we..."

She nodded before he could even finish his sentence.

* * * * *

The two headed back to the dinner party, with the worst "we weren't fucking in the guest bathroom" faces anyone has ever seen. Sera gave Aida a lascivious grin of approval while Dorian narrowed his eyes at her as she sat down.

"When you two are done with your main course, we can move on to dessert. Some people have the worst sense of timing. Or propriety."

Aida swallowed the piece of potato in her mouth before responding to him. "Excuse me, I seem to remember a million different nights going out clubbing with you only to find you later with some strange guy - or two - in the alley behind the -"

Dorian yanked on a lock of her hair childishly like he was her angry, older sister. "I'll thank you to reserve that memory for another occasion, cousin."

She was about to bring up another embarrassing detail - namely Dorian's 12 minute amateur sex scene floating around on certain gay porn websites when Cullen's knee affectionately rubbed against hers under the table, making her less angry.

Aida was going to take him home after dinner and fuck him again. And again.

Aida was going to give him her phone number this time.

Aida was too busy thinking about these details to see the crestfallen look on Varric's face across the table, and the rather victorious way Cullen was chewing his venison.

* * * * *

Sometime after 3:30 am, Aida rolled over in her sleep. Someone's phone was buzzing on the nightstand nearby. She reached over Cullen (who looked downright angelic in his slumber) and answered it automatically with her eyes half-closed, not fully remembering she was at his place and not hers.

"Hello? It's so late, who's this?" she mumbled into the phone.

There was a long pause - and something about it was rather chilling.

Aida glanced at the phone's screen - the number was from the posh area code where her father lived across town, and Cullen had it stored in his phone under one letter: L.
Aida winced. She probably should not have answered it - but why was his boss calling him in the middle of the night? The thought of his hand around her neck while he took her roughly from behind sent a vicious wave of jealousy and insecurity rolling through her body.

"Who is this? I wish to speak to Cullen." Aida heard the slur in her voice. The woman had been drinking. Aida thought fast -

"Oh, uh, wrong number, lady. G'night."

She hit the END CALL button and put his phone back down gently. As she predicted, it rang again. This time, she let it go to voicemail, hoping the cheap ruse had worked on the imperious woman.

Aida looked at her lover, deep in sleep. That punch of envy she had felt had been very real and very visceral. She brushed a golden curl off his forehead and lightly traced the scar at the corner of his lip with a fingertip. She did not want to share this man with anyone.

Chapter End Notes

Ze plot thickens!

I'll try to update it by the end of the week. I have some super telenovelas-style dramatics in store for you, dear readers. Leliana is not the only villain lurking in the wings.
Cullen figured she'd be gone by morning.

Even after their stolen moment in Bull's guest bathroom - which they blissfully continued between his sheets after the dinner party was over - he simply assumed Aida would vanish again much as she had the first time they had been together. Last night during the car ride home she had promised to give him her phone number but they had forgotten all about that as soon they had made it into his living room. This time though, Cullen was ready for disappointment - a feeling he was well acquainted with. A lot of different things had not worked out in his life - Aida was bound to be another one on the list.

He kept his eyes closed but let a hand creep out to feel for the pillow next to him.

"Oh, please don't move. You're ruining it..."

Cullen let one eyelid open. Aida was sitting in a chair nearby, wearing nothing, her legs demurely crossed and a large sketchpad across her thighs. She jabbed her pencil at him with a command - "Go back to how you were lying a second ago."

He was sprawled out on his stomach, sheets twisted up beneath him. He put his arm back where it had been and relaxed, listening to the sounds of her pencil against paper, with the occasional interruption of her eraser at work.

Aida purred at him. "You have no idea how beautiful you are. Stop fidgeting."
"I'm not, I'm just trying to get comfortable. And you only like me for my body."
"Perhaps."

A few frustrated noises later and he heard Aida turn the page. "I give up. Roll over. Let's see what the rest of you looks like."

Cullen smiled to himself before flipping over onto his back. He placed his arm on the pillow behind him, showing off the curve of his bicep, and positioned his leg in a way he hoped she liked, displaying one of his powerful thighs.

But she wasn't looking at the rest of his body. Aida's eyes were drawn right to his cock, resting heavy against his thigh.

"I wonder..."
"Wonder what."
"I wonder if I can make you hard by just looking at it."

Her eyes twinkled when she saw his manhood twinge and she licked her upper lip in an anticipatory manner. She kept sketching, her pencil moving with confidence - even as she eyes stayed trained in one place.
"Are you drawing all of me - or just a part of me?"
"You'll see soon enough."

Aida brushed her hair off her shoulders, exposing more of her full breasts to him. Cullen swallowed, trying to concentrate on something more neutral, like the spirals of her notebook, the beam of morning light on the wall behind her - but her eyes, her observant eyes feasting on the details of his body were as palpable as her magic fingertips. He found himself growing aroused just as she had teased, simply by her looking at him.

But Aida kept drawing.

"Are you alright, Ser? You seem to be in a state."
"I'm fine. You may continue."

There was a flush on her cheeks now as his manhood began to grow harder. The expression on her face told him that her desire for him was now ruining her concentration but then she had a counter strike to his display. She casually uncrossed her legs, and then opened them wider, making him swear to himself under his breath.

"You never play fair, Trevelyan."
"It wouldn't be any -"
"- fun if you played fair, yes, I remember."

Her pencil danced across the page even as her breathing changed and became more ragged at the sight of his arousal.

"How much longer, Aida."
"Art does not operate on a time table, Cullen."
"Other things do though."

When she looked back up at him, Cullen was grasping his cock and stroking it slowly - showing off now. Her mouth fell open a little.

"You're ruining my sketch."
"Maybe I'm making it better."

Aida stopped drawing and bit on the eraser end of her pencil, watching him. Now that she wasn't demanding he stay in a pose, Cullen let his other hand caress his chest before sweeping down his body. He pumped himself in his fist, thrusting a little, pushing his head back against his pillow. He closed his eyes, pretending he was alone - or pretending she had a camera. He concentrated on his pleasure and the sound of her breathing, until he heard her sketchbook land on the floor, followed by her pencil. When he opened his eyes she was on the bed, straddling him.

"You're not much of a muse - you're too distracting."

Aida replaced his hand with hers as she guided him into her, sitting down fully on his cock, making them both groan at the same time. She leaned forward, kissing him before whispering, "You're supposed to inspire me to draw, not inspire me to fuck you -"

Aida began riding him in earnest, sliding up and down his staff in an insistent, hungry rhythm. Cullen wanted to hold onto her hips but she grabbed his wrists and slammed them to the bed next to his head. "No, you lie there, pretty boy - and take it." She let go of his wrists experimentally, keeping her eyes locked on his. He obeyed her rule with a sly grin as Aida returned to undulating on top of him.
He watched her close her eyes and groan, swear, hiss and sigh, writhing and riding him, while he did absolutely nothing but stay aroused and rock hard for her. It was possibly the best beginning to any Sunday he could remember and he grinned from ear to ear - her eyes fluttered open and she saw his expression.

"What's - " She bounced on his cock harder...

"So..." She rolled her hips in a circle...

"Funny?" She leaned forward again, to press down on his wrists and bring her lips within inches of his.

Before she could react, Cullen scooped her up in his arms and rolled her to the mattress, now on top and still deeply seated within her pussy.

Between his own emphatic grunts and sharp thrusts of his hips that made her cry out louder, he managed to gasp out his response, "I'm just - having a marvelous - Sunday morning, that's all - ”

Cullen took two strong hands and put them on the back of her knees, pushing them back and apart, molding her into a tight little angle beneath him. He pulled out of her completely, making her whine and wiggle beneath him.

"You know what would make it better though?"

Aida shook her head at him with a pout, struggling against his grip a little but finding he was much too strong for her.

"Watching you come -" He sucked one nipple into his mouth, and then the next, before continuing - "...over and over again."

Cullen slid back into her with a rough push of his hips and began to rut her hard with unfettered fervor, hoping the neighbors downstairs could hear them. Aida gripped the back of his neck, holding on to him desperately. She began honoring him with a long string of colorful praise: he was a beast, an animal, her lord, her master, an angel with a heavenly cock and soft, perfect balls - and the best fuck she'd had in years - no, decades. He kept diving into her depths until he wiped all the words from her lips and she could only say one thing - please.

They climaxed at the same time, his forehead pressed to hers, the sweat on their brows mingling together. Cullen rolled off her with a long, satisfied sigh. He looked over at Aida and she was staring at the ceiling in wonder.

"So now that you've used me, I guess you're about to make up a cheap excuse to leave."

She turned on her side to look at him, a truly hurt look on her face.

"Is that what you think? You think I'm only interested in fucking you?"

"Between now and last night you've made several references to the fact that you only like my body and not what I have to say about anything."

"Have I? I suppose I have." She giggled to herself. "I'm sorry, I'm just a little overwhelmed. The kind of guys I usually date don't have - " She ran her fingertips up and down the ridges of his torso, counting to herself. "An 8 pack."

"Stop objectifying me, Trevelyan! How would I like it if you said, you're nothing but a heavy pair of soft tits with a bouncy little ass and an even tighter pussy?"
Aida snorted in her endearing, down to earth way. "Fine by me. Nobody's ever said that to me before, so..."

Cullen rolled onto his side to face her. "That's because all the men you've known have been fools. Ungrateful fools. They were handed a treasure and they didn't know what to fucking do with it." He took one of her hands in his and pressed a kiss to her fingers.

Aida laughed again, both pleased and amused. To his delight, she wove her fingers between his instead of pulling away. "Rutherford, you certainly are a big, chivalrous, mountain of muscle. What do you want to do today? Do you have to work?"

"Do you?"
"Nope. We have all Sunday to ourselves. So, pick something!"

Cullen said the first thing that popped into his head. "I want to walk around the city and hold your hand and let people see me with you."

Aida blushed and smiled - the exact result he had hoped for.

* * * * *

They took Barkley to the park and let him roll around in the grass while they sat on a park bench and people-watched. Aida made up stories about people walking by, some of which were preposterously raunchy enough to make him laugh so hard she had to tell him to keep it down, he was making a scene. In the pauses between their banter, they just sat together, his arm around her shoulder, her hand resting comfortably on his thigh. In that lovely, shared silence Aida found herself thinking about her relationship with Samson. She realized now he never wanted to see her during the day, he was a strictly fuck and run sort of guy. She hadn't known how simply sweet it could be to sit next to someone on a bench in the park, touching but not talking. She looked up at Cullen who was gazing at her with that glimmer of devotion that had made her nervous before.

Aida told herself to stop being nervous. "I'm hungry, are you? I didn't get a Rutherford-made breakfast this morning."

"I am definitely hungry. What do you want to eat?"
"What do YOU want to eat?"
"Stop it."
"No you stop it!Alright fine, I'll pick. Let's find a place with good Bloody Marys and pancakes and bacon please."

After a hearty brunch during which Aida learned exactly how much food a mountain of muscle and chivalry could eat (a tall stack of johnnycakes, an enormous bacon and cheese omelette plus the half of hers she couldn't finish, a heap of hash browns covered in hot sauce and four cups of black coffee), he insisted he take her to the boutique where she had bought her dress from the night before, the one he had spilled wine on.

"Cullen, you don't have to buy me a new dress, it was an accident - that lead to a pleasant night and an even more pleasant Sunday."

She let him lead them toward the neighborhood where the mall was located. "Aida, I insist, I insisted last night even before you parted your incredibly hot thighs for me."

She nudged him hard for saying that as a woman and her two children passing by heard every word
he said. They got to the main entrance of the shopping center and then saw the depressing words on
the door - no dogs. Aida knelt down to pet Barkley all over. "Oh, how could they discriminate
against you, look at that face, just look at you." The dog tried to knock her over so he could sit down
on her - one of his standard signs of affection - but Cullen helped her to her feet in time.

"There, your plans have been foiled. Why don't we walk to my favorite gelato place nearby? If you
have still have room to eat anything..."

"No, Trevelyan. You're not getting out of this so easily."

Cullen took out his credit card but Aida crossed her arms in defiance. "You're going to go in there,
buy a replacement for the dress - whether you buy the same one or a new one, it doesn't matter to
me..."

He leaned in closer now. She could smell his cologne and better yet, the scent of his natural skin, a
scent that turned her on in an incredibly primal way. Aida almost trembled out of desire for him as he
whispered right in her ear. "And buy something to surprise me. Anything. I don't care how much it
costs."

* * * * *

That night, back at his condo, Cullen sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for Aida to come out of the
bathroom wearing whatever it was she bought in the mall. His imagination supplied him with a few
possibilities - something tiny, black and lacy. Something pink and see-through. A sky blue satin
corset. A pair of red high heels and nothing else. It had to be something tiny because she came out of
the mall with only a new frock, claiming the surprise was small enough to fit in her purse.

Aida came out of the bathroom, wearing one of his old t-shirts. She was freshly showered, her raven-
black hair wet and twisted into a knot at the nape of her neck.

Cullen gave her a disappointed huff. "Oh. I was was hoping for something a little - less out of my
own closet."

She stopped him by putting a hand up - keeping one hand behind her back. She approached him
shyly and then sat down on his knee. She handed him a toothbrush, still in its package, a ribbon tied
around it.

"What - what the hell is this?"

He watched her swallow, clearly nervous.

"It's a toothbrush. I would like to leave it here, at your place...for me to use. That is - if you... don't
mind?"

Cullen felt his heart pounding.

Aida was asking him for more. She was letting him into her life and asking to be let into his.

Their lips met and he tossed the toothbrush onto a nearby armchair before wrapping his arms around
her and pulling her down to the mattress beneath him. He put two hands on either side of her head
and looked down at her, lust beginning to creep into her eyes.

"Of course I don't mind."
Chapter Notes

Lots of story and #CullenSmut in the middle.

Cullen walked into the courtyard at City Hall on Monday morning to the sound of applause from his coworkers - although Varric's clapping was a little on the sarcastic side.

"You owe me 200 gold sovereigns, Tethras."
"Aw come on, you weren't being serious, were you, Curly? That bet was just to spur you on, inspire you. I knew you needed that extra push."

Blackwall raised an eyebrow at him as he rolled himself a morning cigarette. "You look remarkably more relaxed than I've seen you in decades, Cullen."

Cullen's eyes grew wide and serious. "She left a toothbrush at my place."

His friends all issued sounds of legitimate surprise.

"I think I want to marry this girl."

Now his coworkers held up hands in protest and issued statements of caution to him. "Hey, slow down there, buddy, you just got started!"

Cullen felt that goofy grin spreading across his face again. "She makes me laugh. She's got magic in her hands. She can drink and swear like a sailor but she looks like a saint."

Iron Bull took a sip of his coffee and gave Cullen a saucy look. "A saint in the streets, an insatiable nympho in the sheets - or a guest bathroom will do, right?"

He had his eyes narrowed and a finger jabbed toward his friend, a retort prepared, when Cassandra interrupted them by walking right through their break area.

"8 am briefing. Let's go, we've had a very serious security threat over the weekend."

The tone in her voice obliterated their discussion and the men fell in line behind the Nightingale's chief of staff as she lead them to the meeting. Cullen and his staff found themselves crammed in a corner in a crowded conference room, surrounded by representatives from the police and fire departments, senior city council members, and some very stern characters from Fereldan Homeland Security. Leliana looked pale and shaken while Cassandra began the briefing.

"Over the weekend the Mayor received a video via email from an encrypted source - it contains a death threat from none other than Thedas' number one most wanted criminal, Corypheus - leader of the terrorist cell, the Venitori Independent State. We have since confirmed that it is real."

The lights dimmed and the video played on a monitor on the wall. The twisted visage of the vengeful magister came into focus as he read his list of demands followed by the usual ramblings of a mad man - elven inferiority, the dissolution of all national borders, and the reinstatement of a magocracy
to rule over Thedas. He punctuated his remarks by holding up a picture of Leliana at a photo op, Cullen at her back and the rest of his security team flanking her protectively. Cullen made immediate eye contact with Blackwall, the only man on his team with a child to think of - they were all at risk now, possible collateral damage just by standing within feet of her.

Corypheus ended the video by looking into the camera. "Blasted Nightingale - as figurehead of one of the most sinful cities in Thedas, I will make you pay for your support of the suppression of mage rights and the weakening of bloodlines by allowing a slave race to live among us. Mark my words, Chantry whore, before you seek higher office - I will clip your wings, and your blood will make my blade sing."

The lights came back on and the room was full of anxious murmurs. Corypheus had gassed innocents on his own soil, blown up a commercial jet, and mailed deadly chemicals to government buildings in Orlais. Scarier yet - his bloody tactics were only drawing more supporters to his cause. The rest of the meeting passed in a blur for Cullen. This new development was going to keep him glued to Leliana's side more than he wanted to be, until he could hire more help. Cullen and his captains were going to join rotating members of the HPD for 24 hour protection - and it meant two of them would have to sleep under her roof at the mayor's mansion until Corypheus was captured or she won her Senate seat, making her personal security fall under a new staff that would join her in Denerim.

Four captains dividing up seven nights a week - it meant he would be away from his condo half the time. Barkley would need to be boarded, something the free-spirited beast always hated. But worse yet, this turn of events was going to put a strain on his new relationship with Aida. Aida, with the trust issues, commitment phobia - and voracious sex drive.

He was thinking about her toothbrush with the sea foam green handle as everyone left the meeting room around him, until Cassandra interrupted his reverie. "Cullen, the Mayor wishes to see you alone - of course."

Leliana's unwanted attentions toward him had been noticed among the higher ranking members of Leliana's staff and it earned him a lot of sympathy.

Cassandra lowered her voice with concern as she continued. "Be reassuring, but you know - don't let her touch you."

* * * * *

Cullen entered the Mayor's elegant wood-paneled office that had a breathtaking view of downtown Haven. She was standing in a dark corner near her bar cart, pouring herself a bourbon.

"Would you like a drink, Cullen?"
"It's 9:30 in the morning."
"I suppose it is, but I've had a rough weekend. It's been a long time since someone threatened to behead me."

Cullen stood with rigid posture, his hands crossed in front of him, keeping his eyes trained on the painting hanging behind her desk. It was a still life depicting an empty bird cage with an open door, sitting on a table next to other ominous symbols - a mysterious letter on parchment, a dagger with blood on its blade, a half burned candle illuminating the scene. It was Leliana, in painting form.

"I promise my team will keep you safe, Mayor. I am going to hire more staff and we are coordinating our efforts with the Haven PD and Homeland Security."
She crossed the room to stand in front of him, a hand on her throat as she though she were thinking of her demise.

"I'm scared, Cullen. Have you ever seen anyone beheaded before?"

Cullen did not make eye contact with her nor did he answer. He had seen worse than beheadings. Through his tears he had seen his friends, fellow soldiers, down on their knees begging for their lives, and their screams still woke him at night. They had roused Aida too.

Aida. Just thinking of her name kept him centered - even as the Nightingale reached out to caress his wrist.

"I do wish you'd reconsider the amount of nights you can stay at my mansion, I feel safer when you are at my side. I know I am protected around your boys, and they're nothing but gentlemen, but - "

She swept her other hand up his arm. "...your presence offers me a special kind of comfort they cannot provide."

Cullen knew from past experience in this same situation that if he responded too defensively too quickly it often set off Leliana's temper and he had to be fast to dodge her expensive whisky glasses. Instead he had learned to stay still and say nothing, as though he were dealing with a wild animal. He kept his eyes on the painting behind her desk, counting the bars on the bird cage, knowing if he waited long enough -

The phone on Leliana's desk made a beep and Cassandra's voice interrupted Leliana's moment. "Mayor, I have your campaign manager on line one, he says it's urgent."

"Thank you, Cassandra," she answered in a terse voice. She waited until her chief of staff got off the phone before looking up at Cullen, hoping he'd look down at her with those sweet and golden brown eyes. When he would not oblige her, Leliana curled her upper lip at him in a frustrated snarl. Instead, she settled for ghosting her palm right across the front of his pants.

Cullen took a military step back and turned around, heading for the door. "Blackwall and Varric are stationed right outside your door should you need anything. I'll leave you to your call, Mayor."

When Cullen passed Cassandra's desk a moment later he was walking so fast Cassandra could not ask him how it went - although she could guess by the tightness in his jaw.

* * * * *

Aida barely had a chance to breathe all day, the ER had been a swirl of drama and sometimes when she walked out into the crisp night air outside of the hospital she felt numb, wrapped and packed in cotton. The only thing that made her feel again was a few stiff drinks administered swiftly and in a row. She was trudging to her truck when someone stepped out from between two parking spaces, startling her badly.

"Cullen! What are you doing here! Maker, you scared me!" She shoved him playfully. His tie was loosened around his neck, his hair rumpled from a long day.

"Aida, I wanted to talk to you, right away. You look wonderful, by the way."

Aida looked down at herself. She was wearing grubby old sweatpants and a t-shirt, the casual gear she normally changed into after getting out of her scrubs.
"Alright, I'll accept that compliment, as untrue as it is as the moment. What's wrong, Cullen?"

"Pick a bar, let's go talk."
"Uh oh, you breaking up with me already?"

Cullen put two hands on her shoulders and looked at her squarely. "Don't even joke about that. No, just - some stuff's come up, and I wanted to explain." He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and gave her a tired but tender smile.

"Stuff? Sounds bad. OK, well, I'm not really dressed to go out... I have an idea though, get in."

Cullen climbed into her sturdy, old truck - a vehicle he hadn't imagined her driving, not with that last name of hers. He had expected something more ladylike or swanky, but he knew he was being reductive. Aida was more than what she looked like in a tight lacy dress or how she grew up - she was brassy and confident and unpretentious. She drove them to a liquor store on a corner and told him to stay put while she ran inside. She came out with a grocery bag that she passed to him and then got behind the wheel again.

He looked in the bag and gave her a lopsided grin. "Cheap bottle of whiskey, Trevelyan?"

"Well, I don't know what kind of news you're going to give me, so..."
"Where are we going to drink this fine ambrosia?"
"It's a surprise."

Aida smirked at him and changed gears. Cullen put his hand on top of hers on the gear shift, echoing her gesture from their first date night. Aida loved that he seemed to remember these little things about the times they had spent together.

She navigated them to the north side of town, cutting through a desolate industrial area.

"Is this where you dump the bodies, Aida?"
"Depending on what you're going to tell me, I suppose you might find out."

They started heading up into the hills now, down a gravel road that wove through a grove of pine trees. Cullen noted there were plenty of tracks from other cars and lots of foot prints too. The road curved back to the edge of the hillside, revealing a stunning view of the entire city - where there were lots of cars lined up along the the curb.

"Welcome to 'Third Base', Cullen."

The windows on quite a few of the other vehicles were fogged up - and one minivan parked a little farther away from the others was notably rocking. Cullen grinned at her. "Aida, how did you know about this place?"

"We had to pump a kid's stomach a few days ago, the kid was drunk and drugged up on pills stolen from mommy's medicine cabinet. When the cops pressed him about where he had been partying, he said up here. Standard business for kids from Haven High, I guess. I asked him for directions just to see the view."

Aida chose a quieter spot down near where the road ended and parked. She reached under her seat to adjust her seat so she was more comfortable. She raised an eyebrow at him, signalling to him to open the bottle. Cullen passed it to her and she raised it to him in a toast before handing it back to him.

"Well, what's going on?"
Cullen described his day at work, how the city was under attack, his boss an assassination target. And then he moved on to the parts that made Aida's insides twist with worry. He would be home less, and sleeping under the same roof with a woman who had been plotting and scheming to lure him into her bed since she had hired him at the beginning of her mayoral term. Aida remembered something.

"She called you in the middle of the night on Saturday, after Dorian's party. I'm - really sorry Cullen, I answered it. I was half asleep, I thought it was my phone."

Cullen grabbed her hand that wasn't holding the bottle of whiskey. "She means nothing to me. I just wanted to tell you right away, I didn't want you to doubt me. I know because of Samson the Cunt -. Aida choked on her whiskey a little, in laughter. " - I know he played you, Aida. I heard what you were yelling at him that night when you threw him out. I'd never do that to you. I didn't want you to doubt me, not for a second."

Aida didn't doubt him at all. She leaned over and pressed her lips to his.

"But Cullen. Why not just quit? Or - why not sue her? That's sexual harassment. And if others have seen her..." He took the bottle from her for a sip. "Aida, it's complicated. She was the only person who would hire me and my friends after we came back from Kirkwall with drug problems and PTSD. She gave me a second chance. This other stuff, her touching me and the invitations, it sort of came out of nowhere, and I didn't know how to make it stop."

Aida studied his strong profile illuminated only by the dim lights of the city below. "I'm just biding my time. Maker willing, she'll get her senate seat and I won't follow her to Denerim." She rubbed the back of his neck, finding a knot and pressing on it with her strong fingers. He dropped his head back against the head rest with a sigh, before turning to look at her.

"She's a dangerous woman, Aida. I joked about you hiding bodies - but with her, it's no joke."

Aida blanched. "And you're going to go and live with this woman?"

Cullen passed the bottle back to her. "It won't be permanent and just four nights a week until I can hire more guys. I'll be back at the condo - with you, and Barkley, soon enough. Besides, I won't be living with her. More like, living in the guest house and having to listen to Varric's stories every morning. The ones I've heard for the last ten years."

Aida screwed the cap on the whiskey bottle. "It's not fair. She may not get to have you, but she's taking you away from me. And I was just getting used to you."

He was about to respond when she turned around in slipped between the two front seats into the back seat of her truck. He turned around to look at her. "Aida?"

She patted the seat next to her, her cheeks a little flushed from the drink.

"Get back here. Make out with me like I'm your high school girlfriend."

Cullen laughed, glancing at the other cars nearby. "Which one?"

Aida snorted in delight. "Oh, bragging are we? Were you popular?"

Rather than inelegantly wedge himself into the back seat, Cullen exited the truck and sauntered around the front of her truck with a grin of anticipation on his face. He opened the door next to Aida and sat down next to her, wrapping her in his arms and pushing her down flat onto the
back seat. She pulling his shirt out of his pants and running her hands up his back while Cullen lavished kisses up and down her neck.

"What kind of guy were you in high school?"
"Trevelyan, we're busy doing something, aren't we?"
"Come on, just tell me."

Cullen's hand slid up her t-shirt, fumbling for the back of her bra.

"I was on the rugby team."

Aida squirmed under him, very pleased. "Are you kidding me? That's so hot..."

He got her bra unhooked and rolled one of her nipples between his rough fingers, coaxing a sweet groan out of her. "What about you Aida, were you a honors student? Lead cheerleader?"

"Really? Those are your first two guesses?"

Cullen pulled her shirt up, lowering his mouth onto one of her nipples, making her purr and drag her fingers through his hair. Before moving to her other nipple, he prompted her again, "Go on, what were you like in high school?"

"A smoking under the bleachers, talking back to all the teachers kind of girl."
"Oh, I used to be too scared to talk to girls like you..."

Aida worked on undoing his belt and pushing his pants down his thighs as they tongue-wrestled and groped with a growing sense of urgency. She grasped him through his underwear, making him hiss with desire. "Aida, are we really going to do this here?"

"Come on, jock, give it to me."
"Alright, my little rebel."

They pushed their clothes aside as much as they had to, Aida giggling and excited now as Cullen freed his cock from his underwear. Even in the darkness in the back of the truck, she could see how rock hard he was as he took himself in hand and looked down at her, her clothes askew, her panties looped around one ankle.

"Aida, do you realize we've had sex now in more than a few cramped spaces?"
"Stop talking, Cullen - kids don't come to Third Base to talk about reoccurring motifs in their relationships."

Aida tilted her hips up, welcoming his length as Cullen inched into her tight sheath. He pushed forward until he was buried deep and she writhed underneath him.

"Cullen, please -"  
"The look you get on your face, when you're impaled on my cock, plus the sound of your begging - Aida, it makes me go crazy."

He braced himself, one hand hanging on to the back of the front seat and the other hand pressed against the back window, and then he began to rut her hard, making her swear and sigh and the eyes roll back in her head. Their heavy breathing fogged up her windows now and his athletic thrusts were making the truck's shocks squeak beneath them.

Aida pressed her greedy fingers to his hard, smooth chest, her eyes locked onto his. "Oh baby, it's so good. More, more, more - "
Cullen slipped his index finger into her mouth, groaning when Aida pursed her lips and sucked on it, rolling it around on her tongue. She had learned that he seemed to like it whenever she sought to please herself while he did the same, so she held on to one breast while the other hand worked her clit. The display worked, he began to fuck her harder, jamming her into the corner of the back seat.

"Come on baby, come for me -"
"I never want to come, I want it to last -"

Something attracted Cullen's attention out the window for a moment but she reached up and slapped him - a little hard too - to regain his focus.

"Hey, pay attention while you're fucking me!"
"Trevelyan, you little slut, I'll make you pay for that -"

He pulled out of her entirely, dropping to his knees as best as he could in the cramped back seat. Before she could protest, he sucked her clit into his mouth, making her buck so hard she almost knocked him out cold with her pelvic bone.

"Aida!"
"Sorry, jeeze, I didn't know what you were doing - but keep doing it, I'm so close -"

He began to eat her pussy with gusto, savoring it like an overripe peach, slurping and moaning against her wetness, and then pushed her over the edge when he slid two thick digits into her cunt as deep as he could. Aida slammed her palms against his shoulders, her orgasm making her howl. As her pleasure raced like a wildfire through her veins, Cullen pushed his staff back into her, pumping his hips like a machine until he shot his seed into her so hard his vision went white.

"Maker's. Fucking. Breath."

He collapsed on her, heavy and sweaty. Aida grabbed a handful of his hair, roughly, possessively, pulling his face off her shoulder so she could look at him.

"I demand to have a picture of you on the rugby team."

He broke into one of those grins of his that made her feel like the sun was shining on her face - but then a knock on the window startled the smiles off both their faces. Aida squeaked while pulling up her pants and pulling down her t-shirt. Cullen tucked himself back into his pants and reached over the front seat to roll down the window.

A police officer shined his flashlight right into Cullen's eyes.

"Wow, another set of grown-ass adults. You guys don't have a better place you could be doing this?"
"Barris, is that you?"
"Rutherford? Come on, buddy, you should know better!"

The two men laughed together, Cullen reaching through the window for a handshake now.

"Aida, this is an old friend of mine, Delrin Barris. He's a sergeant in the Haven PD now but we did a tour together in the Hissing Wastes seven or eight years ago."

Aida kept readjusting her clothes until she was modest again. "Yeah, hi, nice to meet you."
"Aida's an ER nurse at Haven General."
"Cool, cool. You still working for the mayor's office, Cullen?"

"Honey, it's late, can you bro down with your friend some other time, please?"
"Did you hear that, Barris? She called me 'honey'. We just started seeing each other, but, I think - "
"Cullen!"

The two men chuckled again, and shook hands one more time. "Alright, we'll get going officer. Sorry to be a bother."

Barris' took on a phony, official tone. "You kids haven't been drinking or smoking any of that reefer tonight, have you?"

Cullen and Aida answered in unison, like good little high school students. "No officer."

"You get going then, and have a good night. Don't let me catch you two up here again."

* * * * *

The next night, Aida drove Cullen to the Mayor's mansion so he could relieve Bull as part of their new 24/7 shifts. Cullen and Aida held hands as they walked up to the front gate.

"Be safe, Cullen. Call me if you need anything."
"No, you call me if you need anything. Are you sure you're up to taking care of Barkley?"
"I don't like to think of him all locked up when he could be staying with me. Just like I don't like to think about you, here."

Aida spotted Bull heading toward the gate, his overnight bag in hand.

"Kiss me, Cullen."

Cullen looked over her shoulder right at a security camera. She knew what he was worried about.

"Let her see you kiss me."

He dropped his bag on the ground and wrapped her in his arms. He gave her a swoon-worthy kiss, ignoring the sound of Leliana's gates sliding open behind them and the approach of Bull's footsteps. When he pulled back from her, her eyes were still closed and her lips pursed as though she expected him to kiss her a few more times. She opened her eyes in frustration, seeing the twinkle in his eyes.

"We're going to talk on the phone - a lot."
"OK."
"You're going to text me, all the time."
"Yes, Aida."
"Facetime too?"
"Of course."
"I'll pick you up in four days."
"I look forward to it, Trevelyan."

Aida surprised him by cupping his manhood through his jeans. She whispered the next part, so Bull did not hear. "And if you have to, the next time that boss of yours tries to touch this, you tell her it belongs to me."

Cullen had to swallow before answering her. "Yes, babydoll. Whatever you say."

"And I like it when you call me 'babydoll'. See you Saturday."

Cullen and Bull bumped fists as they passed each other in the driveway. Aida was about to turn and
walk back to her truck when Bull called out to her - "Come on, babydoll, give us a ride to Dorian's, will ya?"

Cullen watched Bull climb into her truck, the two of them trading sassy remarks. Aida paused before pulling away, to touch her fingertips to her lips in a sweet farewell gesture to him.

He sighed before walking deeper into Leliana's compound, heading for the guest bungalow.

* * * * *

Leliana's security cameras had captured every moment of Cullen and Aida's goodbye, although the feed didn't have any sound. She had been able to spy on them without having to get up from the desk in her home office.

The Mayor's eyes narrowed as she observed Aida's busy hands and the sickening, smitten look plastered on Cullen's face as he watched her walk away.

She didn't know how to do it, but she had to destroy this romance before it could proceed any further. Cullen was hers, even if he refused to succumb to her advances. He was her watchdog, her loyal lion, her shield. Leliana had grand ambitions and Cullen factored into all of them.

This had to stop. She was going to make it stop.
Three Blinking Dots

Chapter Notes

Longish and story-driven until the end when we all get to sit down together to enjoy some #CullenSmut together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

On Friday afternoon on their day off, Sera and Aida decided to take Barkley down to the park and pack up a picnic to take with them, which consisted of two bottles of wine, a loaf of bread, a little wedge of cheese, and not much else.

"Sera, we're going to get hungry at some point, we always do."
"Eh, there's always a hot dog vendor. Or a churro guy. There's always someone. Or Barkley can hunt for us, steal other people's picnics, right boy?"
"Don't tell him that, he's really smart. Seriously. I think he understands everything I say. Watch this."

Aida put two plastic cups into her tote bag and then turned to face the Mabari who was chewing on one of Cullen's old slippers.

"You shouldn't eat Daddy's shoe, he wouldn't like that."

He slowed down his chewing and looked at her, but didn't drop the shoe.

"Barkley, what if I don't like that you're chewing on Daddy's shoe?"

He put the shoe down very slowly and in an obviously begrudging manner.

"Watch this too. Is Auntie Sera crazy? Is she crazy?"

He barked six times in a row, so loud the girls winced a little.

"See, I told you he can understand. Let's get going before we lose all the sunlight."

They strolled down to the park and found a grassy patch where they could lay on a blanket and soak up some sun and keep an eye on Barkley's adventures. While Sera played around on Inquisitr looking for new conquests, Aida read a long piece of journalism about Corypheus in the Denerim Times. It was full of details that didn't make her feel better about Cullen's work, but she couldn't put it down and sometimes interrupted Sera's activities to read a particularly chilling passage to her.

"You're going to drive yourself crazy with that shite. Give it a break. Check it out, those shirtless guys are playing Ultimate Frisbee over there, don't you like that yeah?"

"Hmm, yes, sure." Aida glanced at them but returned to her article.

"You've only been technically 'dating him' for a few days and you've already become one of those boring monogamous people. I thought after Samson you'd want to be slutty, you know. Spread it around a bit! Have some fun!"

Aida put down her newspaper now, returning to her cup of wine. "I am having fun! And I am being
sluttty - with one guy. I can't keep my hands off of him and I think about his cock ten times a day, alright. Are you happy now?"

"I guess. As happy as I could be what with you being the wrong sexual orientation and all."

Aida tore off a piece of bread and folded some brie into it, handing it to the disappointed elf. "Sorry, darling. If I had been on your team, we'd be married by now and raising two or three poorly disciplined brats."

Sera shuddered, jamming the bread into her mouth. "No babies! Not even in just talkin' about it, luv."

They grinned at each other, and it was a carefree moment Aida would never forget - because of what followed.

_Ten blocks away, the top three stories of City Hall exploded._

They couldn't see the building from their vantage point but everyone in the park came to a complete stop. Aida whistled to Barkley who darted to her side in a second.

"What was that? That didn't sound good!"

Sera put a hand on Aida's shoulder. "Stay here, I'll just jog over there and come right back, alright?"

She watched Sera run toward the edge of the park, joining other curious citizens who were peering north toward downtown - then there was another terrifying boom, making everyone duck and hit the ground. Sera sprinted back toward their blanket.

"Pack up, we have to go. Quickly now."

They scrambled, trying not to panic, shoving everything back into her tote bag and putting Barkley back on his leash.

"What's going on, Sera? Did you find out?"

Sera's face was grim, she wouldn't answer. Aida grabbed her arm, hard.

"Tell me."

"Aida, it looks like it was an explosion at City Hall. We should go back to your place, drop off Barkley, and head to the ER, they'll need all hands on deck."

Aida felt faint. She sank to her knees on the grass.

"No, no, we don't know anything yet, you can't act that way right now, we have to move, come on!"

They grabbed their belongings and started walking back at a brisk pace to her place. There was chaos on the streets already, people standing everywhere trying to call loved ones on cell phones, standing in the doorways of bars and restaurants watching breaking news on any available television. Sera didn't let Aida linger, pulling her along, trying to keep her going.

"Sera, please - "

"If we stop to watch, you're going to start sobbing, and we don't know anything yet! Do you even know Big Boy was even at City Hall today?"

Aida didn't know for sure, but she fought back the tears at the corners of her eyes. As they waited at the next light, Sera squeezed her hand.
"You must be brave, and we must think of our duty first. We'll get down to the hospital and then we'll know more. Right? Nod at me, Aida, tell me you hear me."

Aida nodded mutely. Across the street from them waiting on the opposite corner was a woman sobbing, her cell phone pressed to her ear.

Aida tried to divorce herself from this moment.

This is not happening. That woman over there - is not me. Whoever she is crying over, it's not Cullen.

This will be just another normal day in the ER.

* * * * *

Back at her condo, Sera would not allow Aida to turn on the TV. Aida gave her a spare set of scrubs and threw on her own before making sure Barkley had enough water and food and toys to preoccupy him while she was away. She stood in her doorway, looking at him on her bed.

"Barks, you stay here. We won't worry until we have something to actually worry about, okay mister?"

Sera called out from the living room. "Hey, I'm almost ready to go, just let me go to the bathroom, OK?"

As soon as Aida heard the bathroom door shut, she whipped out her phone and texted Cullen: Rutherford, are you okay?

She didn't wait for a response. She sent a second message - Please please please tell me you're okay

Three dots appeared letting her know he was responding and she watched them flicker in the corner of the screen - but no message appeared. The dots stayed blinking at her until Sera popped her head around the corner.

"Come on, let's go."

Aida slid the phone back in her pocket and followed her friend. The dots were a good thing right? Maybe he had been trying to text her back, but someone interrupted.

She pushed aside her next dark thought. Maybe he had been texting her back - when someone took the phone away from him. And this time she did not think of the Mayor, with that perpetually lethal look in her eye, but of the man from her article in the park - the insane man with the face twisted from red lyrium and revenge and ambition.

* * * * *

Sera and Aida headed toward the hospital only to find the entire city block around the facility blocked off and swamped with chaos. They had to fight their way through regular citizens hoping to hear from loved ones and a relentless pack of journalists and TV crews just to get up to the police check point where their IDs let them through. Throughout the ordeal, Aida had glanced at her phone over and over again.

Three blinking dots, still no message.
The girls headed for the ER and found a war zone - but what made Aida gasp with horror was not the sight of bloody wounds or missing limbs. The victims of the blast were covered in shards of red lyrium. The bomb Corypheus set off was not intended to kill but to maim - and drive people mad.

Dr. Vivienne came zooming around a corner, flanked by Dorian and other nurses.

"Come along, Trevelyan, it's going to be a long night - and thanks for coming in right away. It shows character and dedication."

Aida didn't have time to tell her she had her own selfish, romantic reasons for wanting to work tonight, namely that she wanted a chance to check the hospital's database to see if Cullen had been admitted. She tried to keep up with Dorian's long strides as they headed toward the ward that was dedicated to the bombing victims.

"Dorian, have you heard from Bull? I'm so worried - "
"I haven't, darling, and I'm worried too, but we have more important things to tend to at the moment."
"But - "

Dorian stopped her for a moment in the busy hallway, hands on her shoulders, looking down at her with deep seriousness.

"Listen, we can't begin to think about what their day has been like or what they've had to do today or if they're in pieces all over City Hall - " Aida held back a sob at this grisly remark. "We just have to keep going today. I know I barely know the man, but I think Cullen would not like you sitting around weeping in a corner over him. Alright?"

Aida sniffled a little before answering with a small nod. "Back to work."

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It took the news another hour to confirm that the Mayor had not been at City Hall during the time of the blast, but across town at a campaign fundraiser. She and Cassandra and her other advisors had spent that hour at the safe house bickering about how to handle the situation. Leliana had been meeting with representatives and potential donors from some shadowy big banks from Denerim and this was not in keeping with the populist tone of her Senate campaign.

Cullen looked out the window of Leliana's cabin in the woods, ten miles away from Haven. He couldn't help but think of Aida and her frantic texts to him. He didn't have a chance to respond - Cassandra had taken all of their cell phones the second they had heard about the blast. She claimed it was for security measures but they all knew it was about controlling the news cycle and making sure none of them told their loved ones they were safe. Leliana was bending the tragedy to make herself look like an almost-martyr. It was a move that made Cullen queasy - from what he had overheard scores of people had been sickened with red lyrium in the blast. To use this moment as a political opportunity showed him the depths of Leliana's cunning and ambition.

Varric sidled up to him at the window.

"You hear when we get to leave?"
"No, not even when I press my ear right to the door. The spiders are being very secretive while they weave their webs today, more so than ever."

Cullen cracked his knuckles in frustration. "At least give us back our cell phones."
"I know you're thinking about your painter. I doubt she's jumped off the 12th floor out of sorrow for
you, so stop your worrying."

Cullen looked down at the dwarf.

"Varric, I'm not worried about Aida being worried. I'm worried about her being angry."

* * * * *

On Saturday, Aida drove to the Mayor's mansion with Barkley riding shotgun. It was what they had planned earlier and despite the chaos of the last day, Aida held out hope that Cullen would be waiting for her on the other side of the gates, ready to apologize on his knees for not texting her to let her know he was alive. But Aida could not even get into Leliana's neighborhood, there was a road block in place and they would not let her pass, even when she told a little lie, calling Cullen her fiancee. The police officers who turned her away refused to tell her a single thing and advised her to go home. There was a touch of condescension in their remarks, as if she were simply a crazy girlfriend who could not bare to wait to hear from her man.

The blinking dots had long disappeared and were replaced by nothing but silence - until she got a phone call from an unlisted number at 12:30 am, three days later.

"Aida - can you hear me?"

There was a lot of noise in the background - and it sounded like Cullen was at a rowdy bar.

"CULLEN, you're alive!"
"Aida, I'm - "

A voice interrupted them and she sounded like a flirty bar waitress. "Hey good lookin', did you want another beer?"

Cullen brushed her off quickly and returned to speaking to Aida.

"Where ARE you, Cullen?"
"I can't talk long, the other guys want to use the pay phone - we had to hike into town from Leliana's safe house near Lake Calenhad. They took away our phones but going this long without talking to - our loved ones - was too much."

Aida felt a flutter in her chest at being described thus - although she was still very much angry with him.

"Cullen, what do you want? For four fucking days I thought you were dead. Now you're calling me from some shit-kicker redneck bar in the woods in the middle of the night."

"Aida, please don't be mad at me, there was nothing I could - "
"Whatever, I don't believe that - "
"I didn't do this on purpose, do you think I wanted there to be a terrorist attack that caused my boss to panic and lock us all up together while - "

Aida spoke over him. "I'm so angry at you I can barely breathe. I went to work and looked for your corpse among the bomb victims. That's what I did when I didn't hear from you."

"Aida, I want to see you, and I can come home tomorrow - will you please pick me up?"
"No. Find another way home. I'm busy."
"But I haven't even told you when you can pick me up -"
"I'm BUSY. Do you need me to spell it out for you?"

"What about Barkley, can I come get him when I get home?"
"Your dog-walker is scheduled to come get him at eleven. When he's done walking him and giving
him a bath he can drop him off at your place instead of mine."

Aida knew she was being cruel but the last five days had been - beyond lonely and filled with
despair.

"Aida, you won't see me then?"
"No, Cullen. Good night."

She hung up.

* * * * *

Cullen put the phone back on the hook and turned to look at his friends.

"She - is super. Fucking. Pissed at me."

Varric handed him a beer and knocked their bottles together. "You expected as much, remember?"

Blackwall stepped up to the phone next. "I'm sure she will calm down soon, Cullen."

Bull offered some cheap advice. "Buy her stuff. Girls love it when you buy them things to show
them how scared you are that they'll never fuck you again."

Cullen pulled the label off his beer, confused and frustrated. He had hoped to be wrapped in her arms
in 24 hours and now it seemed like that was definitely not going to happen.

The next day, Leliana and her staff heard from Ferelden Homeland Security that it was safe enough
to return to the city. Upon their arrival, all of the security team was relieved of their duties by Cullen's
new emergency hires. Blackwall ended up giving Cullen a ride back his condo. They rode in
comfortable silence, the two of them never being big on unnecessary conversation. As soon as they
pulled up outside of his building though, Cullen's reserve had broken.

"Blackwall, you've got to help me, you're a married man - you must know how to calm down an
incredibly angry woman."

He put the car in park and thought about it for a moment, stroking his beard.

"Well, every lady is different, that's for sure. Josie is a lot different from the Orlesian lasses I once
knew. They'd be the kinds to take Iron Bull's pretty presents and offer forgiveness right away. This
Trevelyan of yours is not going to fall for a dozen roses. In fact, I'd wager that would make her
angrier than she was before."

"Tell me something I don't know, please."

"I can't be certain but I think she's mad at you because this recent ordeal we've been through might
have made her realize how strongly she feels about you. I know things are just beginning in your
relationship but - perhaps her own feelings scared her a little."

Cullen looked up at him, beginning to feel a little better.
"So, what can I do to make her...less scared about how she feels about me?"

"You can't really control someone's feelings, Cullen. Let that be a big lesson for you today."

Cullen dragged his fingers through his hair, tired and exhausted.


Blackwall sighed, patting him on the shoulder.

"Find a way to tell her you've been listening to her. Something that shows her you think about the things she says. You think about the times you've been together - your happier times. Women LOVE to know you've been listening."

Cullen let his advice sink in all the way to his front door. He thought about it while playing with Barkley, then while he ate dinner and got ready for bed. He had to return to the Mayor's mansion in just a few days. He had to fix things with Aida before he went back or he'd go mad.

He was drifting off to sleep when an idea came to him. He looked at the clock and hoped 1 am was not too late to call his sister in South Reach. He was going to need her help winning back Aida's good graces.

* * * * *

Aida was glumly picking at her dinner - leftovers of the leftovers from the night before - when she received a picture on her phone.

It gave her goosebumps.

It was a picture of Cullen - in his high school rugby outfit. She enlarged the photo with an excited swipe.

He was rushing down the field, blonde curls bobbing everywhere. Even on the cusp of adulthood, he was already exuding masculine confidence. He didn't have the scar at the corner of his lip yet and he hadn't been touched by war or torture or drug addiction. It was a pure version of him, one she could never know, but one who had evolved into the man she thought of constantly.

The photo was artfully composed and full of life and energy, and Cullen at any age was a natural subject. It made Aida wonder if the photographer had been in love with him. It was - a perfect picture.

She received a follow up text. "There's more where that came from."

Aida was about to respond when there was a knock at her front door. She kept typing but headed toward the living room.

"Who is it, I'm busy right - "

She opened the door and found Cullen standing there, holding two things - a large pizza, and his old high school yearbook.

"Oh."
"Can I come in? Please Aida."

Aida opened the door wider, letting him in.
"Can we eat dinner together? And then you can look at my yearbook if you want. I had my sister overnight it to me. I called her in the middle of the night about it, she wasn't exactly pleased."

He put the pizza on her dining table and then turned around to look at her since she was being so quiet. Aida couldn't stop the tears cascading down her face.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Cullen. I - should have picked you up. I should have seen you right away. I shouldn't have been angry at you for not calling. I'm just a fuck up, alright? I'm a mess. Look at this place, look how it got while you were away. This mess is me. You should go before I fuck up your life too."

She watched as Cullen crossed the room to stand before her, her face cupped in his large hands.

"I'm not going anywhere. Ever. You could have given me the silent treatment until Drakonis, and I would have been sitting on the other side of that wall, waiting for you to speak to me."

Aida whispered at him. "I don't deserve you."

Cullen shook his head at her, a small smile on his face. "Wrong, wrong, wrong. Wrong on all accounts. Does it pain you to be so wrong all the time, Trevelyan?"

Then his lips were on hers and she felt the terror of the last few days melt away. Cullen held on to her hips, pulling her closer and it gave Aida hope.

The world could try to tear them apart but as long as they could come back to this - the secure sensation of each other, so primal and physical - they'd survive.

Aida deepened their kiss, moaning against his tongue, and without further instruction Cullen lifted her into his arms and carried down her hallway to the bedroom. Once there, they did not bother with formalities, they just began yanking clothes off, kicking and casting things aside, not bothering with seduction or tenderness. They tumbled onto her bed, skin against skin, already working up a sweat out of their sheer anxiousness to be together.

He knelt between her welcoming knees, looking down at her, naked and squirming a little on her sheets. "Did you miss me, Aida?"
"Yes, fuck."

Cullen pumped his cock for her, making her grab the comforter under her with some frustration. Aida wiggled her hips forward, trying to get closer to him.

"Did you touch yourself and think about me?"

Some of the former emotion of the night flickered across her face. "No, I was too worried. But I thought of you constantly."

"I'm sorry I made you worry, Aida. I'll make it up to you."
"Start right now."

She scrambled around on the mattress, now facing away from him and tilting her backside toward him in offering. She grabbed a nearby pillow and stuffed it under herself, making herself comfortable.

Aida knew the magic words that always spurred him on - she begged him, moaning "Cullen, please."
He inched forward, still holding his cock, swiping it over her wet folds, shaking it right against her clit. She mumbled something into the pillow beneath her.

"What was that?"
"You're teasing, you're a tease. Looks like I have to do everything around here."

Aida straightened her arms, getting herself back up onto her palms. She reached around and gripped his staff, pushing her hips backwards, and slowly sliding her pussy onto Cullen's cock.

Cullen grabbed her ass, his fingers spread wide gripping as much of her soft flesh as he could. "Aida, you are Maker sent."

She moved her hips forward and then dropped them back against his length again and again, grinding on his thickness, controlling her pleasure. Cullen just hung on and enjoyed the show as she bucked against him faster and faster, looking at him over her shoulder, her eyes lost in lust.

"It's so good, Cullen, so good - "
"Maker, slow down Trevelyan, you're going to kill me - "

Aida giggled and bit her lip, moving her hips in a circle, enjoying how deeply seated he was in her. Cullen grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled hard, making her arch her back and whine helplessly as he held her body flush against his. He let go of her hair and reached between her thighs, feeling for her pearl.

"You're so wet, so hot..."

He rolled her clit between two calloused fingers, making Aida shudder and jerk beneath him, crying out from the intense stimulation.

"How's that, babydoll, yeah?"

Cullen kept his fingers pressed against her pussy while pushing himself into her as far as he could go. She lifted an arm, holding on to the back of his neck as he thrusted in and out of her and murmured into her ear.

"That's it. You're so sweet. You smell good - "

Cullen inhaled the scent of her hair, just behind Aida's ear, as he pumped his hips against her.

"You taste good -"

He licked her neck, savoring her skin and her sweat.

"You FEEL good - "

Cullen's free hand grabbed one of her breasts, kneading it roughly, pinching her nipple hard, making her body jerk again. Cullen was doing everything right, in the right order, with the exact amount of pain punctuating the waves of fervent pleasure he sent through all the nerve endings in her body. Aida was almost sobbing from need as he played with all the most sensitive parts of her body. A hand worked pulled on her nipples while he sucked on her earlobe, before he switched to vibrating his fingers against her swollen clit while biting on her shoulder like an animal.

"Cullen, I'm so close, please, please, please..."

He released her body and pushed her forward onto the mattress, pinning Aida down, hard and
aggressive, slapping her on the ass, making her squeak and squeal. Cullen roughly rutted into her, until she went completely silent. Her mouth fell open as her orgasm burned through her and then Cullen joined her, shooting his seed into her with a sharp hiss. Cullen sat back on his heels, watching it drip out of her with every pulse of her womanhood. It made him shudder.

"Aida, your pussy…it bewitches me."
"Gee, thanks."

Aida collapsed against the pillow with a little giggle and a sigh. Cullen tucked himself against her, lying on his side so he could gaze at her in her orgasmic glow.

"Pizza's getting cold, babydoll."
"Yeah, it is. But it had to wait, didn't it."
"It'll be just as good for breakfast."

Aida ran the back of her palm against his cheek and then his jaw, drinking in the sweetness of his eyes.

Cullen gave her a nervous look before he asked, "Can I stay here tonight?"

"Yes, of course. And you should get a toothbrush to keep here."

Cullen dipped his head to hers, raining delicate kisses on her lips.

* * * *

Early the next morning, Aida woke up before Cullen did, walking across the condo in a short cotton nightgown, humming to herself with contentment as she headed toward the kitchen to warm up last night's pizza for breakfast.

She checked the clock, 7 am. They had two hours to themselves before she had to drive him to the Mayor's mansion. Aida was digging out a baking sheet to heat up the pizza on when the door bell rang - but, next door, at Cullen's condo.

Aida tip toed to her front door and peered out the peep hole. It was the Mayor herself, dressed in her usual sharp elegance, holding a paper bag of something in one hand and two coffees in a take-out carrier in the other. She couldn't see anyone else as far as the peep hole would allow her. Aida's thoughts immediately turned cynical. Oh, she can keep her entire staff in a paranoid lock down state for nearly a week but here she is standing by herself with no protection - at my boyfriend's front door? It made her crinkle her nose with distaste. She was clearly here to offer him breakfast - and a few other things too.

It made Aida livid - and feel reckless.

She swung open her door, startling the aristocratic woman.

"May I help you?"

Aida watched annoyance flicker on her face before she composed herself.

"Miss Trevelyan. I was unaware that you - lived in this building."
"Next door to the head of your security detail too. What are the odds?"

"Do you - know, where Mr. Rutherford is?"
"He's indisposed, in my bed, at the moment. I was about to make us breakfast before I dropped him
off at work today."

Aida narrowed her eyes, sinking her dagger in deep now. "He's tired. We were - up all night."

Leliana flared her nostrils, trying to control her rage. Aida intuited the woman would have loved to drop the coffees in her right hand and slap her but - she was also very much aware of who her father was, and that she was in a tight election.

"I see. I shall see him at work then."

Aida gave her a phony smile, and then shut the door in her face abruptly.

Leliana headed back down to the limo waiting for her at the curb, where Varric was in the driver's seat, looking anxious.

"So, uh, to City Hall then?"
"Yes, Tethras."
"Guess Cullen will just - meet us at work?"
"Yes, I guess so."

Leliana pressed a button to slide up the privacy screen between her part of the limo and Varric's. He didn't get to hear what she said next.

"That little bitch. I'll make her pay."

Chapter End Notes

Aida's playing with fire! More coming soon. Thanks for your continued readership, Cullenites!
The Nightmare

Chapter Notes

Sorry, no #CullenSmut. I'll make it up to you in the next chapter though. And sorry it's a bit on the short side, but trust me, the next chapter will a smutty stop over before the story really rockets to telenovelas land.

Trigger warning as well: this chapter contains a small amount of torture and violence, "canonical" in keeping with Cullen's lyrium withdrawal nightmares. I've modernized it of course, but if this disturbs you, you can scan quickly and get to where Aida wakes him up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cullen and Aida's courtship sailed forth even as Leliana sought to keep them apart. Cullen was as wily and relentless as she was - whenever she asked for more security Cullen would bounce the request around his captains, doling out sometimes desperate favors so he could spend his nights pleasing Aida and sleeping at her side. Babysitting Blackwall's good-natured little boy for a few hours or taking Varric's filthy car for a wash were small inconveniences compared to being away from her. The rhythms of their lives merged, Barkley stayed with Aida when he had to follow Leliana on the campaign trail and the two of them were waiting for him when he came home.

Cullen felt something he hadn't experienced in a long time, since he was back home in Honnleath. He started to feel like he had a family.

During the long lonely nights on the campaign trail he often worried his affection for her was stronger than hers for him, but he tried not to fixate on this paranoid little idea. Instead, he labored hard to present the best version of himself. He preoccupied himself with meticulously planning their date nights, worked out for hours keeping himself in peak condition for her enjoyment, and even learned to lie perfectly still so he could be her muse, posing for her sketches. He cooked incredible dinners, bought her thoughtful gifts, he laid the world at her feet - all for the privilege of seeing her laugh or smile or moan or sigh.

Cullen was determined to keep his demons at bay, but they caught up with him, one night when Aida was sleeping at his place.

* * * * *

It was the usual nightmare. Kirkwall.

His body ached. They had been torturing him for hours. They tied him up to a car battery and shocked him until every vein on his body stood out. They pulled his fingernails off, they waterboarded him until he choked and sputtered and they had to revive him. He implored his mage captors to just kill him and get it over with, he didn't have the information they wanted, he had never had it. They hated his constant refrain: he had been following orders, everything that had happened at the Gallows hadn't been his choice.

It didn't matter.
They ground him down until he was a nerve ending and nothing else.

Cullen had thought he had subjected him to as much pain as he could take, when one day they tied him to a chair in the interrogation room - and brought in three other prisoners, bags over their heads.

They lined them up in front of him, forcing them to their knees.

This was the part of the dream that made Cullen begin to talk in his sleep.

They were his best friends. The first bag came off and it was Lieutenant Jon Cumberland. He was only 22. He joined the Templars for the same reasons Cullen did, to help people. He sobbed and told Cullen to not tell his mother how he died - and he had no chance to tell him anything else. They put a bullet in the back of his head.

The bag came off the second victim. Sergeant First Class Sybill Lockhart. A good soldier, a good woman, with a wife waiting for her back home. The last time Sybill had shown Cullen a picture of her on her phone, her wife had been 6 months pregnant. Cullen shook his head at her but Sybill was brave. "Fuck em, Cullen! Don't tell them shit! Don't let them - "

They shot her before she could continue. Cullen slumped against his restraints. Sybill would have thrown herself on a grenade to save him and now he had done nothing to save her.

The rebel mages took the bag off the third prisoner and now Cullen began to thrash, trying to smash the chair beneath him and shred the ropes that bound him.

His dream had been rewritten. The third prisoner was Aida.

"No, stop! Leave her alone! I'll do anything!"

His most cruel captor put a knife to her throat. "Fool, you have told us nothing of any use, you have nothing to bargain with!"

Aida was sobbing, shaking her head at him. "Why is this happening, Cullen? Why am I here?"

The mage leaned down to whisper in her ear, while keeping his eyes on Cullen.

"You are here - because he loves you."

The mage's face had changed as soon as he drew closer to her. He sniffed at Aida's soft black hair, threading his fingers into it, pushing it back from her tear-stained face.

"Oh, Templar, she smells so good, and her skin - it's so soft."

The other mages who had dragged out the bodies of his friends had returned, and everyone's eyes had gone dark with the possibilities of what they could do to Aida.

"Please, please, don't - whatever you want from her, you can take it from me."

The head mage looked at his minions, who stared back at him in a deadpan way. Without further thought, he swiped the knife's blade across Aida's neck. Blood gushed and then poured from her neck as she collapsed forward, landing roughly on the dirty floor.

Cullen began to scream.

* * * * *
Aida watched Cullen grind his teeth and thrash on the bed, firmly in the grip of his night terror. She was trying to think of any kind of remedy, but even her many years of medical training were failing her - people didn't exactly show up in the ER because of nightmares. She could only shake his shoulders and call his name over and over again.

"Cullen, please, wake up, please. Cullen!"

She climbed on top of him, sitting on his broad chest, trying to hold him still. She was beginning to worry this was akin to an epileptic fit and she would really have to intervene. Aida raised a hand, a little scared to slap him. What if he slapped back? He was strong, she had watched him in the building’s weight room, showing off for her as she ran on a nearby treadmill. Should she use her magic? She knew he was sensitive about magic use even though they had never discussed it directly before. She rubbed her fingertips together and put them lightly on his temples, giving him just a tiny shock. It didn't work, he kept his eyes locked shut and his body was still rigid and shaking. She decided to try again, with more gusto. She summoned her mana and leaned forward, pressing her lips to his, and giving him an electrical jolt akin to a good hard slap across the face.

Cullen's eyes snapped open and he bolted upright, knocking her onto the floor near his night stand.

"Aida! I'm so sorry!"

Before he could help her, she had already scrambled back onto the bed, grabbing him in a fierce embrace.

"Cullen, I was so scared, you wouldn't wake up - and... This time, you were screaming my name."

Cullen's hands shook, unable to hold her back. He was sweating now.

"Aida, I never wanted you to see me this way."
"But darling, I have. I've been here while you've had a nightmare, but usually I would nudge you a little or encourage you to roll over and you'd calm down."

She ran her fingers through his hair and rubbed his neck.

"Aida, it was different this time. You were there, in my dream. They - " He had to choke back a sob. "They cut your neck from ear to ear. They slaughtered you like my friends. When you asked them why they were doing this..."

"Cullen, we don't have to talk about it, we can just - "
"They said it was all because of me. You were in pain, because of me. They killed you, because of me."

She sat down in his lap, straddling him and facing him. She pulled his chin up so they were making eye contact.

"Cullen, it was just a dream. I'm here. I wasn't with you in Kirkwall, and those men can't hurt me. Will you breathe with me now? In through your nose - and out through your mouth - like this."

Aida closed her eyes and did a round of deep breathing for him. When she opened her eyes to look at him, he was smiling at her, bemused.

"What? What's so funny?"
"Nothing at all. You're even sexy when you're just breathing."
"Come on, breathe with me, it will help. And this is what I want you to do when I can't be with you.
You will just sit, and close your eyes, and clear your mind, and breathe.

They sat together like this for a while, breathing in and out deeply, until Aida discretely checked his pulse and he had calmed down.

"Thank you Aida." He smoothed the hair back from her face with a tender gesture. Aida knew now was the time to say something she had wanted to say - not just today, but for weeks and weeks.

"Cullen. I love you."

The words seemed to transform him right there on the spot, he sat up straighter and with two strong hands he scooped her closer to him. Aida brushed her fingers over his lips and continued, "I've been wanting to tell you that for a while."

"How long?"
"Longer than I care to admit."

"I love you too, Aida. Sometimes when I think about you - I think my heart is going to explode."

They kissed, holding each other tightly. In his arms, Aida realized she had not known a love like this ever, it was a body and soul thing, the sort of situation that used to scare her simply because she had never experienced it. Fear had kept her from this but now she felt nothing but security and peace.

Aida pulled back from the kiss and smiled shyly. "There. We've said the L word and there's no going back now. You can't take it back, Rutherford!"

"I would never. But Aida, I can't shake this feeling that something bad is going to happen to you and I will be powerless to stop it."

"Nothing bad will happen to me - to us - as long as we are together."

* * * * *

Across town, another woman was also thinking about Cullen.

Leliana's numbers were up, she had cornered more important party endorsements and it looked likely that Prime Minister Alistair was going to support her as well. The City Hall bombing had painted her in a sympathetic light, and it was almost certain that Senate seat was hers.

Instead of savoring these facts, Leliana sat alone in her expansive living room, thinking about Cullen Rutherford and how he was slipping through her fingers. He should be standing at her door this moment, but instead it was the Qun. He should be warming her bed. He should be standing at her side at the podium, not behind her. He'd be the perfect political husband - he was "a wounded warrior", not to mention incredibly camera-ready.

Couldn't he see that if she was all darkness, he was the light? They deserved to be together. Her longing for him had become more than physical.

Leliana looked into the fire, sipping her fine whiskey that always reminded her of the color of Cullen's eyes. This stubborn Aida Trevelyan had refused to go away and simply keeping them apart had done nothing to halt their romance. The Nightingale thought about her options. She had plenty of underworld contacts in her ranks. She had spies and assassins and blackmailers at her disposal. Which one of them would do in getting rid of her - permanently? It would be dangerous business. Her father was not a man to tangle with, he had his own powerful alliances. Bann Trevelyan had old
friends who owned newspapers and TV networks, both of which could pop the bubble of her rising campaign. If he really wanted to be nasty, he could even halt construction in Haven, putting a serious damper on the economy of her city.

She was weighing all of the pros and cons when her phone sitting next to her lit up and buzzed. It was Cassandra.

"Mayor, I have some good news. Ferelden Homeland Security think they're getting closer to Corypheus."

Leliana rolled her eyes. Hadn't her right hand learned by now that fear was better for their campaign?
"That's excellent, Cass. Keep me posted."

"I have even better news - there is a possibility they will corner him and his extremists in Haven too. Haven PD is preparing for a tactical alert."

Leliana sat up, putting her whiskey down on a side table. She had goosebumps - intuition and inspiration had struck at the same time.

"Cassandra. Listen to me very carefully: if they capture him, I must speak to him. Is that clear? I wish to look upon the man who wished to make me a head shorter."

She hung up, her eyes glowing with excitement.

_Perhaps we can make a deal, this mad man and I. Perhaps if my two adversaries were to cross paths...?_

Chapter End Notes

Did ya like how I flipped the game dialogue so it was Trevelyan admitting she loved him "longer than she cared to admit"? THAT'S BECAUSE THAT'S HOW I FEEL ABOUT CULLEN TOO! NEVER WANTED TO ROMANCE ANY OTHER CHARACTER. <3 <3 <3

I'll have a new chapter up by the end of the week. Y'all don't even know how much I think about this story! I definitely know where it's going and I can't wait to get there with you guys.
The Nightingale's campaign schedule had ramped up and he was now home less and less. Cullen hated it, he hated saying goodbye to Aida and Barkley so often. As soon as he had to turn and walk away from them both, he wished they were all curled up in bed together on a Sunday morning, Aida reading the arts section while he began to mangle the crossword, eventually having to ask for her help, and then she'd get stuck on the Sudoku and he'd help her with that one, until they were making love for a second time since they woke, driving Barkley off the bed and out of room, crinkling the newspaper underneath them. *That* was where he'd rather be, instead of checking into the Four Seasons in Denerim with Leliana and her staff, wondering if a bomb was going to explode in the lobby.

Cullen passed out room keys to the security staff and went over schedules and protocols for keeping an eye on Leliana while they were at the hotel. After he was done, his team hit the elevator and everyone went their separate ways, but before Varric could exit, Cullen mumbled to him, "Meet me for a drink later?"

"Yeah, considering you just gave me the first shift, I'll need it."
"Let's make it a late one to avoid - certain... people. 10:30?"
"See you then, Curly."

* * * * *

A few hours later the pair were sitting at the bar, halfheartedly watching the end of a football game and downing a few beers. A waitress showed up at Cullen's left side with a Manhattan, putting it down on a napkin near his hand.

"I didn't order this - "
"This is from the lady over there in the lounge."

Varric and Cullen looked over toward where she had pointed. A woman in a tight black business suit and short skirt was sitting with their back to them in a corner of the hotel's elegant lounge. She wore her dark auburn hair in a sharp, angular bob, and when she crossed her legs, Cullen saw that she was wearing silk stockings, and very high heels, the kind with an eye-catching red sole.

Cullen turned toward the waitress. "I...I have a girlfriend."

The woman shared an amused look with Varric. "Don't tell me, tell her."

She swept away before Cullen could argue further. Varric elbowed him. "Just go and get it over
Cullen got off his bar stool with a heavy sigh. "I hate this."
"You hate being handsome, yes, how terrible for you."
"Shut up, dwarf. I'll be right back."

Cullen fixed his hair quickly and smoothed down his black t-shirt, making Varric roll his eyes. "Gotta be presentable when you tell a lady you won't be following her back to her room."

Varric glanced at the mystery woman again. "Shame you're going to tell her no, Rutherford. She looks like a yes. Give her my room number, man. Don't let me down!"

Cullen grabbed the drink and headed for the lounge. He stopped near her right shoulder, looking down at her. She was holding a martini, and fishing the olives out of it.

"Excuse me, miss? Did you buy me this drink?"
"I did," she answered in a measured, aristocratic voice with an Orlesian accent, not looking up at him. She put the toothpick down that had held her olives and Cullen noticed her shiny red nails, filed to a point, like claws.

"Well, I can't accept it. I have a girlfriend waiting for me at home, I'm not sure -"

She interrupted him. "Won't you sit down, I can't speak to you while you're standing behind me."

"My friend's at the bar, he -"
"He'll be fine for ten minutes. He looks like a big boy. No - disrespectful pun intended."

Cullen glanced at Varric, who gave him a "go on!" sort of gesture before turning back to talk to the bartender, who was a fetching elf girl Varric had been trying to butter up all evening. Cullen steeled himself for more awkward small talk before deciding to sit down on the sofa across from her.

He almost choked on his drink once he was seated. The mystery business woman was -

"Aida?"

She held a hand out to him, remaining formal and almost aloof. "Gabrielle Legrand. Pleased to meet you."

Cullen fought back a smile and then shook her hand. It was definitely her, and she was definitely playing a game with him. Their parting a week ago had been particular taxing for both of them, with Aida tearfully threatening to follow him around on this leg of campaign, sneaking into his hotel room late at night so they could be together, but Cullen had told her it would anger Leliana too much if she caught them even once.

"Well, Ser, do you have a name?"

Cullen thought of the football game he and Varric had just been watching and he stitched something together quickly.

"I'm Tristan Murdock."

Aida gave him the tiniest smile, almost breaking character, as she held her martini up to his Manhattan for a toast. After they kissed their glasses together, Cullen had a chance to look at his lover's disguise. She looked expensive. They were sitting close enough to each other for Cullen to know she was wearing a different perfume from her usual scent, and it was heady and exotic. Every
detail of this other woman Aida chose to be tonight was out of character for her. His Aida was soft and earthy, all sweet smiles and lovely curves. This Aida - no, this Gabrielle - was angles and edges, she was a dark femme fatale who oozed both sex and danger.

"Tristan" wasn't going to lie to himself, he really wanted to fuck "Gabrielle". He also realized he was staring.

"So, Gabrielle. What brings you to Denerim? Business or pleasure?"
"Business. I'm a hedge fund manager."

Cullen had to stop himself from snickering. Aida was a little terrible handling her own finances and claimed she was only good at math at work, which never made any sense to him.

"What about you, Mister Murdock. What do you do for a living?"

Cullen didn't hesitate with his answer, shooting her a thousand-watt smile. "I'm a professional athlete - and a model."

Now it was Aida's turn to nearly choke on her drink and Cullen was pleased he was able make her slip up. She composed herself before continuing. "And since you asked me, why are you to Denerim - business or pleasure?"

"Business as well, but I hate to rule out the possibility of pleasure, especially when an incredibly ravishing woman has just bought me a drink."

"And what of this girlfriend you spoke about earlier?"

"Oh, there's no girlfriend. I just had to take a better look at you."

Aida recrossed her legs, and the sound of her silk stockings rubbing against each other made Cullen wish he was between her knees pleasuring her sweet pussy with his tongue. She sipped her martini demurely and Cullen stared at her lips, painted siren red tonight. He wanted those lips around his cock. Just looking at this version of Aida was making him hard in public.

Before Cullen could open his mouth to suggest they continue their discussion in her room, "Gabrielle" stood up, now towering over him in the highest heels he had ever seen her wear.

"Mister Murdock, I've grown tired of our small talk -"
"Oh, I'm sorry, I -"

"I'm in room 908. If you decide to follow me there, this is what will be on the agenda for the evening: I want you to suck my tits and pull on my nipples until I can take no more. And then spank me until my ass is red and tender. You will eat my pussy until I come, then you will fuck me until I come again. And then, I want you to tie me up, and fuck my ass so hard I come a third time, and then when you're done, I want you to finish in my mouth. If you have no interest in these things, you can stay down here in the bar with your friend, watching reruns of Seinfeld."

Cullen's had fallen open while she was speaking.

"And by the way, Tristan, I detest being kept waiting."

He watched the love of his life stride away toward the elevators, leaving only the tantalizing scent of her perfume hanging in the air behind her. As the doors closed in front of her, Cullen exhaled, "Maker's breath."

Cullen darted back to the bar to close his tab, moving fast now. Varric had to grab him by the arm to
stop him from leaving. "Hey, what's going on? Where do you think you're going?"

"To that lady's room, to rut her brains out. Wh-where else would I be going?"
"But what about Aida?"
"That was Aida, you fool. I'll see you tomorrow morning - if I survive."

* * * * *

Aida couldn't believe it, she felt nervous about the knock she was about to hear at the door. She fussed with her wig and touched up her makeup again before running her hands over the luxurious black silk kimono covering her special outfit for the night.

She was already wet with anticipation. She had been wet since watching Cullen's face change from playful to lustful when she gave him her instructions earlier.

Tristan knocked at the door. Gabrielle slipped her Louboutins on and wiped the happy grin from her face before opening the door.

"You're late, Mister Murdock."

Aida grabbed him by one of his jeans' loops and pulled him into the room out of the hallway. Cullen's first instinct was to dip his head to kiss her but she turned her chin from him in a haughty gesture.

"No, I don't want that. Not yet. You haven't even begun to pleasure me in the least. Take your clothes off and sit down on the edge of the bed, please."

Aida watched Cullen's eyes change from the loving and affectionate way he always looked at her to something - darker. They kept staring at each other while Cullen kicked off his shoes and began peeling his clothes off and then his cock sprung free from his boxers, revealing himself to be rigid and ready. She grasped his manhood, feeling him pulse against her palm - and then gave him a little shove backwards so he was seated on the edge of the bed.

"Gabrielle..." The way her fake name rolled off his tongue sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine.

"Shall we begin?"

Aida untied her kimono and handed the sash to Cullen. "You should put that on the nightstand, we'll need it later."

Cullen wrapped the luxurious strip of fabric around his broad palm a few times, and then pulled it tight between his hands, testing it. He then leaned back on an elbow to place it on the nightstand - but he paused when he saw what was sitting there already - an elegant glass objet for one of the special activities later on the menu tonight. She watched as Cullen clenched his jaw for a moment and then turned his attention back to her. Before he could speak again, she let the robe fall open and slip from her shoulders to land on the floor around her heels.

Under the robe, she was wearing silk stockings, held up by her garter belt - but no panties underneath. It was topped with the tightest corset she had ever worn and it had no cups, leaving her ample tits on display. Cullen drank in the sight of her before he put his hands on her waist, and she could tell he was surprised by how small her waistline was in this tantalizing new garment. He
pulled her closer to him and sucked one of her nipples, stuffing his mouth with as much of her breast as he could, while he palmed the other one - hard.

"Yes, that's it - more, now the other one."

She grabbed him roughly by the curls and guided him to her other breast, and he bit this nipple lightly while he pinched the other one, drawing a loud moan from her lips. He went back and forth between her nipples, working them over until they were tight and erect and sensitive. He pulled his mouth away, squeezing both her tits now, before trailing his fingertips down the sides of her body.

"Gabrielle. Can I ask you a philosophical question?"
"I didn't ask you up here to talk but go on."

"Am I in charge - or are you in charge?"

She reached down with one hand and raked her nails across his chest, leaving four red trails behind, making him wince just a little. "I told you of my precise wishes downstairs. I now want to - succumb to you, as you carry each one of them out."

He smirked at her in that way she always loved, with the quirk in the corner of his mouth near his scar. She was about to smile back at him when he stood up and grabbed her by the neck, making her gasp in surprise.

"Down on your knees, Legrand."

She met his eyes, feeling rebellious, and shook her head no. He squeezed her windpipe a little more and Aida quivered with wicked delight, before he pushed her down onto her knees before him. He grabbed his cock and wiped it across her lips, slapping her on the cheek with it.

Yes, she thought to herself. Cullen's getting the hang of this.

"I'm going to make you gag on this in a moment, but for now -"

Cullen squeezed her tits together and slid his cock between her heavy breasts.

"Oh fuck, you feel like heaven."

Every time the head of his cock got closer to her mouth she tried to reach her tongue out to meet it but he would slide away before she could. After a few attempts, Cullen let go of her breasts and then pushed his cock into her hungry mouth.

"Yes, that's it, my Orlesian rich bitch, suck it, deeper -"

Aida strained to swallow more of him until she gagged on his thick cock and tried to pull away. Cullen held her in place with a strong hand on the back of her head.

"Relax, you can do it."

Aida was squirming with pleasure on her knees. Cullen was being so commanding - the sweet, adoring man she usually bedded seemed to be back in Haven. She relaxed her throat and eased him in two more inches, bringing her lips against his pubic hair.

"Very good work. I admit fucking your tits and making you choke on my cock were not on your list, but they were on mine. Now on to the next item."
He pulled his cock out of her mouth and sat back down again, grabbing her roughly and putting her across his knee. He rubbed her exposed cheeks, reveling in their smoothness, always coming close to touching her soaking wet womanhood at the apex of her thighs, but never lingering long.

"Why Gabrielle? Why do you yearn for me to punish you? What have you done? Why do you think you deserve it?"

She answered him in Orlesian, her voice a purr.

"In common, please - "

"I deserve it because I'm not a banker, Monsieur Tristan, I'm a whore - your whore. And I need your discipline."

Cullen raised a hand high and brought it down against her right butt cheek, making her squeal in pain. He smoothed his hand over the mark he just left on her skin.

"Your brown skin is so lovely. But I will make sure you cannot sit tomorrow morning."

He began spanking her relentlessly as she writhed in pain on his knee and her buttocks were red all over. He massaged her cheeks, opening them up to hiss with desire at the sight of her pussy and tight arsehole.

"Tristan, please! Please!"
"Please what, putain?"
"Eat my fucking pussy."

Cullen grabbed her around the waist again, lifting her easily into his arms and carrying her across the room to a plush armchair in the corner. He placed her upon the velvet cushion, opening her legs wide, hooking each of her knees over the chair's armrests. He knelt before her, studying her cunt.

"So glistening and wet, like a dripping piece of fruit."

One of her hands began to creep toward her pussy, but Cullen gave her a stern look. "No, you are not allowed to pleasure yourself. Only I may do so. Do you need to be bound now, Gabrielle?"

Before Aida could even open her mouth he had yanked her roughly to her feet and she was being pushed toward the bed, face down. Aida had known Cullen was strong but this was the first time in her relationship when she was the subject of it. She rolled over and struggled against him as he reached for the sash of her robe but he could literally hold both of her wrists in one of his hands.

"Come on my beauty, don't fight me - "
"You are breaking the rules, you - "
"No no, you said you would succumb to me."

He managed to get her back on the mattress face down again as he bound her wrists tight behind her back. Aida smiled to herself as she felt him yank her hips up so she was on her knees, but her cheek still pressed against the mattress.

"Now I can continue without your interruptions."

He licked at her pussy from behind, making her arch her back and cry out against the sheets, until she was so wet it was coating the top of her inner thighs. She was on the edge of her first orgasm when Cullen stopped in his work to smear his fingers across her cunt, working the wetness over her tighter entrance. He fingered it, testing it, sliding an inch of his finger in.
"So tight, the last man you picked up in a hotel, did he fuck your cute little arse?"
"Please -"
"What are you begging for, Gabrielle?"
"I need to come, I need your tongue again, please Tristan -"

Cullen chuckled to himself and the low rumble of his mirth made Aida squirm with need. She felt his strong hands on her hip bones as he flipped her onto her back, her wrists still bound underneath her. He roughly opened her thighs and dipped his mouth to her cunt, flicking his tongue against her pearl as fast as he could. Aida made eye contact with him over her mound as he suddenly slowed his technique, rolling her clit around in lazy circles.

"No, you're torturing me now -"
"Correct. You told me earlier you deserve it."

Aida almost sobbed with unrequited lust, biting her lip, unable to push herself closer to his mouth with her hands behind her back. He slid a finger into her pussy and then removed it, then tried two fingers, making her moan louder. With his other hand he worked his middle finger into her butt - and then he pushed his mouth against her clit again, sucking on it with loud, satisfying slurps. Aida pushed her head back against the mattress, feeling high on ecstasy. Their lovemaking had always been out of this world but tonight Cullen was being transcendental.

"Fuck, I'm going to come -"

Cullen pushed all three fingers into her deeper and shook his head against her cunt. Her orgasm hit her hard, burning through her limbs, making her dig her fingernails into her own palms, but Cullen wouldn't stop, he kept lapping at her pussy until she had to put a heel on his shoulder and forcibly push him away.

"Stop! It's too much!"

Aida couldn't say more, and it almost felt like her eyes were permanently rolled back in her head. Cullen crawled on the bed toward her, tilting her chin so he could see her eyes. When he spoke, he was more gentle Cullen than commanding Tristan.

"You alright, babydoll?"

Aida nodded weakly with a small smile.

"So let us continue."

Cullen surprised her again by aggressively pushing his cock into her mouth, making her take him. He pushed in deeper again, testing her gag reflex. "Suck, get it ready, I'm going to pound that pretty little cunt of yours." He moaned with abandon as he fucked her mouth and she was powerless to control him. While she was blowing him, he reached for the glass butt plug on the nightstand.

"We're not through yet, Miss Legrand. I owe you two more orgasms. But I think we should prepare you for the third."

He removed his cock from her mouth and she immediately managed to roll over on her own, arse up and ready. He laughed again, "So ready and willing." He rubbed the plug over her sensitive pussy to get it wet and then gently worked it into tight hole, making Aida moan louder than she had all night.

"Fuck! Fuck! Oh Maker, I love it, it's so good, oh fuck."
Cullen leaned forward to whisper in her ear quickly, and once again he seemed to be speaking as himself and not his roleplaying persona. “Listen, if you keep talking like that, I’m not going to be able to last much longer.”

Aida whispered back, "Sorry!" with a saucy grin.

He got back up on his knees behind her and began to slide his cock into her womanhood, going slowly and making both of them groan in tandem.

"All your holes are filled up now, Gabrielle. Maybe next time you should find two strangers in your hotel lounge. Wouldn’t you like that?"

Aida couldn't answer, she was almost sobbing with abandon and lust as Cullen fucked her with slow and leisurely strokes. He went on like this in this unhurried fashion until Aida felt another orgasm building inside her. She tried to push back against him with some urgency but he held on to her hips with an iron grip.

"No rushing ahead. I’m in control!"

He kept her balancing on the tightrope of her second orgasm, unable to come, bringing her close but then pulling out completely to make her whine. Aida knew she was going to beg him to get to the next level.

"Please Tristan, please. Please please please."
"More? You want more?"
"I need it. I’m going to die if you don't give it to me."
"That sounds serious. I shall try to help."

Cullen began slamming his hips against her, making her gasp with surprise. He pummeled her until she was flat against the mattress, and then as if out of her control, Aida began to shake all over and she twitched hard as her second orgasm of the night tore through her. Cullen pulled out of her and turned her over gently to look at her.

He ran a hand through his hair, the other hand holding his cock, and a shy look on his face.

"Aida?" he asked, breaking character. "I have something to tell you. I haven't - done this next bit before."

Her eyes went wide. "What, really?" Cullen nodded, a smile playing about his lips.

Aida had never told him but all his little offhand remarks about how many girlfriends he had had in high school or college or during his military service had always made her incredibly jealous. She hated that others had loved him before her, and maybe it bothered her more because before she met him, she had only had a few steady boyfriends. It also made her worry that there would be other women after her too. But now he was confessing in all his experience, they had finally come to something he had not done before? In this one tiny way, it sort of made him a virgin - at least for tonight.

"So, can...can we just be ourselves now?"

Aida melted. "Of course, my love."
"Can I..."

He pulled her up to sitting upright and undid the sash at her wrists. As soon as she was free she was in his arms and they were kissing deeply.
"I just wanted to surprise you, Cullen."
"Oh I was surprised. I was very surprised."
"Did you like - commanding me?"
"Yes, and I'm not done yet. Take that silly wig off."

Aida pulled it off and removed the pins that were keeping her hair in place. Cullen helped her fluff her luxurious black locks out so they tumbled down her back in a curtain. He sighed as he pushed his face into her hair, breathing deeply.

"Maker, I missed you."

Aida pulled him down on top of her, grasping his cock.

"I'm ready."

She spread her legs wide for him, stretching her arms over her head, giving him a hungry look. Then Cullen moved faster than she expected, and the sash was about her wrists again, as he tied her to the headboard.

"Details, Trevelyon. You know I'm very detail-oriented."

She writhed as he knelt between her knees, removing the plug from her ass very gently.

"I'll go slow, baby. You tell me if - "
"Hey, I'm the one who's done this before, I should be instructing you."

They made eye contact as he inserted just the head into her. She moaned and writhed and dropped her head back on the pillow. "More." With a little roll of his hips, he made his way into her.

"Fuck fuck fuck. Aida, this is incredible."
"More, Cullen. Deeper. Make me take it like you made me suck your cock."
"OK, I told you, if you keep talking like that -"
"Sorry, sorry, I'll be good."

She pursed her lips together, trying to be utterly serious and not incredibly turned on. It made Cullen laugh - and push himself in two more inches.

"More."

He moved forward another inch, stretching her and filling her up. He reached down and played with her clit a little more, making her hips buck forward, diving him in even deeper.

"Aida, now I think I might pass out. You're so - hot on the inside."

Cullen grabbed her behind the knees and held them pinned to her sides so he could see exactly where his cock was disappearing into her, sweat beginning to bead on his brow as he tried to control his movements.

"Do you like it, baby? I had to fly standby to get here - to give you this gift."
"And it is not even my nameday."
"Fuck me, Cullen - fuck my ass until I come."

He held on to one of her legs while the other hand stimulated her pearl, making her drip once again as he plunged into her hard, returning to being rough again.
"Harder Tristan, harder!"

He laughed as he slipped two fingers back into her pussy, making her twitch again. Aida could tell by his face that he was lost in the moment, everything was sensation and pleasure and purely erotic and this is why she came all the way to Denerim. The hand playing with her clit moved faster and faster and she felt herself climbing toward yet another climax.

"Oh fuck, that's it, I'm, I'm -"

Aida went rigid under him as he worked his fingers in her pussy, his thumb focusing her clit. She cried out in abandon as her third release flooded her senses and she dangled loose from her restraints as Cullen kept rutting into her. She lifted her head weakly and looked at him.

"Come for me, your turn now my love -"

Cullen drove his cock into her arse as far as it could go, grunting, his brow furrowed, muscles tensed, and sweat rolling down his face and Aida couldn't help but realize he had never looked sexier. He pulled out quickly and scrambled around her on the bed. Aida opened her mouth and Cullen dutifully emptied his seed onto her waiting tongue. He held on to the headboard, groaning with effort, before he sunk down next to her, untying her wrists and pulling her into his embrace.

"Maker take me, this has been the greatest night of my life."

Aida rested her chin on his chest, tracing a finger over the scar over his lip.

"Cullen. I love you more than life itself."

* * * * *

The next morning, Cullen and a few of his men were waiting for Leliana and her staff to come down to accompany her to a fundraising event. Cullen was supposed to be listening in his ear piece to the feedback from his team but his eyes were looking for Aida who should be checking out of the hotel soon. He had urged her to put her costume back on so that none of his friends - or his boss - would recognize her. Leliana exited the elevator before he could spot his lady love, so he was forced to leave without taking one last sweet look at her in those highest of heels.

Cullen followed the Nightingale closely, Iron Bull flanking her on the other side and the rest of their staff clearing the way toward the valet. Leliana stepped into her limo, Cullen following her - but she put a hand out, stopping Bull from getting in.

"Bull, can I have a word with the head of my security team for a moment? I'll let you know when you can get in and we can leave in just a moment."

Cullen's heart plummeted. He knew then and there that Leliana knew he had been with Aida last night. He had to play it cool, he had no choice.

He sat down in his usual seat opposite from her, trying to keep calm. "Mayor, is there something you are concerned about?"

"Where were you last night?"
"I had a few drinks with Varric and went up to my -"

She bared her teeth at him in an angry scowl. "Don't you fucking lie to me, I know what you were up
Cullen winced. He didn't want Aida to be referred to that way but he did not want to reveal to his jealous boss who he was really with last night.

"What will you do if I tell your precious little girlfriend what you’ve been doing?"

He knew he had to act appropriately in this moment. "I would - greatly prefer - if you kept my indiscretion a secret. She would not forgive me."

"I know she wouldn't. I certainly don't. I cannot believe it, what I want from you, you give so freely to just anyone who asks for it? Anyone but me, that is."

Cullen clenched his jaw and looked away, just trying to survive the next few moments with her.

"Mark my words, Cullen. I will have you - one way or another, even if I have to remove everyone in my path. Do I make myself clear?"

He said nothing, keeping his hands on his knees.

"I said, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Mayor. We should go or you will be late to your event."

Cullen knocked on the limo window hard, two times, letting Bull know they could depart.
Deal with the Devil

Chapter Notes

I hope I don't piss off too many of you! It's on the short side but I hope to update it with another chapter within the next day or two.

Three warnings:

- You might hate me after this
- You are REALLY going to hate my version Leliana after this
- WELCOME TO DRAMA TOWN

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cullen had to wait until Leliana was deep into her speech at her fundraiser to call Aida about the threats she had just made, threats that made his blood run cold. She was a little nonplussed at first, but as their conversation continued, she began to get angry.

"Cullen, you need to find another job - all of you. Your friends are too good to be working for her too."
"I know, baby, but I can't exactly DO that at the moment, I don't have a lot of free time on my hands."
"I will help you look, I've even been thinking about this, I could...talk to my father about you."

Cullen said nothing for a moment, he had actually been thinking about her family lately, and about when he would meet them. Would he ever have a chance to establish any kind of rapport with the man he wanted to make his father in law?

"Really, Aida? I know you don't spend a lot of time with him, or even speak to him regularly."
"I don't, but for this situation, I would gladly reach out to my family."
"You can go do that, but that doesn't fix the immediate situation. If Leliana attempts to contact you to tell you I've been cheating on you, you need to go with it, just to calm her down for now. I've been talking to Varric about this for a while. He thinks I should try to record her harassing me, or threatening you, then I could get a lawyer."

Cullen lowered his voice, livid now. "She wants to destroy us? I won't give her a chance."

"Don't worry, I can handle a phone call from your grabby boss. I love you sweetie, see you in a few days."

Cullen headed back for the wing of the stage where he had been watching Leliana's speech. At this point, he'd even take a job checking IDs at the front door of the Arlessa if it meant getting away from this viper of a woman. Varric's voice broke into his thoughts in his ear piece.

"Cullen, something's going down, Cassandra and her aides think we're going back to Haven a few days earlier - like today."
"Copy that."

As soon as he had acknowledged Varric's update, Cassandra appeared in the wings opposite of him,
looking agitated and upset. She strode out onto stage and Leliana covered her mic with one hand while leaning in to speak to her advisor. As quickly as Cassandra gave her the information, Leliana turned and spoke to her crowd with great seriousness and poise.

"I'm sorry, I must end here. Haven needs me. Haven PD, with assistance from Ferelden Homeland Security, have captured Corypheus's master bomb maker, the elusive international criminal Anders, who is responsible for the deaths of more than 300 innocent souls. He must be questioned immediately and the safety of my citizens is my top priority at this moment. Thank you."

She swept off the stage, flanked by Cassandra and her aides, looking not just senatorial, but downright like prime minister material.

Cullen couldn't help it, he felt a warm sense of anticipation sweeping over him. The world might be on the verge of bursting into flame, but at least he'd be eating dinner with Aida tonight.

Perhaps batting the notorious Anders about like a cat does with a mouse would distract Leliana long enough for him to formulate a good plan for removing himself from her life once and for all.

* * * * *

Leliana watched through a one-way mirror as homeland security and federal agents interrogated the tight-lipped bomb maker. He peered at his captors through his glasses, unmoved by the fate that might awaited him behind bars for the rest of his life, or that even the fate that awaited him should Corypheus get his hands on him for having been tracked and captured. He had elegant hands with refined, long fingers, the ones that had set the time pieces causing the bombs go to off on Flight 387 and in her own offices in City Hall. He vexed them at every turn with his deadpan answers.

"Where is Corypheus now?"

"Do you claim responsibility for the explosion at City Hall - "
"I've told you over and over again - I am no bomb maker. I fix clocks and watches." He grinned while he lied.

"You've gotta give us something - cooperate, just a little - it will lessen your sentence."
"Gentlemen, you know you cannot lessen a life sentence. I know you intend to throw me into a hole and forget about me, so why should I cooperate?"

Leliana broke protocol, storming into the room - which only brought a smile to the bomber's face.

"Ah, the Mayor herself! Well, this is an honor."

Leliana leaned over Anders, who was handcuffed to the table. He did not flinch, only continued smiling at her in defiance.

"You'll cooperate because I'll have a choice of what kind of hole to throw you in. All of us in this room can make sure anyone who ever loved you never sees you again. We can make sure you have no contact with the outside world. You'll have no TV, no books, no mail, nothing to keep your hands busy. You never see the sun again, we'll feed you through a slot in the door. We can make it so you never hear another human voice again for the rest of your life."

Leliana watched in horror as Anders began to laugh, almost lighthearted and carefree.
"Your threats mean nothing to me. You cannot undo the damage I have done. You have no power here, none of you. Corypheus will win - and our cause is mighty. This world deserves to be mastered and ruled by magic, and you cannot stop any of us."

He sat back in his chair, savoring how Leliana and all the federal agents had visibly stiffened during his words, but he wasn't finished yet.

"*Besides - you shall be reaping the fruits of my labor long after you imprison me.*"

Leliana sneered back at him. "I'm not scared of you."

Anders crossed his graceful hands in front of him on the table, linked by the handcuffs. "You should be."

* *** *

Across town, Cullen was unlocking his front door. He could smell Aida's cooking from outside and he could tell it was Italian, her favorite. He got inside and dropped his bags on the floor with a happy thump, as Barkley came tearing around the corner to greet his master.

"Hey boy, where's our pretty lady, did you take good care of her?"

He barked back at him joyfully, before leading him into the kitchen. Aida was shaping meatballs and keeping an eye on her red sauce.

"Hello, welcome home!"

He gathered her up in his arms from behind, kissing her on the neck and on the ear, squeezing her tight.

"Now this is a sight I always love to see, my woman barefoot in my kitchen, making me dinner, like she ought to be."

"You should be glad I'm up to my elbows in ground pork, or else I'd smack you for that remark. Why don't you open the wine? I have some news for you."

Cullen took off his jacket and pulled off his tie, loosening the bonds that always reminded him of his job. He cracked open the bottle of red Aida had chosen for the night and poured out two glasses. Aida washed her hands and turned to join him at the dining table.

"Cheers, so glad you're home, Big Boy."

"Glad to be home, Babydoll."

They clinked their glasses together and took their sips, and then Cullen pulled her closer to give her a long, passionate kiss.

"I have some news too, I should be home more in the next week or two, city business is going to keep the Nightingale in Haven and off the campaign trail for a bit."

"Oh, because of the bomb maker? That guy skeeves me out, every time I see his face on the news. He's so - calm and collected."

"A lot of crazy people are. But I'm glad he's given me a chance to see you more for a while."

Cullen took her by the hand and seated her on his knee. She fussed with his hair and ran her fingers down his jaw.
"Now for my news. If you have time - next week...I'd like you to meet my father, and possibly my sister. Apparently they've been curious about you for a while, and Emilia likes to lurk on my social media. She thinks you look utterly smitten in all my pictures."

"She's right."

Cullen took her wine glass away from her, wanting to kiss her more. She obliged him, but then pulled back. "You didn't let me finish! I told my father about how you'd like to transition away from the Mayor's office. I was very diplomatic, I didn't tell him the sordid details. But I did tell him about your military service and your expertise and - it's probably too early to tell, but it is very possible he could have a job for you. He said it might be a little desk-oriented, but you could travel too. My father owns hotels, office buildings and construction sites, and he's concerned about security procedures at all of them. Also - he might have some kind of grudge against your boss. He seemed a little gleeful at the idea of him stealing you away from her and he hasn't even met you yet."

"I'm not surprised the Mayor has already made an enemy of your father. But, Aida, how would you feel about me working for him though? Would it be strange for you?"

Aida looked thoughtful, her fingers rubbing his neck now. "I'm not sure, maybe it would be. But let's not worry about that now. And let me get back to dinner, I'm working the graveyard shift tonight, I tried to get out of it once I knew you were coming home but there's only so many people I can hit up for favors after a while."

Aida hopped off his lap and he smacked her affectionately on the ass as she went back into the kitchen. He watched her dropping her meatballs into the sauce, humming happily to herself, Barkley near her feet hoping she'd give him a bite of something. Aida's sister was right. He was beyond smitten - and ready to take his relationship with Aida to the next level, starting with meeting her family.

* * * * *

Leliana rose early the next morning, getting ready for a long day balancing the work load of a busy mayor with that of a senatorial candidate. She had to be debriefed by homeland security, meet with the chief of police and the fire chief, as well as call back a few new important donors and appear on a popular local TV chat show where she'd be grilled about things that didn't matter, like what she wears while campaigning and how she managed to stay so fit despite her rigorous schedule. She stretched and was about to slip out of bed and head to the bathroom for a hot shower when the phone on her nightstand rang - her personal line.

She picked it up - an unlisted number. Less than ten people even knew she had this phone - she felt her blood run icy cold as it kept ringing and ringing in her palm. She answered it and said nothing at first, just listening. She could hear breathing on the line.

"Leliana, is that you?" the voice asked in a sing-song manner, playful and menacing. "Go on, answer me, my Nightingale."

She froze. She knew Varric and Iron Bull were on the other side of her bedroom door, but she did not think about alerting them. She couldn't move - she knew this voice.

"Corypheus?"

"Oh good, you haven't forgotten the sound of my voice. I was so worried." He spoke to her as though they were lovers. "Here I was, sitting at home watching you on television, going about your
business as though I hadn't threatened to cut your throat from ear to ear, I was beginning to feel a little hurt. How could she forget me, I asked myself. Are our fates not intertwined?"

Her heart pounded and the hand holding the phone began to shake.

"Anyhow, my love. You took someone from me, my architect of destruction. I long to have him back but I know you would never return him to me. But before you robbed my Anders of his freedom, he was fast at work on some new gifts, scarier than the one I left for you in City Hall. It still disappoints me you were not there to receive it, darling. But I mean to make it up to you - why don't you pull back the sheets on your bed, Leliana. Go on. I can see you from here. Black is not your color, by the way. You look washed out in it."

Leliana's eyes darted around the room - one window had its curtain half-drawn, and it was probably through that he could see her. Or did he have her home bugged? Was there a spy camera somewhere in her own bedroom? She looked over on the side of the bed where she hadn't slept - and drew back the comforter.

Sitting on the pillow was a ticking bomb, its face counting down the minutes until it exploded.

"Ah, isn't it glorious. I miss that Anders. But I will not miss you. No one will, Leliana. You will be a blip in history, fighting the tides that turn toward mage supremacy."

She gasped, trying to catch her breath. She had 3 minutes left.

"Oh, don't think about touching it. And don't think your silly little guards can do anything about it either. That bomb will affect everyone within a 30 foot radius - and I can't wait for you to see what it does. Anders used the power of the Fade, it's new technology, no one has ever done such a thing before."

Two silent tears rolled down Leliana's face.

"Ah, do not cry, my beautiful Nightingale. Perhaps we have time to play a little game before you - go - poof. What do you think? I can stop that bomb from going off with a simple click of my mouse - but, if I do so, three other bombs will go off in the city, at three different locations. You cannot pick the locations, I have already chosen them. It's 5:30 in the morning, some of them may be heavily populated, some of them might be empty. You are gambling with other peoples' lives to save your own. Do you take the bet, Leliana? Choose carefully. I can send you to your martyrdom - or you can live to see another sunrise - "

She opened her mouth, unable to answer - and Corypheus continued, adding an ominous end note. "- and I kill you at another time. So what do you pick?"

Leliana watched the bomb's clock tick down to two minutes. She thought about the day she had ahead of her and how all of it was going to change because of what she was about to decide. She only thought about the next twenty four hours, she didn't think about the rest of her life and how this decision might weigh heavily on her shoulders until she took her last breath.

"I choose life, Corypheus. I choose my life."

"Why am I not surprised," he responded in a cold, disappointed voice.

She heard a click and then the bomb next to her went silent. She hung up the phone, still shaking - and then she let loose an ear piercing scream.
Aida was standing at her locker, speaking to another nurse as she wrapped up another long shift in the ER. They were laughing about the woman who nearly gave birth in the doorway to the emergency room that morning. A contraction hit her hard and she squatted right there between the sliding doors, hollering at the top of her lungs as the doors nearly closed on her. Despite her dramatic entrance, the woman was still in labor, swearing up a storm and startling doctors and nurses that passed her room.

Aida was closing her locker and putting her purse across her shoulder when she noticed people running down the hall through the door of the nurses' break room. They were running away from the ER, not toward it. Aida stepped out into the hallway, dodging patients and hospital personnel. She heard a voice calling to her but it didn't fully register with her, "Aida, don't - don't..."

She turned the corner and standing in the middle of the mostly empty emergency room was a petite elven young lady - with a bomb strapped to her chest. She was shaking. Two security guards had their guns pointed at her, but they were just as terrified as she was, and her brave boss Vivienne stood flanking her, not moving too. Aida spoke in her calmest, soothing voice.

"You don't have to do this."
"I do. Are you a mage as well?"
"I am."
"What I am doing, I do for your freedom, our freedom."

Vivienne answered her, "We are already free, so are you. So please, let's just - "

Aida took a step forward but the girl raised her hand, stopping her. "Do not worry, the bomb will not kill you. Corypheus is wise - he knows there is something more precious than even your lives."

Aida kept her busy by answering her, the two security guards edged forward oh so slightly. "What is more precious than our lives?"

"Your memories."

The last thing Aida saw was the girl reaching for a button on the vest. She squinted her eyes closed and yelled, "Magic exists to enslave man, and to always to rule over him!"

Aida saw a blinding white light - and then utter darkness.

Chapter End Notes

CLIFFHANGER! Don't worry though, I'm already plowing away on the next chapter. If I'm lucky, I can even get it up tomorrow.
Cullen stared at Aida in her hospital bed in Redcliffe General, where the victims of Haven hospital blast had been transferred. She looked like she was only sleeping, and not recovering from a terrorist attack. Cullen rubbed his face in exhaustion. There had been three bombings that morning, in a span of an hour - Haven General, the Chantry in downtown Haven, and the cafeteria on the campus of Ferelden State University - it was Anders's parting gift to Corypheus.

He had been holding Aida's hand for four hours straight since they let him into her hospital room. He was tired, hungry, angry, and sleepy all at the same time. Dorian had been tending to them both, and just now stepped outside to escort Aida's father and sister to her bedside. Cullen had no time to be nervous about meeting her family now. Everything that he had worried about until four hours ago didn't matter any more. He just wanted to see Aida's eyes open and look at him.

Dorian entered her hospital room first. "Cullen, this is Aida's father and older sister Emilia. They came as soon as they could -"

Cullen stood up and at attention, giving the intimidating man the respect he deserved. The Bann held a hand out and Cullen was quick to grip it back.

"I took the company helicopter. I'm Bann Trevelyan, but under the circumstances I think we can drop the title, just call me Edward. Shame we had to meet like this."

Cullen felt the man sizing him up. He was three inches taller than him and stood up straighter in his presence. "Pleased to meet you, Ser. My name is Cullen Rutherford. I've been dating your daughter now for almost six months now. And - I loved her since the moment I saw her when she moved in next door. I'll love her even if she stays like this for an eternity."

His ardent words made Aida's father clench his jaw in sorrow and look at his daughter on the bed behind him. Dorian looked down at the floor, trying to hold back the tears in his eyes, while Emilia didn't bother. She wept, grabbing Cullen for an intense hug. Cullen couldn't help but notice as the woman sobbed in his arms that she was the exact same height as Aida, only a little older and sharing more of her father's features.

"I'm Emilia, Aida's older sister, and we are so glad to meet you Cullen, we worry about Aida a lot. She's always been a bit of a - maverick - never asking for help, or money or opinions."

The Bann laughed, choking up a little. "Opinions? She always had plenty of her own."

They joined until Cullen stopped to correct his words. "Has plenty of her own. She's still here, she's still with us."
He sat back down at Aida's side, holding her hand once again, staring at her as though she were the only other person on the planet. Bann Trevelyan turned to Dorian. "Dorian, can you find this Doctor Solas you mentioned and have him come speak to us? We should wait for Aida's brothers but they were travelling on business and are already on their way back to Haven."

Dorian nodded and stepped outside of the room to make a phone call. The Bann turned back to the scene in front of him, addressing Cullen again.

"I guess we are about to get to know each other, aren't we?"
"Yes Ser, we are. So I should get something off my chest right away then."
"What's that?"

Cullen's eyes bored into the Bann's. "What if I told you I believed this bombing at the hospital to be no accident?"

The Bann stared back at him, as serious as Cullen was - "What do you mean?"

"What if I told you the Mayor might have let this happen on purpose?"

Emilia covered her mouth in shock. The Bann pulled up another chair closer to Aida's bed, sitting down now. "Tell me everything you know."

While they waited for Dorian to track down Aida's doctor, Cullen told them the whole story, from the first time Leliana made a pass at him to the threats she made recently. But more damning than that was what Varric had told him during the chaos that had erupted at the mayor's mansion when the first bomb had been discovered. Varric had been stationed outside of Leliana's bedroom door, and both he and Iron Bull thought they heard a phone ring and Leliana speaking to someone. Shortly after that, she had screamed over the bomb in her bed, already deactivated. Varric had been immediately puzzled - how did she manage to get the bomb to switch off, was it a dud like she was already insisting? But all of Anders's other bombs had worked. Who was she talking on the phone to? And on what phone? There was no record of an incoming call on the land line in her room and according to her Blackberry, the last call she took had been 8 hours before.

When Emilia spoke up at the end of Cullen's story, her voice was shaky. "Daddy, what are we going to do? If what Cullen says is even a little bit true, and did she have prior knowledge to all three bombs before they occurred - then...she has to pay for this. She cannot become senator, she cannot even remain our mayor."

Cullen watched the Bann's face as he processed all this information. He didn't have a chance to answer, Dorian entered with Doctor Solas at his side. The elf had a permanently stoic look on his face as he went around the room meeting Aida's new visitors. Everyone turned toward him with expectation as he began to tell them about Aida's condition.

"Like the other bombing victims, Aida has sustained no injuries whatsoever beyond some minor cuts and bruises from when she fell and lost consciousness. I've been briefed by experts at the scene but they are still gathering information at the scenes and doing research."

Solas hung up a few x-rays on a nearby lightbox mounted to the wall. They were scans of Aida's brain.

"As you can see, everything looks perfectly fine but..."

He took a deep breath before continuing. "Three victims of the attack on the university campus have already regained consciousness. They - all have amnesia."
Emilia began crying again, Cullen leaned forward in his chair, tears springing to his eyes too as he pressed his forehead to Aida's hand.

"Now, we don't know if it's permanent, it's much too soon. But I do know this much - it's not neurological. It's not because she hit her head or because there was a projectile that pieced one of her lobes - the bomb...it was magic, rigged with the power of the Fade."

Dorian's eyes glowed with desperation. "Perhaps it can be reversed. There could be a counter spell?"

The Bann stood up between the two mages. "I'll pay for any research costs, we should be willing to try anything to get our Aida back."

Solas continued, while checking Aida's vitals. "For now, she is in stable condition but I cannot tell you more than that. I know it must be frustrating but when I have more information, you will be the first to know."

The doctor dismissed himself with a little bow of his head before turning to leave the room - and walk across the hallway to give the same speech to that patient's nervous family. Now that he was out of the room, everyone let go of their reserve. Emilia hugged her father while she sobbed, while Dorian kept a supportive hand on Cullen's shoulder as he did the same, still clutching Aida's hand.

Then a little voice interrupted their emotional outbursts.

"What's everyone so sad about? I hope it isn't my fault."

They all looked up at Aida, who was smiling at them rather angelically, as though nothing were wrong at all and she had woken from a short nap, squeezing Cullen's hand back.

"Aida!"

Cullen gasped as her father darted out of the room to look for Solas or a nearby nurse.

She looked at Cullen with gentle affection, but something was different about her already.

"Hello, handsome, what's your name?"

* * * *

They gave Cullen two weeks of bereavement time off. He had stormed into Cassandra's office to quit but she personally begged him to take the time off for now, to save them the PR nightmare of the Mayor's head of security quitting his job so soon after three massive terrorist attacks.

"Take the two weeks, and then all your vacation time and sick days. That should give us more than a month, and then we can transition one of your team members into your position."

"Yes, and as soon as I'm able - I'm going to 'transition' all of us out of here. Something's rotten in these hallways, Cassandra. I know you know it too."

Cullen leaned closer to her over her desk, lowering his voice. "Cass, the Mayor took a call from someone that morning and shortly thereafter hundreds of people no longer recognize themselves or their loved ones. Please think of their suffering - and find out something about that phone call."

Cullen cleared out his locker in their break room as he did not intend on returning. As he walked with his box of belongings back to his car, Leliana and the rest of her security detail were passing
through the garage. Cullen felt strangely liberated when the woman did not even bother looking at him.

The elation of quitting the job he had hated for faded quickly. A week after Aida woke up in the hospital, movers hired by her family came to her condo to pack up her belongings and put them in storage. Nobody in her family had told him they were going to do his, and he had to chase down Aida's sister to find out what their plans were for her. He met her at a coffee shop near Trevelyman Tower, where Aida's entire family worked to maintain their business empire.

"Father wants her to come home to Skyhold and live with him, with help a 24 hour nurse who will help her deal with any anxiety or trauma she is experiencing with the memory loss. He's already hired him, and he seems really nice."

"Him?" Cullen felt jealousy pulsing through his veins. "Who is this guy? Do I have to worry about him?"

Emilia laughed, almost choking on her coffee. It was endearing because she snorted just like her younger sister. "You've got nothing to worry about with this guy. Honestly, he seems a little asexual. But - don't be freaked out by this. I swear he's psychic. There's been a few times when we've met with him to talk about Aida and he's answered questions I was only thinking at the moment."

Cullen sat and stared out at the window at all the people walking past them on the sidewalk. 7 days since the attacks and the world had gone back to normal - but his had completely changed.

"Your father still refuses to consider that she could stay with me?"

"I'm sorry, Cullen. He sees it as a clean cut legal issue. He's like, 'We're her next of kin, and who is he exactly'?"

"I'm her lover and her best friend. I'm her knight and her champion."

Emilia sniffled while she broke her scone in half, sharing it with him. "Oh please don't make me cry, I have a video meeting when I get back to the office. Listen, Cullen, don't be discouraged. I think my father likes you, he's just warming up to you. Come visit Aida whenever you want. Show him how much you care. Be annoying and persistent, he loves that."

After Emilia went back to the office, Cullen stayed at the coffee shop, sitting with Barkley on the patio, a book on his lap he was unable to open and start. His mind kept fixating on one thought over and over again: Aida didn't miss him at all - how could she?

But he had to get used to the idea of spending the rest of his life missing her - not the Aida who was still here, but the one who was gone now.

* * * * *

Cullen pulled up to Bann Trevelyman's mansion a day later, flowers in hand, determined to be a consistent presence in Aida's new life. The security guard at the gate of Skyhold eyeballed his Corvette and checked two times to see if he was on the list before letting him in and directing him toward the manor's porte cochere. He had to meet Aida's caretaker before he could see her but his heart was already pounding in his chest, like when he used to hope he'd bump into her in the hallway outside their condos.

He didn't know what to think of Cole, the strange, pale young man who was in charge of Aida's well-being instead of him, but he was very compassionate about Aida's condition.

"We must remember to be gentle with Aida. She lost her memory a week ago, she's only been home
for a day or two. We're just starting to ease her back into the world. And I must warn you, she sometimes gets upset when she remembers - that she can't remember."

Cullen looked over Cole's shoulder at the oil painting hanging near one of the landings of the staircase. It was Aida's mother in an elegant ballgown, and Aida was the mirror image of her. He remembered Aida telling him over dinner on one of their first dates how she passed away from cancer when she was 12.

Cole looked at him, brow furrowed. "Yes, that's the sort of detail she might find particularly painful as she puts the pieces of her life back together."

Cullen blinked at Cole a few times in surprise. Did he just respond to my thoughts and feelings? Emilia was right, this Cole was not just a nurse and caretaker, he might be not of this world as well. Cullen internally shrugged it off as he followed Cole to Skyhold's library. Magic and inexplicable things used to alarm him, but once you fall in love a mage, you sort of have to get over it.

They paused outside the wide double doors, Cullen feeling nervous again.

"Can I see her alone?"
"Of course."

Aida was sitting on a few pillows on the ground, near a set of floor to ceiling windows in her father's daunting study. She was surrounded by bookshelves of dark mahogany, the walls covered in impressive and grand oil paintings. She was looking through a heavy art history book, turning its glossy pages, as she played with an end of her braided hair. Cullen took a few steps closer to her, but on the soft carpet, his footsteps were a little muffled. He cleared his throat to get her attention.

She looked up at him and smiled and Cullen felt his heart clench in his body. She was so lovely and almost losing her made him experience her beauty in an incredibly visceral way.

"Hello. I remember you! Well, from the hospital that is."

She gestured to him to come closer, patting the cushion next to her. "Come closer, I don't bite. Are those flowers for me?"

Cullen looked down at his hand, having forgot he had brought her a bouquet.

"Yes, they're for you, they're ranunculus blooms...your favorite."

"Hold on, I've been writing everything down. Even little things like that."

Aida held up a hand, grabbing a nearby notebook and pen. Cullen put the flowers down on a nearby end table and joined her near the window, sitting where she had asked him to sit. He watched her start a new page in her notebook, writing "Monday" in the top margin.

"Wait, back up. What's your name again?"
"Cullen."

She smiled at him shyly again, as she scribbled down her notes, narrating them for him.

"Cullen came to visit me on Monday morning. He's...quite handsome and very tall and has kind, whiskey-colored eyes. He brought me my favorite flowers - ranunculus - and they were purple, pink and yellow. I wonder who he is?"
Cullen forced himself to not reach out and touch her, the hem of her dress sneaking up a little revealing a bit of her bare leg to him. Only a week ago he would have pulled her into his arms and opened her mouth with his tongue, tasting her deeply. He took a jagged breath, willing himself to calm down.

"I live next door to you. I'm - your neighbor."

She added this to her notes. "Neighbor."

The next words never made it out of his mouth. "I'm also your boyfriend."

He didn't know why he was scared to tell her, Cole made him feel like he shouldn't overwhelm her with information. This Aida seemed so fragile and innocent, he didn't want to push himself on her like his animal urges were suggesting at the moment. She had survived an incredible trauma. She needed to be sheltered and protected. He felt her soft fingers touching his wrist, interrupting his thoughts.

"Are you alright? You got very quiet there for a moment."
"I'm fine, Aida. What have you been doing since you got home?"
"Oh you know, the usual. Wandering around, wondering who I am, what happened to me, why everyone is treating me like a very expensive vase."
"I'm sorry about that. Everyone just loves you very much."
"Yes, they keep telling me that too. And that I shouldn't leave Skyhold without Cole, or Father. I'm not a child but...apparently I am."
"Well, you must tell me if I start doing that to you too. I only want us to be good friends - again. So. What should we do to fill the time?"

Aida's expression changed, from pleasant and buoyant to anguished and a little panicked.

"I - I don't know. I don't know what I want to do. Everybody keeps asking me what I want to do and what we should do and, and..."

Her face crumpled and she began to cry. Cullen wanted to reach out and touch her but he hesitated, even as her shoulders began to shake.

"I'm so sorry Aida, I didn't mean to upset you."
"Yet another thing people keep repeating to me!"

He stood up, shaky on his feet now. "I'll get Cole, I'm sorry. I'll leave."

Aida darted a hand out, trying to grab him before he moved away. "No, I don't want you to leave, please, I'm just - "

Cullen was out in the hallway before he could hear the rest of her sentence. He called out for Cole, who appeared from a room down the hallway.

"I'm sorry, I upset her, she's crying."

Cole put a hand on his arm, trying to get him to calm down too. "You're upset as well, why don't you get some fresh air? I know this entire situation is taking everyone some getting used to."

Cullen breathed in through his nose deeply like Aida had taught him once. "You're right. I'll just step outside for a moment."

Cole looked at him, the hand on his arm now giving him a squeeze.
"You're going to leave, aren't you."
"Yes. I'm sorry."
"Don't abandon her forever, Cullen. Come back in a day or two."

Cullen cracked his knuckles. He realized her stately home with its vaulted ceilings and tasteful sumptuousness was making him nervous too. He had to get out of there.

"I will come back, but I don't want to distress her more today. Shall I call to set up a time to see her?"

Cole nodded. "Yes of course. And when we decide she is ready to spend a little time in Haven, I'll be sure to contact you."

Cullen sat in his Corvette in the driveway, unsure about what to do: go back inside and comfort her, tell her the truth, tell her he loved her? Or give her space and time to figure out who she was now? Chances are the old Aida was long gone and all that was left was that sweet, innocent woman sitting in the sunbeam in her father’s library.

He pulled out of the driveway, gunning the motor. He'd be back in a few days, after Aida had calmed down a bit. And him too. He had felt very frustrated scrambled in front of Aida. She was Aida, in the flesh, but it also wasn't her. He wanted her, but he couldn't touch her. And selfish thoughts crept into his mind again, he wanted her to want him back.

Cullen needed a drink. He went straight home and then walked over to O'Hara's, choosing the booth he had sat in that long-ago night with Aida when their lives began to intertwine together after she dumped Samson. A few tequila shots later and he still felt disheartened by his visit to Aida.

He was having an itch he hadn't felt in a long time. He was back to feeling incredibly lonely like he did before Aida Trevelyan had tumbled into his lap.

This entire situation was making him miss lyrium.

Cullen didn't have his dealer's phone number anymore, but what were the chances he still lived on 17th Street? He even remembered the other details. Three flights up, corner unit, apartment D. He glanced at his watch, it was 5 PM in the afternoon. Mike would definitely be home, lying on the couch, eating a bowl of cereal and watching cartoons.

He could hear his raspy voice in his imagination. "Cullen, how's it been, man? I haven't seen you in years? You want your usual stuff?"

He flagged down the bartender, settling his bill.

Mike would be home. And Mike would remember him.
The Journal of Aida Trevelyan

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's short-ish, but it's because the next chapter is gonna be an emotional doozy - and then the one after that, we will return to some #CullenSmut shenanigans.

Wednesday

Cole thinks I should write more regularly in my journal, not just taking notes, but writing down my thoughts - especially since I find myself often confused or upset but have trouble expressing to others what I'm feeling. It's a good idea as sometimes I don't think anyone wants to hear how I feel. They same the same things to me over and over again - how I'm lucky to be alive, how they're glad I'm alive, how it must be so nice to have so much free time. It isn't that nice. I'm locked up in Skyhold most of the time, looking at books in the library, walking in the garden. I stay away from the TV in general unless (cousin) Dorian comes to visit and then we drink wine and watch bad reality shows. He tells me that this is what we used to love to do and I do enjoy it when he comes to visit because he treats me normally and doesn't look at me with pity in his eyes. He actually teases me about what's happened, calling me Aida Amnesia and Little Miss Forgets-a-lot, but I don't mind and vastly prefer his silliness to the maudlin sentiments everyone else extends my way.

I like the visitors but I'm always jealous when they leave. I want to be useful, I'd like to help people. Cole thinks maybe we should start a support group for those of us hurt in the attacks who have lost their memories too, but Father has already nixed the idea, saying people are always looking for a reason to scrutinize or attack our family.

What I'd really like is to get out of Skyhold and go back to Haven and just walk around the city and blend in with everyone and act normal and look normal. Have a coffee, walk around the art museum, buy groceries, take them home, make dinner. Everybody does everything for me here, I don't even get to choose what I eat for dinner.

I'd also settle for having my things back. I'd like to look through what they boxed up from my condo, but they all say I'm not ready yet.

Friday

Cullen visited today. We spend a lot of time stammering and blushing around each other but I'm not sure why. We played chess and he was so wonderfully delighted when I won. He also spent a lot of time talking to father in his home office but I couldn't hear anything when I lurked around the door. I wonder what they're being so dodgy about.

I told Cullen how I just wanted to get out of the house a little bit and he said he would try to do something about it. I said he could come sneak me out in the evening and we could go to a bar and sit together and people watch and he said that was something I used to like to do all the time.

I like it the most when he visits because he looks at me in this particular way that I can't put my finger on.
Whenever he leaves I always ask him when he'll be coming back.

Tuesday

I caught Dorian and Cullen arguing with each other today, outside in the driveway. I saw them from upstairs but when I came outside to speak to them they stopped their conversation and refused to tell me what they were fighting about. I guess Dorian bumped into him as he was leaving after another clandestine meeting with father.

I asked Dorian what they were bickering about - he said they don't see eye to eye on how to talk to me. I don't understand at all, Cullen seems to speak to me freely of what my life was like before the accident, just as Dorian does. I don't get the feeling either of them are hiding anything from me? Dorian says Cullen is being stubborn and stupid about something, but he won't elaborate.

Friday

Sera came to visit today, we got drunk in the gazebo in the backyard and Cole found us both out there, sleeping on some patio furniture. She said everyone at work misses me. I can't believe I used to work in a busy ER. It explains why my current idleness bothers me so much. Sera joked that we could switch places, that she should lie around Skyhold eating cake while I go work a 12 hour shift at the hospital.

She wondered why I wasn't drawing at all - I said nobody had told me I drew! I'm asking Cole for some art supplies right away.

Monday

Father told me at dinner tonight he's hired Cullen to work for him. Apparently it was something I suggested before the bombing! Cullen seems relieved, he told me he hated his previous job.

I'm upset though. He will be away more. I only have a handful of visitors, my condition has made a lot of my former friends nervous around me.

Cullen promised that before he leaves on Thursday, he will bring his dog by for a visit. He said Barkley was already excited to see me.

Wednesday

Barkley Barkley Barkley!

I couldn't help myself, I sobbed when Cullen tried to leave with him, so he is letting me take care of him while he travels on business. And now father and Cole both think it'd be fine for me to take care of him since he's so protective of me already. He follows me around everywhere.

There's also a part of me that wanted to keep Barkley because I knew Cullen had to come back to get him. I worry he finds his visits with me boring. We seem to have spent a lot of time together before my accident and sometimes I run out of things to say to him and he seems disappointed.

I wonder if he has a girlfriend. He doesn't speak about one. But just look at him, he must. I find myself thinking about him a lot and thinking about this mystery girlfriend and I find it angers me. He must be off with her when we are not together and he is not at work. He takes her to restaurants, they
walk together in the park. I bet she makes him laugh - I can't seem to make him laugh too much. She must be beautiful, and tall like him. They probably turn heads in public wherever they go.

While he's away I bet they will speak to each other every day, whereas I am still not allowed to have a cell phone. Does she send him naked pictures of herself? Do they have phone sex? Why do I think about these things?

I'm so dreadfully jealous of her, that's why.

Well, she can't be that great since I'm the one who gets to take care of Barkley, right?

**Monday (Two Weeks Later)**

Cullen came to collect Barkley but - something has been strange in the air lately. Father seems angry - not at me, but in a general, brooding way. Now they have also taken the TV away from me. Something must be going on in the news that they are trying to protect me from.

Cullen didn't stay long. He was very flustered too. Dorian is the only one who will tell me the truth - apparently they are trying to "go after the people who did this to me". And apparently it isn't "people" - but "one woman in particular". Dorian thinks they cannot pin anything on her, but she will suffer in other ways because of her actions.

Nobody will listen to me but I don't really care if they punish the people or the woman who "did this" to me. What's done cannot be undone. I'll probably be like this forever. And it doesn't matter because Cullen seems less and less interested in me every time he sees me. His hands shake and he seems in a hurry to go somewhere else and do something else. He promises whenever he's out of town Barkley will always stay with me, so at least I have that. Five minutes of his company once or twice a month.

He already visited me too much for a **neighbor** I guess. He needs to get back to his regular life. Get back to that girlfriend of his.

I'm so angry and I don't know what to do about it. All I want to do is run away. I don't even want to be around people who remember me anymore. I could start a completely new life, somewhere else, and just be someone else. I don't need to be Aida anymore.

**Thursday**

I've been thinking about it, I do need to get out of here. It will be tricky as I don't even have an ID or driver's license, they've taken all those things away from me. They must be somewhere though. I could manage it if I could get my hands on a decent amount of cash. I could nip away in one of father's cars. With a fake ID I could get on a train. I could find some kind of work in Val Royeaux.

I just want to disappear. Most of me has disappeared already.

I've been keeping an eye on the guards that watch Skyhold on their night shift. They get very negligent - stopping to take a long break around 2 am to eat, but they often end up distracted by the TV in the security booth at the gates for at least an hour after their meal. Cole poses more of a problem, he is so in tune with my feelings that I suspect he already knows what I'd like to do. How am I supposed to distract someone whose job is solely to keep an eye on me and make sure I am safe?

I've made friends with one of the girls in the kitchen. I give her bits of my old jewelry to pawn and
she brings me the money. I fed her a line about just wanting my own pocket cash so I could buy some things for Barkley, and she bought it. I'm now getting to know the constant stream of deliverymen who come to Skyhold. One truck brings food, a courier brings my father papers and other important work documents, we don't even do our own laundry, we have a service for that as well. Someone has to be kind enough to believe I just need a little ride into town.

(A week later) Thursday

I've spent days and days begging Cole to let me have a little access to my things from my condo. I lied and told him I just wanted to go through my old clothes, and that I wouldn't look through the other stuff since they still think it would upset me to look through what is left of my former life. It's a strange sentiment - how could I be upset really when I remember none of it anyhow?

I don't know what happened to my ID but I did find my passport, and it's still up to date. I'll be Aida Trevelyan for one last time, in the Haven train station.

Gabrielle Legrand. I've already picked out my new name.

(Two weeks later) Friday

I've saved up enough and waited long enough, today's the day. I've bribed one of our regular deliverymen to drive me into Haven, dropping me off at a mall near the train station before Cole can even notice I'm gone.

Cullen came to get Barkley tomorrow so I needn't worry about leaving him behind.

I'm packing light. I'm excited. New things, new places, new people.

(updated entry) Friday

Cullen found me, fifteen minutes before I was about to get on the train to Val Royeaux. He was so livid he yelled at me in the middle of the train station. He dragged me out of there, gripping me so hard by the arm I thought I would bruise.

Only a child thinks of running away from home, Aida, he hissed at me as strangers gawked at us as he bellowed in my face. What was I thinking? Where did I think I was going? What did I think I was going to do once I got to Val Royeaux? Didn't I think for a second of all the people who would miss me? What if something had happened to me in Val Royeaux? Did I think I was going to sleep on the street, what kind of job did I think I could get once I got there, a woman with no memories or skills to speak of. Didn't I think Cole and the other people who had helped me would get into trouble for my selfish stunt?

He shoved me into his car, making sure the doors were locked before he called my father to say he had found me. He was in Denerim on business and was relieved I had been found. I begged to speak to him, hoping he would not fire Cole for my behavior. Father was nicer to me on the phone than Cullen had been moments ago and promised no one would be in trouble for assisting in my aborted escape. He only made me swear I would never try such a thing again.

I gave the phone back to Cullen and he said he was driving me straight home back to Cole, but he wanted to make a stop at his condo first. I hid my excitement at seeing where he lives and where I had lived, staying silent in the car.
A few minutes later I was twelve floors up, standing on his balcony, staring at the beautiful Frostbacks while Cullen disappeared into the master bedroom. His condo was tidy and full of books. I looked at his living room sofa and imagined what it would be like to sit there and watch a movie with him, his arm around me. While he was busy, I snooped a little, hoping to find a picture of him with his girlfriend but I found nothing, no sign of a woman ever having been to his condo. It didn't make me feel better really. Maybe she just didn't leave her things all over his place.

After a while I realized Cullen had been gone for at least twenty minutes. I walked down the hallway to his bedroom and nudged open the door - he wasn't in there, but I saw a light on in his master bathroom. I called out for him but he didn't answer, so I pushed open the bathroom door next. Cullen was sitting on the closed lid of the toilet - his shirt sleeve rolled up and a needle in his arm, a look of bliss and contentment plastered on his face.

I couldn't breathe. I staggered backwards with a gasp, apologizing for having interrupted.

I returned the patio, sitting down on his only deck chair. He had followed me out there immediately and was mumbling his own apologies, slurring his words, high on lyrium.

And this is what's been haunting me, I wish I could take back my words. I asked him wouldn't it be a faster death to just jump off the balcony rather than do what he was doing to himself?

He didn't answer.

I asked him to call for my father's driver, that I wanted to go home right away and that he was in no condition to drive.

I don't want to leave Skyhold now. Not for a while.

Cullen dropped off Barkley before he left on business yesterday, but I did not come downstairs to see him, Cole spoke to him instead.

Cole and Father have been discussing what happened and they think I need a little bit more space in general. At least they've let me look through my possessions from before the accident, I have something to pass the time a little, paring down things I feel I don't need anymore. I found my phone in one of the boxes and I'm charging it as I write this.

I'm so curious about my emails and texts and pictures. What had I been doing before I lost all my memories?

**Sunday**

I called Cullen on my old phone, I could tell it shocked him to see that number pop up on his screen - but he was glad to hear my voice, and I his. I told him I didn't want to leave our relationship in that terrible place on his balcony. He started to explain to me about his addiction and this recent relapse but I insisted that I wasn't judging him, I only wanted him to be happy and healthy.

He swore to the Maker I would never see him like that again.

I had a thousand burning questions for him - over the weekend I had opened up every single box that had come from my condo. I wanted to tell him I had looked through my phone and read all my texts. I saw the photos I sent him and the ones he had sent back to me. I know now what he has been hiding from me this entire time.

But why?
I've been thinking about this for days and can only find one answer - perhaps he does not love me anymore. My accident changed everything. Why else has he been acting like we were only friends and neighbors?

My heart was thumping loud in my chest as he told me he would see me at my family's Satinalia party in just a week. I had been so distracted by life lately that I hadn't even noticed the holidays had rolled around.

I need to find a beautiful dress. I need to buy him a wonderful Satinalia gift. And I need to confront him about why he's been lying to me since I left the hospital.
Satinalia Surprises

Chapter Notes

Making it Christmas/Satinalia in June for you by updating TWICE in a day! I brought you a box of #CullenFeels. You can't return them, they're yours forever.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Satinalia at Skyhold was a black tie affair. Cullen had never worn a tuxedo before, and now suddenly he owned one, tailor-made to fit him. He had been working for the Bann for months now and the job had transformed him from a former soldier and hired hand into an executive in charge of security across all the Trevelyan holdings which stretched from one side of Thedas to another. The Bann owned all sorts of different businesses so the work was a lot more interesting than he expected it to be.

As he got ready for the party, he kept an eye on the news on the TV in his bedroom. Leliana's numbers had slipped hard after the bombings - and not because of any actions he or Aida's father had undertaken. There had been a public outcry that not enough had been done by city hall to protect Haven's citizens. Multiple organizations had been found at fault, from the slow response at the university campus to lack of emergency procedures at Haven General. At the center of it all was Leliana, who remained terse and tight-lipped during investigative hearings around the attacks, and she never elaborated about the mystery phone call she had received that morning. Many pundits called her ice cold and uncooperative, and more stringent voices online accused her of being in league with Corypheus. Her political career was in shambles and in Cullen's head that was payback enough.

Cullen had been glad to hear that his former colleagues were doing better than Leliana too. The last time Cullen had spoken to Cassandra she was angling to work for Elissa Cousland, the new mayor, as her press secretary. Leliana had foolishly put all her hopes on her senatorial race and had declared long ago that she would not seek reelection in her own city. Varric, Bull and Blackwall were already working for the military hero, and Varric had been advocating for Cass to join them in their support for the Hero of Ferelden.

Almost everyone had landed on their feet after the attacks - with two big exceptions. Cullen looked in the mirror and adjusted his bow tie. He was still very deeply ashamed of his short-lived lyrium relapse. And Aida remained inside the walls of Skyhold, sheltered and insulated. From what Cole had told him, after her one escape attempt she had given up on the outside world past the driveway of her family's mansion. She had been poking through her old possessions and drawing a lot.

He was so nervous about seeing Aida tonight that he considered feigning an illness and staying home, but he knew that was cowardly talk. She was likely very angry or just confused about him hiding the truth of their relationship from her while she recuperated. He had to explain - even though the explanation was going to be painful.

* * * * *
Skyhold was dripping with Satinalia decorations, the stately manor felt like a castle out of a fairy tale. Waiters swept through the crowd with trays heavy with champagne flutes and delicious bites of food, and even after all the swanky fundraisers he spent standing behind Leliana, Cullen knew that the Trevelyans took luxury to another level.

He had deposited his small gift for Aida under the 8 foot tall Satinalia tree in the corner of their salon and was chatting with a few coworkers when he heard an audible murmur rippling through the crowd gathered at the foot of Skyhold's sweeping staircase. He looked to the top of the stairs and saw Aida, holding on to Cole's arm. She was dressed in a ballgown of gold, dipping low in the front with a keyhole neckline, and a black velvet cape over her shoulders, embroidered with gold leaves and twining flowers. They went down the staircase slowly, Aida's gown spreading out behind her as though she were a queen on her coronation day.

Not a queen - an angel, he corrected himself. All she needs is a pair of wings.

Cullen watched as she greeted her father, brothers and sister first, before being absorbed into the crowd of well-wishers and family friends. Before he could worry about her walking up to him and slapping him in front of a room of aristos and business magnates, the dinner bell chimed and he followed everyone into Skyhold's dining hall. Despite his nervousness about seeing her, he had hoped to be seated closer to her, but instead she was eight seats away from him and on the other end of the table. He had to tell himself a few times not to stare at her and concentrate on all the food that was placed before him. Dorian had been seated on his left though, and had kept him entertained with gossip about the other guests or how completely improbable it was for the Bann to get his hands on 2,000 oysters, flown in from the distant oceans of Braavos.

"Where's Bull, Dorian, you didn't want to bring him along?"
"Working tonight, the new mayor does things like deliver toys to orphans for Satinalia instead of plot to harm her own citizens for personal and political gain."

Cullen shushed Dorian as a scandalized dowager across the table shot them an alarmed look. "You're drunk, Dorian, and speaking louder than you think."

"Oh who cares. If my father were here, he'd call this a stingy little cocktail party. You should see how we celebrate in Tevinter. There's a lot more nudity for a start."

Cullen almost choked on his filet mignon and had to have a sip of wine to clear his throat. He glanced down the table and saw Aida looking at him, a smile at the corner of her lips. He gave her a bow of his head, and raised his glass to his lips in a small toast to her. She brought her glass to her lips too, blushing now. They locked eyes and Cullen felt like she had been looking at him differently all night long - in a more familiar way, less curious and sweet - and a little bit more like she had that steamy night when she had surrendered her body to him in Denerim.

Cullen drained his wine glass. This was not the appropriate place to relive that memory. He tuned back in to Dorian's conversation.

"Bull and I are thinking about getting married."

Before Cullen could offer his congratulations, Dorian had already turned to egg on the old lady who had been listening to their chatter all night long. "What do you think of that, Aunt Demelza? Two men getting married is already pretty ghastly in your book, but how about a man and a Qun? What kind of odd children could we even have? Well that's a silly question, clearly we'd have to adopt."

Cullen burst out laughing now, loud enough to make the entire party look at him. Aida beamed at him and he thought his heart would liquefy in his chest. He spoke to Aida's father from across the
"Sorry, Bann Trevelyan. Your distant nephew excels in saying scandalous things."

Aunt Demelza piped in now. "Oh please, I've heard worse."

Dorian and Cullen raised their glasses to the old crone who joined them in a toast, triggering everyone else to do the same. The Bann stood up now, glass in hand.

"And another toast, to my family, but this year, especially to my youngest daughter. Our survivor, Aida."

Aida was staring at Cullen again as he brought the glass to his lips. Staff began to clear away the dinner dishes to set dessert before the guests. He was still chatting with Dorian when a man wearing white gloves placed the elegant slice of chocolate cake in front of him. He also interrupted his conversation by discretely whispering near his ear, "Miss Trevelyan would like to speak to you privately in the salon after dessert and coffee."

Cullen felt a familiar nervous tremor in his right hand and he clenched it shut to still it.

* * * * *

Aida waited for Cullen in the study, pacing a little, checking her hair over and over again before refilling her wine glass. The door behind her opened and Cullen paused before entering.

"Aida? Did you wish to speak to me?"

"Cullen, come in. I haven't seen you in a while. Happy Satinalia."

She watched him close the door behind him, crossing the room to her side. He took one of her hands in his, bowed over it and pressed a courtly kiss to her knuckles.

"Happy Satinalia, Aida. You look stunning tonight."

"So do you, Cullen. You should wear a tuxedo every day. Please, sit. Would you like some wine?"

He nodded and sat down on the red velvet setee nearby, watching her move about her father's library, listening to the rustle of her gown. She placed the two wine glasses on a book that had been sitting on the desk, using it as a tray to bring his drink to him. She sat down next to him, offering him his drink before taking hers. She watched his eyes look at the book sitting in her lap - and knew by his face that he recognized it. They clinked their glasses together and took a sip. Aida put her wine down on the end table nearby, resting her hands on the book in her lap.

"Cullen. I had some questions for you. As I told you on the phone last week... Cole and Father let me go through some of my old things and I found a lot of items among them that I have some questions about. Considering you knew me before my accident I was wondering if you could help me."

She chose to speak to him almost formally, opening the book on her lap - her old sketchbook. She flipped past her pencil drawings of random, everyday objects, a few landscapes that had watercolor paint added to them, including one of the view off their condo balconies. Aida kept turning the pages until she landed on a particular picture.

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It was a drawing of Cullen, lying face down on his bed, the sheets crumpled around and underneath him, his face pressed to the pillow. Aida's lines were loose and gestural. She had captured the
curliness of his hair and the lines of his muscles with a few masterful strokes of her pencil. Cullen flushed, remembering that Sunday morning. She turned the page and now he was lying on his back in her drawing, a hand on his erect cock and the back of his other arm raised and pressed to his eyes, his mouth open in an expression of lust and pleasure.

She went deeper into the sketchbook, showing him that she had drawn him in the nude countless times, and studies of just his face, in which she detailed the attractive sweep of his jaw and the angles of his handsome brow. She had captured his hands, with their battle scars crossing the knuckles, and more than a few pages dedicated just to his mouth and the scar at the corner of his lips. She kept turning pages until the pages went blank, and then there were two pictures of him tucked into the sketchbook. She handed the photos to him. One was of Cullen during his early years as a Templar, and the other was a photocopy of a picture from his high school yearbook.

"Did I draw these pictures of you?"
"Yes."

"Why do I have these old photos of you?"
"You must have found this Templar one somewhere in my condo, and this second one, I gave you. You asked for it."

Aida looked at him but Cullen only stared into the fire nearby, still holding the pictures.

"Cullen. I wish you'd answer the question you know I am about to ask you, without me having to ask. Just tell me the answer."

He drained his wine glass and put it down on the thick rug under his feet. He took the sketchbook out of her hands and tucked the photos back into it.

"Aida...when you woke up from the bomb blast, you were so different. They told me - you were emotionally stunted, that in many ways you were an innocent again. Your therapist told me that in time you would recuperate and return to a form of yourself, but you'd never be the same again. You look like Aida but you are not the Aida who drew these pictures."

He handed the sketchbook back to her and left her side, standing by the fire now.

"You're not her. You'll never be her. So it didn't matter if I told you that we were once together. That's all."

Aida put the book down now, joining him near the fire. "But Cullen..."

"I'm sorry. I understand that this choice of mine hurt you. I have never wanted to cause you any pain."

She put a hand on his lapel, stepping closer to him now, tears glistening in her eyes. "You didn't let me finish - what if I want... What if I want to be with you again? What if I want - that - again," she said, gesturing back toward the sketchbook. Aida tilted her head toward him. "Kiss me, Cullen. Just kiss me once. Consider it my Satinalia gift."

"You're not her. You'll never be her," he repeated, a little less convinced the second time as her hand slid up his chest to land on his shoulder.

"Then pretend, Cullen. Just a little. Please."

She stepped even closer to him, her breasts now touching his chest "Kiss me."
Aida moaned with pleasure when he pulled her flush to him, grabbing her around the waist as his lips parted hers and their tongues danced against each other. She ran a hand through his hair, delighting that it was softer than it looked.

Cullen pulled back from her, looking down at her face. She glowed up at him, "I knew you were going to be a good kisser."

He blinked at her a few times in surprise, his mouth a little open. "Aida, those are the same words you said to me the first time you kissed me."

She put both her hands on his chest again, in a pleading fashion. "Can't you see, I am her. It's me, Cullen, I'm your Aida. The situation may have changed a little but I'm still here, it's me, it's - "

The door to the library swung open, revealing Aida's father with a glass of brandy in hand. Cullen and Aida took quick steps away from each other, hiding their blushing cheeks.

"Cullen, there you are! Come along, I have some friends I'd like you to meet. They're interested in our new high rise in the Western Approach."

The Bann bellowed back in laughter at someone down the hall and shut the door as quickly as he had opened it. Cullen turned back to face Aida, who was still looking at him hungrily.

"I must go, Aida. I put a gift for you under the tree but it's just a little trifle. This is much more important."

He slipped a hand into his tuxedo pocket and removed a blue poker chip-sized token, pressing it into her palm. "I've been lyrium-free for two weeks, as I swore to you. Every time I see you, I shall give you a new chip. And I will never fail you in this task."

He grabbed the hand that held the chip and kissed it fervently, but it was not enough for Aida. She pushed her way back into his arms, kissing him deeply again, until she stopped to look at him.

"Cullen - my entire family is leaving in three days for our winter trip to our estate in the Free Marches. I won't see you for weeks. Meet me at my father's chalet tomorrow evening in Redcliffe - please."

"Aida, I did not make myself clear earlier. We can never be together - I will never feel the same way about you as I did about the Aida I used to know. I've already hurt you too much, I do not want to hurt you more."

"And I did not make myself clear either - I want you, I want to be with you, that's all. I don't need more than that from you - for now."

She kissed him again, taking one of his hands and sliding it into the neckline of her ballgown. She was not wearing a bra and she could tell by his face that the feel of her breast aroused him in an instant, renewing all the memories he had of their physical relationship. Cullen kissed her back forcefully now, hungry and desirous, before he pulled away and bowed over her hand once more, brushing her lips over her knuckles.

"I must go now, my beauty."

"Wait a moment, I have a gift for you too. Come here."

He followed her back to the desk where a box tied up with a bow was waiting. She handed it to him, watching his face carefully. Tucked inside the velvet-lined box was a dazzling solid gold Cartier wrist watch with a royal-blue face, ringed with tiny sapphires and diamonds. On the back, his initials
were etched in stately letters. It was the watch of a noble gentleman.

"Aida, I cannot accept this, it must have cost you a fortune." She slipped it on his wrist despite his protestations.

"It did, and it doesn't matter to me, can't you see? I'd give you everything I have. I know you loved me, and still love me. Please, Cullen, meet me at my chalet, tomorrow. I'll be waiting for you. If you do not come, then I'll know, and I'll never speak of this again. I'll never bother you again. Please."

He paused in the doorway, looking so dapper and handsome it nearly brought her to her knees.

Before Cullen turned to leave, he quirked a smile at her that filled her full of hope.

Chapter End Notes

I told you I wouldn't hurt ya for too long, didn't I? Although I am awfully fond of these cliffhangers now.

WILL HE SHOW UP
I DON'T KNOW

(I do know)

PS follow me on Tumblr please, I'm: thetemplarandtherogue.tumblr.com
"With one swift strike he pierced her heart..."

Chapter Notes

Enjoy the #CullenFeels and the #CullenSmut, and the story rolls forth in the last section.

The day after the Satinalia party Aida arrived at her family's chalet in the afternoon, dropped off by a chauffeur. Cole knew where she was going and knew there was no stopping her, but she had only left her father a cursory note. She had been a little worried about her father not approving of her disappearing for three days to an isolated, romantic chalet with one of his best new employees, a man he clearly trusted, but Aida shook off those anxieties. For the first time since her accident, she felt like she was seizing the reins of her own life, determined to write her own destiny - starting with getting Cullen Rutherford to take all his clothes off in front of her again.

She opened the door to the chalet and stepped inside. There was a large fireplace, nearly six feet wide, with a thick Antivan rug in front of it crowned with a pile of soft pillows. Aida was quick to imagine them lying there in the firelight, his head between her legs. The idea made her giddy as she went about preparing the place for their stay, putting champagne on ice and laying out a platter of cheese and fruit. She hung her clothes up and located the luxurious black silk kimono she had found in her belongings. She wanted to be wearing it when she came to the door to greet him.

Aida started a fire, using her magic to do so. Cole had been encouraging her to tap into her powers more, hoping it would bring her confidence. She sat on a few pillows, watching the logs crackle and burn, feeling full of anticipation. Since the moment she had seen her own intimate sketches of Cullen she had longed to be with him - even just to be near him. She was certain her feelings for him now matched the feelings she had for him before the bombing. Aida believed her body remembered his, even if her mind did not. And now her body was calling out to him - would he answer?

As the clock ticked past 9 pm and then 10 pm Aida realized Cullen was letting her know how he felt in the cruelest way possible. By the time it was 11, she tumbled into despair and she could not hold back the rush of sorrow she felt. Tears poured down her face as the fire grew weaker in the fireplace. She took off the black silk robe and slipped into bed, alone.

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Cullen nearly collapsed to his knees when the chalet came into view. He had been hiking through the mountains behind Redcliffe for hours now, his overnight bag flung across a shoulder. A logging truck had lost control on the highway miles below and had blocked up both lanes of traffic, and there was no cell reception. The men clearing the accident who let him pass on foot warned him it was going to be a long walk to his destination but 13 miles didn't sound like a lot at that moment. He only thought about Aida waiting for him and how every minute without his arrival that passed might have been like torture to her. It wasn't ego that made him think this, he felt the same way being apart from her as well.

By the time he had arrived at the chalet's front door it was past midnight, he was frozen through, and his dress shoes were killing him. He rang the doorbell but couldn't hear it chime and then switched to banging on the front door. He took a few steps back and looked at the chalet, hoping he was at the
right place, and worried if he was going to have to creep around the perimeter, peering into the windows looking for Aida. He rubbed his hands together, warming them up a bit before knocking on the door again. Just when he was wondering if he was going to have to sleep in the doorway, a light flickered on inside and he heard footsteps coming closer to the door. She spoke through the door, keeping it shut for now.

"Who's there?"
"Aida, it's me..."

He touched the door in a hopeful gesture. There was a long pause during which an icy wind made Cullen pull his collar up higher. He had definitely not dressed for these conditions.

"Aida, please, let me in, let me explain."

The door creaked open, revealing her tear-stained, exhausted face. "What do you want."
"Aida, I want to come in. A big rig overturned on Highway 395, I've been walking for hours, my feet are killing me and I'm freezing. If you don't want me to stay, I understand, but please -".

She had opened the door wider while he spoke, holding her flimsy robe shut with one hand. Despite how cold he was, he felt a warmth flooding his veins just looking at the kimono she had chosen. He remembered it clearly from that night in Denerim at the Four Seasons, when she let it fall from her shoulders, revealing her voluptuous breasts to him.

"Oh, Maker. I'm sorry, come in right away."

He took two steps in, dropped his bag on the ground and sat down on a bench in the foyer right away, still rubbing his hands together and blowing on them. Aida locked the door shut behind him, and then cupped her hands around his.

"Whiskey and a hot bath, does that sound good?"

He shivered, nodding at her. Before he could stop her, Aida dropped to her knees, untying the laces on his shoes.

"Aida, you don't have to do that -"
"I don't have to do anything, you silly man."

Cullen was too tired to argue, he let her take his shoes off and pull off his socks, revealing swollen, blistered feet.

"Oh, you poor darling. Let's get that bath started. Follow me."

Aida stood up and Cullen stopped her for a moment, a hand on her shoulder. "You thought I wasn't coming, didn't you."
"Yes."
"I'm sorry."

"And if you hadn't shown up, I would have never spoken to you again. Or at least I would tell myself to not speak to you, but I'd give up pretty quickly, I think."

Aida smiled at him shyly before ushering him toward the wet bar to get him a glass of whiskey. "I'm glad you're here."

Cullen watched her pour him a little fine whiskey and hand him the glass before leading him by the hand to the master bathroom. He began pulling his clothes off while she filled the wide marble
bathtub, adding a little fragrant oil to the water. When she turned around to face him, he was naked. Aida inhaled sharply, her eyes roving up and down his frame.

"I'll get you a towel."

But she didn't move.

Cullen stepped closer to her, undoing the sash around her waist. He slipped his fingers beneath the silky fabric, parting it and letting it slide from her shoulders, watching her nipples hardened as the cool air hit them. Cullen traced the line of her collarbone with just one finger.

"Is this what you want, Aida? Do you want to be with me?"
"Cullen, I shouldn't have to repeat myself."

Cullen's mouth was on hers as soon as she had answered, his hands lifting her off her feet under her buttocks. She wrapped her legs around him as he stepped into the hot bath, lowering them both into the water, never breaking their kiss. He sat down in the tub with her in his lap, the water sloshing everywhere.

"Cullen, please -"

Aida begged him, as she slid her cunt along his length, grinding on his cock, making him even more erect. In response, he sucked one of her nipples deep into his mouth, toying with it with the tip of his tongue before moving to the other one.

"Cullen, please, please - "

He felt for her pussy under the water, sliding two fingers into her and circling her clit with his thumb as he darted his tongue against hers. He shook that hand hard, not being gentle, wanting to drive her crazy. She cried out, grabbing his shoulders.

"Please what? Please make you come? With just my fingers, or do you want my cock too?"

Before she could catch her breath, Cullen guided his thickness into her. He held on to her ass under the water, guiding her movements, making her undulate back and forth. Aida pressed her forehead to his with a satisfied moan.

"I don't remember, Cullen, but - I know I miss this. My body wants this, my body remembers this. It's so good, you're so good." She rode his cock, making leisurely circles with her hips.

Cullen sucked her nipples, biting them a little, working them until they were stiff and overly sensitive until she had to yank his head away by a handful of curls. "Mmm, Aida. Just to refresh your memory, I'll tell you then - "

He pushed his hips up, holding on to her shoulders so he also bore her down on his every thrust. "You - were, and are - an - insatiable - horny - slut - for my cock."

Aida's giggle quickly transformed into a moan as he felt for her pearl once again. "Aida Lyanna Trevelyan, I have fucked every part of you - your mouth, your tits, your pussy and your arse."

Her face grew even more red as she listened to him, mesmerized. "And I've come in your mouth, on your tits, in your pussy and up your arse."

Spurred on by his words, Aida began to ride him harder, holding on to the edge of the bathtub
behind him, swearing and sighing, wild and wanton, beads of water rolling down all her tantalizing
curves. Cullen kept one arm firmly around her waist, keeping her pinned on his cock as he stood up,
still holding her in his arms. He carried her into the bedroom where they tumbled to the bed, still wet
from the bath, his cock still deep within her. Cullen pulled one of her legs up, resting it against his
chest as he leaned forward, opening her pussy to him more. He kissed her ankle as he pumped his
hips against hers and her cries became more high-pitched and intense.

"Maker, you're so wet -"
"Please, Cullen, just like that, keep going -"

Cullen leaned forward even more so that her knee was almost flush against her side and Aida was
taking the full length of his cock with every smooth thrust. Cullen kissed his way down her leg,
feeling drunk on fucking her.

"It's been too long, Aida. I've wanted this - every time I came to see you, I wanted to do this with
you."
"So did I - so please, please make me come."

Cullen cleared his mind of all thought except one, to make Aida explode with pleasure. The hand
that was not holding on to her leg moved to her cunt and began savagely flicking at her clit. He
watched as a flush crept over her body and her skin grew hotter underneath his hands. and then her
entire body went rigid, bucking hard, her head pressed into the mattress behind her with an emphatic,
orgasmic gasp. Cullen joined her, collapsing on top of her as he filled her up with his seed. Cullen's
climax was so intense he was still spurting when he pulled out of her with a soft grunt of satisfaction.

He pulled the down comforter around them, and then wrapped her in his arms, kissing her on the
forehead. Aida had a dreamy, faraway look on her face.

"Cullen, do you have to leave in the morning?"
"No. I'm yours until you join your family in the Free Marches."

"I don't want to go anymore."
"I don't want you to either."

They drifted off to sleep together, holding on to each other.

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The next morning, Cullen was reminded of how insatiable Aida could be. He was not able to put his
pants on until she had been satisfied three times, once with his cock, again with his tongue, and then
the last time he laid there and watched her please herself. He had to convince her they needed to eat
something substantial if they were going to carry on like this for the next two days. They decided to
hike down to his car and drive into Redcliffe to get brunch and pick up more food.

Cullen and Aida sat together on the patio of a restaurant that had a view of the lake, the two of them
unable to stop beaming at each other. Their waitress asked them if they were on their honeymoon. It
made Aida blush.

Cullen was starting to relax. He had always been a little on edge around post-accident Aida because
he wanted to vigilant about what he said to her and how he spoke to her. He had convinced himself
that this Aida was not his Aida and had to be treated differently, that was all. But after last night - and
this morning, he realized how stupid and stubborn he had been. This woman was definitely his
sweet, sexy, powerful lover. However much of her was missing did not change this fact.
He reached out to touch her hand on the table as she sipped her coffee. "Aida, are you happy?"
"Yes, even though they didn't have chocolate chip pancakes."
"You used to like blueberry pancakes."

She wrinkled her nose at the thought. "Those are fine, I guess. Chocolate chip is better."

He was about to say something a little silly, that he loved her, even though she no longer liked blueberry pancakes, but the look on her face made him stop. She was staring at something behind him, mouth agape.

Cullen turned around. A woman at the table behind him was reading the front page of the Sunday paper. Below a story about the floundering economy, a secondary headline shocked him as much as it had her: Bombing Victim Regains Memory

The subheader read: Controversial Magic Helped Survivor Return to Her Life

The two of them looked at each other, sharing the same thought, taking out their phones to locate the story online. There weren't too many details, but Aida studied the picture in the article of the beautiful Orlesian woman with the closely-cropped hair. The story identified her as Doctor Vivienne de Fer, and according to the details, this woman was standing three feet away from the terrorist when she detonated her bomb. Aida realized this woman had been her boss in the ER, and the piece ended on an optimistic note, saying she was on her way back to work as soon as she could prove she was competent.

Cullen watched Aida sit back in her chair, putting her phone down. They did not speak for a while as the waitress cleared away their breakfast. He took the last sip of his coffee and summoned the courage to break the silence.

"Shall we head to the grocery store, pick things up for dinner tonight?"

She nodded quietly as they both stood up. Aida didn't speak until they were in the car, and she began crying.

"Darling, what's wrong?"
"What do you mean, what's wrong? Can't you see, there's a way for me to go back to normal? How can we just go to the store and buy dinner? I want my life back, don't you want that too?"
"I do, but - Aida, we need to find out more. There were two words in that story that made me queasy - blood magic. It's not something I'm comfortable with, because of my time with the Templars."
"But, Cullen - "
"Can't you see, it wouldn't be worth it if it meant putting yourself in mortal danger. I'd rather you be like this forever than - be dead."

They sat in silence together, holding hands.

"Cullen - can I please just - find out more? This should be my choice, not yours. I promise not to do anything without telling you first. But I deserve to talk to Doctor de Fer at least once."

He squeezed her hand harder.

"Aida, if anything happened to you - I don't know what I would do with myself. I don't know if I could continue without you."

Aida turned to face him, reaching out to touch his neck. "It wouldn't be just for me, it'd be for you too. I want to be the Aida you loved and not this one."
Her sincere words were like a punch to the gut. Cullen's voice cracked as he responded. "What I said the other day, in Skyhold - I was wrong, Aida. Forgive me. I love the Aida that you are now, and the one you were before, and any version you'll be after this."

She unbuckled her seat belt, crawling into his lap on his side of the rental car to kiss him deeply. He didn't know how long they had been like that until a woman appeared in his window, waiting to get into the vehicle parked next to them. Cullen broke the kiss and looked at her a little sheepishly, even though the stranger gave them a tiny smile of approval before getting into her car. Aida squirmed on his lap, bringing his attention back to her. She was about to start kissing him again when he interrupted -

"Come on, Trevelyan, let's go back to the chalet, where I can properly give you what you need..."

"I don't think I can make it back to the chalet. Drive over there, pull off that side street. I want you now."

Chapter End Notes

I love you all, thank you for reading!
The Ex

Chapter Notes

Exploring Aida and Cullen's relationship a little bit and then they take their clothes off for our sordid enjoyment. #Cullensmut in the second half for those of you who like a warning - or a sexy promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It wasn't fair.

It definitely wasn't fair how attractive he was, Aida thought to herself, watching Cullen make his way from the bar of the little Redcliffe cantina they were in, two margaritas in hand. She watched in amused annoyance as the bartender flirted with him, a waitress from the far side of the restaurant came to ask him if he needed help, and two giggling women stopped to joke with him that the two cocktails he was carrying were meant for them. Aida thought of the irony of not being able to remember what she had been doing a few months ago, but word after word came to mind just watching him stride across the restaurant back to her side - charming, dapper, majestic, comely, cute, sexy, magnetic, seductive, bewitching, statuesque, winsome, gorgeous and good-looking.

Pulchritudinous!

She giggled when a man at the next table interrupted him now, trying to strike up a conversation as he passed, but Cullen politely nodded his head toward her. The man turned around in his seat and the two of them exchanged a pointed glance. "Back off," she told him with her eyes. "Lucky bitch," his eyes glinted back.

Aida pulled his chair out for him, taking her drink out of his hands. "That certainly took long enough, Rutherford. Did you have to stop and flirt with everyone in the entire restaurant?"

He leaned over to kiss her before sitting down, tasting of salt and tequila and spicy good food. "I don't intend for these things to happen to me, Varric used to tease me that I did it on purpose somehow."

They clinked their margaritas together and sipped. "Varric?"

"The red-headed dwarf fellow with the rude mouth, he came with me once to visit you at Skyhold. Remember, he hit on you right in front of me while you two were playing chess? And I kicked him so hard under the table he upset the entire board and all the pieces?"

Aida smiled at him, caressing his knee under the table. "I do remember that."

Their time was running out, tomorrow morning he had to take Aida to the airport where she would fly via private jet to her family's sprawling estate in the Free Marches. The idea of being apart from him for four long weeks was beginning to drive her mad, and she dare not tell him of the assorted daydreams that been flitting through her head all day. They were all crazy, desperate thoughts, like throwing a very convincing fit in the airport, making the two of them be escorted from the premises. Handcuffs! She could handcuff them together and throw the key into the lake. She thought about lying and telling him she was desperately sick and needed to be taken back to Haven - not sick -
pregnant! She grinned to herself, knowing he'd roll his eyes at that statement, how could you possibly know I knocked you up in the last thirty-six hours?

A child. Cullen's child, inside of her. The idea suddenly made her sit up straight, an intent look on her face. What would that be like? Would he want that? Had - the other Aida - ever talked to him about that? And wasn't she jumping ahead, what about marriage? What kind of wedding? A huge Chantry affair, with five hundred guests? Or could they run off to somewhere far away, some quiet corner of Tevinter, and marry in private?

Cullen put a hand on the one that was resting on his knee. "What are you thinking about? You got very quiet there for a second."

Her hand slid up his thigh, squeezing him suggestively under the table. "I was thinking about how I could possess you - permanently."

"You already do, Miss Trevelyan."
"Yes, but how to tell everyone else in Thedas to keep their hands to themselves?"

A third voice interrupted their conversation. "Cullen? Cullen Stanton Rutherford, is that you?"

Aida and Cullen looked up at the new person standing near their table. The slim elven woman was stunning, blessed by the Creators with ivory skin, big purple eyes and a mane of silver hair she wore half-shaved on one side, braids down the other. Her delicate vallaslin curled along the lines of her jaw and her chin, up toward her cheekbones and she stood before them with the easy physicality of a gymnast. Or an assassin. Aida watched as Cullen stood up slowly, his mouth open in shock.

"Iselle? Iselle Lavellan, I haven't seen you in ages. Maker, you look amazing, how are you?"

The two of them were laughing and hugging and then holding each other at arm's length to study each other. Aida glanced over at the table with the two cougars that had tried to talk to Cullen earlier. They both gave her a sympathetic look which made Aida start to drink her margarita a little faster. It took Cullen a few beats to remember she was even seated there.

"Iselle, let me introduce you to - "

Aida held a hand out before Cullen could continue. "Aida Trevelyan."
"I'm Iselle, I served two tours of duty with Cullen, saw some dicey action in the Fallow Mire together when he was a Templar and I was Special Ops. But, hey look! We both survived, right?"
"Very nice to meet you, Iselle. Would you like to sit down?"

Cullen immediately turned to another table, asking them if they could take their spare chair. Iselle gave Aida a cautious look. "I don't want to interrupt."
"Oh, you're not interrupting." Aida said in a tone she hoped conveyed the fact that the elf was very much indeed interrupting.

As soon as she was seated with them, the two ex-soldiers began to catch up with each other, reminiscing and reminding each other of inside jokes, gossipping and laughing. Aida had no choice but to play with her phone a little and finish her margarita until she had a chance to go to the bathroom. She got up without announcing where she was going.

Once she was alone in a bathroom stall, the existential dread began to set in. Despite their lovely getaway at the chalet, Cullen was still really a stranger. They had been clearly been lovers before her accident but where was their relationship going before the bombing? The texts and emails and pictures in her phone seemed to paint a portrait of a happy couple. Just a moment ago Aida had been
thinking about what it would be like to marry him and start a family with him but is that what the other Aida wanted too?

As the florescent light above her flickered, echoing the indecision she was feeling, Aida realized something - it was much easier to think about who she was now. Now is what always matters, it's what Cole kept telling her over and over again but she was too stubborn to listen. Now is all we have. And now she needed another drink.

Aida bought a round of tequila shots at the bar and brought them over, sitting down between Iselle and Cullen again. "Shots, for old friends, and new ones." She waited until everyone had drank them down before asking her next question. "So, Iselle, I'm getting a vibe here that you and Cullen clearly used to date - what was that like?"

Iselle swallowed, glancing at him. He had a bit of a panicked look on his face.

"That doesn't seem to be - polite, or diplomatic - discussion, considering - "

Aida raised a hand, trying to get their busy waitress to stop at their table, and then spoke her next words without looking at Cullen. "Oh, I'm not his girlfriend. I barely know Cullen. Had a bit of an accident a month ago, lost my memory, but that's a much longer story. Three more shots of tequila please."

After their waitress walked away, Aida continued. "Go on, tell me something about your relationship. I'm just curious. Were you happy?"

"Mostly. Sometimes it was more of a love-hate thing than a love-love thing."
"Why did you break up?"

Cullen nudged Aida with his knee under the table but she nudged him back.

"I didn't want to. Cullen sort of had a drug problem back then, I don't think he wanted to, um... You know what, this really isn't the time or place to talk about this."
"Oh, I am sorry. I didn't mean to bring up anything hurtful. I just wanted to hear about what Cullen was like, in his 20s."

Iselle smiled to herself. Aida could tell that once upon a time, Cullen had made her very happy.

"He was very gallant, a true gentleman. You know, as a female soldier, you sort of want everyone treat you like you're one of the guys, and he did that, but if anyone spoke too roughly to me or crossed a line - he would quite literally pound them into the dirt."

The next round of drinks arrived in time and Aida raised her shot glass to Iselle's. "To the gentlemen in our lives, past and present."

Aida proceeded to get drunk enough to not care if anyone spoke to her for the rest of the night. She sat between them, listening to their banter, feeling nothing.

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In the car on the ride home, Cullen worked up the guts to break the silence.

"So, exactly how much trouble am I in, on a scale from 1 to 10?"

Aida leaned her head against the cool window of his rental car. "You're not in any trouble. I'm just
drank a little too much... And it was obvious from your body language that you used to fuck her brains out. I shouldn't have invited her to sit down but, maybe I hit my head harder than we all thought, huh?"

"But you told her you weren't my girlfriend."
"Truthfully, I barely know you, Cullen."
"Aida, just yesterday - yesterday I told you I loved you. I meant it. So why - "

"I don't know why! I just got so incredibly jealous and I wanted to hurt you. You know, before I knew we had history together, every time you used to leave Skyhold I would torture myself with the idea that you were going back to your condo to be with your girlfriend. I used to make myself sick with envy."

Cullen pulled onto the highway that lead to the posh neighborhood where the Trevelyan chalet was located. He was glad of the drive so they could work this out in closed quarters where Aida could not escape him. He had not forgotten how slippery she was at the beginning of their courtship.

"I'm not the only one with exes, Aida. When I met you, you were dating this utter prat of a douchebag of a cunt. Samson. A musician and 'poet' type. I used to hear you making love with him through the wall between our condo. The night you broke up with him I had to intervene because he was banging on your door trying to be let back in. You were with him for five fucking years. Don't you think I was jealous of him?"

"I don't know, Samson hasn't had a chance to interrupt a lovely evening we were having by making fuck me eyes at me yet, has he."
"Iselle was not looking to hook up with me, we were just talking. I haven't seen her in 8 years, Aida."
"And how am I supposed to know that? If I hadn't been there, things might have gone differently! This is why I'm upset! You're always off travelling for business. Women probably throw themselves at you left and right. How am I supposed to cope? I have nothing to hold on to while you're away."

She sniffled, looking for a tissue in her purse.

"Cole was right. It was too soon for me to be out and about in the world with you. It just makes me feel more lost than ever. I should just be with my family for right now."

She blew her nose and added in a shaky voice. "All I wanted was for you to lay me down front of that big fireplace tonight and make love to me before I have to leave. And somehow, I have managed to screw this up with my... feelings. What a mess I've made. I'm a mess. You should run from me as fast as you can."

They had pulled up in front of the chalet. She got out of the car quickly, searching for her keys. Once inside, he tried to hold her but she squirmed out of his arms.

"I better pack. I have an early flight tomorrow morning."

Cullen sat down in front of the fireplace, staring at it intently. What the fuck had happened tonight? He hadn't expected her to be so hurt by the sudden appearance of a random ex-girlfriend. Everything had been going so well until they went into that cantina. He listened to her moving around in the other room. She barely had anything to pack, she was just avoiding him. He heard water running, and then the sound of her brushing her teeth and washing her face.

No, this would not do. They were not going to part ways tomorrow with this dark cloud hanging over them. They'd been through worse than this, much worse.
He started building a fire.

* * * * *

Aida was brushing out her long, raven tresses and blankly staring at herself in the mirror when Cullen appeared behind her. He put a heavy hand on the back of her neck, sending chills of desire up and down her body.

"Excuse me, Trevelyan. I don't think we were finished."

She pouted a little. "Cullen, I'm tired. I just want to - "

He picked her up like a barbarian, flinging her over his shoulder without another word, carrying her back into the living room where the fire was roaring now. He put her down on her feet and then surprised her by dropping to a knee.

"Aida, I have no ring to offer you - *yet* - nor a sword to swear upon, but I give you my word and my heart. Yes, it is true, there have been many women before you, but from the moment you let me into your life, you have been the only one. And that is how it shall remain until I take my last breath."

Cullen waited, watching her face as she looked down at him, her hair tumbling about her shoulders, looking like a goddess from an old oil painting, albeit one who was wearing one of his old college t-shirts for a nightgown.

She lifted the hem of the t-shirt and cast it aside, revealing her naked body in the firelight. He sighed, reaching out to bring her closer to him with two hands. She wove her fingers through his hair.

"I accept your pledge, I accept your words, and your heart. But...there's something else I want desperately."

"Ask anything of me, Aida. Anything."

"I don't want to go to the Free Marches tomorrow. Come with me to Val Royeaux instead. Be with me when I speak to Doctor de Fer. Help me get my memory back, whatever the cost."

Cullen sat down with a nervous chuckle, on the pile of thick blankets and pillows he had arranged in front of the fire.

"Maker, your father is going to kill me."

She sat down close to him now too, beginning to unbutton his shirt as she kissed him.

"It's okay, he'll forgive you. He thinks you can do no wrong - "

"And yet, tomorrow, I'll purposely put his daughter on the wrong plane, accompanying her to Orlais where we're going to find out more about dangerous, illegal blood magic of which I am sure he disapproves of greatly."

Aida silenced him with another deep kiss, slipping her tongue into his mouth, making him moan, before pulling back.

"So you'll come with me?"

"Yes, Aida, Andraste's tits. Don't you realize there's nothing I wouldn't do for you?"

Aida slid her hands inside his shirt, feeling his hard, smooth muscle.
"Except tell an ex-girlfriend she's interrupting our date night."
"I won't make that bloody stupid mistake again, I assure you."

Cullen discarded his clothes, before stretching out on the blankets again. She pushed him down flat, a hungry look on her face as her fingers graced over his defined pecs and abs and she made her way down his body.

"Are you mine, all mine, Cullen Stanton Rutherford?"

She grasped his cock, leaning forward so she was only inches away from it and he could feel her breath upon it: "Is this mine?"
"Fuck, yes."
"What should I do with it? Tell me."
"Put it in your mouth, suck on it."

With a little moan she slipped him into her mouth, rolling her tongue around the head. He pulled her hair back from her face so he could watch her head bobbing up and down the length of him, and then stopping to lick his shaft all over like a melting ice cream cone. She made eye contact with him as she pushed more and more of him into her mouth.

"Fuck, Trevelyan. Look how hard you made me in less than a minute."

She released him from her mouth with a cat-like smile, stroking him. Cullen surprised her by reaching out and grabbing her by an ankle, pulling one end of her toward him.

"Come here, I want to taste you."

He positioned her pussy over his face and pushed his face between her folds, making her gasp and swear. Cullen pushed her hips up for a second, so he could speak. "Excuse me, I didn't say you could stop doing what you were doing. Back to work, soldier."

"Yes SER," she chirped at him before diving her mouth back onto his cock. Soon they were moaning and groaning in tandem, Aida's hips writhing on his face with increased urgency as her slick arousal filled his mouth and covered his chin. Cullen felt the telltale signs of her climax approaching, the little twitches in her hips and her body going rigid. He held on to her hips, knowing she would try to dismount, holding her in place. Aida stopped sucking his cock, speaking to him over her shoulder.

"Cullen, baby, stop, I'm going to come, and don't you want to f-"

He pressed the flat of his tongue against her clit and shook his head until she sat down on his face, screaming out with pleasure. He had to tap her on the thigh to get her to move.

She collapsed onto the blanket in a daze.

"For Maker's sake, how and why are you so good at that? Don't say practice. I don't need to be reminded what a slut you've been."
"Me? I'm the slut?"

He crawled toward her like a hungry predator and in a possessive move leaned over her, cupping her mound with one strong hand, sliding three of his fingers into her at once.

"Look at that, you're so wet, and your clit is so swollen like you could fuck a hundred men tonight and come over and over and over again. And she has the audacity to call me the slut."
Aida squirmed underneath him, utterly bewitched. "I don't need a hundred men when I have exactly one of you - with your dirty talk - and your perfect cock."

She giggled at her little rhyme until Cullen kissed her, hard and hungry, so she could taste herself on his lips, and at the same time, he pushed his rigid cock deep inside of her. He began rutting her against the pile of pillows, pushing one of her legs wide open. He pumped his hips into hers, and then slowed down, making her feel every inch of him moving in and out of her, before switching back to being rough and dominating. She was lost in a haze of pleasure, not even holding on to him, her arms stretched above her in utter blissful surrender. Her eyes fluttered open to look at him.

"I love you, I love you, I love you - fuck me harder. Take me. Use me. I am yours."

He collapsed onto her now, holding her deeply as they became one over and over again. Her arms were a sanctuary, their love was the most powerful drug he had ever known. He felt total abandon when they were together like this. How could one person make you feel so lost and so found at the same time?

Cullen heard her cries become more insistent and felt her teeth biting at his ear and on his shoulder. She always became a little wild right at the moment of her climax, he had plenty of her fingernail marks criss-crossing his back. He wore them like a badge of honor.

"Aida, are you close?"
"Mon coeur, I am, please, make me come and then I want to see you come."

He held her down by the shoulders, jackhammering into her, sweating with effort, until he saw her face flush and she pressed her head back into the pillows, digging her nails into his wrists. She cried out, her voice echoing against the high A-frame ceiling of the opulent chalet. Cullen pulled out of her, sat back on his heels and spat his seed onto her pulsing womanhood with an animalistic hiss.

Looking at what he had just done made him dizzy. He laid down next to her with an exhausted huff.

"You know, Aida Trevelyan, love of my life, you might not remember but this whole 'argue and fuck' thing is a very familiar cycle to me."
"Is it so terrible?"
"Not. At. All."

He intertwined his fingers between hers, drawing her knuckles to his lips for a kiss.

"You could send me to the ends of the earth in a fit of rage and then summon me home, and I would walk the entire way if I had to."

"I know you would. And... I suppose I could bump into a million of your ex-girlfriends and... eventually learn how to deal with it in a mature and adult way."

Cullen laughed spontaneously, making Aida smile with pleasure. "That's not the same thing at all!"

She pulled him closer, pressing her forehead to his. "We should get some rest. We are flying to Val Royeaux bright and early tomorrow morning."

Cullen grunted with some annoyance. "I'm not overly fond of Orlesians, I've had to go into battle with some pompous shite chevaliers and it wasn't fun."

"Come on, a few days in Orlais with me will be better than that. Cullen, these people invented
whipped cream and lacy underthings. Think of it that way."

Cullen nuzzled her neck, biting her lightly. "Those are both things I'd love to see you wearing - and nothing else."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Aida is being very demanding. I know. The guy gives her his heart and she's like MORE MORE MORE!

Jealousy is tough though, I think jealousy can break even very strong relationships but these two won't let it!
"Our memory is a more perfect world than the universe..."

Chapter Summary

“Our memory is a more perfect world than the universe: it gives back life to those who no longer exist.” — Guy de Maupassant

Chapter Notes

Short-ish and smut-free but we got to gets this story on the road here.

And Dragon Age purists, forgive me for placing Merrill in Tevinter - I know elves and Vints haven't historically gotten along but she needed to be at work in a place where blood magic was less frowned upon. Let's just say everyone's EVOLVED on their racism toward elves in this AU.

Aida and Cullen arrived in Val Royeaux the next morning, after he begged her to call her father and tell her what she was up to.

"It's sweet how much you care what my father thinks," Aida said as she squeezed him tight while they waited for a taxi outside of the airport.
"He's not just your father, he's also my boss. Which means I'll have to work while we're here."
Aida pouted. "How convenient, especially when I said all I wanted to do was take you shopping and buy you things."

He cupped her chin, giving her the sternest look he could manage. "Trevelyan, remember why we're here."
"To have lots and lots of sex in a really fancy hotel room?" she answered with an impish grin.
"Maker's balls, we need to stop at a vitamin shop or something. I'll need supplements to keep up with you."

Cullen got a taxi to stop for them and he opened the door for her, but not before she could whisper in his ear. "Do you want me to suck your cock in the back seat of the cab?"

"Get in, you brazen harlot! This Orlesian weather is making you twice as insatiable!"

* * * * *

They checked into their hotel and then immediately went back out to make their appointment with Doctor de Fer. Aida watched the streets of Val Royeaux unfurling in front of their taxi. She decided very quickly that she loved it here - the warm sunshine, the people eating leisurely lunches at sidewalk cafes, well-dressed women walking down cobblestone streets in improbably high heels. Everything was a feast for her eyes and even if nothing came of meeting up with this regal woman,
at least she was not locked up in her room in Skyhold. The architecture got older and more stunning as their driver navigated them toward Vivienne's villa and Aida began to feel nervous. She squeezed Cullen's hand.

"What's wrong, kitten?"
"It just suddenly occurred to me that maybe she doesn't like me? I don't remember what kind of nurse I was. Or what if she just can't help me? What if it was a fluke? What if -"

"First of all, everyone likes you. I bet our cab driver likes you."

The cabbie smiled at them via the rear view mirror and responded, "Oui, elle est très jolie!"

"Not sure what he said, but it seemed nice enough. Also, there's no point in worrying until we meet her, right?"

The cab pulled up in front of a neo-classical ivory-colored building with an elegant fountain out front. The cabbie pulled around it with an impressed whistle, muttering to himself in his native tongue while looking up at the building through the windshield.

Now it was Cullen's turn to give her hand a nervous squeeze. "This is not a villa, Aida. This is a bloody chateau."

They paid the cab driver and walked together toward the grand entrance. Aida ran the doorbell, triggering ominous chimes from inside the grand estate. Cullen clenched the hand that was not holding Aida's.

"She's powerful, I can feel her from out here."
"Cullen?"
"Just an old Templar mind trick. Don't mind me," he muttered as he brushed some imperceptible lint off his suit jacket.
"You can't be nervous too, someone has to be the -"

The heavy mahogany door creaked open, revealing an imperious ancient butler waiting for them on the other side. "Miss Trevelyan, I presume? And Mister Rutherford? Do come in, my lady is expecting you. This way, to the salon."

Aida threaded her arm through Cullen's and sent a prayer of thanks to the Maker that they had both decided to dress up for this meeting. A grandfather clock ticked away in the hallway but the rest of the manor was silent, almost oppressively so.

The butler opened a set of double doors revealing an elegantly appointed salon, the furniture was all dark wood and covered in velvet or embroidered brocade. Near one of the settees, Vivienne was fussing over a gilded tea service until her butler cleared his throat.

"Your guests, milady. Please ring if you need me."

Cullen hung back while Aida approached the beautiful woman, wearing all black. She held out her two hands to Aida, a look of familiar affection on her face.

"Darling, I don't do hugs, but it is awfully grand to see you. Come here, let me kiss you, Aida."

The woman gave her a kiss on each cheek and then pulled back to look at her. "You look marvelous, exactly the same. I suppose it makes sense, I look exactly the same..."

Her voice grew wistful. "Although everything has changed. Well, let's not get sentimental right off
the bat, is this the man next door you could never stop going on about?"

Cullen stepped forward and bowed over her hand. "I'm Cullen, Doctor Vivienne."

"My goodness, where did you get him? And are there more of him available?" Vivienne gave Aida an impressed look. Cullen tried to continue - "I work for Aida's father, Bann Trevelyan and - "

Vivienne gave him a playful smile as she interrupted him. "You used to be a Templar, hmm? I can feel it. Doesn't bother me. Come sit, have some tea and a tiny sandwich. It will be amusing to watch you manage such dainty things."

Aida and Vivienne chatted for a while, filling each other in on what had happened after the bombing while Cullen quietly ate almost the entire tray of cucumber sandwiches. Then the banter faded away, and Aida could hold back no longer.

"Vivienne..."
"I know, it's come time to tell you how I got my memory back. It's just that - it's also tied in to a recent pain I had to suffer, the loss of my dear lover Bastien. This was his home, he left it to me - after the...accident."
"Accident?"

Vivienne sniffled a little, trying to compose herself. Aida reached out to place her hand on top of hers in comfort. "Doctor Vivienne, we needn't do this today. I can come back some other time."

"No, dear, I'll be fine. Thank you for being so sweet. You were always such a joy to deal with at work. Tough and compassionate."

Vivienne took a deep breath to center herself and then began her story.

Cullen and Aida listened to Vivienne speak without interrupting. After the bombing, Vivienne had wasted no time contacting first neurologists and then mages about her condition. The doctors had no solutions, but many mages believed if the bomb was Fade-based, it meant there was some way to reverse its effects. No route was off limits to Vivienne and Bastien, they saw clairvoyants, psychics and seers or anyone who could somehow 'see' where her memories had gone. They went to hippie healers, they took ayahuasca - Vivienne even considered shock therapy, but Bastien had put a stop to that idea immediately.

But Vivienne made more progress when she began consulting with "less reputable" mages, men and women whose ideas were considered controversial or downright dangerous. And then - she found Merrill.

"Here's the part where things - get a little unbelievable. In fact, I'm not sure tea will do for the rest of this. Why don't you get your big ex-Templar to make us some martinis, the bar cart is just over there," she gestured with aristocratic flair. Aida gave him an encouraging smile as he got up to be of service to the two ladies.

"Who's Merrill, Vivienne? Start there."
"She's a mage, like you or me. And she's a woman of science as well, just like us. Merrill has been studying blood magic all her life, but she pursued hematology in med school - and the two go hand in hand, don't they. So where is Merrill today? Working in a great big impressive laboratory at the Tevinter Technical Institute, where all sorts of ground-breaking science is helping mankind study diseases of the blood and auto-immunity disorders."

Cullen interrupted to hand Vivienne and Aida two perfect martinis. The beautiful Orlesian woman
took a sip and then gave Cullen an appreciative look. "Marvelous. He's a keeper, Aida."

"Oh, I know, but do go on -"

"Merrill has access to all kinds of incredible equipment and yes, it's all for science, but why not use it when no one's looking for your own personal research purposes. She told me she had a hunch that Anders' bomb had simply sent my memories into the Fade - where an Envy demon had scooped them up and consumed them, keeping them for his own."

She put her glass down and crossed the room to a desk in a corner, bringing back a pad of paper and a pencil. She began to draw something for them.

"Magic aside for a moment, Merrill works with a centrifuge at Tevinter Tech, it sits in a room twice as big as this one. They use it to study blood that has been spun around so fast that various elements of it settle and others can be isolated. It's incredibly strong, operates on its own power grid..."

She drew a simple diagram of what the machine looked like - and then pressed hard on the paper to draw an angry X in the middle of the circle.

"The machine, loaded with blood, in conjunction with spell-casting, helped me locate and summon the demon who stole my memories. And then I struck him down with magic, right there in a lab in a world-famous university."

Aida glanced at Cullen. He had a troubled furrow in his brow. "Madame de Fer, if you don't mind me interrupting - where'd you get the blood?"

At this, Vivienne grew still, her face heartbroken. She spoke in a lower, somber tone. "My heart, Bastien... Merrill explained *the blood of a loved one* makes the summon spell more powerful, and the more you put into the machine, the better chance you'll have of locating the right demon. What would be the point of all this to-do if you summon the wrong demon? The transfusion must be performed on-site to get the best sample possible, so we drained him until the point of death - but the process to put new blood back into him...something must have went wrong while I was dealing with my foe. It's my fault, I wasn't thinking like a physician because how could I when I couldn't remember any of my medical training? We should have had a *regular* doctor or nurse on hand."

She sniffled again, and Aida dug in her purse for a tissue to hand to her. Vivienne blew her nose and heaved a heavy sigh. "Bastien was not a young man. He had other health problems. But he insisted he be the donor, he thought our bond would strengthen the magic and improve my chances. When I was done battling the demon, he was already experiencing internal organ failure. His official cause of death was listed as liver disease."

Vivienne looked at Cullen and Aida sitting side by side, both had grown pale while listening to the end of her story. She leaned forward to hold Aida's other hand. "All last night I thought about how I would tell you this story - and how I could both warn you and encourage you. A few things are certain: most of your life you have been using your magic in a healing capacity only. Before you undertake such a thing you will need to learn how to wield your powers *as a weapon*. Second, you will need a *lot* of blood from someone you hold dear, and they must be willing to risk everything for you - it will only maximize your efforts in summoning the demon. And lastly - it would help to have some friends on board, wouldn't it. Because here's the most annoying part, darling - you can't shoot a demon with a gun. It doesn't respond to modern weapons. It is a beast of the Fade, as ancient as the Black City and the fallen magisters of old."

Cullen's face had gone a little funny. Aida could read his thoughts before he voiced them. "No guns?
So how - "

Vivienne finished the rest of her martini, nibbling delicately on the spear of olives Cullen had added to her cocktail. "Don't suppose you know anyone who's good with arrows, axes, daggers or swords?"

* * * * *

That night, Cullen and Aida had a romantic Orlesian meal at a restaurant off the Belle Marche. Both of them were still troubled from their meeting with Vivienne to truly enjoy the view or the decadent food.

"What are you thinking about, Aida?"

"How I don't want to watch you bleed out while a demon stomps on my head and then escapes from Tevinter Tech and goes on a local rampage. What are you thinking about?"

He held her hand on the table, making intent eye contact with her. "Well, I was thinking that I believe you could do it. You could train until your magic is strong - I could train with you, babe! I'm a Templar, I have faced rebel mages on the battlefield. We can formulate a plan, assemble a team. I didn't want to say anything while we were there, but Vivienne was too hasty. She rushed into the thing, she sort of said so herself."

Aida's chin wobbled a little as she came close to the verge of tears. "I know what you're thinking, and I won't let you do it, you can't be the donor. Look at her - yes, she got her life back, but she seemed so awfully lonely. I won't let you put your life on the line for me. I won't let you die for me."

Cullen shook his head, the scar at the corner of his lip quirked up just a little. "I won't - because you're not going to let it happen, right? You're gonna nail that demon right between the eyes with the lightning I know you have within you. And we'll go home to the 12th floor of our building in Haven and have dinner at my place, with Barkley sitting under the table, eating scraps you sneak to him when I'm not looking."

He leaned closer, sweeping the hair off her neck in a gesture that gave her a frisson of delight before he continued. "And then I'll fuck you in the bed where I first fucked you. And our lives will continue - together."

Aida slid a hand up his thigh under the table. "Tell me more about the fucking."

"Aida, can you try to concentrate for once?"
In the weeks following their visit to Val Royeaux, Cullen and Aida's plans came together very quickly. Dorian and Vivienne had already pledged to help Aida with her magic training, with Vivienne also getting Doctor Solas on board, Aida's consulting physician after the bomb blast and a mage of considerable talent. Aida would work with one of them in the morning while Cullen helped her with one on one combat in the evenings, sometimes joined by the cacophony of his old coworkers Cassandra, Blackwall, Varric and Iron Bull, lending their often-conflicting advice. Sera and Cole sometimes joined in, offering emotional and medical support - with Sera surprising everyone with her archery skills. ("Wot, I did it in college a bit, don't be so surprised. A lot of hot girls on the archery team," she added, for clarification.)

One evening while Aida listened to one of Doctor Solas many lectures, resting with a bottle of water while Cole rubbed her aching shoulders, tired from wielding a heavy battlestaff, Dorian and Vivienne pulled Cullen aside for a little chat.

Dorian gave him a reassuring arm squeeze as he lead them farther away from Aida. "Listen, Cullen, don't get - offended by what we're about to tell you."

Vivienne examined her shiny manicured fingernails as she spoke. "Darling, you can also feel free to disregard this piece of advice too. I thought it was a little silly."

Dorian rolled his eyes now. "Fifteen minutes ago you thought it was a good idea, but in the presence of the strapping ex-Templar you're now changing your mind?"

"Cullen has that affect on women, I'll have you know."

"Men too, but I guess I have a stronger attention span than you do, Madame de Fer. Anyhow. Cullen - Aida's battle magic is strong, but still needs fine-tuning. Her aim is never quite right and one thing she cannot seem to master is the Fade step."

Cullen thought about their last few one-on-one sessions...some of which ended preemptively when Cullen or Aida could not control their desire for each other. His eyes darted toward the pile of gym mats where he had rutted her hard, both of them barely able to take off all of their work out clothes. Cullen tuned back in to what Dorian was saying, now in a lower, conspiratorial tone.

"We are all very much aware of your hold over Aida - and this move is very important in dealing with a shifty demon - or two, or three, depending on how many show up to Aida's summoning."

Vivienne interrupted Dorian. "Oh, do get to the point, dear. Cullen - we think maybe you could motivate her a bit in mastering this move."
Cullen glanced toward Aida now, who met his eyes, giving him a look he knew meant "I wish we were alone right now."

"Motivate her how? You both know I'm no longer taking lyrium, there's only so much I can do magic-wise to help Aida."

Dorian shooed Vivienne away with a little flick of his hand, which made her narrow her eyes at him before turning to rejoin Aida and Solas. Now alone, Dorian backed Cullen into a corner, away from where Aida could see them.

"Listen. Just...withhold it, a little."

"Withhold it?"

"Don't be daft, Cullen. You know what I mean by it. Come up with some way to give her a little incentive. We all think she's simply lacking a little confidence, she's holding back for some reason, possibly because she doesn't want to hurt anyone, we can't be sure. But it is a matter of life and death that she master this move. So. You know. Give her something work toward - perhaps by not giving her something she wants."

Cullen shook his head at him, something between a lighthearted smirk and a grimace of distaste on his face. "Are you suggesting to me I stop fucking my girlfriend until she can successful Fade step around a demon? Andraste's merkin, you actually discussed this with Vivienne and Solas?"

Dorian nodded vigorously, glad to not need to spell it out for him, but Cullen wiped the look of relief off his face with one little shove against his shoulder.

"Are you out of your mind? Have you not met your own cousin before? Do you know how -"

Dorian shook his head now, "No no no, no details, please, I - "

Cullen continued, "- many times I have to make her come just to make her fall asleep so she stops begging for it?"

Dorian closed his eyes in faint disgust. "Need I remind you you once - serviced her - in a guest bathroom in my fiancee's home, while everyone was barely 20 feet away?"

Cullen smiled to himself a little dreamily. "You didn't have to remind me, but it is a memory I shall treasure always."

The mage shoved him back now. "Are you going to help us out or not? It's your blood on the line, not mine. You could both die during the ritual and it'd just be two less people to invite to my wedding."

Cullen looked over Dorian's shoulder and saw Aida watching them out of curiosity. "Are you sure this is going to work, Pavus?"

"It wouldn't hurt to try. And start tonight. Merrill's centrifuge isn't just sitting around waiting for us, it's an important piece of scientific equipment and it's in constant use for official research. She told us we have one shot at this in a month, and then after that, we'd have to wait for almost a year. So it's now or never."
Half an hour later Cullen and Aida were alone on the training floor, getting ready for their routine. Aida hopped back and forth from foot to foot, warming up, watching her boyfriend shed his track jacket. Aida grinned at him in anticipation, but he did not smile back at her this time. She slowed her hopping a bit.

"What's wrong, Cullybear?"
"Don't call me that while we're training. I've been speaking to your mages, and they think you're not progressing fast enough."

Aida pouted. "Really? But look what I can do, I couldn't even do this last week."

She conjured a little ball of electricity in one palm, and then tossed it into the air in an arc, while conjuring two more, juggling all three balls of light with a pleased look on her face. Cullen grabbed one of her wrists, causing the magic to dissipate away.

"Ow, baby, why?" she whined, while rubbing her wrist.
"Be serious, Aida. Juggling isn't going to save your life or mine. Now, go get your staff. We should start with sparring and then you need to learn how to flank me with your Fade-step."

Aida peered up at him, studying his face. Her golden lion of a boyfriend was stern and serious, hard edges in his eyes instead of the usual soft affection. She watched him pull on protective gloves before strapping on some Kevlar gear, fixing it to his arms, shoulders and shins. He then stepped out into the middle of the training ring.

"Alright, attack. Come at me. Hard. Don't hold back."

Aida took a deep breath, centered herself, and then ran at him full speed, swinging her staff before her in a graceful move - which he blocked with one quick movement of his arm, the blow not even causing him to take a single step back.

"Trevelyan, don't stop just because I stopped you - what's your counter move?" he asked, still gripping her staff hard, pushing her back a foot or two. "Next time, be ready to counter. Use your magic."
"But Cullen, I don't want to hurt you."
"Don't worry, Solas enchanted all my gear earlier today. Try it again."

She backed up a few feet and charged at him again, but Cullen side stepped her and with a simple swipe of his foot, sent her plummeting to the padded floor. She rolled over with an oof, looking for him to help her up. But Cullen stood where he had tripped her, waiting with an impatient look on his face.

"Trevelyan, you'll never best me by running right at me."

She squinted at him in irritation before slamming a fist onto the mat below her, causing ice to skim out and cover the floor beneath him. Cullen took a wobbly step to center himself and then she scrambled toward him, slipping on her own handiwork, but successfully knocking him down and getting on top of him. She tried to give him a jolt of electricity to subdue him but she was shocked to feel her mana drain away from her. Cullen flipped her onto the mat beneath him with an easy move.

"Cullen, how?"
"It's in the gloves. Also enchanted by Solas since I can't use my Templar skills on you anymore."
"You're not playing fair - "

Aida saw a glimmer of his usual sweetness in his eyes as he brushed some hair off her face. "It
wouldn't be any fun if I played fair. That's one of your old lines."

His face grew serious again as he stood up, once again not helping her to her feet. She stayed on her back for a moment, shooting him a dirty look. "What's up with you, Rutherford? Why are you suddenly being such a hard ass?"

"Because you're being an insufferable little rich girl who wants everything handed to her. The other Aida was never like this. She drove a beat-up old truck and cooked her own dinners and worked long shifts in the ER saving lives and helping people. Where as you are lying on the floor whining that I'm not being nice enough to you."

Her eyes grew wide at his cutting words. "Cullen!"

"Attack, Aida. Get up and attack."

They proceeded like this until midnight and the two of them were bone-weary and worn out. Aida had only tried once to Fade-step around Cullen and she had failed, finding herself four feet away from him with her back to him, leaving her utterly vulnerable to attack. But Aida was more frustrated that Cullen had treated her like a childish Templar recruit who needed unbending discipline - and worst yet, he seemed to be blind and deaf to her flirtations, touches and gestures. Aida watched him putting away his gear and checking his phone and generally ignoring her.

"Cullen...can I come over tonight?"

He glanced at his watch with a nonchalant yawn. "Sorry babe, I've got an early meeting tomorrow morning. By the way, decent work today. Needs improvement, as always though."

Aida shook her head in some amazement as he simply turned to head toward the exit without her. She had to grab her gym bag and run to catch up to him in the parking lot next to his Corvette.

"Cullen, what's wrong, why are you treating me this way?"

He closed his trunk and turned to her with a bit of a pained look on his face. "Aida - they think I'm being too easy on you because you're my lady. And maybe I am. So from now on, when we're in that building, things are going to be different. That's all."

"They? They who?"

"They everyone. Especially the mages. They told me you're still having trouble with -"

"Fade stepping, I know. It's hard! I'm trying my best."

Cullen cupped her face with one of his hands and Aida leaned into it, dying for his touch after his business-like treatment of her all evening. "I have some bad news for you, my love. Until you can accurately and confidently pull off this spell, we are not having sex."

Aida's jaw fell open and she shook her head slowly at first, and then more emphatically, especially as Cullen brushed past her, about to get into his car.

"How. What. You can't do that."

She saw him smile to himself before composing his face to look at her again. "I certainly can."

Aida scrambled for a comeback. "Well then, I guess we're through. I refuse to be in a relationship with someone who refuses to take their pants off." She waited for her words to sink in and have an effect, but Cullen only shot her one of his wonderful sunshine-warm smiles.
"Alright, Trevelyan. Whatever you want. Varric was going to spar with you tomorrow anyhow, and then I'm off to Denerim until the end of the week on business so for the next few days you can concentrate on your spellcasting. Although I suppose my opinion doesn't matter, as you're done with me now, right?"

Aida stomped her foot and it only made Cullen laugh.

"Goodbye, Aida. Good luck with everything."

She watched him drive away, wondering what in the void had just happened, and if it was for real and if he was gone for good. In a shell-shocked state, she pulled out her phone and called for her father's driver. He told her he'd pick her up in 20 minutes so Aida went back inside the warehouse to wait for him.

Aida paced around, fighting the urge to call Cullen and beg for his forgiveness - or yell at him until she was hoarse. She approached one of the training dummies in a corner, glowering at it in misplaced anger. She held her breath, centered herself, and tried to Fade step around the dummy. In the blink of an eye she had ran right into it, knocking herself onto her arse on the floor behind her.

"Andraste's bloody tits!"

She laid back on the mat under her, thinking about how just the night before and only a few feet away Cullen had peeled down her shorts and pressed his sweet lips to her pearl. It was enough to make her want to cry in frustration. She had no choice but to practice the move, every cursed day, until he got back from this business trip. She sat up with a groan, hearing her phone buzzing in her bag nearby.

She retrieved it - a text from Cullen! With a smug grin she unlocked her phone and looked for his message.

And then three thoughts occurred to her at once.

*How'd he get home so quickly?*

*What did I do to deserve this?*

*If I drive right over there and bang on the door, could I make him fuck me?*

Cullen had sent her a selfie, taken in his bathroom mirror. He was freshly showered, his blonde mane wet and slicked back. The towel around his waist hung loose, revealing just a little bit of his golden pubic hair, and the tight, dipping lines of his obliques that lead to what she wanted so badly at that moment. His trademark smug little smirk tilted the corner of his perfect lips to one side, knowing he looked good and knowing how much she loved him, and wanted him, constantly. She watched as three blinking dots appeared under the picture. She held her breath, wondering what he was about to say.

"Practice hard, Trevelyan. If you're not still mad at me when I return, I'd like to see what you've accomplished.

Yours faithfully - Cullybear"

She swore out loud, clutching the phone hard. They had all found the one thing that would motivate her to perfect her magic.

It was blackmail.
It was genius.

Why did she have to have such smart friends?
Oh Alistair! You made Aida do a bad thing.

Settle in, this is a longish chapter and #CullenSmut is your reward.

Cullen spent the next few days in Denerim a little on edge. He didn't like blackmailing Aida and he wasn't sure it was going to work. He was also very anxious that she had meant it when she said they were over and she was through with him. She hadn't responded to the post-shower picture he had sent her, but at least Varric had let him know she was continuing with her training. Maker's balls, he was even fretting about that smooth-talking dwarf being around his girl so much. He was only supposed to be in the capital for four days, but the time crawled by. Interminable meetings, checking on Trevelyran properties and fake-smiling at new potential clients - during all of it he could only think about their last sparring session, with Aida pinned to the mat beneath him, a frustrated pout on her always-tempting lips.

He sat in the lounge of the Four Seasons hotel, in the same seat where he had flirted with "Gabrielle Legrand" not that long ago. He was so close to calling her, but every time he looked at his phone he heard Dorian's voice chastising him. "Stop it! You'll ruin everything just as she's getting better, and for what, your own selfish bodily needs?"

Cullen wanted to grab the imaginary mage and shake him. "It's not just physical! I love this woman with every fiber in my body! I can't think straight without her!" He smiled to himself, imagining Dorian's reaction to being manhandled thusly. "I'll thank you to not yank on this t-shirt, I just bought it."

He downed his whiskey straight and ordered another one. And then another. He slept fitfully that night, dreaming of Aida dancing just out of his reach, her light, lilting laughter torturing him from the Fade.

* * * *

Friday evening, Cullen was at the Denerim airport, waiting to board his flight back to Haven when he got a phone call from Aida's father. Even though he had worked up a warm rapport with the intimidating Bann, he still felt nervous taking a call from him. He wasn't just his boss, but a man he always wanted to impress for Aida's sake.

"Cullen, my boy, where are you? I need your help as soon as possible."
"Of course, Bann, whatever you need. How can I be of service?"

Cullen fiddled with his pen nervously while the Bann told him about a last minute cocktail party he was going to throw on Saturday night for none other than the Prime Minister of Fereldan himself, Alistair Theirin. Alistair was in Haven, ostensibly to present the image that the Venatori terrorist threat had grown less dire since the bombings, but the Bann was a little dismissive of that, saying Mrs. Theirin was overly fond of the skiing to be found just outside of town and the high-end shopping in their downtown district.
"Cullen, I'm sorry to report I'd like you working security at this event. I would love to have you over as a guest, as you have been invited before, but I'd feel safer knowing you were taking care of this event - and my family - personally."

Cullen squeezed the pen in his hand so hard he nearly broke it. If anyone ever tried to hurt Aida again... The Bann seemed to read his thoughts, even over the phone. "Of course, Aida will be there. After Alistair and his wife depart, you are free to, ah. Socialize with my daughter."

The two men coughed, muttering things like "yes of course" and "she's a lovely girl" to cover their awkwardness. Cullen wrote down the rest of the details about the party and promised to get started on putting together a security detail in time for the gathering tomorrow. He was both excited to be of use to the Bann - and to see Aida again, who would surely be wearing a beautiful gown and would light up every corner of Skyhold with her grace. Even if she being serious about this little breakup, he just wanted to see her. When Aida was just the mysterious woman next door, he used to be glad to just catch a glimpse of her in the lobby - nothing about that had changed.

* * * * *

Aida watched her older sister getting ready, fussing with her hair and makeup a little more than she usually did. The two women were almost through a bottle of pre-party champagne.

"Emilia, why are you going to so much trouble tonight? It's just one of Father's boring cocktail parties."

She rolled her eyes at her younger sister in the mirror. "Aida, the Prime Minister is going to be in our living room tonight. Can you please be a little bit more excited? He's only the leader of half of Thedas."

"But he's married. Who cares?"

Aida flopped back on the bed, thinking only of Cullen. Her father had told her he would be in attendance tonight, but working security - and she was not to bother him as all of their safety was on the line.

Emilia lacquered on a little more red lipstick. "Aida, haven't you seen a picture of Alistair recently? He's so dashing. The man is a war hero. And he likes to flirt."

Aida sat up with a curious grin. "Emilia, you sound like you've flirted with the Prime Minister before."

"Maybe I have. Maybe I haven't. Maybe it helps the family business, maybe it doesn't."

Emilia turned around and frowned at Aida on her bed. "Is that what you're going to wear?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's awfully boring. Don't you have something more low-cut, maybe sparkly?"

It was Aida's turn to roll her eyes now. "You know that I can't remember if I have such a thing. Do you think I do?"

"Well, I do, and we're the same size. So get off and take off that Chantry sister outfit."

Aida looked down at her simple black dress. It was modest but still clung to her curves. "I don't think what I'm wearing is so terrible!"

Emilia was already deep in her closet, digging through the choices, emerging with three frocks in
hand. She held up the first one, light pink and covered in gossamer ruffles. Aida grimaced. "Too princess-y." Her sister dropped it on the bed next to her with a huff. The second dress was short, and covered in silver sequins. "OK, you're kidding right? Daddy would flip out. Looks like something a Tevinter sex worker would wear to dinner." Emilia huffed again. She was down to the last dress, which was absolutely lovely - forest green, low in the front and on the sides, but still tasteful, its hem skimming the ground. Aida lit up, knowing Cullen would love it.

"Alright, I'll wear it. Let me borrow that necklace of mother's you wore to the last party."

Emilia smiled a victorious smile. "Excellent. And let me re-do all your makeup while we're at it."

Aida emptied the last bit of champagne bottle into Emilia's glass. "Ugh. I think we're going to need more booze."

* * * * *

Cullen stood with four of his men on the steps of Skyhold, watching Alistair's Bentley and entourage making its way up the long driveway. The car pulled up in front of the steps leading to Skyhold's entrance and Cullen walked forward to open Bentley's door. The Prime Minister's wife stepped out first, revealing two flawless supermodel legs before the rest of her came into view. Before marrying Alistair, Giselle Theirin had been famous for her magazine covers and the tiny crocheted bikinis she tended to wear on them. Cullen lent her a hand with a small bow of his head. Alistair exited the car next, smoothing down his tuxedo jacket with a confident gesture before focusing on the man standing at his side.

"Rutherford, you dog. Haven't seen you in years. How's the mayor's office?"
"I wouldn't know. After the bombings, I moved on to work for the Bann."

Alistair looked up at the face of the mansion with a cocky smile. "Moving up in the world, good for you. Seeing more of the posh side of life from the other side of your trigger for once."

Cullen kept a polite smile plastered on his face. He wanted to tell the man he was also, almost, part of the family but he was already half-way up the steps. Cullen and his guards followed close behind. Once inside, all the Trevelyans were in position to greet him - and Cullen's eyes went straight to Aida, standing between her oldest brother Maxwell and her father. She was even more elegant than she had been at the Satinalia party, with her hair piled high on her head and a golden pendant resting right above her breasts, stamped with the proud stallion of house Trevelyan. Cullen realized he was not the only man staring at her in the room - in fact, the Prime Minister's eyes were fixed on her, even as he shook hands with the Bann, introducing his new wife to him.

Cullen had to hang back, staying closer to the front door. He could only watch helplessly as Aida gave him the smallest sweet smile before being lead away to the salon by the Prime Minister, who now had Aida on one arm and his bombshell wife on the other.

For the rest of the night, Cullen kept a vigilant guard over the proceedings, having to observe passively as the most powerful man in Ferelden flirted aggressively with Aida. Cullen found it unbelievable that it didn't seem to bother Giselle Theirin at all, and in fact, she was giving Maxwell Trevelyan the same amount of scandalous attention. And the Orlesians get all the credit for being philandering adulterers, he mused to himself, counting down the minutes until the party would be over and maybe he could corner Aida in a quiet corner of Skyhold and promptly abandon that sexual blackmail plan once and for all.
Aida was overwhelmed with Alistair's attentions. Emilia had been right, the man was incredibly charismatic, funny and movie star handsome. And quite handsy. He had found every occasion to touch her when given a chance and by dessert he was discreetly pulling up the skirt of her gown under the table, looking to lay a hand on her bare knee. He was moving fast and Aida was a little too tipsy to think twice about his seductions. She and Emilia should not have drank so much before the party and the wine had kept flowing during dinner. Aida tried to sip some water to sober up as the waiters cleared away their dessert plates. She felt Alistair brush an errant curl off her shoulder that had slipped loose from the knot on the top of her head.

"Aida, your father was telling me about a real Canaletto hanging in his study. I would love to see that, if you would be so kind to show it to me?"

Aida's eyes darted around, looking for Cullen but not spotting him. She had wanted him to stare at her all night with barely masked longing - she had wanted him to be dying of jealousy - but instead he had been nothing but professional, calling her Miss Trevelyan whenever he had to address her. She refocused on Alistair, so dashing and charismatic.

"Wouldn't you like to join everyone else in the gardens, I'm sure my father is serving brandy and some of his finest cigars at the moment."
"We'll catch up to them - eventually."

Outside in Skyhold's gardens, the rest of the cocktail party mingled among the carefully tended flowers and fountains. Cullen and his guards now had to spread out across the perimeter, keeping an eye on the proceedings from a distance. Cullen was about to relax as some guests started to say their good nights to the Bann, but one of his security detail spoke up into comm device in his ear.

"Boss, I - don't know what to do. I just walked in on Mrs. Theirin and Maxwell Trevelyan having - a moment together - in the gazebo. He took off real quick, he was super embarrassed, and now she's crying and asking for her husband so they can leave. She's also missing a shoe."

Cullen winced. These sort of dramatics were not in his wheelhouse. "Alright, Mike, you take perimeter patrol. I'll go look for him. I don't know what to do about the shoe. Maybe I'll find it on my way in."

He started making his way back into Skyhold, passing a few of his men looking for the Prime Minister's wife's shoe in the bushes near the gazebo. He checked the dining room but found only waiters taking away the glassware and the used linens. Alistair was not found in the salon or billiard room either. Cullen decided to check the Bann's personal office, even though he rarely entertained guests in there.

He opened the door without knocking, finding Alistair sitting on a divan in the corner of the room, having "a moment" of his own, with someone's fingers woven into his hair. At the sound of the door opening behind him, Alistair sat up and turned around - revealing he had Aida in his arms. Her lipstick stained his lips and a corner of his collar as well, and the strap of her gown had slipped from her shoulder, baring one breast to both men. Aida gasped, covering herself quickly.

Alistair's eyes opened wide. "Maker's taint, you startled me. Is there something you need?"

"Yes, Prime Minister Theirin. Your wife is looking for you, and she's rather intoxicated. I think she wishes to go home."

Alistair cleared his throat. "Ah yes, it is getting rather late. Would you give me a moment please?"
Cullen closed the door and leaned on it for a moment, feeling like someone had punched in him both kidneys. All the torture he had endured, every nightmare he had suffered - nothing made him feel as lost as what he had just witnessed.

* * * *

After Alistair had left her in her father's office, Aida had sat there sinking into an intense depression. She had truly made a mess she may not be able to clean up - and if anything Sera and Dorian had told her about her former life was true, this was nothing new for her. When she had asked them about what she had been like before the bombing they had both said a few of the same things - she had been a hard-working nurse, a talented artist who didn't take herself seriously enough, an earthy (read: horny) woman stuck in a one-sided relationship, a drunk and a bit of a slob, but the thing that stung the most was they had both called her a fuck-up.

"You just sometimes made decisions that didn't make any sense, like Samson. You let that idiocy go on for a long time," Dorian told her once.

"You also jerked Cullen around so much in the beginning, I'm honestly surprised he continues to like you," Sera added, with a sarcastic tilt of her head.

Aida blinked away a few tears. If he continued to love me despite how I treated him then - perhaps he can forgive me, she reassured herself. The thought made her heart soar, pulling herself out of her stupor, determined to find him right away to apologize. She got up and swept through the house looking for him. The rest of the guests were gone and the mansion was quiet, her brothers and their wives gone and her sister and father probably retired for the night already. Aida looked out of the sitting room window, the one that had a view of the south end of the estate and saw Cullen standing near his Corvette near the gates of Skyhold, chatting with one of two of his guards. She didn't think twice. She kicked off her high heels and headed for the front door, determined to catch up with him.

She ran down the driveway just as he was saying goodbye to his staff, one hand on his car's door.

"Cullen, please, wait, let me explain. Don't leave."

He turned toward her with a weary, sad smile. "What is it, Miss Trevelyan?"

"Please stop calling me that."

"Fine. Aida, can I help you with something?"

She shook her head at him. "Don't talk to me that way. Let me apologize, it didn't mean anything, it happened so quickly - "

He looked at her, unperturbed and calm.

"I didn't even like it, Cullen. Please believe me," she whispered at him, desperate now.

Cullen looked over her shoulder at her stately home. "You know, for the last few days since I saw you, all I did was wonder if you were really done with me. Tonight I got my answer."

She took one step forward, both her hands stretched toward him.

"No, no, how could I be done with you? I love you. I love only you."

Cullen unlocked his door but paused before getting in.

"Aida, I just need some time to myself. Have a good night."
Aida watched him drive away and then sat down in the driveway, beyond despondent. Emilia found her out there twenty minutes later, unable to move.

"Sweetie, please stand up, let's go inside. I didn't know you were out here, you're going to catch your death."

"It doesn't matter. Just leave me alone."
"Come on, before Father sees you and really gives you a what's what."

Two mornings later at one of her training sessions, she told Dorian and Sera about her behavior at the party. They didn't seem surprised.

"Oh Aida," they sighed in resignation, and in unison.

"I know. I screwed up bad. Real bad."

Sera shot an arrow into the empty warehouse and Aida flung a tiny fireball at it, incinerate it before it could hit its target. Dorian gave Aida an impressed look.

"All this being heartbroken seems to do wonders for your magic handling though. Do that again."

Sera nocked two arrows into her bow and shot them off at the same time before giving Aida a moment to breathe but Aida's fireballs caught up with both arrows at the same time. It was Sera's turn to marvel at her sudden uptick in spellcasting quality. Aida fussed with an end of her hair, still anguish.

"Listen, guys. Can we not tell everyone else about...how Cullen's not going to - not going to be there - at the thing - anymore?"

Vivienne and Solas entered their practice gym just in time to hear this question. Aida melted under their stern looks almost immediately, telling them what had occurred, and then Vivienne took her for a walk around the block to speak to her alone.

"You need to apologize to him, over and over again!"
"I tried, I tried right away Doctor De Fer. I've made an awful mess of everything."

Vivienne stopped her, putting two hands on her shoulder and looking at her intently. "It's not just for the sake of your relationship. The bond between you makes the blood magic stronger. I'm sure your father could easily pay one of his minions to bleed for you but it won't be the same. You risk summoning the wrong demon - or a pack of them."

"I want to win him back, truly I do. But we should prepare for Cullen to not be there. I'm just going to have to train harder and be ready for anything."

"And you WILL have to find a new donor. Don't put this off, Aida, or we'll be waiting a year to get into Merrill's laboratory."

Cullen went on with his life, completely numb and joyless. He went to work, walked Barkley, attended his Narcotics Anonymous meetings, and saw no one outside of of his office. It was a lot like his life before Aida moved in next door except now he had more time and money at his disposal but no one to lavish either thing on. He spent an inordinate amount of energy avoiding the news - often
Alistair's triumphant visage would be plastered on the front page of the Denerim Times as he shook hands with some foreign dignitary, and he was also on the cover of glossy tabloid magazines, frolicking on the beach with Giselle - or a Giselle-look-a-like. If the story was about Alistair and a woman that wasn't his wife, it made him ache because he knew he could not blame Aida for what happened at the cocktail party. Instead of think about how hurt he was, or what Aida was doing as her date with the Tevinter Tech centrifuge approached, he chose to walk around in a fog, on auto-pilot - until one morning, his steadfast assistant Krem pushed a copy of the Haven Daily under his nose.

"Ser, hate to bother you but - I think you should see this."

Cullen felt his pulse quicken - Aida's picture was on the front page of the local paper. The article was embellished with an artsy black and white photograph of Aida, standing in her empty condo, right next door to his, looking out her patio window. The headline read "Bombing Survivor Gambles on Blood Magic Cure", and the first sentence of the lede started with, "The youngest daughter of construction oligarch Edward Trevelyan has been training for the battle of her life - for her life."

All the feelings he had been avoiding came flooding back to him like a tsunami wave as he found himself staring at Aida's solemn profile in the picture. Maker, this means she had been just next door at some point recently. She had been in the elevator where they had started their fiery romance. She had looked at his door as she unlocked hers.

Had she hoped he was home, or dreaded his presence?

"Mr. Rutherford, would you like some water? Or a coffee? Or a drink?"

Cullen looked up at Krem, having forgotten he was standing there.

"Thank you Krem. I'm fine. Thank you for bringing this to my attention."

The young man cracked his knuckles anxiously. "It's just that - I couldn't help but notice you, ah, cleared your calendar of your training sessions with Miss Trevelyan - and you haven't exactly taken a call from her in a while. I figured you would have appreciated the update. But if I'm wrong, tell me so, and I can - "

Krem leaned forward to slide the newspaper away but Cullen held it down with one hand. "No, Krem, you were right to show me this." He smoothed out the front page, running his fingers over the picture. With a crooked smile he looked up at his assistant. "And you were right to intuit that things haven't been exactly blissful between Miss Trevelyan and I. Don't suppose you know what I should do about it?"

Krem ran a hand through his hair, a nervous gesture he had picked up from Cullen in the last few months working for him. "Well, if you're still a little, ah, uninterested in speaking to her, sounds like you could call your old coworker Varric, as he's quoted in the second page of the article as being one of her combat instructors."

Cullen clenched his jaw. That mouthy dwarf. He was overdue for a talk with him for sure.

* * * * *

A few nights later, Aida was waiting for Varric to show up to spar with her a little. Solas, Vivienne and Dorian had been working her over intensely in the days getting closer and closer to the day they had all come to simply call, the Summoning. Next week, she and her team were going to go to
Tevinter to consult one last time with Merrill and study the lab space to prepare. She spun around in the middle of the warehouse, swinging her staff with confidence, imagining the demon that had stolen her memories standing before her. Vivienne told her it could be 10 feet tall - with Solas adding ominously, "Or it could take the form of one of your fears or anxieties." Dorian had laughed off his remark. "I didn't know Chastity Demons existed, although there are parts of the Fade that have gone unexplored for many millennia."

Aida heard the door open behind her. She spun around on a heel, ready to fling a little lightning bolt at Varric's head - but gasped when she saw Cullen standing there, his duffel bag of equipment over one shoulder. She took two steps back in surprise, extinguishing her magic.

"Cullen. What are you doing here?"
"Talked to Varric today. He couldn't make it."

Aida smoothed down her hair a little, feeling nervous. "But I spoke to him today too, and he said he was coming."

Cullen raised an eyebrow at her as he approached their practice ring. "I can call him right now, if you wish."

"No, it's fine. You can see for yourself how much I've progressed."

She watched him putting on his usual enchanted protective gear as she fretted about what kind of underwear she had put on earlier. Don't be stupid, Aida. He doesn't care. The thought made her pout, idly forming an electrical boomerang in one hand, a handy trick she had come up with herself. She tossed it at him playfully, watching him take a quick step as it spun around him before returning back to her right hand.

"Hey, I wasn't ready yet."
"Sorry," she giggled, biting back a smile.

He moved into the ring, picking up a shield that had been hooked to a nearby training dummy.

"Alright, Trevelyan. Do your worst."
"Are you sure?"
"Absolutely."

Aida slammed one end of her staff down onto the floor, using it as a counter balance to kick both her legs forward against his shield, causing him to step backwards. Before he could say anything, she had landed on both feet, sending two separate fireballs arcing around him to hit him in the back, where they were absorbed by his magic gear.

"Maker, Aida!"

He peeked at her over the edge of the shield in shock, seeing her transform her staff into a spirit blade which she swung at him with a war shriek and Cullen had to drop the shield to tuck into a roll to avoid her. He edged toward a training dummy that had an old practice sword hanging from it, grabbing it quickly. Her magic blade and his clashed together over and over again until he had pushed her back into the center of the ring.

"Someone has definitely been practicing all her moves."

Before he could smirk at her she had raised a fist to the heavens, burning a perfect circle around him. When he tried to step forward toward her, it flared up, keeping him locked in the smaller ring. She paced around him like an angry lioness.
"Hey, take it easy."
"I will do no such thing. The last time we sparred here you did not treat me the same way."

Cullen clapped his hands together once, the magic gloves forming a Templar-style shield he used to protect himself as he stepped through her fire ring. The moment he left it, the shield disappeared and it was his turn to stun her with a column of blinding light he conjured with one hand.

Aida blinked a few times and realized Cullen was no longer standing in front of her. She wheeled around in time to need to duck a swing from his dominant sword arm, and had to spin once again when he countered with a dagger blade she didn't know he had. They squared off again, panting and catching their breaths.

"Can I show you something your friend Cassandra showed me?"
"You shouldn't ask, you should just - "

Before he could react, Aida had dropped her battle staff, charging at him with a yelp, grabbing him around one leg and flinging all her weight against him, knocking him to the ground for the first time in their all their sparring rounds. Cullen landed with an grunt, but Aida scrambled out of his arms when he tried to lock her body to his. She was up on her feet, re-armed with her staff, bouncing back and forth on her feet with a triumphant grin before he could stand back up.

"Did you know Cass loves MMA fighting?"
"I do now, that was a - "

Aida attacked again, engaging the blade on the end of her staff, swiping it toward his face, making him back up again. She flourished her free hand toward him, surprising Cullen with a strong windy blast that he had to lean into to not lose his footing - and then Aida began playing rougher and meaner - flinging random items from around the room toward him, making him duck and hide, roll and lay flat to avoid her barrage of objects.

But then she made a simple mistake, accidentally letting a mace roll toward him on the floor. Cullen grabbed it and attacked back, summoning his Templar shield again, putting her on the defense until she felt the concrete wall behind her. He pressed forward until he towered over her and she could smell his sweat and his cologne and his skin.

"Surrender, Aida."
"Never."
"I have you cornered."

With an aggressive move he grabbed her wrist, slamming it to the wall next to her, making her drop her staff. He kept her wrist pinned there, as he leaned forward closer. She could feel his breath on her cheek now and the low rumble of his always-arousing voice was in her ear.

"Do you surrender?"

She looked up at him, making eye contact with him - before she closed her eyes, centering herself. Cullen heard a whoosh and then she was gone - standing at his back, a dagger point pressed to his jugular.

"Do you surrender, Templar?"

"Aida, you did it! You Fade stepped!"

There was a second whoosh and Aida was in front of him again, the point of her blade now pressed
to the flesh under his chin. Cullen raised his arms in a gesture of submission.

"You look ready for next week."
"I am. And I did it without you."

She pressed the blade into his skin a little more, tears glistening in her eyes.

"I had to do it without you. You left me no choice. You wouldn't forgive me even though I begged for forgiveness right away. Do you think I heard from Alistair after that night?"

Cullen felt the tip of her blade cut him lightly. "No, I don't."

She dropped the dagger to the floor with a clang, looking exhausted.

"I think I've had enough for today. I've been training since 9 am. I'm just going to clean up this place before I go."

Aida pushed past him, kicking at the head of a training dummy that had come off during their fight. She heard Cullen speak up from behind her.

"Who is - did you find a donor? That article in the newspaper this morning wasn't clear."
"I did."

She picked up the dummy head and jammed it back onto its body.

"Who is it?"

Aida turned around to face him again, looking at him with defeat in her eyes.

"It's my ex-boyfriend, Samson. You remember him, even if I don't, right? Father has to pay him half a million in bearer bonds. Almost everyone doesn't approve of him joining us. They think our not very pleasant past could muddle up the magic a little, but he will have to do."

She shrugged at him, trying to be nonchalant. "The worst thing that could happen is the Summoning doesn't work and I have to wait a year to try again."

Cullen gritted his teeth, practically stomping toward her in the middle of the warehouse.

"No, the worst thing that could happen is you die, Aida."

He yanked her into his arms, kissing her roughly. She wriggled a little, trying to push him away but he squeezed her tighter. He released her from the kiss, growling into her ear, "Don't fight me. Forgive me, Aida."

Aida answered him by grabbing onto his neck and jumping into his arms, wrapping her legs around him. She kissed him back as aggressively as he had, digging her nails into his shoulders. They tumbled to the mat together as though they were still sparring.

Cullen straddled her, yanking off his shirt and pulling down his sweatpants and boxers in one go. Aida managed to unzip her sports bra, freeing her breasts, but Cullen couldn't wait for her to peel off her black yoga pants. He grabbed them by the waist band and tore them with a snarl, and then treated her panties in the same fashion.

"Cullen!"
"I can't wait, I need you now."
Aida arched her back hard as he dove his face between her legs, pushing his mouth against her pussy. He spit into her cunt, licking her from one end to the other, ending with a swipe around her clit. She gushed in response as one hand worked his cock and his tongue continued to flick hard against her pearl. She grabbed two handfuls of curls, grinding upwards against his mouth, not caring if he could breath or not.

"Yes, Cullen, make me wet and then fuck me."

He got back on his knees and leaned over her to kiss her, letting her taste her own pussy and her sweat on his lips. Cullen grabbed her by the ankles and held her legs open wide as he thrust into her, merciless and savage. She cried out in response, grabbing on to her own breasts and pinching her own nipples.

"Oh Maker, Aida, how I've missed your tight little cunt."

He let go of one of her ankles, keeping her leg pressed to his torso. With his free hand he pressed on her neck, pressing down on her body hard as he thrust into her. She rolled her eyes back in her head, enjoying his ruthless treatment of her.

"Do you know what I thought about when we apart and I pleasured myself, Aida? Do you want to hear?"

He let go of her windpipe now, flinging her leg to one side so she was still on her back but her hips were tilted sideways at a new angle. He held on to the back of her knees as he pounded into her from this new position, making her moan louder.

"I thought about how I wanted to fuck you with Alistair in that library. I wanted you to suck our hard cocks. I wanted you down on your knees before both of us."

Aida watched his face as he unloaded his dirty fantasy on her. Maker, she missed his mouth in more than one way. He opened her legs again so he was back between her, his hips slapping against hers.

"I would have eaten your sweet, soft, perfect cunt while the Prime Minister jammed his dick deeper into your mouth. I wanted us to suck your tits together at the same time while our fingers pushed against each other's, playing with your clit and testing your tight little arse."

Aida hissed as she flicked at her pussy with her fingers, watching his manhood plunge into her over and over again. "What else, tell me, you beast - "

He grabbed a handful of her hair, pinning her in place as he rutted into deep and hard. "I wanted us to take turns fucking you. While Alistair took your from behind, I'd make you choke on my dick, and then we'd change places, and you could taste your own cunt on his cock."

Cullen leaned over her now, pushing his staff into her as far as it could go, making her eyes roll back in her head again.

"You're in so deep, oh Maker, Cullen, please - "

He pressed his lips to her ear as he continued, whispering hoarsely now. "And then we would ravage you together. You'd get on top of me, baring your ass to him, as he slid into your tight hole, inch by inch. You would be full of our cocks, impaled on them both, as we start to hammer into you. Sliding in and out in tandem. Filling you up, making you take us both."

Aida raked her nails across his back, grabbing him by a handful of hair so she could kiss him again. She bit his lip like an animal possessed and it made him grab her legs and twist her into a new shape.
He got back up onto his feet and pushed his cock straight down into her. She was taking the force of him against her shoulders as he fed his rock hard manhood into her cunt.

"That's it, you little slut. Look at you, look how absolutely wet you just thinking about being fucked hard by two men - "

"Cullen, Cullen, I don't need him - I only need you..."

He pulled out entirely and then pushed his way back in again until she had taken all of him. He did this over and over again until she whined and squeaked and babbled and begged him for her release. Cullen let go of her legs and fell between her thighs again, parting her slick folds with his thumbs and sucking right on her clit. Aida bucked hard under him, screaming again. She was so out of control that her magic released inside of her too, burning a circle around them both, sparks raining down on them. Cullen scrambled to his knees and guided his staff into cunt again, pumping hard as his balls - wet from her over-arousal - slapped against her ass. She gripped his biceps, cooing at him encouragingly now. "Come baby, come for me."

Cullen threw his head back and roared as he shot his seed into her, his body jerking with pleasure until he fell forward on her, his head between her breasts. They laid there breathing heavily for a while, not saying anything, until she twined her fingers into his hair softly.

He pulled her into his arms and rolled onto his side so they could look at each other, her head resting on his arm. She traced the scar before running her fingers over his lips while she asked, "What are we going to do about Samson?"

"Tell him to fuck off. Forever. I'm coming with you Tevinter. As if there was any doubt."

They kissed, gentle and sweet now, before Cullen pulled back and stared into her eyes. "Aida, I never want to fight with you again. I will fight beside you, and for you, but - please promise me, we will never be parted this long again."

She pressed a hand to his chest, right over his heart. "I promise. Now drive me home to your place. I can't go back to Skyhold looking like you ravaged me right through my clothes."

Cullen laughed and the sound made her heart swell with pride, with love - with peace.
The phone on Cullen's desk lit up with a friendly ping.

"Cullen, Miss Trevelyan is here to see you."

Cullen took a step back from the bulletin board where he had all of his notes and plans for Aida's Summoning tacked up.

"Send her in, Krem. And hold my calls, unless it's Rylen, then patch him through please."

He heard Aida's playful giggle in the background and Krem joined her for a moment while responding, "She's flirting with me ser, but I'll send her in regardless."

Aida swept into his office, her hands full of shopping bags, looking very much like the youngest daughter of one of the richest men in Thedas.

"Darling, I'm sorry I'm a little late, I had a few important errands to run."

She dropped the bags all at once and ran into his arms, knocking the breath out of his body.

"Important errands? At Neiman Marcus?"

She pulled him down by his tie for a kiss, humming with pleasure. Her fingers were quick to undo the knot under his collar.

"Aida, we were going to talk about Tevinter today, remember?"

"Can't I just swap out this tie first? I hate it."

She pushed him backward toward the edge of his desk, making him sit down. She dug through her shopping bags, looking for the right box while Cullen watched her with bemused eyes.

"Ah, here. See. So much better. Brings out all that molten gold in your eyes."

"Molten gold?"

"Molten gold and whiskey brown, and all mine."

Aida tossed his old tie on his desk while she put the new one around his neck. She straightened it and smoothed it down before looking at him.

"Aida, are you alright?"

"Maker, you know me so well. I'm nervous, aren't I. Two more days and we'll be there - and..."

She took him by the wrist and turned it toward her, touching her lips to the vein there with a feather-light kiss that gave him gooseflesh.
"You don't have to worry about me, Aida. But you must have a strategy. We need to go over the blueprints for the lab, and Merrill has sent over some photographs. The centrifuge is on the bottom level of the lab, one floor above it is a large work room they are going to clear out for us."

He lead her over to the bulletin board in the corner, showing her the pictures and diagrams and what the space would look like where she would face down her demon.

"I'll be one floor below. Sera and Cole are going to set up a triage area where -"

Aida finished his sentence for him, her voice hollow and far away. " - they will bleed you until your heart stops."

Cullen squeezed her shoulder while he pressed a finger to one of the pictures on the board. "You won't be there. You won't see it happen. You'll be here - where a Fade rift will be generated and the demon should appear."

"Or demons, plural."

"Vivienne and Dorian are going to cast a protective barrier around the building. It will hold for only so long. You will need to be fast. Or yes, Tevinter Tech campus security is going to be quite overwhelmed by the demons in the university library."

Aida pursed her lips. "Solas said there is a possibility that I may not have to do it alone - depending on their spell-casting, but they won't know until the day of. I think it's easier for me to think about going in by myself, somehow shouldering all the pressure feels more appropriate."

She turned away from him, pulling away to look out his office window. Cullen followed, standing behind her and wrapping her in his arms.

"Tell me why I'm doing this again - why I'm possibly sacrificing you for it."

Cullen nuzzled her neck, kissing her on the ear before speaking. "That bomb didn't kill you, but it tore you in two. It hit the pause button on our life together. In just a few days, we will move forward."

Aida turned around to face him. "But where were we going? What was going on in our relationship?"

Cullen couldn't help himself, he blushed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Well, you know. A lot of what we get up to now. Fighting. Making up. Making love. But we used to do some other things we haven't had a chance to do quite yet. Sleep in on Sundays, do the crossword together. Go to brunch, run errands. Take Barkley for a walk in the park, and sit together under a tree, watching people go by."

Aida brushed her knuckles down his jaw line. "That sounds very nice."

"I would come back home after being away for weeks on end, and you would be waiting for me, cooking dinner in my condo."

"Cooking what?" she asked, while twining her arms around him to squeeze his ass. It made Cullen swallow because he knew all of Aida's less-than-subtle signs that she wanted him.

"Spaghetti and meatballs. Garlic bread and Caesar salad. Two bottles of...two bottles of."

He stuttered as her bold hands began to work on undoing his belt, even as she kept her face innocent. Cullen heard people right outside of his office, Krem joking around with one of the other assistants.

"Aida..."
"What?"
"We shouldn't."

Cullen sighed as she slipped a hand into his boxers to cup him.

"We should. We also could both be dead in a few days. Do you want your last thoughts of me to be you telling me no? Or me down on my knees sucking your cock behind your big executive desk?"

Cullen opened his mouth, growing hard against her palm - but before he could answer, his phone lit up on his desk again.

"Ser, Rylen on line 1, it's about the issue at the oil refinery in the Hissing Wastes."
"Patch him through, Krem. Thank you. I'll be - "

Aida was pouting at him, disappointment and lust mingling together on her face in a very alluring way.

"I'll be busy for a little bit. Make sure nobody disturbs us, er, me. Disturbs my phone call."
"Yes, your - phone call. Don't worry, I'm out here holding down the fort."

He managed to slip out of Aida's grasp, zipping up his pants before he headed back to his desk to take the call. Aida dropped herself onto a sofa in the corner, looking through her phone in boredom. Cullen kept an eye on her while he spoke to his coworker.

"What's going on, Rylen, fill me in as quick as you can - I have a meeting to get to later."

Rylen chortled at him. "Your shared calendar says you're free for the rest of the day. Does the boss's daughter have anything to do with this?"
"No. Aida isn't here, uh, at the moment. Now what's going on at the refinery?"

Aida narrowed her eyes at him as he continued his call - which started to go on a little longer than either of them would have liked. She stared at him with obvious longing as he wrote down notes and tried to work through various business issues with Rylen. She casually let the hem of her skirt ride up as she stretched one of her tanned legs out on the sofa beneath her. Cullen leaned back in his chair, keeping his eyes glued to her, until he realized his coworker had asked him a something and he had to answer.

"Well, that raises more questions, Rylen. We'd have to restructure that entire unit. That's definitely a longer conversation."

Aida huffed another sigh at him and Cullen could only shrugged his shoulders at her in apology. The two kept their eyes locked on each other, Cullen wondering what Aida would do to complicate his work day even further. He got his answer when Aida leaned back on the sofa and wriggled out of her panties, flicking them at him like a rubber band. The light blue lacy garment landed on his desk and Cullen was quick to take them and drop them into a desk drawer with a stern look. It only made her get off the couch to saunter over to him, rolling his chair back from his desk and sitting on his lap. She nestled into him, kissing him on the neck.

Cullen covered the mouthpiece of the phone and whispered. "Aida, come on -"

She kissed him on the lips next, running a hand through his hair and mussing his curls. He had to nudge her off his lap with a disciplinary look on his face and kept his hand over the phone as he chastised her again. "Aida, I have to be professional."

"Well, I don't."
Cullen had to answer Rylen once more, and while he was talking Aida dropped to her knees before him, unbuckling his belt again. Cullen held his breath as she took his cock out and rubbed it lightly across her lips. It began to stiffen quickly and Aida gave him a wicked smile.

Maker, this woman is going to be the death of me. He kept talking to Rylen, keeping his voice steady and calm even as Aida began laving the head of his penis with teasing licks. It was too much, if she was going to do this, she needs to do it properly. Cullen put a hand on the back of her head and pushed her down, making her take him deeper into his mouth. She sucked on him a little noisily, and Cullen hoped Rylen couldn't hear it. He pulled her up by a handful of hair, playing rough, and mouthed the words Be quiet please! Aida rolled her eyes at him and dipped her head back to her work again.

Her tongue was sinful, he had to stop himself from gasping when she sucked on the head and had to bite back groans when she drew one of his balls into her mouth. He also saw her hand slip between her thighs and knew from her own raspy breathing that she was pleasing herself at the same time too. Aida worked him into a painfully hard state, and then she stood up, sitting on the desk in front of him, right on top of some paperwork. She pulled up her skirt and opened her thighs wide, showing him how wet she was.

Cullen shook his head at her. She opened her pussy for him with two fingers, spreading it wide. He dropped his head back, hoping the sigh that just escaped his lips didn't catch Rylen's attention too much. When he reached toward her with his greedy fingers, she slapped his hand away, and continued rolling her clit between her fingers. He gave her a naughty look and before she could react, he grabbed his smartphone off the desk next to her and snapped a picture of what she was doing. She gave him an "I can't believe you did that!" face, and then in retribution, she leaned forward and smeared her arousal on his lips so he could taste her.

That was it. She had just won this little chess game.

"Rylen, I have to cut it short, my assistant has Mr. Trevelyan on the other line - "
"Ok, but, will you email me about -"
"I will, by the end of the day. Bye, Ry."

Cullen slammed the phone down and then grabbed Aida by the hips, drawing her to the edge of the desk.

"You minx. You harlot. Slut. Whore. Is this any way for the Bann's daughter to act?"
She batted her eyelashes at him in a display of faux-innocence, even as she kept playing with herself. "I don't know. I guess I didn't get a lot of discipline when I was growing up? I can't be sure, what with the amnesia and all."

Cullen sat down in his chair, pumping his cock with one hand now. "I know one thing for sure, you behave like a woman who is always used to getting her way."

With that, he rolled his chair forward and pushed his head between her thighs, sucking her clit between his lips. Aida threw her head back and moaned with abandon.

"Aida, you need to be quiet!"
"Baby, I'm sorry, you're just too fucking good, you eat my pussy so good - " she responded, in a still-too-loud voice.

"That's it. You asked for it - and you deserve it."

He took the tie Aida had discarded earlier and stuffed one end of it into her mouth, wrapping it
around her head like a gag to muffle her voice. She whined at him through it and it only made him harder. She made a motion to untie it but he grabbed both of her wrists in one of his strong, powerful hands.

"No no no."

With his free hand, Cullen untied the newer tie around his neck and bound her wrists together.

"There we go. Now we can get down to business."

He held her bound wrists in one hand and tore open her blouse with the other, making her buttons scatter across his office floor. He unfastened the front clasp of her bra, freeing her breasts. Aida's eyes registered her shock, especially as he pushed her back down on the desk and pinned her wrists to the desk above her head.

"Keep them there, or I will make it worse for you, hmm?"

She nodded, delight and lust and submission all over her face. She arched her back, presenting her tits to him and he bent forward to draw one taut nipple into his mouth, and then the other. He sat back down in his chair and rolled it closer one again, lowering his head to her pussy again. He pressed his mouth between her folds and began spelling out a secret message to Aida, using the tip of his tongue against her clit to write it out, letter after letter.

A-i-d-a, I l-o-v-e y-o-u.
I w-o-r-s-h-i-p y-o-u.
I w-o-u-l-d d-i-e f-o-r y-o-u.

By the time he was done, the leg Aida had hooked over his shoulder had begun to twitch and her hips were writhing in circles beneath him. She was close, and so was he so he pulled her up to sitting and then helped her stand up and turn around. He kissed up and down her velvet-soft neck, kneading her breasts with both hands while grinding his erection against her arse.

"I can't say no to you, if you asked me to fuck you in the lobby of your father's building I'd have to do it."

She made a happy noise against the gag, nuzzling him back, and then he shocked her again by pushing her flat against his desk so her cheek was pressed to a file folder under her. He kept a hand on her head as he pushed his cock deep inside her.

"Fuck, you're so wet."

Aida struggled against him and whined as loudly as she could with the gag in her mouth, but he kept her pinned there. "Shhh, be a good girl, take it -" Cullen lifted one of her legs so her knee was on the top of the desk and he could plunge into her deeper. He watched his cock slide in and out of her, slick with her desire. He pulled back and reached for his phone again, wanting to document more of the moment, taking a video of her being so submissive.

"Mmmm, so hot. You're so fucking hot. You want it now, babydoll? Nod for me."

She was squirming and ready and also knocking some of the objects off his desk. Cullen felt an animalistic hunger tearing through his veins - he dropped his phone on his chair and then cleared the surface of his desk with two angry swipes of his arms, sending everything to the
ground with a clatter. He then returned to rocking his hips against hers, rutting her hard.

Aida gasped against the gag, while Cullen tried not to moan and groan - then a knock at the door caused both of them to grow still and silent. Krem spoke from the other side - "Cullen, is everything alright? I heard a - noise?"

"Yes, Krem, Aida's just very clumsy! Don't worry!"

She gave him a dirty look which he wiped off her face by pushing his cock into her as far as it could go.

"Alright Ser. Just ping me if you need something."

Cullen waited to hear his footsteps fade away before he went back to fucking her hard against his desk. He grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled so her back was deeply arched and he could whisper into her ear. "That's it, that's it, you're so good, your cunt is incredible today, you little slut. You going to come for me? Hmm?"

Aida's eyes rolled back in her head as he pumped into her faster. Cullen let go of her hair and reached around her, feeling for her clit and flicking it from side to side with two fingers. Aida twitched and shuddered in his arms as her orgasm peaked and she cried out against the gag, as loud as she could. Her climax was like an electrical charge that surged through his body and he he pulled out in time to shoot his seed against the smooth globe of her ass.

"Don't move. One last picture please."

He snapped a few pictures, proud of his handiwork, until Aida stood up and turned around with a pout. Cullen untied her wrists and pulled the gag out of his mouth.

"I never knew ties had so many uses."
"Shut up. I hate you. I love you."

Aida looked down at her clothes, utterly ruined. She took off her ripped blouse and used it to clean herself up.

"Now how am I supposed to leave looking like this?"
"You bought new clothes today, didn't you? Just leave wearing something else. Krem won't notice - or least he won't come out and say anything about it."

Aida snapped her bra shut and turned to look at him, but Cullen was just sitting in his office chair, rewatching the video he had just shot with a smug look on his face. She sat down in his lap, snatching the phone out of his hand.

"Don't! I want to keep that video forever!"
"You better not send it to anyone!"

They sat together, holding each other in a post-orgasmic afterglow, Cullen running his fingertips over her shoulder and up and down her arm. Aida broke the silence.

"If something happens in Tevinter...you'll always remember me, right?"
"What kind of question is that? Ask me another one."

"Can we have Mexican for dinner tonight?"
"Of course."
She unbuttoned the top two buttons of his dress shirt, slipping a hand under the garment with affection. Cullen put a finger under her chin to make her look at him.

"Aida? Something else on your mind?"

"Yes. I'm - I'm scared to ask you."
"You, scared? Of anything? I don't believe you. Go on, ask me."

She ran a fingertip over his upper lip and then made eye contact with him, shy and sweet.

"Cullen, when we come back from Tevinter... can I move in with you?"

Aida's face fell when he didn't answer at first, but he hadn't been expecting her to say that at all. "Never mind, sorry. I should have waited until after the Summoning to ask - "

He squeezed her tight, kissing her hard on the lips.

"Aida, Don't be sorry. And the answer's yes. A thousand times yes. I want nothing more."

Cullen pressed his forehead to hers and began to laugh.

"Barkley is going to be so excited when I tell him."

Chapter End Notes

Alright, time to stop putting it off. Aida's big demon showdown comes next chapter.
Aida watched her friends and family swarming the lobby of the Minrathous Ritz, chatting as they waited to check in to their rooms. She was the reason they were all there but nobody was paying attention to her. It gave her a quiet moment to look at them all and appreciate them, treasure them, hold them closer to her heart.

It was happening tomorrow morning.

Aida had less than 24 hours with all of these people, some of whom shared the blood in her veins, others she had met not too long ago but had become pillars of strength and inspiration for her. Cullen's old coworkers had helped her train out of respect for him, and now they had become important parts of her life. She watched Varric telling Solas and Blackwall a story that probably wasn't true, and neither the elf or the burly bearded human found it very funny, but they listened just the same. Dorian and Bull were at the hotel bar, ordering drinks even though it was only 11 am. Sera, Cassandra and Vivienne were discussing something serious together, and she could tell from twenty feet away that Sera wasn't being very serious about it. Cole was busy reassuring her siblings and their families, one of her young nephews nestled in his arms as he spoke. Aida looked for Cullen in the group. He was speaking to his father and she could tell by the dark circles under his eyes that he was just as worried as her.

Aida wrote only two sentences in her journal that morning before they left for the airport:

*I am almost certain I am going to die tomorrow. It's too late to back out now.*

On her bed, she had left a series of handwritten letters, one for each important person in her life. If they returned to Haven with only her corpse, she had a special goodbye prepared for each one of them. In the package to Cullen, she had also left a copy of her life insurance policy and her banking information, tucked into the pages of her sketchbook. Whatever she had in this world she was leaving to him. He deserved all of it.

As though he knew her thoughts had turned to him, Cullen crossed the lobby to get down on one knee where she was sitting, looking at her at eye level as he cupped her hands in his.

"Sweetheart, I'll go find out what's taking so long to get us all checked in."

He made a motion to stand but Aida stopped him.

"Let me just look at you, for just a moment."
She swept a lock of his hair off Cullen's forehead and gazed into his eyes. The sound of everyone else's chatter fell away. She had told everyone - her family, the curious members of the press that interviewed her before leaving Haven, her closest friends - that she was going to kill a demon for herself and to be whole again, but the quiet truth was she was doing it for him. He had told her of everything that had happened to him in the Templar service - and explained that he had not even told "the other Aida" of the things he had to do in Kirkwall, and what had been done to him in turn. There was a part of her that wanted to prove to him she could be as strong as him, face down something that no man could not tame or even understand - to put herself back together so they could be together.

She wanted to do something impossible, in his name.

"What are you thinking about when you look at me like this?"
"How as much as I love everyone who is here with us today, I wish it was just you and me."

He kissed her on the knuckles. "It will be just you and me, soon enough. We just have to get through the next two days."

Her father called Cullen from the other side of the lobby and he looked over his shoulder at him. "I'll be right back." When he stood, she held on to his hands. Every moment with him felt both heavy with importance and also light and fleeting.

"I love you."

Cullen reached down and touched her on the nose in an affectionate gesture.

"I'm only going over there, and I'll be right back."
"I know, I was only telling you because I felt like it."
"Yes, but on the plane, whenever I got up to go the bathroom, you had to tell me too."

It was her turn to kiss his hand now, right on one of his old battle scars. "I'm just running out of time to tell you so."

Cullen gave her a stern look in response. "No, you're not, and you're not allowed to talk like that. Now smile. Smile to make me feel better."

She gave him a meek smile.

"More."

Aida stretched her face into an uncomfortable grimace of a yearbook smile. It made Cullen laugh.

"That's better."

* * * * *

That night, after a big dinner with everyone at a rowdy, fun Minrathous taverna Aida and Cullen retired to their hotel room. She came out of the bathroom to find Cullen waiting for her, naked in bed, wearing only a coy smile on his face. Once she appeared, he pulled back the edge of the comforter next to him and patted the mattress.

Aida fiddled with the end of her braid. "Cullen, I - I'm too nervous."

Cullen burst out laughing and then realized she was being serious. "Aida, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to
laugh, come here. We don't have to do anything. We can just hold each other, and rest."

"I'm worried I won't even be able to close my eyes. And I'm afraid to take something in case it makes me groggy tomorrow." Aida turned from him and headed toward the window.

Cullen slid out of bed and headed for the bathroom. She heard him digging around in his toiletry bag for something and then he returned, holding a bottle of lavender oil.

"Come here, take off your nightgown and lie down. Let me give you a massage. It will help you relax."

Aida crossed the room and stood before him, biting her lip. "Oh Cullen, you don't have to, if you're tired..."

"It wasn't a suggestion, it was a command. Come here."

She stepped toward him and let the light silk nightgown she was wearing slide from her shoulders. He took it from her and left it on the bench at the foot of the bed. Aida laid down on the bed face down, her forehead pressed to her folded arms beneath her. She felt him kneel on the mattress next to her, rubbing his hands together to warm up the oil. He pressed his palms to her lower back and Aida sighed. She always loved his hands, the way they were shaped, and how strong they were, how gentle they could be. He moved from her lower back to her calves, running his broad palms up and down her legs, sometimes sweeping his fingers on the inside of her thighs, provocatively close to her pussy.

Cullen moved back her back, digging his knuckles into the knots near her shoulder blades. "Ugh, that's good, keep doing that," she moaned, beginning to melt into the bed beneath her. Aida heard him make a small sound as his hands made broad circles across her back and his fingers touched the sides of her breasts. Aida made no protest, waiting to see if he'd try the move again, but he focused his attention on her shoulders and her neck instead.

"You've gotten stronger, I can feel it, your body changed."

"Do you still like it?"

He chuckled, warm and husky with the desire she knew he was trying to control. "Very much so."

Cullen made her unfold her arms from under her so he could rub her triceps and biceps. He worked his fingers between hers, rubbing her hands, sore from weeks of training and gripping a battle staff. Aida opened one eye to peek at him over her shoulder. Cullen's cock was stiff and standing at attention as he gently laid her right arm back next to her. Just looking at him in this aroused state made her want him between her thighs.

"How's that? Feel a little better?"

"What about the rest of me?"

Aida rolled over to look at him, baring her breasts and the rest of her body to his gaze. "Maybe these - other parts of me - need some of your tender, loving care too."

Cullen stared at her body spread out before him, putting the bottle of lavender oil down on the nightstand. "Show me where."

Aida graced her fingers over one breast, circling a nipple, and then the other, while the other hand parted her folds for him, pressing a finger to her clit.

"I thought you were too nervous to - "
She grasped his cock before he could finish his sentence, making him groan. She saw the droplet of precum glistening on the tip of his head. "Please, baby, I want it inside me."

Cullen did not hesitate, he guided her to sitting and then pulled her into his arms, his back to the headboard. She sat in his lap, wrapping her legs around him so they could face each other. Aida watched his face as she oh-so-slowly lowered herself onto his hard manhood until he was completely inside her, savoring the way his adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, trying to control himself and let her take the lead. She stared at his flushed cheeks as she circled her pussy against him and grinned to herself as squinted his eyes shut for a moment, a moan of pleasure parting his lips.

"Fuck, baby, you're so sexy," she hissed at him as she began to buck on his cock just a little harder. His amber eyes flicked open as he put a hand on the back of her head to pull her closer to him for a kiss. "I'm yours, all yours. Fuck me the way you want, Aida."

She leaned back, offering her tits to him. He hungrily sucked one of her tight nipples into his mouth, biting it lightly, making her cry out, before moving on to the other. Aida leaned back further until she slipped out of his arms and her palms were flat on the mattress behind her, her back arched in delight. Cullen took the cue and began pumping his hips up and into her. She glanced at him and saw his eyes glued to the spot where they were connected. He pressed a thumb to her clit as he fucked her harder.

"Maker, Aida, you always get so wet when you're impaled on my cock." He pushed his dick all the way into her, making her gasp. Feeling him so deep insider of her made her say something she didn't mean to say. "Fuck me like it's the last time, Cullen."

He shook his head at her, steely and determined. "It's not, we have the rest of our lives - to do this every night, to do this whenever you want, Aida." Cullen growled, grabbing her and rolling her to the mattress beneath him, sliding back into her sheath. Aida wrapped her legs around him again, holding him as tight as he was holding her. They cooed at each other, calling each other sweet names, whispering "I love you" into each other's ears, biting and kissing and groaning. Aida felt her climax approaching, and she began pushing on his shoulders.

"Baby, what's wrong?"
"I'm going to come, I'm close - please, I want your mouth."

He kissed her a few more times before pulling out and dropping to his knees between her thighs. He parted her pussy and sucked her clit into his mouth the way he knew she loved, pursing his lips around it and kissing it over and over again with loud, sloppy noises. Cullen opened his mouth wide and pushed the flat of his tongue against her pearl and then shook his head vigorously, pulling her over the edge. Aida cried out, grabbing the sheets next to her and clamped her knees around his head, bucking against his face. He had to wrestle with her a little before she let go and he was able to kneel between her thighs and insert himself back into her.

"Oooh, even wetter. Soft and wet and hot and tight."
"Finish baby, I want to feel your come inside me."

Cullen fell forward on her, unable to control himself anymore and then he let loose, hammering her into the mattress. She held on to his ass, squeezing him hard and encouraging his enthusiastic thrusts until she felt his cock grow hot and harder inside of her. He pressed his forehead to hers, staring into her eyes as he shot his seed into her with a long, satisfied moan. He rolled onto his side, still holding her.

"Sorry, Aida."
"Sorry for what?"
"I know you didn't feel like, ah, you know, doing it with me tonight. I got carried away, your body, your smell, your skin. I cannot resist, ever."

"Cullen, do you really think you just forced yourself on me?" The idea just made her giggle, grabbing a lock of his hair and wrapping it around a finger, encouraging its natural curliness. She let it go and the curl sprung into place, right in the middle of his forehead, making her laugh even more, even as a more serious thought popped into her head.

"Cullen, I would slay a thousand demons just for five minutes in your arms."

He tried to smooth his hair back into place, giving her a look that was half annoyance, half affection.

"Five minutes? I last longer than that, don't I?"

Aida scratched his chest lightly, biting her lip as she shot him an enticing look. "I don't know, I can't remember. This amnesia is terrible! Maybe we should do it again, just to be make sure I don't forget again."

* * * * *

They rose early the next morning. After breakfast, Aida said her goodbyes to her family at the hotel, having decided their presence would be too distracting at the Summoning site. She kissed each one of her nieces and nephews and hugged her siblings close, promising she would be back at the the hotel in time for dinner. She spent extra time with her father, Cullen waiting for her outside of his suite.

Aida sat down on the edge of his bed. The Bann pulled a chair closer so he could face her.

"Aida, I want to clear the air with you, before you leave."

She reached out and took his hand, and the gesture only seemed to make him shakier.

"Before your accident, you were not particularly close with me, or your brothers or sister. Once you were old enough to be on your own you left us all behind. I realize now I should have encouraged you to go to art school instead of medical school. Or, I should have even more supportive of your nursing career and your magic skills. I should have just - done everything differently. And I'm sorry. I spent too much time mourning your mother and not enough time raising my youngest."

The two of them were crying now. Her leaned forward and pressed his forehead to their hands they had clasped together.

"Daddy, you have nothing to be sorry for."

He straightened up to look at her again.

"I'm worried maybe after you regain your memories, you will go back to not wanting to be a Trevelyan anymore."

Aida blushed now, her eyes darting toward the door where Cullen was waiting on the other side.

"I promise you I won't push you all away anymore. And besides, it's possible after all of this is over someone will make me a Rutherford soon. I hope."

The Bann regained his composure, standing up and clearing his throat.

"Call him in here, Aida, if you please."
Aida went to the door and cracked it open. Cullen had been standing at attention in the hallway.

"Cullen, my father wants to speak to you."

Cullen entered, looking nervous, but walked up to his boss to offer him a firm hand shake. Aida looked at the two most important men in her life, wondering what this was about.

"Aida, I want a moment alone with Cullen."

Aida raised her eyebrows in surprise. "I'll just step out on the balcony for some fresh air, is that alright?"

Her father nodded at her and she went out onto the large terrace that came with her father's deluxe room. She wanted to give them some privacy but she couldn't help herself, she stood at one corner of the balcony where she was out of their sight but she could still see them inside. She watched her father saying something to Cullen, and as he continued, Cullen laid one hand on Bann's shoulder. When he was through speaking, she was surprised again to see the two men embracing. Cullen signaled to her that she could come in now.

"Aida, we should leave now, everyone's waiting for you at the site. Did you say goodbye to everyone who is staying at the hotel?"
"I did."

She hugged her father, who squeezed her back so hard she thought he'd crack a rib.

"May the Maker watch over you, kiddo. I'll see you both later today, right?"

The two responded to him in hopeful unison - "Right."

In the elevator down to their car, Aida stole a glance at Cullen.

"What did my father say to you?"

Cullen inhaled, not making eye contact with her. "I'd rather not say, it was - said in private, you know?"
"Come on, Cullen, please just tell me."

He waited until they were in the car on the way to the university.

"He told me that no matter what happens today, I am always going to be a part of your family, and he was glad to have me - as a son."

Aida felt a sense of serenity spread from her heart to every limb in her body. She no longer felt scared to face a beast of the Fade, knowing Cullen would not be alone now should anything happen to her.

* * * * * *

Merrill was waiting for them at the curb outside of the hematology research facility on the Tevinter Tech campus. Aida hugged her right away - they had only met over many video chats. The elf was in a white lab jacket, her brown hair tucked back behind her in a bun, a pair of eyeglasses balanced on the end of her nose.

"Welcome, Aida. It's so good to meet you! I hope the press at the gates of the university were not too much of a bother?"
Aida huffed. "Why is everyone so interested in me? They didn't do this to Vivienne until after the ritual."

Merrill shot Cullen a slightly bewildered look. "We're about to generate a Fade rift - using both science and magic - to help the youngest daughter from one of the oldest families in the Free Marches, a victim of senseless terrorism who only helped people every day of her life, and she wants to know why people are interested in her story?"

Cullen shrugged back at the elf, proud and trying to be nonchalant. "She's also really cute, but she doesn't ever seem to remember that."

Aida nudged him as they walked through the front door of the lab. "Don't call me cute when I'm trying to be a mage bad ass today."

"Sorry babe," he grinned at her as he held the next set of doors open for her.

Merrill lead to them to a large room, emptied of its research equipment where her friends were waiting for her. She stood in the middle of the room, realizing the practice space that Cullen had set up for her was the exact replica of where she was standing. Solas approached her first, with Vivienne and Dorian at his side.

"Now that we are here, we mages are confident we can cast a strong enough barrier around this space that would also allow three extra people to fight at your side. We have no idea what's going to step through the Rift, and while you have become a formidable battle mage in the last months, you should think strategically about who should assist you."

Aida looked at the people assembled before her - three mages, three rogues, three warriors. She glanced at Cullen. He gave her a look that told her she was the only one who could make this decision.

"Dorian, Sera, Cole - I want you to stay with Cullen and monitor his health during the blood work since you all have medical training. Blackwall, I cannot ask you to risk your life when your wife and child need you. I want you, Cass and Vivienne to stay upstairs, but outside of the barrier as a line of defense should anything - run amok."

Aida paused, hoping everyone she had addressed was fine with her commands. Everyone only looked back at her with deference and respect. She cracked her knuckles and made her final decision.

"Varric, Solas and Iron Bull - you're going in with me. So. Shall we begin?"

Dorian turned and threw himself into Bull's arms, who hugged him so hard he lifted him off his feet.

"Don't worry, my Vint. You know I can swing an axe."

Crushed in his embrace, Aida could still hear Dorian's muffled words. "Aida, if you get him killed, I will step into the Fade myself to slap you for the rest of eternity."

** * * * * *

Aida watched as Sera, Dorian and Vivienne got Cullen settled into the triage unit. He laid down on a gurney and turned his arm toward Dorian so he could find a vein. Dorian looked at the marks from his lyrium addiction with some chagrin but said nothing until he could not locate a vein under his
"We should use the other arm. Let's switch the rig to the other side of the bed."

Cullen's flushed cheeks betrayed his embarrassment. "No, don't go to that trouble, I'll just lie the the other way on the bed."

Aida helped him with his pillows, trying to make him more comfortable. Dorian inserted a needle into his arms and began withdrawing the first pint of blood from him. Aida had to force herself not to cry, squeezing his hand until she felt Merrill's touch on her shoulder.

"We need to get you upstairs. Sera will take over now, and Dorian and Vivienne are going to come with us to cast the barrier but he will return to keep an eye on Cullen."

Sera piped up now. "Don't worry, girly. Look what I brought with me!"

They was a rolling cart nearby, covered in emergency medical supplies, but she leaned down to open a case on its bottom shelf. When she turned around, she had a formidable bow in her hands, almost as tall as she was - and she had three arrows loaded into it at once. Everyone emitted sounds of disapproval, dodging away from her aim.

"Careful where you point that thing!" Dorian exclaimed, his arms crossed in front of his face defensively, Vivienne and Merrill cowering behind him.

Cullen chuckled darkly. "Well, I'm in good hands. Go on Aida. I'll be fine, unless Sera accidentally shoots me."

Aida leaned down to kiss him, and a tear from her face dropped on him, rolling down his cheek.

She whispered in his ear as Sera switched out the blood sample bag for another one. "I love you more than life itself."

* * * * *

Aida did not look at her watch after leaving Cullen's side. She did not want to measure the minutes that were ticking past as they drained him to the point of death. Solas, Varric and Bull waited with her to hear a status update from Merrill on her walkie-talkie. Varric passed the time by tinkering with his crossbow, winding it up and getting it ready. Bull watched him with amused eyes.

"You never told me you had a crossbow."
"A crossbow with a name! Bianca. I take her out shooting on the weekends."

Despite the tension, Aida had to ask, "Bianca?"

Varric smiled with pride. "She's been with me longer than most women have, although you missed your chance, Trevelyan. Maybe if you had been going out with me and not Curly, things would have been different and I'd have renamed her Aida by now."

"I'm glad Cullen is downstairs and not in the room to have heard that. He'd punt you across the room, buddy." Bull leaned on his axe and looked at Solas, who stayed out of their playful banter, and was meditating nearby, leaning up against a column. "Hey elf, you said you've done this before?"

Solas nodded but did not open his eyes when he answered. "The Fade is unpredictable. We do not
know what we summon. Your lightheartedness is refreshing in the face of such unfathomable power."

Varric cleared his throat, shooting Bull a funny look. "Well, go on Bull. Say something funny again."
"I thought that was your job, dwarf."

The walkie-talkie strapped to Aida's belt came to life and Merrill's voice interrupted their discussion. "Alright folks. This is it, curtain call. We're turning on the centrifuge now. Visual coms are working so we can see you from the control center. If this works, the rift should open in the next two minutes."

Aida grabbed the walkie-talkie, sweat on her brow already. "Is Cullen alright?"

"We have stabilized him, and we will begin the autologous procedure to put the blood back into -"

A green crack of lightning caused Aida to drop the walkie talkie. The Fade rift opened up above them, a blinding shard of light. Aida readied her battle staff, flanked by her chosen companions.

An enormous Pride demon stepped forth, accompanied by two Rage demons. Solas was the only one of them not taken aback by their fearsome appearance and had already cast a barrier in front of their party. In a stentorian voice, he called to Aida, "Now, Aida. Hit them with ice and lightning!"

The battle unfolded in an almost surreal way to her, her mind trying to focus on the task at hand and not the enormity of realizing all that separated the Fade from this world was a thin Veil and that monsters lurked on the other side. Varric rained arrows down on the beasts, Bull spun and hacked at them, Aida summoned blasts of ice and wind and bolts of electricity, every trick she had learned while Solas kept them as safe and protected as possible. The two Rage demons dissipated back into the Rift, leaving only the Pride demon to deal with.

Aida steadied herself and Fade stepped around the massive beast, who was distracted by Varric and Bull's attacks - and their playful, annoying remarks about its size and relative ugliness. She turned her staff into an enchanted sword and then hacked away at its legs, feeling like her goal was close at hand. She put all of her frustration and rage into every blow she landed, thinking about how her life had been interrupted, her sweetest memories ripped away - how for months and months at Skyhold she had to look at that painting of her mother over the stairs and could only wonder what that woman had been like. She battled for Cullen, knowing later he would watch the footage the security cameras were taking and be proud of how hard she fought. Cullen. Cullen. Cullen. She repeated his name in her head as she dodged the swinging arms of the demon. She thought of his golden eyes boring into hers as she summoned all her mana to hit her foe with a mighty burst of flashfire.

She heard it scream, falling at her feet. She waited, thinking she would feel her memories fill her back up like a lungful of clean, crisp Haven mountain air. But she felt nothing. Aida turned around to look for her companions who were all catching their breaths, looking at her in amazement.

Aida took one step forward to join them - and then felt herself being pulled away, back and upward. Bull ran forward, reaching for her hand. Her fingertips brushed against his and then she heard a terrible whoosh - and her vision blacked out.

She felt nothing, heard nothing, saw nothing. She was floating in space.

* * * * *

Cullen's eyes fluttered open as he took a few tentative breaths. Dorian was at his side, checking his
pulse and looking at him with concern. Cullen tried to sit up but Sera pushed him back down again. The elf's face was tear-streaked, her eyes unable to look at him. As gently as he could, he removed her hand from his arm and sat back up again.

"What's going on, where's Aida?"

Everyone was in the triage unit with him, everyone except her. Merrill stepped around Solas, holding a tablet device.

"It would be better if you just watched this. I can't explain it. I don't know what to do."

She put the tablet in his hands and cued up the security footage for him. Cullen watched with some delight as Aida vanquished the three demons with all of the magic she had in her fingertips. And then his pride turned to shock and dismay as the Fade rift sucked Aida out of the room, and then closed behind her.

Cullen looked up at Solas. "This is your area of expertise, is it not? Just...open it back up again, we must go in after her."

Solas swallowed before answering carefully. "It doesn't work that way. All the protections of the past that mankind put on the Veil to keep demons at bay, you cannot just tear through them. These little controlled openings are even very risky - did you know the Tevinter government was ready to deploy military force had something worse gone wrong today?"

"Something worse - than this?" Cullen spat in response, gesturing toward the video footage in front of him.

Everyone was silent until Varric moved closer to his bedside. "Curly, she fought so bravely, I've never seen anything like it in all our years of military service."

Cullen swung his legs around off the bed, standing up even though he still felt weak. "So what are we going to do about this? What can we do?"

Vivienne's somber voice answered him. "We wait, darling. We wait and we pray that she is safe on the other side and looking for a way back here. We can do nothing else but that for now."

He let her words sink in before he wordlessly walked out of the makeshift triage unit they had set up. He waved off their concern and their gestures, and kept walking until he was out of the building, out in the parking lot. It was dark now and the stars twinkled above him, oblivious to his suffering.

Cullen dropped to his knees and let forth a heartbreaking sob. When they had been parted before, Cullen had always felt numb. He would shut down on the inside, going through the motions of being alive and engaged with his life. But now, everything was different, he felt pain scorching through every fiber of his being.

Aida was gone, and he nor anyone else could be sure she would come back.
Aida heard Chantry bells chiming.

She cracked open her eyes and the ceiling above her came into focus. It didn't look like a hospital ceiling, and she didn't feel injured. Aida sat up with a jolt, realizing the bells were just her morning wake up alarm on her phone, sitting on her night stand. Aida tapped the screen to silence the alarm, and then a flash of recognition hit her. She was in her condo bedroom, the way it was before the bombing. She stared at the pile of laundry sitting on a chair that had long cascaded onto the floor, her jewelry and perfume bottles askew on her wardrobe, even the tilted lampshade on the lamp by her bedside she had never bothered fixing. Not only was everything the same, but Aida remembered that it was the same. The idea set her heart thumping with adrenaline.

But something was wrong, deeply wrong. Where were her friends and family, they wouldn't have just dropped her off in Haven with no fanfare. Cullen should be here. Cullen should definitely be here.

Aida began to panic, she needed air. She crossed through the living room and headed for her balcony, sliding open the door. She braced herself for the mountain chill but felt nothing, outside was just as stuffy as it had been inside. She studied the familiar Frostbacks in front of her. They looked flat, like the walls of a movie set. Something was not right, this was not real. She heard movement coming from the unit next door and her pulse began beating hard again.

Cullen's patio door slid open, and a statuesque blonde woman stepped out onto his patio, supermodel stunning. She was wearing Cullen's old Fereldan U t shirt, the same one Aida used to wear when she was staying over at his place. Used to wear? Did that even make sense? Had she time-travelled through the Fade, had Solas ever told her such a thing was possible? She felt so disoriented she thought she was going to throw up. The beautiful woman took a few steps closer to her, concern on her face.

"Hey there, you don't look so good..."

Aida put a hand out to grasp the railing in front of her and swayed a little. She heard a second pair of footsteps and knew who was coming out to the balcony next. She could barely look at him as Cullen spoke to her with detached politeness.

"Miss Trevelyan? Is everything alright?"

Aida mouthed the words Miss Trevelyan to herself before straightening up quickly, brushing the tear from her face before either of them could see it. His hand rested the mystery woman's waist as he
stood at her side and Aida was hit with a wave of intense jealousy so strong she thought she was going to black out.

"I'm fine, sorry, just, had a spell there for a moment. I have to get to work. Have a nice day."

She rushed back inside before she could be forced to witness any display of affection between the two of them. Once in her living room, she heard her phone ringing. She picked it up without looking at the screen.

"Trevelyan, you're late - again. That's the second time this week."

She nearly gasped at the sound of Dorian's voice, which was devoid of any jesting.

"I'm, I'm sorry Dorian. I don't feel so good today."
"Hungover again?"
"No, I...just never mind. I'm on my way. Sorry. I'll make it up to you, we can - "

He cut her off before she could promise him anything. "If you're not here in twenty minutes, I'm telling Dr. Vivienne. I'm tired of covering up for you."

Dorian hung up. Aida dropped her phone and squeezed both of her fists as hard as she could, before standing up to get ready for work.

* * * * *

Aida pulled into a parking space at work and took a breath. She didn't even remember getting into her truck at the condo building but here she was, already at the hospital. Whatever this place was, this fake Haven, it didn't operate on regular time - in fact, every time she tried to focus on a clock or a calendar, she found it hard to read it, the numbers and words swirled in front of her, never staying still. For now, it didn't matter, if Dorian said she was late to work, then she was late to work. She got out of her truck and marched toward the ER - but paused for a moment near the smoking area, where Sera was puffing on a morning cigarette and looking at her phone. Aida gave her a shy smile.

"Hey, Sera, how's it going?"

The elf looked up at her and gave her a nonchalant half-shrug before returning to her phone. It hurt as much as if the girl had fired an arrow right at her chest and Aida had no choice but to keep walking. She spotted Doctor Solas talking to some other personnel outside the main doors to the hospital, but he looked right through her as she passed. In the ER, Doctor Vivienne treated her with the same amount of indifference as they worked side by side, while Dorian seemed to downright loathe her.

Aida let it all happen to her. She never tried to correct anyone, or shake them by the shoulders trying to get them to wake up and remember the real her, and their real relationships to her. During her break time, she had tried to call her father, only to be rebuffed by his assistant, who told her in very general terms that Bann was simply too busy to deal with "whatever issues" Aida was having at the moment. The snippy young woman would not even patch her through to her brothers or her sister.

After work she went to O'Hara's, the Irish pub where she had shared tequila shots with Cullen, in another Haven in another time and drank until the bartender cut her off. The brassy blonde took her whiskey glass away from her. Aida remembered her name with a nostalgic internal sigh. Flissa,
right?

"You've had enough. You've been in here for five hours."
"I live across the street, so I don't have to drive, but you're the boss."

The bartender put her tab down in front of her. Aida gave her her credit card without looking at the total.

"You seem like you're avoiding going home."
"I am, I got something - unpleasant waiting for me there, I just know it."

Flissa rang her up and gave her her receipt.

"Best to get it over with then. And besides, you can't stay here."

Aida trudged back to her condo, listening to the sound of the snow crunching beneath her boots. She cursed this world for not even being able to get the details right. It wasn't even cold enough for snow, the air in Haven still felt like a warm room whose windows had never been opened.

She kicked off her boots and started pulling off her clothes. She strangely knew what was coming next, after the long torture of her day. She got into bed and waited.

It all unfolded exactly like she thought it would. She heard Cullen's front door open, and the sickening sound of him flirting and giggling with his date. The sound of their affectionate banter coming through her bedroom wall made her want stab knives into her ears, and that was even before the laughter turned to silence, punctuated by an occasional moan. She listened for the creak of his bed springs, and now she could hear the girl's voice closer to the wall, urging him on. Aida didn't know if it was her imagination or the thinness of the walls, but she thought she heard zippers unzipping, buttons being undone, the crisp sound of his dress shirt slipping from his broad shoulders.

It was torture, he was going to make love to this stranger in the bed where he had loved her. She heard the girl tell him how good he was, how good he was making her feel and it took Aida a few moments to realize she had tears cascading down her face.

This wasn't a test anymore. This was the Void.

She had died and gone to her own personal hell, where she had no friends or allies or lovers. She had the basic framework of a life she had missed so fervently, but none of the joy she had known. Their groans next door were getting louder and more passionate, his bed frame was knocking against the wall as he rutted his girlfriend into an oblivion she had once cherished.

Aida didn't want this life.

She got up out of bed, walking into the living room and out onto the balcony. Without further thought, she climbed up on the railing and swung her legs around and jumped.

* * * * *

Aida heard Chantry bells chiming.

She snapped her eyes open and was back in her bedroom in her condo again, the sun rising and turning the sky outside a phony shade of pink. She tapped her phone to silence it and stood up.

She remembered jumping off her balcony and then nothing else. It was clear there was no escape from this life, and judging by the alert on her phone, she would not be late for work this morning.
There, that was it. She could claim one small, unimportant victory in this world where nothing mattered.

* * * * *

On the other side of the Veil, a week had gone by. Cullen had been inconsolable, sequestered in his room in the Minrathous Ritz, blaming himself for everything that had happened. He refused to speak to anyone or see anyone besides the staff who delivered two meals a day. On the eighth day, he heard a key turn in the lock of his suite's front door. Cullen sat up in bed and found Cole and Solas standing there, looking down at him buried in sheets and blankets. Cole took a deep breath before speaking.

"The Bann said if you didn't get up by Sunday, we could come in here and get you out. Or at least try to get you out."

Cullen ran a hand through his unwashed hair and gestured to the two men to sit down in the two arm chairs near the window. He stood up, stretching his unused muscles for a moment, before sitting down on the bed facing them. Cullen was still too heartbroken to even sit up for very long, he leaned forward, elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. Solas spoke next, and in his agitated state, Cullen found his Elven smooth voice rather soothing.

"Cullen, have you been sleeping well?"

Cole answered for him. "I think he would like it if you didn't ask him questions you already know the answers to."

Cullen kept his head in his hands and didn't respond.

"I only ask because there is a way to contact Aida on the other side of the Veil and get a better idea of what she is going through."

Cullen sat up now, his face pale but growing more excited. "You believe she is alive?"

"I cannot be 100% scientifically certain - but, we are not in the realm of science here anymore, correct? I have been meditating about this, reaching out to her, and receiving very strange signals in return."

"S-signals?" Now Cullen was feeling very awake. He squeezed his right hand shut to keep it from shaking. Solas got up to pace back and forth while he spoke.

"I theorize the demons we killed that day were not the right ones. Aida's foe is darker and stronger than the one Vivienne had to face down. I believe that whatever force consumed Aida's memories wanted more - that this creature became jealous of what she has and sought to destroy her happiness - permanently - by imprisoning her in the Fade. Aida needs to finish the job and kill this demon, on its home turf, without any of us to assist her."

Cullen swallowed a few times - and then reached a hand out to take the cold glass of water Cole had already poured for him. "You spoke of signals from Aida? What kind of signals?" He felt Cole's hand on his shoulder now, squeezing him in support. Solas' brow furrowed in worry.

"I have heard her crying in the Fade. I believe she - is being tortured. She begs to be returned to us."

Cullen covered his mouth with his hand as Solas continued. "Do not despair, Cullen. You need to
make contact with her in the Fade, try to learn more of her situation there."

Cole sat down next to him. "Your love for each other - think of it like a direct line to her. You can see her and talk to her again. But it means you must rest."

Solas stood up now, picking up a bottle of sleeping pills from his night stand and then tossing them into Cullen's lap. "It means no more of these. If you've been taking these at night you haven't been sleeping properly. You need to focus on Aida and get deep, refreshing sleep - and if you speak to her, stay focused. We will need as many details as possible. Call me if you are able to find her - in your dreams."

Cullen nodded, standing up to shake Solas's hand before the elf left. He turned around in time to see Cole flinging open the curtains on his hotel room windows. "I'll help you pack."

Cullen looked at the bottle of Ambien lying on the bed nearby. "Where are we going, Cole?"

"Back to Haven, of course. You should sleep in your own bed, the bed you've shared with Aida, and be closer to the life you lived with her."

Cullen picked up the pills and headed for the bathroom. He popped open the bottle and dumped them into the toilet, flushing them for good.

"Let's go home, Cole."

* * * * *

Aida rolled a post-work joint, and headed up to the pool on the roof, hoping to sneak in a quick swim. The pool was technically closed after 10 PM but the gate was never locked and had the entire roof to herself, to enjoy a solitary smoke and then float on her back in the heated water and look at the stars above her. She made a game of it, trying to spot the seams she knew were up there in the phony sky. Enough time had passed in this bizarro-Haven for her to know everything was fake, and she was trapped in this place, being forced to star in a movie that was the inverse of her formerly happy life. She hated to admit it, but she was getting used to it. She avoided Cullen as much as possible and slept in the living room if he had a lady over. She was never late to work and made no attempts to befriend or interact with Dorian or Sera or any of her other friends or family. She played by the rules that seemed set for her and fell into a gentle, emotionless rhythm. No one made demands on her time and in some odd, twisted way she accepted her circumstances.

On the roof, she smoked half the J, put the rest of it aside, and dove into the pool. Aida kicked into the deep end to touch the bottom and then darted for the surface, gasping for air, enjoying the small rush she always felt after this little ritual. When she blinked open her eyes, Cullen was standing at the edge of the pool, shirtless and in swim trunks, towel in hand - staring at her.

Aida pouted, nobody had ever interrupted her at this time of night in the pool area before, especially not someone she had begun to see as a villain in her life. The terse, detached manner he always used when addressing her was worse than the grunts, groans and moans she had to endure when he had a lover over. Aida heaved an annoyed sigh and then swam to the opposite end of the pool. She pulled herself out of the water and wrapped her towel around her, determined to make a quick exit. Aida tried to brush past him but gasped when she felt his hand on her arm.

"Aida."

She looked up at him, and then away. It was hard to look at him and not be filled with love and lust
and longing. She yanked her arm away.

"What do you want, Rutherford?"

"Aida, it's me. I - I'm here. Don't you recognize me?"

Aida began to tremble. She took a step backward from him.

"Why are you talking to me, why are you speaking to me this way? Don't you have a - girlfriend - waiting for you downstairs?"

He reached out to touch her again but she backed up again. "Girlfriend? Aida, you're my girlfriend. I'm dreaming. I'm here in the Fade with you."

Aida shook her head at him. It was some lie, another tick mark on the long list of calamitous things that had recently happened to her. "Stop fucking with me, leave me alone."

She tried to pass him again but this time he blocked her path with his body.

"Aida, I miss you so much, please, I could wake up at any second. Please believe me."

He dropped his towel and cupped her face with his hands, looking down at her with both tenderness and intensity. Aida reached out and put her two palms on his broad chest. The small puckered scar from a long ago bullet wound was right under the ring finger of her left hand, where it should be. Her other hand graced down his side, tracing a long scar he had there, another souvenir from his Templar service.

"Is it really you?" she whispered as her fingers swept up his forearms.

Cullen dipped his head to press his lips to hers and she felt like she was buzzing from head to toe, thrumming with an electricity and a power that only one man ever inspired in her. He pulled back, guiding her to a nearby lounge chair where they could sit down together.

"Aida, as much as I want to peel that bathing suit off of your body, we need to talk, our time is limited. Tell me what's been happening to you on this side of the Veil."

Cullen held both of her hands as all of her loneliness and frustration poured out of her. She started with seven simple, devastating words. "I have no love in my life."

As she continued telling him the details of how her life felt like a maze she could not escape from, Cullen pulled her onto his lap, her towel wrapped around the two of them. She spent quite a bit of time talking about how the dagger in her side was the torture of catching the other Cullen necking with some woman in the elevator, and the indifferent way he always treated her whenever they crossed paths.

"Cullen, I hate to tell you this, but, I've tried to kill myself - over and over again. I can't live like this, next door to you when you don't love me - but I can't die here, at least not by my own hand. I admit I've thought about getting someone else to do it. If you die in the Fade, do you die in real life? Sounds like something stoned teenagers ask each other."

Cullen squeezed her hands tight between his, kissing her knuckles. "Aida, the idea of you committing suicide because of how the kind of-sort-of version of me treats you will haunt me forever. We have to get you out of here. Have you had no clues at all about who has trapped you here and what they want from you?"
She shook her head sadly before tucking herself in closer to him, luxuriating in the feel and smell of his skin.

"Why didn't you try to come here sooner, Cullen?"

"I couldn't sleep after you slipped through the Fade Rift. I didn't speak to anyone for days. Everyone else flew back to Haven but I couldn't leave. But I'm back in my condo, with Barkley, and we'll wait for you. We'll wait for you to come home, forever, if need be."

Aida nipped a few kisses against his neck. "Come back soon. I can't live without you."

Cullen pulled back to look at her, two fingers under her chin. "Listen, you need to observe your surroundings closely. Something or someone is clearly preying on you, and it knows how to hurt you the most. But I just had an idea - what if you didn't let it get to you? What if you were as disruptive as possible here?"

She grimaced, thinking about his advice. "Do you mean - try to be happy somehow?"

Cullen nervously played with a lock of her hair. "Aida, you said it yourself. The thing that upsets you the most about this world is the state of our relationship here. So don't let it upset you. Do something about it. It might cause the demon to drop the game and show itself."

She tried to read his expression. "Do something about it? What are you suggesting?"

Cullen blushed. "I don't know, but...I give you my permission to do what you need to do to get out of here."

Aida looked him in the eyes. "I will tear this thing limb from limb, so we can be together again."

He put a hand on the back of her head and then greedily drew her in for a kiss that left both of them breathless. Aida twined her fingers into his curls.

"Baby...what happens when you wake up?"
"I don't know, we'll find out soon enough."

Aida locked her lips to Cullen's again, desperately weaving her tongue around his.

When she opened her eyes, he was gone.
Aida lit another smoke off the end of her last one and poured herself another cup of coffee, feeling keen and alert. She walked out onto her balcony and stared at the fake Frostbacks in front of her. If this world was not truly her own, then why did she have to act accordingly? Aida giggled to herself, now determined to sweep all the pieces off the board.

She would start with the obvious things first, and then work her way to the person she was determined to bring to his knees, the man next door.

* * * *

A few hours later, Aida sauntered into work in street clothes, heading for Vivienne's station where she was currently speaking to Dorian about a patient's progress. An unlit cigarette dangled from her lower lip and she kept her sunglasses on as she approached the two of them.

"I quit."

Dorian's jaw dropped. Vivienne froze.

"I'm sorry, excuse me?" the aristocratic Orlesian asked, arching an eyebrow in surprise.

"Nobody likes me here, I would even consider this place a hostile work environment. You should be glad I don't sic my father's lawyers on this place honestly. So peace out! I'm cleaning out my locker! Don't call me!"

Vivienne stood up, slamming her pen onto the paperwork in front of her. "Nobody was going to call
you! You'll be lucky to find any work in this city as a nurse, no one here is going to give you a recommendation."

Their confrontation was beginning to attract the attention of other nurses. Sera was now standing in the doorway, with a few other tittering elves. Aida shrugged her shoulders. "Doesn't matter, don't care, in fact, here, I have a special prescription for the two of you."

She pantomimed reaching into her pockets and pulling out two middle fingers, one for each of them. Dorian burst out laughing, unable to contain himself, slapping a hand over his mouth. Vivienne shot him a dirty look and then picked up a phone in a threatening manner. "Trevelyan, do I need to call security or are you going to leave peacefully!?"

Aida turned, pushing her way past the looky-loos, giving Sera a healthy shoulder-check on her way out. It pained her to be rude to her friends and her old boss, but as she reminded herself, these people weren't them, they were cheap fun-house mirror versions of the people she loved. She pulled a garbage bag out of her purse and began dumping the contents of her locker into it, thinking about how her next step after this would be to cash out the trust fund her mother had left to her and head to O'Hara's for a round of tequila shots. She felt eyes watching her and stopped for a moment, looking over her shoulder. Dorian and Sera were standing nearby. Aida turned back to her locker, peeling off the photos she had taped to the inside of the door.

"What do you two bastards want?"

Sera giggled, a little nervous. "Nothing. That was just, amazing. Been a while since someone walked out of here like that."

Aida slammed the locker shut and faced the two of them. "Glad I could be entertaining at least. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some indulgent, heavy drinking to do."

She wanted to pass but the two were blocking the door. Sera nudged Dorian who finally spoke up. "We're sorry, Aida. We know we've been remarkably unkind to you lately. We've just been stressed and short-handed around here."

Sera piped up, "But we also asked each other why we were being so nasty and - we didn't really know why? It's odd, innit? It sort of felt like...we had to? We know it's strange. Can't explain it really."

Aida flung the garbage bag over her shoulder and said nothing, gesturing for them to move out of her way so she could leave. The Vint and the elf stepped aside, looks of regret on their faces now. They waited for her to get a few feet away before Sera called after her. "We'd like to join you for that drink later if you'd let us?"

Aida paused, remembering the plan at hand. Disrupt. Be happy. Push back. Did this include, making friends with people who should be her friends already? This world was so confusing, but maybe they'd buy her a drink or two and it'd be worth it.

"Yeah, I'll be at O'Haras at the corner of Broadway and 12th - starting in about fifteen minutes, depending on how fast I can walk."

* * * * *

Hours later, after closing time, Aida stumbled home alone, pleasantly loaded. It had only taken a few
rounds of drinks to melt Sera and Dorian's hearts, and the idea that the demon imprisoning her here could not break her strongest friendships gave her some hope she could cling to. She pressed the button for the elevator and leaned against the doorway, smiling to herself.

Maybe Cullen would dream about her again tonight.

Maybe she would be deep in slumber when she would feel the duvet cover slide off her body as he slipped into bed next to her. Maybe he would wake her with sweet kisses from her ear to her shoulder, like he used to during their less complicated Sunday mornings. She wanted to feel his hand creep around her waist, reaching for one of her breasts. She wanted to arch back against him as he kneaded it, putting her hand over his to encourage him. She wanted to roll over and meet his lips with hers, offering the rest of her body to him - and then the fantasy unfurling in her head came to an abrupt stop. The intense yearning she felt for him only reminded her was stranded in the Fade, separated from him for Maker knows how long. Her thoughts went from lusty to heartbroken so fast, it made her tear up. Aida sniffled and pulled herself together as the elevator finally dinged and the doors parted in front of her.

And there he was, the other-Cullen. The one that did not love her. Aida huffed an annoyed sigh and then got into the elevator, standing as far from him as possible.

"Good evening, Trevelyan."

Aida ignored him at first, watching the numbers light up as the elevator traveled to their floor - but then she remembered her plan of attack. She looked over at him. He was in his old security detail uniform of black suit and skinny black tie. He looked exhausted and possibly suffering from his usual lyrium withdrawals.

"No date tonight? Can you even sleep alone, Rutherford?"

The look on his face was exactly that of a child whose ice cream cone has been slapped out of his hand. Aida wanted to laugh but she had more insults at hand.

"Oh, that's right. They don't usually stay the night. Disposable and recyclable - sustainable even! Where do you even get them? The enchanted rain forest of utterly forgettable girlfriends?"

Fade-Cullen loosened his tie and fixed his eyes on her. "Excuse me, Trevelyan? What's gotten into you?" Aida had to struggle to maintain eye contact with him. There was no denying that as much as this version of her man tortured her, she wanted him too. She'd want just about any version of Cullen the Maker could present her with.

The elevator pinged as it hit the twelfth floor. She delivered her parting line with steel in her voice. "Oh nothing. It's just that you wouldn't know what to do with a real woman if you ever got one in your bed."

She didn't wait for his reaction. She was inside her condo in a flash, her back pressed against the door and a grin plastered on her face. Today was the first decent day she'd spent in the Fade. Fighting back felt good.

* * * * *

The next day, now unencumbered with a work schedule, Aida woke late and headed to the art supply store. She roved the aisles, grabbing paints and brushes she had always held back in buying
because they were pricey. She wanted to paint big paintings, something she had always been afraid to do. She wanted to go looser, get abstract. She had a series of nudes in mind. All she needed was the model...

For now though, she would paint when she felt like it, draw whenever she wanted.

But nothing changed, no demon came charging into her living room because she was acting indulgently. Quitting her stressful job and drinking a glass of red wine for breakfast was not enough to break whatever spell was keeping her here. She didn't know what to do and it was giving her anxiety that she didn't know how much time was passing in the real world. Despite her stress-free lifestyle, she had trouble sleeping at night and often woke up feeling exhausted. Doing whatever she felt like it did not make her stay in the Fade any easier to accept nor did it cause any of her circumstances to change.

And then one night, the real Cullen delivered some news from the waking side of the Veil that made all of Aida's feelings boil over.

Aida had fallen asleep on the couch, an outstretched hand still holding her dying cigarette. Gentle fingers swept the hair off her face before taking the smoke out of her fingers and to grind it out in a nearby ashtray.

"Aida, you're going to set yourself on fire."

She gasped, sitting up, almost knocking her head against his. "Maker, Cullen, I could have killed you!"

In the dim, blue moonlight coming in through the nearby windows, she saw the side of his mouth tilt in amusement as he cupped her face with one of his hands. "With what?"

Before he could move, Aida had the blade of a karambit knife at his throat. His whiskey-colored eyes twinkled at her as he put both hands up, playfully. "And where was that hiding exactly?"

"I'll never tell. I've been armed at all times because Andraste only knows what I might have to do to get out of here." She snapped the knife shut and pulled him on top of her by his t-shirt, wanting to feast on those lips she had been drawing in her sketchbook from memory. They moaned into each other's mouths as they kissed and held each other tightly. Aida murmured into his ear, "What took you so long to come back? I feel like I've been waiting to see you again for weeks."

Aida pulled back and searched his face as Cullen held her in the crook of his arm. He looked as tired and frustrated as she had been feeling lately.

"Aida, I'm glad I'm dreaming of you tonight. I have something to tell you."

The tone in his voice made her sit up and face him. He pressed one of her hands between his.

"Darling, your family...they want to have a funeral for you. They think we have waited too long. They think you're - dead."

Aida struggled to control her face as shock and sorrow hit her at once.

They were giving up on her.

"No, Cullen - you can't let them. I'm still here. Haven't you told them you've talked to me?"

"Cole and Solas are the only ones who believe me. Everyone else - I can see the pity in their eyes."
They think it's grief and nothing else."

Cullen looked away, dejected and heartsick. Aida clutched at his hands. "Cullen, do you agree with them - that I'm stuck here, that I'm - gone?"

His eyes welled up with tears that he fought back as he spoke. "I know you're not gone. I know when I come here that it's you." He danced his fingertips from one of her shoulders to the other, above the neckline of cotton nightgown. "I know it's you, I know this body." His touch gave her gooseflesh up and down her arms. Cullen cupped her face again, rubbing his rough thumb over her full bottom lip and she kissed it as he did so.

"Cullen, you musn't let them bury me yet. What if it effects my ability to get out of here? What if it condemns me to be stuck here somehow?"

Cullen's hands were growing hungrier, even though their conversation remained dire. "I'll ask Solas what he thinks. Aida - I'm dying on the other side without you. Please - can we...?"

Aida didn't answer. She simply reached down and pulled off her nightgown, freeing her breasts for him before unbuckling his belt as fast as her fingers could move. She whispered hoarsely at him, in a desperate tone. "Hurry, before you wake up."

Cullen pushed his pants and boxers down while devouring her mouth ravenously. They moved fast and without subtlety, their kisses edged with nipping teeth, their caresses aggressive and demanding. Aida gasped as he rolled her onto the couch and roughly grabbed the waistband of her panties, peeling them down her legs. Before she could react, his fingers had parted her folds and his lips were pressed to her pussy. She shrieked with delight, grabbing him by a handful of curls and propping herself up on one elbow to watch him at work, grinning and biting her lip as he made eye contact with her over her mound. Cullen lapped at her from side to side with broad sloppy strokes before curling and swiping his tongue around her pearl as though he were licking at a dollop of whipped cream on top of a dessert.

"Baby, I always love your mouth - but I need your dick inside me please."

He lifted his head from her pussy, her wetness all over his lips and chin as he shot her a feral, steamy look. "Tell me how you want me, Aida. I want to fuck you the way you want to be fucked."

"I want to ride you, baby. Please."

Cullen shook his head, a familiar smirk spreading across his face. "Every time, Aida. Every time you say please, I am completely under your control."

She pounced on Cullen so fast it knocked the wind out of his body. "Aida! Slow down -"

"No, we can't. You could disappear at any second, and I won't take that chance." They scrambled into position, Cullen now seated on the sofa with her straddling his muscled thighs. Aida lowered herself onto his stiff cock with a long, satisfied sigh and it made Cullen swallow and furrow his brow, trying to master his desire for her. "Aida, you're too much, it's been too long, I feel like I'm already going to come soon -"

In response, she began bouncing on his manhood in a steady rhythm. "Maker, you're so hard, you're in so deep -"

One of Cullen's hands held on to Aida's ass, encouraging her to slide back and forth on his cock while the other hand cupped one breast, and then the other. "Is this really happening? I swear I can
feel you."

"Yes baby, you're here, it's me, and your cock is magnificent."

She rode him with gusto, taking the full length of him with every bounce of her hips. Cullen's voice took on a pleading tone, "Aida, I can't hold on, you're too good, it's been too long without you."

Aida ignored him, holding on to his broad shoulders as she fucked him hard, groaning in tandem with him. "I'm so close too, come with me -"

She looked into his eyes as she rolled her hips faster and faster until Cullen threw his head back with a feral growl, exposing all the sexy lines and sinews of his neck to her as he shot his seed deep into her womanhood.

And then Aida's eyes fluttered open and she found herself alone on the couch - naked and unfulfilled.

The orgasmic wave she had been surfing ebbed away. His climax must have woken him up, yanking him back into the real world.

Aida flopped back on the couch with a sob... A sob that turned into a wail of anger and desperation -

The rage she felt went pulsing through her body and with two swipes of her arms, she cleared everything off the coffee table in front of her, everything hitting the floor with an angry clatter. It wasn't enough. She wanted to destroy this world.

Aida stood up, throwing on her nightgown and began stalking through her condo, tearing pictures down off the wall and smashing the glass, pulling every book off her bookshelves and then sending the shelves crashing down on the mess. She flung open cabinets in the kitchen, breaking her plates, smashing her wine glasses. She grabbed a knife out of a drawer and headed for her studio, slashing at her paintings, tearing them to shreds. She worked her way through every corner of her home, trashing it thoroughly.

She left a trail of bloody footprints behind her as she broke every possession she had.

* * * * *

The other Cullen was next door, sitting on the edge of his bed while watching a war documentary on TV, Barkley at his side as he ate a bowl of cereal for dinner. He heard a thud that made him pause, but assumed it was coming from his TV. Barkley's ears twitched and the big dog sat up on the bed next to him, looking pointedly at the wall that separated his condo from Aida's next door.

"You hear something, boy?"

The Mabari snorted, one ear up and the other down. Cullen paused the documentary and heard another emphatic crash, one hard enough to make his bed frame shake. He stood up, focusing on the noises coming from next door. Cullen leaned a little closer to the wall just in time to hear Aida's heartbroken wailing. He looked at Barkley next.

"Should we call the cops, Barks? What's going on next door?"

The dog gave him one confident bark, followed by some begging whines. "But Barks, we're not too keen on that lady huh? She's - a weirdo, isn't she?"

Barkley kept whining, especially as the noises next door grew louder and more violent. "OK, ok, I'll
Cullen pulled on an old t-shirt and slipped on his flip flops before heading to Aida's front door. He banged on it with a forceful fist. "Miss Trevelyan, are you alright?"

She did not answer. He pressed his ear to the door and heard glass shattering. Cullen heaved a sigh and went back into his condo, heading for the balcony now. He crossed the small gap between their balconies, hoping her patio door was open. It wasn't, but Aida had thrown a heavy bookend at the glass, providing him enough of a hole to slip his hand through and unlock it from the inside.

Cullen paused to take in the destruction Aida had wrought - how could someone so petite have made such an epic mess? A strange sense of *deja vus* tingled through his veins as he picked his way through the wreckage toward her bedroom. He turned the corner in time to see Aida punch the mirror of her medicine cabinet three times in a row, until it shattered and broke.

"Aida!"

She swung around with a gasp of shock. She had cuts all over her knuckles and there was blood smeared everywhere, on her nightgown, on her arms and legs.

"Rutherford! What are you doing here?"
"I thought you were dealing with burglars or - something worse, I don't know."

She looked at him with distaste. "Get the fuck out, nobody asked you for your help."

Aida wheeled around and punched the piece of the mirror still attached to the cabinet so hard it made Cullen flinch and take a step back.

"If I leave, you leave me no choice but to call the police. Do you want to deal with them, or with me?"

She sat down on the closed lid of the nearby toilet, defeated, new tears rolling down her face. "I'm fine, please, just leave."

Cullen dipped into a squat so he was at her level, holding her wrists gently in his hands, turning them toward him. "You're cut to shreds. Were you trying to..."

Aida did not leave the question hanging in the air for long. "Yes. I was. Aren't you glad you came to intervene now? I look forward to standing awkwardly with you in the elevator in the future."

Cullen couldn't help himself. He gave her a half-smile. "More awkwardly, you mean. We were plenty awkward already."

Two more tears rolled down her face even as she returned his smile. "Sorry. It's just that I've heard you have so many orgasms through that wall. How could it not be awkward?"

Now they laughed together, almost uncontrollably - until Cullen stopped. He looked down and realized he was still holding her hands and he fought a strange urge to lean down and kiss her on one of her bloody cuts. The foreign - but fervent - feeling almost knocked him backwards onto his arse.

"Cullen?"
"Nothing, sorry, my mind wandered for just a moment. Would you please consider coming next door, just to calm down for a bit? We can clean you up."

Aida sniffled, reaching for a nearby tissue. "I'm a nurse, I can fix myself."
"Alright, true, I've seen you in your scrubs, although not so recently."

She blew her nose with a rather adorable honk. "Yes, I quit my job. I'm an artist now, or at least trying to be, before I fucking destroyed all my canvases."

Cullen handed her another tissue. "Why don't you tell me all about it? Come next door, I'll pour you a whiskey."

Aida turned away with an unreadable look. "I don't want to be any trouble."

"More trouble than you are already?"

Aida smiled again, a pretty blush flashing across her face. Cullen stood up, holding a hand out to her. "Come along, Trevelyan. You can meet my dog. And FYI - he's the best dog in all of Thedas."

Cullen guided her toward her front door, touching her on the elbow, and just a few steps out of her front door and to the right put them in his condo. He watched her gazing around his place with yet another look he could not parse or understand. She looked sweetly relieved, maybe even nostalgic, about being in his living room. Cullen heard Barkley's claws clicking in the hallway and he turned to advise her.

"Listen, he doesn't like everyone, so don't be offended if he doesn't - "

The Mabari came charging around the corner, barreling into Aida and knocking her down flat. He licked her face, and then concentrated on the cuts that were on her arms and hands. Aida giggled as she tried to get the beast off of her.

"Stop that, Barks! We need to get those cuts cleaned first! Maker, I've never seen him act this way before!"

Aida managed to sit up, pushing Barkley off of her as much as she could. "Stop it, Ser Barkington. Sit."

Cullen watched with shock as Barkley got off of her and sat down obediently. "Good Ser! Good Ser Knight! Give me your paw, come on, shake. That's a good boy. Oh, I've missed you, Mister!"

"Missed him?"

Aida made another strange face before speaking up again quickly. "I've met him before, um, you know, bumping into him when your dog walker drops him off."

"Yes of course. That makes sense. OK, Trevelyan. Sit at the table please. I have a medical kit. I'll find it and then, shall we have something to drink?"

Aida nodded shyly as she sat down where he had instructed her to sit, and then he headed to his bathroom to search for his medical supplies in his bathroom and when he came back Barkley was sitting next to her, his head on her knee, giving her an ooey-gooey look of devotion. Cullen watched them together for a bit, still surprised by his Mabari.

"I don't get it. He's never acted this way with any girl I've brought home."

Aida dipped her head, looking for rubbing alcohol in the kit he had brought her. "Girls, all of them. Never any women."

It was probably the third or fourth time that night that he smiled, unable to stop himself from doing...
so. He headed to the kitchen to find two glasses for them and then made a stop at his bar cart to pour them two fingers of fine whiskey. She put down the cotton ball she had been using to clean one of her wounds to take the glass from him.

"To what - or whom, should we toast?"

Aida grinned at his dog. "To Barkley, of course."

They touched their glasses together and then he watched with some surprise as Aida downed the liquor in one go. She gave him another smile, bolder than the shy ones she had been giving him all night. "More please?"

An hour later, the two of them were both intoxicated, and Aida was all patched up and calm now. She stood up from his kitchen table and wobbled on her legs a little.

"I should go, I've taken up too much of your evening."

Cullen reached out in time to steady her by holding her arm. "You are so very drunk, Trevelyan. And your place is a total mess. Why don't you just bunk here on my couch tonight? Deal with everything tomorrow?"

Aida's cheeks were rosy, and the shifty way she always looked at him seemed to be gone, she was able to look at him square in the face.

"It would be nice to not be alone tonight. Are you sure you don't mind?"

Cullen gestured to the big couch behind him and the cashmere blanket thrown across the back of it. Aida smoothed her hair a little and sat down on the couch, stretching out on it. Cullen picked up the blanket and draped it over her and then he dropped to one of his knees, speaking to her in a soft and gentle tone.

"Need anything else?"
"No, I'm wonderful, thank you."

Aida sat up, reaching a hand out to stop him from leaving.

"Thank you, Cullen."

She leaned forward, kissing him on the cheek.

Cullen surprised himself by involuntarily leaning into the feather-light touch of her lips before pulling away.

* * * * *

The next morning Aida woke up on Cullen's couch, a note on the coffee table nearby. She grabbed it like a teenager receiving the first note from a boy she has a crush on. It didn't say too much, but the familiar sight of his handwriting made her heart race.

"Aida, if you need anything, call me, here's my number. My dog walker is coming at 11 to get 'Ser Barkington' and he can lock up behind you. Hope you have a better day today. Cheers."

Aida took a deep, relaxing breath, stretching from her toes to her fingers. It felt good to be back in Cullen's apartment, even if none of it was real, and he would never be the man she truly loved.
Barkley followed her as she walked out onto his balcony for a little fresh air.

Aida came to an abrupt stop, her jaw agape.

There was - a tear - in the sky - next to the tallest peak in the Frostbacks, the mountain she looked at every morning. She could see it, as though it was a rip in one of her canvases. The little gap made it very obvious to her that those mountains in the distance were not real, something she had suspected since her first moments trapped in the Fade.

Things had finally changed. She did not wake up alone in her bed, and somehow, she had done *SOMETHING* to change her circumstances.

The fog in her mind cleared even further. She remembered the small peck she had laid on Fade-Cullen's cheek.

She remembered him leaning into it.

The memory made me feel warm all over - and much less lonely.
Aida tapped her fingers on her knee with impatience, watching the banker behind her desk typing something into her computer at a tedious speed. Even though she was now locked in the Fade, bills kept coming in the mail. Aida had snarled at the first 'past due' notice that had come to her condo. Oh okay, no friends, no family, no love of my life - and I still have to deal with my credit card? Ridiculous. But whatever or whomever had made a carbon copy of her world to torture her did not know to eliminate certain resources Aida had at her command. She had a trust fund left to her by her mother that she never touched, out of respect for the loving woman who was robbed of the chance to raise her to adulthood. She had never wanted to coast on her inheritance in the real world - but in this trap, she had to use everything at her disposal - and she had a plan to bribe her way closer to the kind-of sort-of Cullen next door.

"Alright, Miss Trevelyan, you're all set. The bulk of your trust fund has been transferred to your main savings account. I just had to, you know, double check that you were you and whatnot."

Aida took a sneaky glance around the lobby of the bank. "H-how much is in there now?"

The dwarf adjusted her glasses, blushing slightly. "I would prefer not to say. How about I just write it down?" She scribbled something on a notepad and then pushed it across her desk toward her.

Aida's eyes popped. It was more than enough than she needed to start the next little part of her plan - which she needed to put into gear today. Her family was burying her on the other side of the Veil. Her friends were going to start thinking of her as no more than a memory. And Cullen - it hurt too much to think about what he was going through. It hurt - and it made her angry. She squeezed her left hand, cracking the knuckles.

"Is there anything else I can do for you today?"
"Yes, give me 10K of it in big bills. I have to bribe someone in about - " Aida checked her watch. "About an hour?"

* * * * *

Aida waited in her living room, in "booty shorts" and a low-cut tank top, listening carefully for Cullen's dog walker to return with Barkley. She leaned against the wall near her front door, listening for the sound of the Mabari's claws to signal their arrival. She heard the man jingling his large set of keys and swung open the door before he could get into Cullen's condo.

"Hello."
The hapless man nearly jumped a foot in the air, dropping Barkley's leash with a squeal of surprise. Barkley took the opportunity to promptly run into Aida's living room, flopping onto her rug to rub his back all over it with slobbery glee.

"Barkley, get back here. Do you mind? Can you get him for me?"

Aida stepped aside, motioning into her condo with a smooth gesture. "Why don't you come in and have a little drink? It's cold out today. What's your name again?"

He stuttered, trying not to stare at her cleavage. "M-Morris, I'm - I'm in a bit of a hurry though."

Aida wanted to roll her eyes at the nervous man but instead shot him the most seductive look she could muster at the moment. "Come on, Morris. I have a proposition for you. Don't you want to hear what it is?"

She watched him weighing the possibilities in his head. She couldn't tell if he was fighting the urge to run away or run right into her bedroom. "OK fine. Five minutes only, then I have to be clear across town to walk three terriers."

Aida lead him to her dining table where she pushed aside some sketch pads and her ash tray. She put a heavy glass tumbler down in front of him and poured him three fingers of whiskey.

"Oh, I - "
"Just sip it, you don't have to finish it."

Aida lit a cigarette while she watched the nervous man try the whiskey and look around her condo with some curiosity. Barkley got up and sat down next to Aida, his chin resting on her knee.

"So what's this you wanted to discuss - what's your name again?"
"Aida."

Aida grabbed a paper bag off the chair next to her and dropped it on the table between them.

"What's this?"
"Ten thousand sovereigns. They're for you."

Aida saw the sweat break out on Morris's brow. It helped that she had also turned up the heat earlier to exaggerate the effect.

"And what do I have to do for this - overly suspicious bag of money?"

She gave him her best femme fatale act. "Just stop walking Barkley. Tell his owner you're overbooked, too busy. Doesn't matter what you tell him. Just take the money and then vamoose. I estimate that's more than you bill him in a year, and here you are earning it for doing nothing."

"But what for? Why?"

"Because I want to walk him. That's all."

Morris put a hand out to touch the bag but then pulled back. "Wait, what if you're one of those crazy stalker chicks that is looking for some kind of way into Cullen's life? And then somehow you fake
your own death and he gets framed for your murder?"

Aida let another million-sovereign smile spread across her face. "Do I look like I'm crazy?"

* * * * *

As Cullen waited for the elevator in his complex, he listened to the voice mail from his dog walker for a third time. He didn't get it, Morris had been walking Barkley for years now, and now out of nowhere, on a Wednesday, the guy quits and leaves his dog with his neighbor? He didn't know what to think of it but he wanted to get Barkley back from that woman next door.

*That woman.*

He was often filled with irrational antipathy when thinking of her but when he found himself in her presence it was a completely different story. There were a few times when he stood next to her in the elevator and the air between them crackled with chemistry, even as they both remained brooding and silent, and the day after her angry tantrum all he had thought about was the kiss Aida had graced on his cheek.

If he really stopped to think about it, his feelings made no sense.

Cullen undid his tie a little and then knocked on Aida's door. She opened it too quickly, as though she had been waiting for him.

"Hey, I heard you have my dog?"
"I do. He's here, come in."

Cullen put a hand up, stopping her. "No, that's fine, I'd just appreciate if you'd give him back to me."

She rolled her eyes at him, crossing her arms over her chest. "Whatever. Barkley! Your daddy's here. He's grumpy and in a shite mood as usual."

Cullen looked over her shoulder. The dog was snoring on her rug, a half-chewed up high heel under his paw. He whistled at him. "Come on Barks, dinner time."

Aida bit her lip, giving him a guilty look. "Sorry. I fed him already. Wasn't sure when you'd be home."
Cullen scowled. "What'd you give him?"
"Steak, rare. A little mashed sweet potato. Is that alright?"

Cullen's stomach growled without his consent. She smiled at him shyly. "I made extra. And Barkley looks like he doesn't want to go anywhere at the moment anyhow. Come in and let me feed you."

She opened the door wider and Cullen found himself taking a step forward, even if he hadn't wanted to. He rubbed the back of his neck and returned her smile. Without too much more awkward small talk he was seated at her dining table, trying not to gobble down the fine dinner she had cooked for his dog? He snorted in the middle of his meal.

"What's so funny?"
"You cooked this, for Barkley?"
"Well yes, he's so lovely and sweet isn't he? Only the best for the best. Besides, I didn't make him the side salad. Like he'd eat arugula."

She refilled his wine glass and Cullen realized he actually felt relaxed. He sipped the fine red wine and looked around at her walls.

"You paint these?"
"I did. Well, not that one. That's Cezanne of course."
"Of course."

He wanted to tell her he liked the colors she chose and her broad, confident strokes, and most of all how she captured the light in her landscapes, but he kept his opinions to himself and drank his wine instead. Barkley got up from his napping place with a yawn and padded into the living room. Cullen leaned down with a hand extended to pet him but to his surprise Barkley walked around him and went for Aida instead.

"Barkley! I've had a long day at work and this is how you treat me? I thought we were bros." He sat down next to Aida and smiled up at her, panting. Aida looked down at him, pretending she was voicing his thoughts.

"What's that boy? You want me to tell him now? Are you sure? But I can tell he just wants to leave, even though there's also dessert in the fridge."

Cullen was almost distracted by the promise of dessert, but he narrowed his eyes at the rest of her words.

"Tell me what?"

Aida emptied the rest of the wine bottle into her glass, giving herself a generous pour.

"Listen, Cullen. Your dog walker was explaining to me that your place is really out of his way and most of his business is uptown and on the west side. Why not let me tend to Barkley while you're at work? I'm here already. He likes me a lot. I can take over for Morris quite easily now that I've quit my day job."

Cullen sighed, leaning back in his chair. "I don't know. It makes sense. Barkley seems to like you."
"Seems to like me? Really? Watch this."

Aida turned to the face the dog sitting next to her. "Barkley, daddy wants you to go home now and never see me again. Never ever."

Barkley threw back his head and emitted a heart breaking wail. He was so loud he set off howling from a dog living in a condo unit 4 doors down from them and made a few other dogs in the complex begin to bark. Cullen stood up in alarm. "Barkley, stop that, I've never heard you do that before! Oh, alright, fine. You both get your way." Barkley stopped howling and went back to panting at both of them, now content.

Cullen sat back down, taking a huge gulp of his wine with a scowl. "Morris did other things too, you know. He gave him baths and trimmed his nails. You'll do all of it?"
"Of course."
"I suppose we should discuss payment."
Aida pushed her chair away from the table, standing up. "Give me a second. I'll get dessert."

Cullen watched her disappear into the kitchen, noticing the promising curves of her ass cheeks peeking out of the bottom of her shorts, sending sudden, inappropriate ideas rocketing from his brain down to his groin. He took a deep breath when she came back into the room, putting a plate in front of him.

"Apple pie with a strudel-crumb topping and fresh, whipped cream."

Cullen's mouth watered. It was his favorite dessert. He gave Aida another wary look.

"OK, Trevelyan. What gives. You fill me full of filet mignon and a very nice cab franc and now you've made me my favorite dessert. Are you - a mind-reader by any chance? I know some mages are capable of such things. Tell the truth."

He watched her face change from lighthearted to - something else he could not parse.

"No, no mind-reading skills. I guess I just lucked out choosing your favorites. Hey, we were going to discuss money, but I wanted to stop you before you could. I have a deal to strike with you, and I hope you don't shoot me down right away."

She waited until he was in the middle of a big mouthful of dessert.

"Cullen, I need a figure model. The art school downtown gave me a few people to meet up with but - they weren't what I was looking for at all. I don't need a few old exhibitionists with saggy skin, or a rebellious young punk girl with piercings and tattoos. I have a series of nudes in mind, and honestly: I'm looking for someone who looks like you. Athletic, broad shoulders, built like you just stepped off your marble pedestal."

Cullen swallowed and looked at her squarely. She blushed but continued. "I'd only need you to pose for me for an hour or so, and whenever you're free. When I'm done my series will be twelve, large format paintings, although I won't paint with you in the room. I just need sketches to start." She took a breath. "You're going to say no, aren't you."

He took the last bite of his piece of pie, wiping a finger across the plate to get the rest of the whipped cream. He thought about it.

Nobody would have to know, right? He certainly wouldn't tell Varric. He'd be saving money. Barkley loves her.

And after that dinner, he sort of loved her too.

No, wait - he hated her. He hated the inexplicably mournful way she sometimes looked at him. He hated her little snarky comments about his other lovers in the elevator and definitely hated it when she blasted baroque harpsichord music through the wall while he was entertaining them, which he always found rather distracting, like she was doing it on purpose. Worst of all, what he really disliked about her was she was clearly another rich girl mage who did as she pleased with little consequence - and now she was trying to get him to take his clothes off?

Aida stood up again, reaching a hand out for his plate. "Just forget it. It was a stupid idea. I don't know what I was thinking. We barely know each other and I'm asking you to... I'm sorry I took up so much of your evening."
Cullen put a hand on her wrist and they both froze.

Her skin was warm, and so smooth - tawny-brown, like coffee with an indulgent amount of cream in it.

"We have a deal, Trevelyan. When do you want to start?"
"As soon as possible. Do you want another piece of pie?"
"Definitely."

* * * * *

Cullen knocked on her door a few days later, on a bright and cheerful Sunday morning. Aida answered it, wearing a paint splattered, over-sized men's shirt, revealing her bare legs underneath. Her midnight black hair was pulled into a bun with a pencil stuck through it.

"Come in, do you want a cup of coffee before we start? Honestly though, it might make you jittery and it will be hard to stay still."
"Sure, I think I can handle it."

He watched her flitting about in her kitchen, always giving him small moments of eye contact. She brought him a cup of coffee in a mug that said "World's Sexiest Nurse" on the side, and also handed him a biscotti. He took a sip and then tapped the writing on the side of it while he grinned. "This true?"

Aida shrugged, both coy and confident. "I've never had any feedback to the contrary so far. Go on, eat your cookie - and then pop your clothes off. I'll wait for you in the studio, it's the first door on the left."

She turned on her heel and bounced away, humming to herself. Cullen waited until he heard her enter her studio before putting the mug down on the kitchen counter and stepping back into her living room. She had left a white cotton robe for him draped across the back of her couch. Cullen took a deep breath before kicking off his flip flops and pulling off his t-shirt, sweat pants and boxers. *Can't believe I'm doing this. Why didn't I say no?*

He opened the door to the studio and stepped into the room, full of natural light coming in through its floor to ceiling windows. Aida had set up an small platform where he assumed where he would pose, and she was fiddling with a camera on a tripod in front of it.

"Hey, you didn't say anything about photos."
"I'll only use it if you can't stand as long as I need to make a sketch or two. Since you aren't a professional figure model, you might find it tiring at first. It's not as easy as people think. Let's begin, shall we?" She gestured toward her staging area, and Cullen stepped up onto it and faced her. "Robe off, please."

Cullen looked at a point behind her while he slipped the robe from his shoulders and handed it to her. Aida threw it over a nearby chair and turned back toward him, her face professional and blank.

"Put your left foot up on these books I've placed here. Let me see how you stand naturally."
"How I stand naturally with my foot up on a medical dictionary and an anatomy book?"

"Are you going to be difficult the entire time?"
"Sorry, I'll be good."

She took a step back and looked at him. "Turn your head towards me. No, that won't do. Look at the back corner of the room. Now down a little."

Cullen turned his head, intuitions she was trying to get the best angle of his jaw. "That's good but your arms aren't right. Well, your right arm looks fine there, but - relax for a second, I'll be right back."

Aida skipped off to her kitchen for a moment and came back with a pear. "Here, hold this in your right hand, and, like this, near your shoulder."

He got back into the pose she asked for and started laughing. "I'm sorry, it's just, who stands like this?"

Aida stood behind her easel, where her large sketchbook was tacked up and open and ready. "The ancient Greeks and Romans apparently. They just stood around naked, with pears, all the time. Besides, I may not paint the pear in, I just wanted to get your arm in that position. So Rutherford, here's the deal, you are going to get tired in about 5 minutes, so just let me know, and we can take a break - and then we can try a different pose or two. How's that sound?"

"Just draw, Trevelyan. You talk too much."

Cullen surprised himself by being able to pose for her for nearly fifteen straight minutes as she drew him in silence. They attempted two more standing poses, and after that, it was Aida who needed the break. Cullen put his robe back on and watched her drink a glass of red wine and smoke a cigarette.

"Aida. It's not even 11:30 in the morning."
"So?"
"It's a little early for wine, isn't it?"

Aida rolled her eyes and gestured to him to get back onto the stage. "I'm an artiste, Cullen. This is what I do, this is how I live. Now, I was thinking, maybe a seated pose next. Something Rodin would have liked."

She brought over a folding chair and put it on the stage for him, gesturing for him to get naked again and sit down.

Cullen watched her eyes as he handed her the robe. The amount of academic detachment she was exhibiting toward his physique was beginning to bruise his ego. When she had initially suggested trading her dog walking services for his amateur figure modeling, he had figured it was one of the more elaborate ways a woman had plotted to get him to remove his clothes, but now he realized she was being serious about her art, and he was just a prop.

He was mulling this over when he felt her hand on his shoulder. "Do you mind? Can I just - adjust you?" She gently guided him into the position she wanted, making him lean forward slightly so he had a hand on each knee. Her fingers tilted his chin up a little, pulled one of his legs into place. Her hands never lingered as she sculpted his body to her artistic desires.
She took a step back and framed him for a moment with two fingers. "There. Contemplation. Look contemplative about something."
"Contemplative?"
"Reflective. Meditative. I don't know - think about push ups, or whatever else you do to look like this."

He turned his head to sass her back. "Pull ups. It takes a lot of pull ups to look like this. And yes, push ups."

Aida tsk-tsked from behind her easel. "You moved and you just ruined all of it."

Cullen smirked to himself as she crossed the room to correct his pose, her pencil tucked behind her ear. As she leaned closer, he noted the smell of her perfume, tuberose and amber, mingling with the scent of her skin, cigarettes and dark red wine. Aida took a half step back and looked at him again. "Your hair has gone all - fluffy. Can I fix it?"

She dropped to one knee and threaded her fingers through his hair, sending shivers up and down his spine. She swallowed before speaking again, visibly nervous now. "There, that's better."

Aida stared at him, her eyes locked onto his lips. Cullen leaned forward, expecting her to meet him half way but she stood up and turned on her heel, heading back to her easel. Her cheeks were flushed but she refocused on her work, going back to look at him with an artist's aloofness.

Cullen stayed in his pose, confused by his own disappointment.

* * * * *

Half an hour later, Aida let him get up and put his robe back on.

"Thanks, Cullen. I know this must be weird, but - I think you will find this is a deal that will make everyone happy. Or at least, me and Barkley. And we're the only two that matter really."

He stepped off the little stage she had set up for him and headed for her side, but she closed her sketch pad before he could see her work.

"Can't I see what you did today?"

She blushed, touching one of her cheeks but keeping her other hand on the pad so he could not flip it open. "Oh, um, I'd rather n-"

It was now his turn to reach out and touch her, his hand landing lightly on her wrist. "Artistes should not be shy, Aida."

Aida bit her lip and flipped the pad open to the sketch she had just finished. It was on cream-colored paper, rendered in pencil and charcoal with flourishes and details in terra cotta pastel.

Cullen had never seen himself like this before.

She had rendered him as majestic as an Olympian - but she had also captured him deep in thought, a soldier returned from war, still Shouldering the heavy burden of his trauma.
Aida gasped when he turned and grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Who are you? Why - why does it feel like every time you look at me, it feels like, you - know things about me?"

Aida's chin wobbled as she tried to contain her emotions. "What do you mean?"

"You are a stranger, you shouldn't - know me this well."

Aida squirmed, her hands on his wrists, trying to loosen his grip. "I just drew what I saw, I'm sorry if it upset you." She trembled as he cupped her face with one of his large, calloused hands. His voice dropped a notch.

"Explain to me why when you touch me, or I touch you - "

"Why what?"

"Why I want more of you, every time..."

She tried to control her breathing. This had been the trap she set for him, and he was walking right into it - but, now, she felt guilty. Wasn't this cheating on her real Cullen, waiting for her on the other side of the Veil? After that utter cock-up with the prime minister in her father's study (a memory that made her queasy each time she thought of it), she never wanted him to doubt her feelings for him ever again. Wasn't she violating his trust again? Didn't he give her his permission?

*It was too late, Aida let him kiss her.*

*Oh Maker, and he kisses just like the real Cullen.*

He kept kissing her as she undid the belt of his robe, slipping her hands under it and pushing it off his shoulders where it fell at his feet. She felt his hands slip under her panties off her hips to cup her ass, kneading the globes of flesh, trying to get as much of his hands on her as he could. He broke the kiss, his lips marking a trail from her velvet earlobe down to the sensitive juncture of her neck and shoulder.

"Get your shirt off, this second - "

She responded to him in playful sing-song: "Cullen, I thought you didn't like me."

"I don't. You're mouthy. I can tell you're spoiled. You slam doors all hours of the night. My dog likes you more than he likes me. But right now, I want to fuck you against that wall over there."

He grabbed her shirt and pulled it off over her head. "Andraste's tits - er, your tits, Aida. I knew you weren't wearing a bra." Cullen dipped his head to suck one of her brown nipples into his mouth with noisy gusto before moving on to the other one. She held his head to her bosom, fingers tangled in his curls for the second time that afternoon.

"Cullen, let's go to my bedroom."

"No, I can't wait."

He backed her up against the wall, the sheer mountain of his flesh pressed against her. Aida lifted a leg, hooking it around him and drawing him even closer. Cullen locked his eyes to hers as he licked
three fingers of his left hand and then pressed them to her cunt.

"Wet already, I see," he rasped at her, his voice low and husky.

In that moment, Aida felt like Cullen was the desire demon torturing her directly. Aida let her head fall back against the wall as he circled his rough fingers around her pearl, rolling it around, making it swell even more. She groaned with abandon as he slipped two digits into her pussy as he pinned between his broad chest and the wall behind her. She whimpered, feeling herself dripping with desire. She was lost in his arms, forgetting this world was an illusion she was trapped in. He wove the fingers of his other hand into her hair at the nape of her neck and pulled roughly so her mouth was open to him again. He dove his lips down on hers, twisting his tongue around hers, tasting her until she was breathless.

No no no no no, he's too good, I shouldn't enjoy this, he's just a pawn in someone else's game - I can not, should not, will not, begin to feel things about him.

Her internal monologue was interrupted by Cullen's hand on her throat, squeezing her windpipe with a touch of predatory possession.

"Tell me, Trevelyan, tell me the truth. You planned this. You didn't want to draw me, you just wanted to fuck me."

Aida shook her head, giving him a lost-virgin-in-the-woods look. "No, no, I did want to draw you. And yeah, maybe, see what your cock looked like." She punctuated her remark by reaching down to grasp him, finding Cullen hard and more than ready. Aida pumped him a few times, sliding her palm along the bottom of his cock, rubbing a thumb over the head and smearing the moisture she found there. Aida pressed that thumb to her tip of her tongue, making Cullen watch her taste his precum. It made Cullen give her one of his smoldering smirks that always made her knees wobble.

"You are a little mind reader, and maybe you're even a little psychic." Cullen leaned in closer now, his lips against her earlobe, kneading one of her breasts in one hand, the other still occupied with playing with her pussy. "You knew all of this would happen. But what you couldn't predict or plan for - is how hard I'm about to make you come."

He lifted her into his arms effortlessly, holding her up under her arse with two capable hands. Aida pressed her forehead to his, gazing at his face as he lifted her even higher to impale her with his manhood, inching her down over him bit by bit, slowly, exquisitely, making her savor every inch of him. She exhaled, ragged, full of expectation as she began to grind on him. Cullen leaned her weight against the wall a little so he could rut into her even deeper, making Aida groan and swear with each hungry thrust and jerk of his hips. Aida's hair came loose from its bun and tumbled down her shoulders, and Cullen burrowed his nose into her silky mane, breathing in her scent. "Fuck, you're incredible. Why didn't we do this sooner?"

Aida held on to the back of his neck, leaning back, sliding her pussy and down his cock with abandon and giggling to herself in between the moans. Of course he could rut her standing up. The man could probably rut her in zero gravity or underwater, he was clearly capable of great sexual ingenuity, on this side of the Veil or the other. After how long marooned in this terrible place, she finally felt something good, that humming deep in her belly of her climax building - joining with another sound from outside - one that Cullen didn't seem to notice. It sounded like thunder, or the rumbling of an impending avalanche. She shook it off for a moment, just wanting two things - she wanted to come, and watch his face when he exploded inside of her.
"Cullen, please - 
"What, baby?"

Aida kissed him softly, pretending for a moment it was her Cullen - and said the magic words. 
"Please, Cullen - make me come."

Cullen grunted with determination, nipping at her bottom lip with his teeth. He gripped her flesh as hard as he could and guided her hips into a bouncing rhythm on his cock, their flesh slapping against each other, as her pussy dripped slick arousal all over his balls. The wave of her orgasm grew, meeting with that that roaring sound coming from somewhere outside. Aida dug her fingernails into his shoulders and threw her head back with abandon, seeing stars as she cried out in sheer ecstasy - only vaguely aware of the strange astrological rumble and roaring coming to a crescendo outside. Cullen was more distracted by her sheath squeezing him tight - he pushed himself into her as much as he could, holding onto her arse hard as he unloaded his seed deep within her with a satisfied groan. Aida couldn't hold on to him any longer. Her hands slipped away and he had to pull out and gently lower her onto her feet. She watched as Cullen grasped himself and pumped it a few more times, milking a few more sweet drops from his throbbing cock. Aida was in a daze as she dropped to her knees and sucked him into her mouth, tasting her own pussy mingling with his saltiness. He had to pull her back to her feet to make her stop. "Stop, Trevelyan, that's - more than enough, thank you though. Thank you very. Very. Much."

Aida glanced at him and then headed for her discarded shirt nearby, pulling it on over her head. 
"You're welcome. I'm sure you want to make a quick retreat now."

Cullen pulled on his robe, looking nervous now, but Aida tied it closed for him.

"I know what you're going to probably say. Something about - how you're not looking for a relationship, you have - commitment issues. You don't want to hurt me. You'd like to continue taking your clothes off for me, and maybe fucking me from time to time, but that's it. And you'd like to - be friends, of course. So go on -say your lines for me."

"I don't know what to make of you. Yes, I was going to say all those things, but..." He looked down at her, wrapping a lock of her hair around one of his fingers.

Aida took that hand and turned it toward her, kissing his palm gently. 
"But what?"

"I don't want to anymore."

* * * * *

Aida watched him sleep.

Cullen had an arm thrown across the pillow above his head, a hand resting on his chest. She thought about the Cullen in the real world, slumbering in the same way, but maybe with a furrow in his brow because she was not at his side.

Aida slipped out of bed, through her living room and out to the balcony to have a smoke. She had noticed this earlier while she and Cullen were eating dinner together but he didn't seem to notice that the presence of that tear in the sky. It had gotten a lot bigger, revealing only darkness behind it, but
even if she was able to rip the facade to shreds, how was it supposed to help her get home? Bedding Fade-Cullen didn't seem to break the spell, but it did make - someone out there - angry. She had to prepare herself for a reset. She shouldn't be surprised if tomorrow Cullen went back to being a cad. The pleasing high of seduction was ebbing away and she was homesick for her real life again.

She hated to admit it but she knew she would not be able to get out of here on her own. She need help, guidance - from anyone. Help. Please.

She also needed a drink. Aida stubbed out her half-finished cigarette and headed back inside to open another bottle of wine. As soon as she slid the patio door open, her phone began to buzz on the kitchen counter. Who was calling her this time of night - or at all? She flipped her phone over and squinted with confusion at the number: 777-7777?

Aida answered it but only heard strange static. "Hello? Anyone there?"

A garbled voice said her name - a voice she sort of recognized, but she had found anything hard to believe once she got stranded in the Fade. The line went dead. Aida stood there, still holding her phone, a weird, uncanny feeling travelling up and down her body. The phone buzzed in her hand again, making her jump.

Aida read the text message over and over again, wondering if it was a prank.

"Aida it's Solas, on the other side of the Veil."

She tapped out a message to him as fast as she could. "i want to talk to you, please, can we talk, can i call you somehow"

She watched the three blinking dots, waiting for his response.

"Go to sleep Aida. Now that we've made contact, I can try to meet you - in the Fade within the Fade."

Chapter End Notes

(Yes, Aida paid 10K for a shag with Cullen. Wouldn't you?)
All That We See or Seem

Chapter Notes

(is a dream within a dream)

How could she possibly go to sleep now, with her pulse racing like this?

Aida stared at the kettle on the stove, waiting for it to boil. She'd sip some chamomile tea and and take some melatonin and drink an entire bottle of wine if she had to, but she didn't want to keep Solas waiting. Dr. Solas had always been an intimidating neurosurgeon, but any mage worth her spells also intuited the elf had deep knowledge of things no one man could scientifically explain. He had to know some way out of here.

Maybe there's some sort of - pipe, I could jump into? Or...a wall, I could roller skate through? I've clearly consumed too much pop culture to think about this clearly. She gulped down her tea as soon as it was cool enough to drink and headed back to bed.

* * * * *

Aida awoke sitting at a large wooden desk, her cheek pressed to a piece of parchment. She jerked upright, realizing she was still holding a quill too. Aida stared at her own hand - a quill? The ink had dribbled on the letter she had been writing. She put the quill down and took a deep breath, looking around at the room she found herself in. Big balcony doors exposed views of snowy mountaintops nearby. An epic king-sized bed sat across the room, draped with a luxurious embroidered coverlet. Candlesticks illuminated the room and war banners hung from the walls. She sat back in her chair and looked down at herself - linen top, velvet vest, tight leather pants, knee high boots. She felt a little light-headed.

How many other Aidas are there out in the cosmos? How many other worlds did she exist in, how -

She stopped pondering the mind-bending concept of the multiverse and looked down at the desk again. Her eyes fell on a tooth, almost a foot long, curved and coming to a lethal point, serving as a paperweight on top of a stack of correspondence. Aida tugged on the letter on the top of the pile and looked at the slanted writing. Requisitions? And on the back, a soldier's report. Aida gasped when she saw the initials at the bottom of it: C S R.: Cullen Stanton Rutherford.
Commander Cullen Stanton Rutherford.

Aida pressed a hand to her forehead, looking at the piece of parchment. She felt both hot and cold as she read the details. Lady Trevelyan, our engineers and workers are progressing on fixing the bridge at Judicael's Crossing. We are receiving disturbing reports of dragons in the area - a detail I would not tell Iron Bull until your more pressing missions in Emprise de Lion are finished.

There was a knock at a door somewhere in the chamber, followed by the sound of brusque footsteps. Aida turned around in time to see an old woman enter the room, carrying a bundle of firewood.

"Mornin', Inquisitor. Oh look at that, did you fall asleep at your desk again? You work much too hard. Shall I draw a bath for you?"

Inquisitor? Is that me?

Aida glued a fake smile on her face to hide her confusion and growing sense of panic. "I think I'll be fine today, thank you. But have you seen - Solas, anywhere about? Know where I could find him?"

The woman gave her a strange look before putting a new log on the fire for her. "Suppose he is where he always is, Herald - in his bloody solarium, painting all over the walls."

Aida fussed with an end of her braided hair. "And where would that be?"

The servant dusted her hands off before standing up with an aching groan. "My word, Lady Trevelyan, you are awfully scatterbrained this morning. Were you up all night drinking with Ser Pavus again? Solas's solarium is the door to the left before you leave the keep, near the fireplace. Your friend is always posted up there, so - turn left at the red-headed, smart mouthed dwarf."

Aida watched with some shock as the woman actually curtsied to her before leaving the room. She crossed the room to check her reflection in the looking glass. It doesn't hurt to always look good, right? Especially if Commander Cullen was about. She pinched her cheeks, Scarlett O'Hara style, and smoothed down her flyaway locks. After a a little more nervous fussing she knew it was time to leave her bedroom and look for Solas. She headed for the stairs the servant had used until she hit a heavy door. She took a deep breath and pushed it open.

Act normal, Aida. Don't be all freaked out by -

She had to crane her neck back to look at the floor to ceiling stained glass windows that filled the huge mountain keep with colored light. A simple wooden throne sat before the windows, overlooking long banquet tables and benches. Aida stood there, taking it all in - until the nobles noticed her.

She pushed through the crowd of strange Orlesians, hearing snatches of other languages mixed in, Antivanian merchants, hints of accents from Orzammar - she didn't know what they wanted from her, so she remained polite but adamant that she was in a hurry. She managed to make it through the third set of babbling aristos when she spotted Varric sitting near a roaring fire at the end of the hall. He waved her over as Aida shook off the last of her admirers.

"Hey Varric - nice bling!"

Varric cracked a smile at her. "Bling?"

"You know - " Aida motioned to the big gold necklace hanging around the dwarf's neck. "Bling! Your necklace!"
"That's a new word to me, I'll have to write that one down. Besides, Killer, it's not a necklace, it's a chain. Women wear necklaces, men wear chains."

Aida rolled her eyes, starting to feel a little comfortable in this world. "Thanks for the fashion lesson, Tethras. I'll be sure to swing back later and hear your views on petticoats and smalls." She pushed open the door to Solas's room but heard Varric's departing remarks before it closed behind her: "I like how it always goes back to bedroom antics with you, Aida. Shoulda nicknamed you "Bunny" instead of...

Aida stepped into the large rotunda and gasped. Solas was standing on some scaffolding, working on the most beautiful mural she had ever seen. Gold, sunset orange, forest green, teal blue - a feast for the eyes.

"You never said you were a painter too, Doctor Solas. Do you mean to tell me during all our talks and training sessions before Tevinter, we could have been talking brush techniques and color theory?"

Solas turned to look down at her, palette in hand. "In this world, I paint. In our world, I'm regrettably too busy."

Aida scrambled up the small ladder to join him on the scaffolding. She arrived in time to see him putting featherlight touches onto the wet fresco wall - it appeared to be a representation of the very castle they were standing in.

"What is this place, Solas? Did you conjure it, so we could meet here?"

Solas kept his eyes on his painting while Aida picked up a spare palette that was sitting nearby and busied herself with mixing paint for him.

"No, I didn't conjure it, but once we did meet in a world like this. This is just another life we've experienced - and one in which you are princess, mage and hero. I figured it would be a suitable place to meet to speak."

He gestured to her to pass him the paintbrush she was holding. "Why didn't we speak sooner, Solas? Cullen has visited me twice, but no one else. Can it be that - everyone has just forgotten me?"

Solas applied paint to the sky around the castle. "The Fade is not an easily navigable place. And you are not simply wandering around the world of dreams - you are most definitely trapped in a corner of it. It seems like a type of possession, although your mind and your memories remain unaltered."

Aida passed him the palette she had been working with. She had mixed him a fresh set of paints, identical to the ones he was working with. Her reward was an imperceptible smile from the stoic elf.

"I definitely feel tortured, and trapped, and fucked with - but I've been fighting back lately, and it feels good."

Solas bit the end of his paintbrush, thinking for a moment. "I'm not sure it's the best tactic. You risk the demon attacking you when you are not ready to fight. No, I have been thinking about this, and consulting with Vivienne. We have crafted - a hypothesis, of sorts. We have no way to run tests - and no time to visit libraries of the arcane and do research."

Aida grabbed the sleeve of his tunic. "Solas. Tell me. I'll do anything."

She let go as quickly as she had touched him - and the room turned blood-red around them - the
murals transformed into gory scenes of warfare and death, the air filled with shrieks and demonic screams. Solas's eyes were pitch black, frightening, as blank as the Void itself.

"Blood magic, Aida. Blood magic got you here, and blood magic will get you out."

Aida gasped and blinked - and everything snapped back to normal.

"But Solas, I know nothing of blood magic, I still don't even know what we were doing at Tevinter Tech that day."

"And that's perfectly fine - you don't need a centrifuge this time. You need only two things to trigger a new tear through the Veil - another strong blood sacrifice, from a willing victim, whose death is brought about with a special ritual blade, made of bone taken from a high abysmal blood dragon."

Aida turned to face the rotunda, leaning on the nearby railing, now frustrated. "And where am I supposed to get both of those things?"

Solas passed by her and headed for the ladder at the edge of the scaffolding. "Well, I think you might have one of them already. I know there is no rushing the cause of romance, but - perhaps Cullen could serve your purposes again?"

She followed him down the ladder and toward his desk in the center of the room. "Serve my purposes? He's not - a blood bag. He's - "

Solas halted and faced her. "Do not forget yourself here, Aida. He is not Cullen - he is but an illusion, a shadow on the wall."

Aida wanted to cry. She knew Solas was right, but - it still hurt to think of another Cullen sacrificing himself for her. "Alright. I understand. But what about this special blade - where can I get such a knife, what does it even look like?"

Solas led her gently by the elbow to his desk, where a beautiful old tome was sitting open. He flipped a few heavy pages in the book, until he landed on a picture of a bejeweled knife, with a short, sharp bone blade.

"I admit this part could be harder. Such items are hard to come by since the dragons' extinction. I know of one in Haven's Natural History museum, in their relics collection. A criminal mind would say, go in there and take it. But perhaps a young lady with the Trevelyan fortune at her fingertips could have one commissioned and crafted. There are still a few dwarven artisans who specialize in such work."

Aida frowned. "Jeeze, maybe I shouldn't have spent ten thousand sovereigns on bribing a guy named Morris."

"Who?"

"Never mind. It doesn't matter. I can figure it out. Thank you Solas - your interest in my lost cause is one of the few things keeping me going these days."

Solas surprised her by using an elegant finger to lift her chin, tilting her face toward him.

"Aida. I brought you to this place because in our other lives, when we were here together - you were a conqueror, a leader of men, elves and dwarves. You took the heads of your enemies who would not yield, showed mercy to those who deserved it, and brought peace to the land. You were a mage of extraordinary gifts - and beauty."

He surprised her once more by stroking her cheekbone with one of his knuckles - before stepping
back quickly.

"I wanted to show you this Thedas to encourage you in your quest. The real world needs Aida - your friends and family are languishing without your presence. One thread pulled can unravel so many other lives. Which reminds me - if you walk through that door, and along the walk way - you might bump into someone I know you long to meet."

Aida took two steps forward and hugged the elf harder than she knew he'd like. When she pulled back, he was blushing from his chin to the top of his head. Aida looked at the door he had gestured at earlier and rushed toward it. She had a feeling she knew who was waiting for her in that castle tower.

* * * * *

Aida knocked on the door but received no response. Voices were discussing something on the other side of the door. Before she could knock again, it opened and four soldiers paused to clap a clenched fist over their hearts before continuing on their way.

Aida almost fainted when the man behind the desk came into view. A beam of sunlight made his golden curls light up and glow as he bent over the paperwork on his desk.

"Cullen?"

She startled him, he stood up quickly - and the sunbeam hit the cuirass of his armor, blinding her temporarily. She put a hand up in front of her face and took a step forward. She used to think there was nothing sexier than Cullen in a tuxedo - and of course, Cullen lying naked on her sheets - and now she was pleased to learned he could even be bewitching in a full suit of armor. He stepped around the desk and Aida got a closer look at him, already wanting to run her fingers through the fur gourget around his shoulders.

"Is there something you need?" His voice was low and affectionate, as he rubbed his neck in his familiar gesture of nervousness.

"Ah, um..." She couldn't stop staring at him.

"I expected to see you at the war table later today."

He moved closer to her and Aida almost began to tremble in longing for him. She wanted him to take off those leather gloves and touch her.

"Am I interrupting your work?"

He shook his head as though she had asked him an incredible question. "Never."

"Well, what are you working on then? Why don't you show me?"

He gave her a slight bow and extended a hand toward his desk, where a map laid unfurled, its edges held down by four gleaming quartz crystals. She followed him to the desk and picked up one of the crystals, holding it up to the light.

"That's lovely."

"You gave me all of these, don't you remember? After you returned from the Hissing Wastes. I both like that they are useful, and beautiful - and they remind me of you, every day, when you are far
"away."

She put it back on the map and blushed, feeling his eyes on her. "The Arbor Wilds?"
"As you know, we hope to corner Corypheus here soon. I am certain you will return triumphant."

Aida mustered the courage to look at him, knowing those amber eyes of his could bring her to her knees. "We. We will return triumphant. My victories are yours, Commander."

She looked at his lips. *Kiss me, please. I need you.*
She looked into his eyes, and told him silently: *I want to love you in every existence I am granted.*

Cullen took his gloves off and reached a hand out. "You have some - paint? On your cheek, just here. May I?"

She leaned into his touch as he tried to wipe the paint off her cheekbone. Aida held her breath as he touched her oh so gently. The dust motes danced around them and off in the distance she could hear banners flapping in the wind. *No amount of time or space can separate us, Cullen - and I will never stop loving you.*

Cullen leaned down and kissed her, her face cupped in his strong hands. A tear rolled down her cheek. *Love of my life - of my many lives. Champion of my heart.* He parted her lips with his, rolling his tongue against hers - Then Aida heard thunder above them, before a strong wind blew all three doors to Cullen's office open.

The air was filled with the terrible clamor of ravens cawing as hundreds of the midnight-black birds swept into the room and swirled about them, pecking and beating their wings against their faces. The squawking was deafening, Aida could barely cover her face to protect herself -

And then she saw her - standing in the doorway.

A voice in her head whispered - "The Nightingale."

Cullen wrapped his arms around Aida as the woman drew closer, the crows never harming their dark mistress.

Another voice spoke in her head. *You will NEVER possess him. I would rather him be dead then lie in your arms ever again. I swear this to the Maker: I will find a way to kill us all.*

More birds filled the room until the inky darkness blotted out everything else.

* * * * *

Aida sat up in bed, screaming, sweat pouring off her brow.

Cullen grabbed her by her shoulders and shook her. "Aida, wake up, you're having a nightmare - babydoll, please wake up."

Aida caught her breath and looked at him. "Did you just call me Babydoll?"

Cullen pulled an adorable face as he thought of a different nickname for her. "Kitten?"

Aida grabbed him and held him tight. He pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"What were you dreaming about?"
"Just the boogieman, I guess. Or boogiewoman."
"I get nightmares too. Some nights are worse than others."

Aida relaxed in his arms as he settled them back into bed. "Just hold me please, until I fall asleep?"

When Aida slipped back into sleep again, she did not dream of a castle on a mountaintop, or a dashing knight in gleaming armor. Her dreams were scattered and strange. She heard thunder again over Haven, and the sky ran down daggers with jeweled handles. She stirred blood into her coffee. She saw a premonition of Cullen, his veins slashed open.
Aida's instincts had been right. After their day of passion in her studio that lead to her bedroom, Cullen-of-the-Fade returned to his usual standoffishness, even though he had been sweet the night she had been shocked by Leliana's sudden re-appearance in her life. He disappeared the next morning, leaving nothing but the indentation of his head on his pillow as a reminder of his presence. Aida had a smoke and a coffee on her balcony, thinking about this while she stared at the two rips in the sky over Haven. The demon who had imprisoned her here seemed to be intent on serving her up some life lessons along with her punishment. Aida now regretted the way she had avoided her real Cullen at the beginning of their relationship. She remembered how had done the exact same thing to him, how she had discouraged him from pursuing her. Now that she was in danger of losing her old life, she knew she had been stupid. She had thrown away so much happiness, and now she was stuck in a bizarro realm looking for a one of a kind knife and a man willing to die for her, unsure she would ever find either if the odds were rigged against her. But Aida had never been prone to moping, she was a doer and a taker. She scribbled her plan on a page of her sketchbook: Get the knife. Learn the magic words. Seduce the man, kill the man. Be born again.

A dark thought hovered in her mind, stubborn and hard to dismiss. Revenge.

Leliana.

She certainly had something do with all of this - and even if she was not the direct reason she was trapped here in the Fade, Aida now believed it was her envy pulsing through this world. The former mayor's appearance in her dream could not be sheer coincidence. In fact, now that Aida had all her memories back, she could now recall her two brief encounters with that woman. Each time Leliana could not hide her deep contempt for her. Each time

We are linked.

We love the same man.

But she can't have him - in the real world, or the Fade.

Aida went online and a few moments later she was printing out a picture of Haven's scheming mayor. She pinned it to her bedroom wall and walked into the kitchen and came back with three paring knives. Aida stood on one end of her bedroom and flung the three knives at the Nightingale. Only one stuck.

She had work to do.

* * * * *

A few days later after a long work shift, Cullen was sitting at the corner of the dive bar around the corner from city hall, waiting for Varric to get back from the bathroom. The dwarf pulled himself up
on to the bar stool next to him, with a twinkle in his eye and his trademark smirk on his face.

"Cullen. There is - quite a girl - sitting in that booth back there. She's reading though. You know what girls say nowadays - don't bother them when they're reading."
"Or when they're wearing headphones."
"Or if they're brandishing a knife at you. Maker knows I've been in that situation before."

Varric looked over his shoulder toward the booth he had gestured at while Cullen looked at a notification on his phone. An intriguing blonde had swiped on his Inquisitr profile and also let him know she was just a few blocks away at a different bar. The thrill of the chase always gave him a ping of adrenaline so he accepted her invitation to meet up tonight.

"I know I shouldn't bother her, but I still want to go talk to her. If you get up to go to the bathroom, try to look at what she's reading, will you?"
"Leave her alone, dwarf. She's reading in a corner of a shitty bar. She wants to - "

Varric nudged him. "That's easy for you to say, in fifteen minutes you'll be off on your next conquest. Come on, help me out. And I promise I won't be too creepy when I approach her."

Cullen sighed and hopped off his seat. "Just this once, and you owe me."

He headed for the bathroom but didn't look at the girl in the booth right away. He primped in the bathroom and then gave the mystery woman a glance on the way back to the bar.

It was Aida, her head bowed over a library book about dwarven art history, with a few more at her side. She had a half-finished beer and an empty shot glance sitting next to her sketchbook where she was drawing a little. The light hit her raven locks and he remembered what it felt like to bury his face in her hair. Cullen sat down next to Varric, more than a little flustered.

"Well?"
"Well what?"
"What was she reading?"

Cullen huffed a sigh, flagging down the bartender to settle his tab. "I don't know, man. I'd leave that one alone, she looks - uh..."

Varric tried to look at his reluctant wingman but Cullen nervously kept his attention on the busy bartender. Varric's grin started to slip from his face. "Wait a second, you don't want me to talk to her, do you? Do you know her?"

Cullen dropped his credit card on his tab, running a hand through his hair, trying to keep his face neutral. "Ah, sort of. She lives next door to me. Trust me, you do not want to get involved with her."

A stubborn glint was creeping into Varric's eyes. "Why? Be specific."

"She thinks she's an artist, so you know - it's all that usual stuff. Chain smoking. Drinking too much. Always melancholy, gives you these moon-y, sad looks for no reason. And - she's a mage, and maybe the mind reader kind. You have to watch what you think around her."

"Ooh, thanks for the tip, I'll try to keep my thoughts benign and non-pornographic while I stare at those pillowy lips. You should run along, Rutherford. The other girl is waiting for you around the corner. You can leave this one to me."

A few minutes later Cullen was striding down the sidewalk to his date when he caught a glimpse of his reflection in a shop window. He was scowling. As he crossed the street toward the nicer bar
where his hookup was waiting for him, he realized he had disliked speaking ill of Aida, but also Varric had been right - he didn't want the dwarf hitting on the girl next door. He wanted to be seated across from her in that booth, watching her draw. He wanted to taste the tequila on her lips.

Cullen shook off his thoughts of Aida. The blonde looked better in person than she did on his phone.

* * * * *

Aida walked home from the bar, whistling a jaunty tune to herself. It had been nice to bump into Varric, who still enjoyed flirting with her in this world as much as he did in the real one. It didn't take much prodding to get him to talk about all the antique dwarven dragon bone knives she had been staring at in her library books, and they had a coffee date in a few days so he could show her a catalogue of antiques his brother dealt in. The Tethras auction house might have the blade she was looking for, but the enchanted, jeweled handle might take more searching. Varric hadn't even asked her why she was interested in such a thing, he was simply glad she didn't kick him out of her booth.

She unlocked her front door and kicked it open, balancing her keys and mail in one hand and the books in the crook of her arm. The first thing she noticed was her patio door was open, and a navy blue blazer jacket was hanging on the back of one of her dining table chairs. She quietly put down her things but held on to the heaviest of the art books, intending to use it as a bludgeon if she had to. She tip toed toward the patio and then froze when she saw a figure on her balcony. Cullen turned around to face her, the wind rustling his hair.

"Is it...you? You-you?"

He gave her one of his crooked smiles and took a step forward. "It's me-me."

She pulled him inside by his tie and then into her arms. "I can't believe you! The other-you could have seen you, then what? Maybe it would have made this entire world collapse on itself!" Aida squeezed him so hard she hoped he awoke with bruises on his arms.

"I fell asleep on my flight from Denerim back to Haven. And here I am."

She swept her hands all over him, through his hair, down his neck and shoulders and arms. She started pulling his dress shirt out of his pants, wanting to feel the lean muscle underneath, but he stopped her.

"Babe, the last time - when we... when I, finished, I woke up. And as much as I liked that, I want to spend some time with you, I -"

Aida laughed, free and easy, the only way she could when the real Cullen was around. "- just want to talk? Not to enforced tired old gender stereotypes but I have literally never heard a man say that, ever."

"Go on, open a bottle of wine and tell me what you've been up to."

Cullen sat down on her love seat and waited for her to join him. After she poured herself some red wine, they curled into each other on the couch like it was a real Thursday night and he was home from work. She told him about Solas's advice in the dream he had conjured for her, and what Cullen had looked like in his full suit of armor.

"Armor, really?"
"You looked good, my love. You had big sword - ",

He kissed her on the ear, giving her gooseflesh. "I still have a big sword."

Aida bit back a giggle and grew serious. "Leliana - she was there too. She threatened us - again."

Cullen squeezed her hand. "It was just a dream."

"No, it wasn't, it felt as real as this does. And I think it's some kind of sign, although I haven't been able to figure it out. Now, it's your turn. Tell me what you've been doing?"

Cullen stared at something on the other side of the room, his demeanor now as serious as hers. "After your funeral, your father insisted I join a support group. It's just a few other people who also have loved ones who are missing, and we get together to talk every week with our therapist. Except..."

She waited for him to continue, her heart already breaking. "You know, they treat me a little differently because I keep insisting you're coming back, and I refuse to stop believing this."

Aida traced his lips with the tip of a finger. "Thank you. Thank you for that. Knowing you are waiting for me is the only thing keeping me going. But..."

Cullen waited for her to continue. Best get this over with.

"I have to tell you - I slept with him. The you-next-door. Whenever I interact with the Fade-Cullen, it seems to weaken whatever spell holds this world together, especially since it seems he was 'programmed' to reject me. The more I win him over, the..."

Aida hid her face in her hands and began to cry. "I'm sorry, Cullen - please forgive me, you must forgive me. It didn't seem right, but, I want to get back to you and -"

Cullen's laughter cut her off and she looked up at him in shock. "What is so fucking funny!?"

"You're apologizing to me, about having sex - with - me. You know, Aida Lyanna Trevelyan, when I met you, standing on that balcony there, on a sunny Saturday morning, in your painter's smock and bare legs, I had no idea shit would get this supernatural."

She nestled into his lap, hiding her face against his shoulder. "All I remember about the first time I saw you are those abs and pecs and lats of yours. Sorry. I know you don't like it when I objectify your beauty."

Now they laughed together and Aida felt more carefree than she had in ages. Even in these extraordinary circumstances, Cullen was always real and more genuine than everyone else she knew or encountered. Her mirth ebbed away when she saw the way he was looking at her.

"Aida. Haven't you realized by now - what we have together, how we feel about each other... it does not surprise me that I loved you in that other world, and that I love you in this one - and continue to love you in the one I live in now."

She sniffled as she downed the rest of the wine in her glass. "I gotta get back, before some other woman snatches you up. Someone is bound to realize how good you are."

Cullen cupped her face with one of his hands, rubbing a thumb over her bottom lip. "You know, just because I can't come, doesn't mean you don't have to."

Aida felt her blood catch on fire at the low rumble of his words. "You have no idea how relieved to
hearing that.

He stood up, lifting her easily in his arms, carrying her to her bedroom. Aida watched the light and shadows playing off his profile as they walked together. My muse. Once in her room, Cullen put her down on her feet and then sat down on the edge of her bed.

"Take your clothes off. I want to watch you."

Aida's fingers moved quickly as she unbuttoned her jeans and unzipped them. "Slow down. And look at me while you do it."

She felt herself getting wet just from the sound of his voice. "Tell me what you want me to take off first."

"Your jeans. They make your ass look incredible. No wonder that idiot next door can't keep his hands off of you."

Aida turned around and began inching her jeans down, letting him get a good look at the tiny hot pink lace underpants she was lucky enough to wearing that night. She stepped out of her pants and turned back to face him. "What next?"

Cullen leaned back on his hands, an infectious smile on his face. "Those funny socks, with the ice cream cones all over them."

Aida snorted, rolling her eyes. "Don't make fun of me!" She snatched them off her feet quickly and threw them into a corner. "Now you've ruined the tone of everything by mentioning my socks."

Cullen smoldered at her. "Take your top off."

She crossed her arms and grabbed the hem of tank top and pulled it up over her head, tossing it aside. She shook out her hair, knowing he liked it loose and falling about her shoulders. She watched his eyes darting over her body, feasting on her skin as she had feasted on his so many times.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered - reverent, worshipful. Aida unhooked her bra and let it drop near her feet. Cullen let a ragged exhale slip from his lips as she hooked two fingers into the straps of her panties and slid them down her legs.

She now stood naked before him, the two of them listening to the other's breathing. Cullen shook his head at her. "I wish I could draw like you can. I wish I capture what I see. I have to be content to remember."

Aida danced her fingertips over her breasts, making her nipples hard. "You don't have to be content to look. You can touch. You can taste."

With a hungry growl in his throat, Cullen grabbed her around the waist, pulling her onto the bed next to him. "Then I shall touch you, and taste you, for as long as I can."

Cullen pulled open her knees, parted her folds, and reached his tongue out to dip it deep into the center of her.

* * * *

The other Cullen was coming home next door. His date did not go well, he hadn't been in top form
tonight, and the beautiful blonde left him feeling cold. He stood in his kitchen, drinking a beer and feeling a little agitated. He remembered one of Aida's little slights she had once shot at him in the elevator - that he rarely slept alone and clearly did not prefer it. He sighed as he checked on Barkley and then headed to his bedroom. He got undressed and into bed, checking his texts and emails before turning in for the night. Cullen reached out to turn off the lamp on his bedside table, and then froze.

He heard a moan - followed by a giggle.

It was Aida, next door. Cullen sat up in bed, listening for more. She said something he could not make out, and then groaned again. He heard the slight creak of her bed, and Cullen's imagination furnished him with a vivid detail - one of Aida's graceful hands, grabbing on to one of the slats of her headboard, to give it a good, hard pull.

He could not quite make out what she was saying, but he could hear her tone - begging, pleading.

Cullen picked up his phone again and tapped out a frantic message to Varric: "Bro, how'd it go with my neighbor? You next door right now?"

Varric didn't answer right away so Cullen had no choice but to sit there and listen to the sensual moans from girl he was blaming for his bad date tonight. He leaned against his own headboard, unable to not eavesdrop. He should get up and go watch TV in the living room, go for a walk, do just about anything else. His phone buzzed on the pillow next to him and he snatched it up right away.

"Nah, she only wanted to talk - and about my brother's business too. Gonna hang with her soon tho, not giving up." Cullen rolled his eyes at the heart-eyes-emoji Varric added at the end of his message before returning the phone to his nightstand.

He laid down, still unable to get up and leave. Jealousy glued him to the spot. He wanted to tell himself he was only feeling this way because he could not get the blonde to follow him home, but it was more than that. He wanted to be the reason she was moaning next door.

Cullen listened to her breathy sighs building, her moans becoming more like desperate cries, and then the cries turning into emphatic swears. She got louder and louder, begging for more. He heard her shout, "Make me come, baby - please!" and he imagined her back arching, her lips parted.

Aida's long, sweet wail as she climaxed felt like a spell spreading throughout his body, from the top of his head down to his toes.

He rolled over on his side with a pout.

They were overdue for a drawing session.

The next time he was between those thighs he'd wipe the memory of that orgasm clean from her mind.
The days after a visit from the real Cullen were always hard. Aida always found herself torn between bursts of ambition, research and planning, and bouts of melancholy and depression. Her moods swung wildly between hope and pessimism, and it was beginning to take an emotional toll on her. To simplify her life a little, she had been avoiding the Cullen-facsimile next door, thinking it wouldn’t make too much of an impact in either of their lives. She dutifully took care of Barkley but did not seek out his owner’s company, and remained oblivious to the fact that the sound of her passionate climax filtering through the wall the last time the real Cullen visited had been like a siren song to the man next door.

Aida was dropping Barkley off on a Friday afternoon when she bumped right into Cullen-of-the-Fade, in his own doorway.

"Maker's toes, you scared me! What are you doing home this early? Shouldn't you be off making sure the Mayor doesn't trip and fall on the sidewalk? Or get shot in the face by mage militants?"

He ignored her teasing, blocking the doorway with his frame. "Aida. H-how are you? I haven't seen you in a while."

Aida opened her mouth but said nothing, noting to herself that this was the most excited this man had ever been to see her. His voice got lower, more intimate. "I was just thinking about this the other day... I haven't posed for you - since that first time."

She kept her eyes trained on a spot outside of his condo. "Yeah, ahh, we should get together soon then. I'll call you."

Cullen put a hand on the frame, really blocking her in his place now. "I'm free today? Wasn't expecting to be dismissed at 3, and I don't have any plans." He cut her off before she had a chance to sass him about anything. "And no, I don't have a date tonight."

Barkley had wandered up to her during their conversation and had sat down on her foot, as though doing the bidding of his master to keep her there a little longer. "Oh, I don't know, I was actually
going to go check something out at the Natural History museum this afternoon."

He lowered his arm with obvious disappointment. "If I was no good at it - the posing, that is - you can just tell me. It won't hurt my feelings."

Aida got a few visceral flashbacks of how his skin looked in the lighting she had set up for that session. Aida kept her thoughts to herself. You just don't go around telling a man to his face that you could spend an eternity worshiping the elegant, dipping line of his right bicep.

"No no, Cullen, you did a wonderful job. I've just been preoccupied with other things."

Cullen ran a nervous hand through his hair. "Oh, yeah, heard you've been hanging out with my friend Varric. He told me you're obsessed with dwarven artifacts and daggers and the like. You're an odd one, Trevelyan. No friends, no family, no job - and weird hobbies."

Aida fought the urge to reach out and undo the tie knot around his neck, she knew he usually removed his tie the first chance he got when he got home from work. "Duping attractive men into taking all of their clothes off while I stare at them for at least two hours is not a weird hobby, Ser."

"So you admit you duped me?" Cullen cracked a smile that made her miss her real lover more than ever.

She shook her head. "I didn't dupe you. You willingly disrobed. And, you started the other stuff too, if I recall."

Cullen stood there, staring at her, still half blocking the doorway. She sighed, sensing he was waiting for her to kick the ball back to him. "So, do you... want to walk over to the museum with me or what?"

He snapped to attention, not hiding his eagerness. "Let me just change. Barks, you keep her company."

Barkley trotted around her in a circle before stopping in front of her to give her a snort of approval.

* * * * *

They walked across downtown together, not chatting. Aida had too much on her mind, mostly how rare dragon bone artifacts were turning out to be. Solas's throwaway remark about needing to steal one was starting to sound like a more viable plan every day. She was imagining herself sliding under a grid of red laser security beams in Haven's stately Natural History Museum when she realized they were already at the ticket counter and Cullen was paying for her entrance fee.

"You didn't need to do that, here, let me pay you back."

Aida reached for her purse but he brushed her hand away. "Don't. And don't argue about it. Where do you want to start?"

Aida had wanted to go straight to the dagger Solas told her about, which was in the Orzamarr antiquities collection, but Cullen's eyes were lit up with a childlike glow as he looked up at the dragon bone skeleton that hung from the ceiling in the main hall. "How about we start around the corner, in the Indigenous People of Ferelden wing, and we'll work our way around?"

They strolled together through the exhibits, the museum blissfully empty this late on a Friday afternoon. Aida stopped to sketch objects she liked and Cullen waited patiently for her each time.
Aida felt strange about all of this - she and real-world Cullen had never been to this museum together in their courtship. She was doing something new with not-quite-Cullen and it was sort of - tripping her out. *Perhaps when I get back, I will take the other Cullen here, and we'll have the same date.*

*My life - lives? Are so weird.*

They meandered their way into bird exhibit. She watched him staring at a stuffed dodo in a display. He noticed her watching him and gave her a crooked smile as he pointed at the odd bird. "What? You're not going to draw his picture? Look at his beak. Look at that face!" Aida shook her head at him, biting back her grin. *Great. He's doing it again. Adorable doodlebug alert.*

Cullen lead her into the hall of mammals, which was dark, except for the lit up displays of majestic, exotic animals. They walked side by side up to where a noble lion was standing over its pray, one paw on a bloody gazelle. She looked at his profile.

"He reminds me of you."
"I'll take that as a compliment."
"It was one."

He was about to respond when he spotted something on the other side of the room that made his countenance change. He stepped closer to her, his hand grasping her arm above the elbow.

"Kiss me. Now."
"What?"
"Please. I'll explain later."

Before Aida could agree or protest Cullen had twined an arm around her waist, scooping her closer to him. His kiss landed lightly at first, and then deepened when she responded to it. When she slipped her tongue into his mouth, he slid a hand into one of the back pockets of her jeans, squeezing her ass. She heard someone clearing their throat and Cullen pulled away, leaving her full of regret.

"Hey, Cullen. Long time no see. Never did get that phone call from you the next day - or the day after that - or the day after that or - "

A beautiful, buxom red-head was standing near them, her arms crossed and a grimace on her face. Cullen cleared his throat a few times before speaking. "Ah yeah, sorry, I - " She surprised both of them by giving him a hard shove with both hands before storming away, her footsteps echoing around the hall.

Aida snorted. "Friend of yours?"
"Not anymore, I guess. That went better than I thought it would, honestly - although I thought the kissing would have kept her from - "
"- shoving you? If anything, that guaranteed it."

Aida strolled away from him, toward the wing of antiquities, but he stopped her in front of the display of four graceful halla, one of them with a head raised and nostrils flared as though she were catching the scent of a predator in the wind.

"Hey. Kiss me again."

Aida peered over her shoulder for a moment. "Oh, is the red head back? Or, a different slighted lover?"

"No, kiss me because - why not."
Cullen drew her body flush against his again, brushing his lips against hers and making her sigh before opening her mouth up with another exploratory kiss. She held on to his shoulders, rocking onto her toes to get closer to him. One of Cullen's hands crept under the hem of her t-shirt, the tips of his fingers grazing against her stomach before travelling higher to cup one of her breasts. She was about to brazenly grab his cock through his pants when they were interrupted again, this time by a museum security guard coughing diplomatically.

"Folks, we're going to close in half an hour. If there's something else you'd like to see besides - each other - you should head over to it now."

Cullen cupped her face with a hand, rubbing a thumb over her bottom lip. It made Aida's heart clench. How often had the other Cullen done that to her after kissing her? She stopped to correct herself. *No, not other-Cullen. The real-Cullen.* Thinking of him made her remember why they had come to the museum in the first place.

"Quick, Rutherford - antiquities!"

With a laugh they were off, holding hands and running through the museum even as guards urged them to slow down. They slid on the slick floors, shrieking with delight, until they hit the plush velvet carpet in the antiquities wing. Aida went straight for the beautiful dragon bone dagger, set with jewels by mage artisans of the past. She sketched it quickly, a slight sweat breaking out on her brow. She could feel the object's magic humming toward her - it felt like an anchor, a true object of power - a ripple from the real world reaching out to her. This was the key, surely this was her way out of this strange world.

Cullen caught up with her, standing at her side - and the dagger began to sing.

"Do you hear that?"

Cullen put a hand on the back of her neck, weaving his fingers into her hair a little. "Hear what?"

She looked at him with some alarm. "Uhm, step closer to it for a second, do you see the delicate etchings on the handle, they're so pretty..."

He fell for her ruse and took two steps closer to the dagger - whose melancholy melody grew louder as Cullen leaned closer to it.

Aida blanched. If that was the key - he was the lock. Solas's theory could very well be right. Blood magic got her here, and it would get her out again - by forcing her to do the one thing she didn't want to do. She heard the elf's solemn voice in her head - "It's not him, Aida - he is but a shadow on the wall."

A shadow who had just reached out to hold her hand, a shy look on his face.

"Why are you so interested in this stuff? Why knives?"

"I don't know really. Don't you just think it's beautiful? It has power, elegance - it can peel an apple, or kill a man."

Cullen studied the blade, sitting on a plush emerald pillow. Aida could have sworn the knife even sighed at him, at the end of its little melody, before it began singing again.

"Let's go Cullen, they're going to close in five minutes. And - you're holding my hand, you know."

"I do know."
After they left the museum, Aida let him take her to a gastropub around the corner from the restaurant, where she watched him eat an enormous burger and almost all of a basket of fries. During their dinner conversation, Aida learned for the first time that her Cullens were not identical. This dopple-Cullen was, well, there was no elegant way to put it: he was sort of a "bro". He lacked the refinement of the gentleman she knew in the real world, the one who knew how to wear cuff links, who could make her a perfect martini, and always kept his hand on the small of her back as they walked from the valet to whatever wonderful, romantic restaurant he had chosen for her. This Cullen liked sports, was a little vain, and merrily kept up with the amount of tequila shots she ordered. It didn't bother her though, it was sort of - interesting - to get to know this version of him. Strange that this trap she was locked in had provided her with a copy of her man, who had the wrong insides - but it also made sense. Whoever put her here didn't know him the way she knew him.

"Hey, you're not saying much."
"I don't really know anything about - um, football. I don't really like sports."

Cullen reached for a shrimp on her plate and Aida slapped his hand away. "Excuse me! You ate all the fries, how are you still hungry?"
"I'm a big guy, I need to eat a lot, keep up my strength - for later."

Aida leaned back in the booth, biting into the piece of food he had tried to steal. "And what's going on later?"

He mimicked her body language, fixing his face to be nonchalant. "I don't know. Shouldn't you feel inspired after looking at all that art and artifacts? Perhaps you feel like drawing."
"It's only half-time, Cullen. Don't you want to see if your beloved Grey Wolves will win?"

He shook his head slowly and Aída was reminded of the lion in the museum - commanding, powerful, predatory.

She flagged down their waitress, snapping her fingers in the air to get the woman's attention. It made Cullen throw his head back and laugh.

Cullen kissed her at every intersection, always keeping a possessive arm wrapped around her waist. When they arrived at their front doors, Aida pulled away from his lips to ask him an important question - "Your place, or mine?"

He pushed her up against her own door, dipping his head to lick her earlobe. "Yours."

Aida unlocked her door and before she could react, he had swept her into his arms, carrying her in. Aida nuzzled his neck as he carried her through her condo. The real Cullen would have preferred his place - although he was too polite to ever say so, she knew he thought her place was chaotic and messy, the opposite of the law of order he imposed in his own home. This Cullen didn't care, this Cullen wanted to devour her whole. He laid her down on her sheets and the two began undressing, fast.

"I thought I was going to do some drawing?" He flung her bra away and kneaded her breasts while she undid his belt. Cullen smirked at her as she unzipped his pants. "Later. Doesn't matter. I don't need to trick you into taking your clothes off."
As soon as they were naked, Cullen pressed her wrists to the mattress above her head, his lips hovering above hers. Aida felt like all she could see were his honeyed eyes gazing down at her.

"Tell me how you want it."

He lowered his lips closer to hers, just breathing on her, and Aida would have swooned had she not already been flat on her back. "Go slow. Make it last."

Cullen rolled off of her to her side, trailing the fingertips of one of his hands down the middle of her body, between her breasts and across her stomach, until his hand landed on her mound. His lips nipped at hers as two of his fingers slipped between her folds and Aida opened her legs wide so he had better access. Cullen circled those two fingers over her clit - watching her face as he stimulated her lightly with gentle, little strokes.

"Cullen - more please."
"You said to go slow, Aida. Open your mouth."

She obliged him and he swiped the tip of his tongue against hers, making her moan, "Oh Maker, Cullen. I want your mouth on my clit." He bit her on her shoulder as his two fingers into her easily, wet with her desire. "Not yet, baby. You said to make it last, and I always follow orders."

Aida grasped his cock in response, making him groan and shut his eyes. She pumped his cock while he continued exploring her pussy with his fingers, their desperate whines against each other's mouths getting more and more desperate and emphatic.

"Cullen, please!"

He ignored her, sucking one of her nipples instead, making her arch her back, trying to push more of her breast into his mouth. "Cullen, please..."

Cullen's fingers moved south, teasing her other entrance before dipping back into her cunt. "Please, Cullen!" He pretended to be deaf, still flicking at the sensitive tip of her nipple with the tip of his tongue. Aida was soaking the sheets beneath her and writhing against his hand now.

"That's it, buddy. You can't make me beg three times and not give me what I want."

Aida sat up, crawling over his body, giving him the opportunity to give her a few saucy smacks against her butt. "Trevelyan, just where do you think you're goin'?

She cut him off, diving her mouth onto his cock and pushing her cunt onto his face. She heard him laugh between her thighs for a second, but then he moaned right against her clit when she drew him as deeply as she could until his cockhead was at the back of her throat. Aida enjoyed the manly taste of his skin, sometimes brushing her tongue across both his balls before going back to working his shaft, while Cullen flicked at her pearl from side to side, holding on to her butt with two firm hands.

Aida felt her orgasm growing closer, but needed more than this, she needed his thick cock filling her up. She scrambled forward off his face and then sunk onto his manhood, keeping her back to him. Aida bit her lip as she bounced on top of him, giving him a good view of her ass.

"Maker, you're a wild woman, I don't even have to do anything."

Aida responded by rolling her hips in a wide circle, pushing her hair to one side to look at him over her shoulder.

"Do you not like sexually aggressive women? Because I can -"
She dismounted from him and crawled back up the bed with a giggle, lying down at his side with a meek look on her face.

"- just lay here and make halla eyes at you if you like," undercutting her modest words by opening her thighs for him. Cullen rolled over on top of her without a second invitation, filling her up with his cock once again. He pressed his forehead to hers as he eased his way into her hot, satin-y sheath with excruciatingly slow thrusts.

"You're always joking, Aida."

Aida grabbed onto his ass, trying to push him in deeper. "So?"

He brushed some hair off her face with a tender touch of his finger tips. "You don't have to. I already like you. A lot."

They both paused in their love-making for a moment, looking at each other. This was exactly what Aida didn't want - to develop feelings for a quasi-Cullen that might not even exist while a real one was waiting for her - and to encourage those feelings in return. But here they were, falling for each other all over again.

Was she lucky to love the same man twice? Actually - did this count as three times, considering the Aida without memories fell in love with Cullen too?

_The man is balls deep in your pussy right now, Trevelyan. Just - enjoy it and stop thinking so much!_

Aida pulled him down with a hand on the back of his neck, seeking a passionate kiss. She bit his lip when he pulled away, ignoring all her jumbled thoughts.

"Make me come, my muse. Make me come hard."

Cullen's braced himself with two hands on either side of her head as his hips picked up speed, his eyes squinted shut in concentration. Aida pressed her heels into the small of his back, giving each one of his thrusts an extra push. She held on to his biceps, watching his face as he rutted her and the headboard began banging against the wall in a steady rhythm.

His golden eyes snapped open to look down at her and his passionate gaze was as palpable as a jolt of electricity. The way he looked at her made Aida's climax surge through all her nerve endings as she pressed her head into the pillow under her, crying out in total abandon. Cullen followed her over the edge, filling her full of his seed as he gasped against her lips.

Cullen rolled off of her catching his breath, the two of them facing each other. He laughed, unable to help himself. "You are intense, Trevelyan. I confess..."

He reached out to touch her face and she took his hand, turning it toward her to kiss him on the palm. "...you are like no other woman I have ever known."

* * * * *

Aida waited for him to fall asleep before slipping out of his arms and going out to the living room for a cigarette. She couldn't sleep, a troubling idea kept pacing back and forth in her mind, that even the pleasure she felt in Cullen's embrace could be part of the trap she was in.

When Fade-Cullen would not love her, it felt like torture - and now when he did, it felt like a tactic to make her forget her real mission, to get back to her real life at any cost.
Aida smoked and pondered all of this. One name kept snarling at the edge of her thoughts: Leliana. After her disruptive presence in Solas's dream, Aida had taken notice of one major detail in this other realm - Leliana could do no wrong, according to the TV and the newspapers. And she noticed Cullen never complained about working for her, and never mentioned her at all. Sometimes Aida had even fretted that when he did not come back to his condo until late that perhaps he could have been warming his boss's bed on those nights.

Aida grabbed the remote nearby, turning the TV to the all-news station. The Venitori Independence State was always making news even here in this other-Thedas, dropping bombs over cities in the Arbor Wilds, gaining no foothold there, and only killing innocent civilians in their futile quest for total mage supremacy.

An idea began to glow in her imagination, like a candle in a darkened room.

Corypheus was still a menace here, but he had not put Leliana on his hit list - yet.

Perhaps he could be persuaded to do so?

Aida could see the talking heads on TV, their practiced news delivery tinged with disbelief as they reported that the black sheep daughter of one of the richest men in the world became bewitched by the idea of uniting Thedas under mage rule - and cut the throat of Haven's progressive mayor from ear to ear.

No, she would not sacrifice another Cullen, real or not. She had done it once and it got her into this situation.

She would take the opportunity here, in this strange world, to take her revenge on the woman who sought to keep her and Cullen apart. She would do a desperate thing instead - go rogue, go dark. Go evil.

The news story about the air strikes in Arbor Wilds was finishing up with footage from a recent video Corypheus had released onto the Internet. He looked right into the camera and said in Tevene, "Believers! Join me and justice will be ours."

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is called The Radicalization of Aida Trevelyan so GET YE PREPARED

And don't forget to follow me on Tumblr: http://thetemplarandtherogue.tumblr.com/
I know I said this chapter would be entitled "The Radicalization of Aida Trevelyan" - but I'll save that for chapter 32. Settle in for some smut and feels, my favorite combo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Corypheus calls to me."

These were the first words Aida wrote in her new journal. It was not a sentence she believed at the moment, but committing it to paper made her feel - more the part.

She started to fill the other pages with news clippings and notes, especially about mages whose dedication to the Venitori Independence State had surprised their friends and loved ones. They were all young men and women who left their comfortable homes, walking out on their lives as though they were going out to run an errand - only to emerge months later on the other side of Thedas, with a bomb strapped to their bodies, or an assault rifle in their hands, pointed at unlucky citizens who had tried to stand up to them. Aida tracked down countless stories like these looking for patterns.

How exactly do you go and sign up to become a militant mage?, Aida scribbled onto a fresh page. You don't exactly just go waltzing into a recruitment center.

A vigorous knock at the door made her jump and slam her journal shut. She jammed it into a free space on her book shelf before heading to see who it was. A quick glance through her peep hole revealed Fade Cullen, undoing his knot of his tie.

"Aidaaaaa. I know you're home. Come on, babe. Open up, let's get dinner."

She sighed, leaning against the door. She remembered something else she had scribbled down in red ink on a page in her journal.

I don't want Cullen to know. Either one of him.
If I'm going to do this - I will do it alone.

"Aida?"

She opened the door, torn between wanting to spend time with him because he was only Cullen she had in this world, and wanting him to stay as far away from her, the murderous mage with blood magic on her mind.

"Cullen, is this what you do now? Just bang on my door whenever you want?"

Aida tried to keep her face neutral and calm as he smoldered at her with one of his sexy half-grins.

"Hello neighbor. Neighbor with benefits."

Despite her not having opened the door too wide, Cullen stepped into her foyer, filling the space immediately with his predatory, masculine energy. He put his hands on her hips and dipped his head to kiss her, before backing her up a few feet to press her against the wall. He nuzzled her neck,
making her sigh.

"Thought about you all day."
"Cullen, you can't just come over whenever you feel like it."

When he responded, Aida felt his lips moving against her earlobe. "Says who."

"Says me! I could be working. Or, I could be entertaining a gentleman caller."

Fade Cullen pressed his hips against hers, scoffing. "Pfft. Highly unlikely. I've only heard a man over here the one time, and - "

He planted three light kisses against her lips. " - pretty sure I fucked you harder than that."

Aida snorted, unable to believe this - if only he knew who was in her bed that night! Cullen gave her one more peck on the forehead and then sauntered into her living room, dropping himself onto her couch. She followed him in quickly, snapping her laptop screen shut before he could see what she had been reading - a Denerim Times longform piece on the Venitori Independence State.

"Come on, I wasn't going to look!"

She turned the TV off too. Since her decision to go rogue, she had done nothing but consume the Orlesian news, finding their coverage more thorough. Cullen huffed at her. "Hey, I wanted to see how the Great Wolves did tonight."

"You have a TV in your condo, you know. And maybe Barkley's lonely."
"Trevelyan, are you trying to get rid of me? Do you - really have a boyfriend coming over?"

Aida sat down on the couch, but at a platonic-friend distance.

"Well, do you? You're not answering." She saw hurt flickering over his features. "If you really need me to leave..."

"No, I don't - although...he does show up when he can, and can't really tell me when he's going to be - in town. It's a long distance thing. A very long distance thing."

Cullen scooted closer to her on the sofa. "Sounds serious, but very complicated?"

"It is. I love him."
"Why aren't you with him then?"

Aida stood up, tears forming in her eyes now. There was a bottle of red wine on the kitchen counter and she poured them each a glass.

"We can't be with together at the moment."

They clinked their glasses together but neither of them offered a toast. She could tell by his face that he was still curious about her mystery man.

"Does he know about us?"
"He does."

"And he's cool with it?"
"Surprisingly cool with it."
Aida watched Cullen sip his wine, a crease in his brow and a thoughtful look on his face.

"What? What are you thinking about?"
"I'm thinking I might be a little jealous of this man."

Aida snorted again, almost spilling her wine, and then her snort devolved into a round of giggling. Cullen drained his glass and put it down on her coffee table, waiting for her to finish. She wiped a tear from under an eye and looked at Fade-Cullen.

"The two of you - are just so alike, I'm sorry, it just struck me as incredibly hilarious."

He pouted back at her. "Go get dressed, Trevelyan. Let me spoil you by taking you to a nice restaurant - because the other guy can't."

* * * * *

Aida enjoyed watching Cullen-of-the-Fade squirm through a more formal dinner than he was used to. He struggled with his chopsticks, ate a mountain of spicy tuna rolls, poured soy sauce on everything, and kept a hand on her knee under the sushi bar through their entire meal.

As they walked back to their condo, Aida noticed the sky glitching out above them. It had been doing this more and more as her relationship with this Cullen progressed. She was definitely breaking the code of this trap she was in, but she would not be satisfied until she was home again. They were strolling past a department store when Aida stopped Cullen by pulling on his hand. A small crowd of people had gathered on the sidewalk to look at a gargantuan TV displayed in the window, currently tuned to the news. The crawl at the bottom of the screen made Aida's pulse quicken.

**HOSTAGE CRISIS: Four Ferelden Doctors Missing in the Arbor Wilds**

They flashed up pictures of the idealistic young people, each who had joined humanitarian organizations hoping to bring aid to the troubled region. The program cut to footage of what happened to the last doctor captured by the Venatori and a few people in the crowd turned away before they could see the masked man push the sobbing young man down onto his knees before the camera. The angry mage raised his enchanted sword above his head in a graceful arc.

Cullen pulled on her hand. "Come on, babe. I know what happens next, and it ain't pretty."

As they waited for the light to change at the next intersection, Cullen kissed her neck, one hand sweeping south toward the curve of her buttocks, but Aida could only think about one thing at the moment - getting captured, on purpose, in Corypheus's backyard.

* * * * *

Cullen did have other things on his mind, after their sushi date. He kept her locked in his arms, pressed up in the space between their front doors. Cullen asked her a familiar question, "Your place or mine?"

Aida had to extricate her tongue from his mouth before she could answer him. "Yours, darling."

He unlocked his front door with quick fingers and then picked her up and carried her over the transom as though they were newlyweds. It made Aida giggle and kick her feet, flinging her high
heels off, caring not that Barkley was going to find them and chew them into into a pulp.

Cullen laid her gently on his bed and began running his hands up and down her body with an intent look in his eye.

"Cullen, what's up with you tonight?" she asked, as he lavished kisses on the top of her foot. "I wasn't lying earlier, when I said I had been thinking about you all day."

He graced his hands up the back of her thighs to locate the straps of her panties under her dress. He pulled them down her legs, brushing his rough fingertips over her thighs as he did so.

"I've been thinking about your beautiful brown skin, lying on my sheets..."

With two deft flicks of his fingers, the straps of her silk shift fell off her shoulders. He began peeling the garment from her body, landing kisses all over her as he stripped her of her dress.

"I've been thinking about what you have between your thighs..."

He opened her legs wide, hissing with desire.

"I've been thinking about how sweet you always taste -"

He dipped his head to lap at her pearl, making Aida grab the sheets next to her and cry out. He looked at her, over her mound.

"And now I can't stop thinking about how you don't belong to me - but..."

Aida popped up on her elbows to make eye contact with him. "But?"

He grinned at her, "He's not here right now to stop me, is he?"

He pressed his lips back to her cunt, making her scream in delight again. *Why is he always so good at this? If there are a thousand other Cullens in the multiverse - are they all good at this?* The idea made Aida giggle and moan at the same time, especially as Cullen slid two fingers into her pussy and began pulsing them in and out of her. Aida writhed her hips up and down, enjoying his tongue's torturous circles and flicks. She grabbed the backs of her own thighs and held herself wide open for him, swearing and babbling praise about his tongue, until she finally moaned at him, "Why are you still fully clothed, Cullen?"

He sucked her clit into his mouth, making her hips buck under him - but stopped short of making her come. "Maker's tits, I had totally forgotten. My bad!"

Aida whimpered with distress as his mouth left her quim and watched with some surprise as Cullen got undressed so fast he was practically a blur. Before she could cue him to what she wanted, his weight settled on the mattress next to her and she felt herself rolled on to her side so that he was behind her. He held one of her legs up as he inched his thick manhood into her in one sweet thrust and Aida melted into his arms.

"How's that, baby?"

"You're so good, you're so -"

He cut her off with a sharp thrust of his hips. "What was that? You didn't finish?"

Aida tried to answer again, "You're so - "

Cullen pushed himself in even deeper, making her squeak in surprise.
"I'm sorry, I keep cutting you off - what was that?"

"You're so -"

Cullen began pumping into her in earnest now, making her drop her head back against his in ecstasy. He reached his other arm around her to flick at her clit again and she felt engulfed by him, the heat of his muscles, her body pinned next to his. Aida reached down to cover his hand with hers, her fingers brushing against the cock pushing in and out of her. They clutched each other, becoming one and she finally got to answer him - "You're so good, Cullen. So good." He rolled his hips in a circle in response, growling against her shoulder as she reached back to weave her fingers through his hair.

There was no time, in his arms. Impaled on his cock, her worries drifted away - until he spoke again.

"I wish you were mine, Trevelyan. Mine forever."

She turned her head to look at him, and those eyes locked onto hers, flecked with gold. She could not lie to him. "I am yours, Cullen. More than you can ever know."

Cullen squeezed her tighter and fucked her with a ruthless hunger, three of his fingers still working her pearl, the other hand on her windpipe, choking her a little. Her vision blurred as her orgasm spread out across her limbs. Lost in a haze of pleasure, she was vaguely aware of Cullen pushing himself into her sheath as far as he could go as he came, his cock jerking hard as he shot his seed deep within her.

Aida sighed as she felt Cullen relax next to her. She wove her fingers between his and kissed him on the knuckles. With a little nudge he encouraged her to roll onto her side to face him.

"Aida, did I cross a line? By saying...what I said?"

She brushed her fingertips over his lips. "No. You didn't. Don't worry about it." She walked two fingers up his biceps with a coy look on her face. "Rest now. You did - a very - good - job - tonight."

Cullen kissed her, getting on top of her again, the two of them giggling as Cullen whispered into her ear. "Give me five minutes, I can give you an encore."

* * * * *

Cullen awoke the next morning, feeling refreshed, the way he always did when he had a body to curl his around at night. He reached out a hand toward the pillow next to his, hoping his fingers would be tangled in midnight black hair, but instead he felt nothing. Cullen snapped his eyes open. Aida was gone.

He pulled himself out of bed and stalked through his condo, looking for any other sign of her. Barkley was chewing on one of her high heels from last night, not even bothering to look up at his master. He noticed she had made him a pot of coffee, and it was percolating away in the kitchen. He was about to look for his phone when he finally saw it sitting on his dining table - a letter, in a rose-colored envelope, his name was written on it, in her elegant handwriting that looked as though it were from another time. Cullen felt his heart squeeze. His instincts told him this was no love letter. He sat down to read it.

My dearest Cullen -

I'm going away for a while, and I'm not sure when - or if - I will ever be back. I have had a calling of
sorts, one that I cannot explain to you because surely you would try to talk me out of putting myself in danger. But before I leave, I must urge to tell you something, something that I am sure will make you think I'm crazy - and if that is the case, so be it. Write me off as another "crazy chick" who stumbled through your life, another bullet you dodged. I'm sure you will have another beautiful woman in your bed soon enough.

So here I go. This is my story.

I'm not from here, and I don't mean Haven, or the Free Marches where my family is from, or anywhere else in this Thedas.

I'm from another world - and magic trapped me here.

Your time as a Templar must have exposed you to some extraordinary truths, and this is just another one of them. What feels real to you is very much not real to me. My friends, my family - and my lover - wait for me in that other world. I'm going away to try to find my way home, and it might entail me doing some bad things to do so.

The other man you claimed to be jealous of last night - is you.

I know you better than you think I know you. I know how you got that scar on your lip, I know when and where you adopted Barkley, your favorite foods, what makes you laugh and cry. I have held you when you awoke from your nightmares. We were both so lost until we met each other. I was afraid of love until you saved me.

The last time I saw the other you, he was sacrificing all the blood in his body to make me whole again. I suspect an equal amount of blood must be spilled here to return me to him. No, not to him - but to you.

I know it makes no sense. I know you will think I am crazy. I am sorry for all of this, I am sorry I got involved in your life. I should have left you alone.

Do not try to find me, but know this, I love you, Cullen. I love you so much I would do incredible things to be re-united with you.

Please be well, please be safe. I wish you only sweet dreams.

Yours, in the past, present, future - and any other world where I can find you.

Aida Lyanna Trevelyan.

* * * * *

Cullen read it three more times and then put the letter down and dashed through his living room, out his front door, to bang on hers. He pressed his forehead to her door and spoke in a calm, clear voice: "Aida, are you still there? Don't go, please, let's talk - I want to talk to you."

He heard only silence from the other side. She was gone, and he did not know where or what she was up to.

He wanted to tell her he believed her.
(This chapter was my little homage to Outlander - especially to a certain moment in season 1/book 1.)

ALSO CULLEN SAID THE TITLE OF THE FIC! Maker, I love it when they do that in movies & TV shows.
The Radicalization of Aida Trevelyan

Chapter Notes

(Sorry, no #CullenSmut or #CullenFeels but I want to get back to that ASAP as much as you do.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aida stared at the little boy sitting on the chair in front of her, covered in ash and his own blood. He could only stare back at her, shell-shocked and blank.

Venatori missile strikes had flattened a village near her Healers Without Borders mobile unit and it would be a long night of soul-numbing work trying to patch up the survivors. What was left of them. A wave of hysterical families had come stumbling into camp after midnight, weeping about the people they had to leave behind. Aida had no time to think about how she didn't want to be stationed in the Hissing Wastes, farther from Corypheus's direct impact. Tonight she would not be able to step out for a quiet smoke break to look at the expansive desert sky. She wouldn't get to sleep for hours, on the small, cramped cot that was assigned to her. There was no time for any of these things yet she still thought of Cullen constantly. He - and the countless soldiers who came before him in history - were right. War is hell. There is nothing glamorous or heroic or noble about it. It reduced people to simple emotions - fear - or hate. And now she had dropped herself into the middle of it on purpose for her own selfish reasons.

Aida cleaned the little boy up, being soothing and gentle, humming under her breath so he had something to listen to instead of the sound of relentless bombing coming from where he had fled. She found an empty bed in a their unit for him and checked his vitals one more time before noticing the child was focusing on her.

"Close your eyes, little guy. You're safe here."

He peered at her with a mournful, broken look. Aida searched her memory for the 'Vint word for "safe" and murmured it to him. The boy's sweet brown eyes finally closed and she brushed the hair off his forehead. Aida remembered another time and another place, when she had whimsically daydreamed about what it would be like to have Cullen's child growing inside of her. She shook her head, denying herself the false comfort of nostalgia. This was her life - for now. And for Maker knows how long.

A voice broke into her thoughts. Hawke, one of her supervisors, was standing in the doorway of the triage area. "Aida, you need to rest too, you've been on your feet for more than 12 hours." Aida swiveled in her chair, taking in the sight of the striking, broad-shouldered Grey Warden. Must he be so blighted attractive? She didn't want to have awkward sexual tension with some new man she did not even know in the real world, but Aida had to admit, she was lonely, and their situation always stressful. The workplace flirting helped them get through the bleakness.

Aida was musing to herself for a nanosecond about what it would be like to hold on to those shoulders while Hawke's hips rolled against hers when the crack of nearby artillery fire startled them both. "That sounds close - closer than it has all week." The man looked alarmed but it sent Aida's heart pounding in a different manner. She wanted the baddies to get closer. Every thought she had not fixated upon Cullen were all about the madman Corypheus and how he could change her life
once again with just one decision. She wanted him to find her.

A mortar landed close enough to make Aida's ears ring and Hawke grabbed her hand and pulled her after him now. "Shit, these bastards are feisty tonight. We may have to move - right now!" Aida glanced over her shoulder at the boy who was now sitting up in bed, his two arms reached out to her. "I'll be back, don't worry!"

The two darted through the different units of the mobile encampment, shouting orders. They needed to figure out who could walk and who would need to be carried, how many supplies they could grab and load onto the few trucks and jeeps. Hawke stopped her in a hallway, where the lights were flickering on and off as the mortars landed closer and closer.

"Aida! I know this is weird to bring up at the moment, but - I think you are - incredible."

Screams pierced the air, coming from the wing just to the north of them. "Hawke! This is not the time or the place - "

"It's just, if we get separated tonight, or something happens, I would have kicked myself for not having said so."

Aida felt like this was all unfolding in a dream. Hawke kept talking but she could not hear him over the relentless rumbling of helicopters hovering nearby. The shouting coming from the other side of the compound got more pitched and urgent and then another mortar impact sent the two of them tumbling to the ground, Hawke protecting her body with his.

"They're here - aren't they?"

The lights went out and Aida heard the sound of shuffling from one end of the hallway. She peeped over his shoulder and three heavily-armed Venatori rebels were shining flashlights toward them.

Hawke looked down at her, his eyes intense and serious. "Stay calm, don't panic, and don't draw attention to yourself."

"I promise to try to do at least two of those things." Aida lifted her head off the ground two inches to press her lips to his in a fleeting kiss.

* * * * *

The mages shoved Aida and Hawke into a room where they had gathered up the other staff and patients who had not hidden themselves well enough or made a desperate run for it during their siege. The Vint at her back shoved her forward roughly with a push of his Kalashnikov barrel, herding her and Hawke into the crowd of cowering would-be victims.

She knelt with the others, watching the man who seemed to be the head mage pacing back and forth, communicating with unseen colleagues with a walkie-talkie. Aida tried to follow his lightning fast Tevene. It sounded like they had stumbled upon their camp and now didn't exactly know what to do with them. She heard the verb 'execute' being bandied around and it made her dart a hand out to squeeze Hawke's hand. The head mage finished up his call and turned to face the group, waving his gun at them for emphasis.

"So, my little friends - my captains and I are making our way through your neighborhood, and we have a few questions about possible military installations in Fairel. We know many of you were - fleeing - in that direction. Anyone know anything? Hmmm, how about you, my Elvish beauty, on
your feet."

The mage pulled an Elven nurse to her feet by a handful of her white-blonde hair. Her whimpering made all the other women cringe, especially as the grimy man buried his nose in her mane. "What do you know? Hmm? If I flayed the skin from your beautiful body, would someone speak up and Tell Us How Many Grey Wardens Could Be Waiting For Us In Fairel?"

"I know nothing, Ser. I am just a nurse here, a - "

He flung her away back toward the other nurses, who formed a protective circle around her.

The mage paced, growing more furious. "All I hear are whimpers and whines. You are all just rats, the lowest of the low, and here we are trying to reason with you. It seems blood must be spilled this night to get you to take me seriously."

He took a few steps forward to grab another victim but Hawke blocked his path, now on his feet and towering over the man with the gun. "Stop. We can talk. There is no need to stoop to barbarism like the rest of your brethren." Hawke's tone only inflamed the mage even more, making the strange bloody-red glint in his eyes glow even brighter. "And what's that supposed to mean - the 'rest of my brethren'?"

Hawke began arguing with the three mages, their shouting growing more and more fiery. One of the Venatori grabbed a refugee and pulled the helpless young man into the middle of the room. "Fuck it, let's just shoot them all, one by one, and be done with it!"

Aida stood up now, putting two fingers into her mouth to blow a screeching whistle that made them all stop yelling.

"If you men would only shut up for four seconds! I am Aida Lyanna Trevelyan. My father is Bann Edward Trevelyan - he owns a third of Thedas. Take me, as a hostage, and leave these people alone - and perhaps you can use me to bargain with him - perhaps you could gain access to the oil pipe that runs north from Fairel to the border of Tevinter."

The lead mage let go of Hawke's t-shirt and pushed him away, turning to look at her standing there with her two fists clenched at her sides.

"We did not know we had a lady among us. Do you mind me asking, are you a mage yourself?"

Aida dredged up the lie she had told the woman at the Healers Without Borders office. "I am, but...my skills were forbidden to me from a young age. I was made to feel shame over them and today they are weak and unpredictable. But I am a damn good nurse, even without magic."

She made a gesture toward the head mage to lower his gun. "Please, comrade. I can be of use to you. But only if you leave these people here and do not come back. Take me with you - "

Hawke tried to interrupt. "Aida, no, you can't - "

The little boy she had been helping earlier burst from the arms of the adults around him and ran toward her, grabbing on to one of her legs to sob. Aida knelt down and wiped the tears from his face and spoke softly in the common tongue. "Don't cry. I am going to take the bad men away and they won't come back."

* * * * *
The "bad men" were very deferential to Aida, even though they could have treated her like chattel or part of their spoils of war. Quentin, the head mage of this rebellious faction, held her hand as she stepped into the jeep, as though he were helping her into her carriage. Once inside, he clapped her in handcuffs though. "I apologize. But you have not earned our trust yet."

She watched him snap them shut around her wrists, his hands shaking so much he almost found the task hard to complete. "Quentin, are you ill? Can I help?"

The mage at the wheel, who had tattoos up and down the side of his face, shot a glance at them through the rear view mirror. "He'll be fine, Princess. What he needs is waiting for us back at the compound."

Before Quentin could pull away, Aida held on to his wrist and turned his arm to face her. Track marks.

"Lyrium?" She asked him gently, more gently than she even intended. "No, Miss Trevelyan. Something better than that." Quentin leaned closer to her, his voice low and confidential now. "It gives - light - to our cause. It sings in our veins. It is a gift from Corypheus."

She saw his shirt shift in the dim moonlight, revealing a few inches of his pale shoulder to her. He had red crystals sticking out of his skin, like a rash, and it pained her to look at it. She hadn't seen a red lyrium junkie up close since her days in the ER, and she knew from dealing with them that it was twice as addictive than the stuff Cullen got hooked on during his Templar service. Quentin regained her attention by scooting even closer to her in the back seat of the jeep. "Perhaps you would like a taste too. We find it makes hostages more docile... when we give them a leash we can pull on."

Aida didn't answer or risk angering him by moving farther away from him. She looked out at the vast desert spreading around them, the mobile care camp growing smaller in the distance. She had already only brought one duffel bag of belongings with her to the Wastes, and now she was leaving that behind as well. She had only the clothes on her back. She belonged to them now.

* * * * *

They drove for so long Aida fell asleep, still handcuffed. She awoke when they reached their destination, a compound hidden by dramatic rock formations, battered by a relentless dusty wind. Two of her captors pushed her down a long hallway and Aida got glances into various rooms and offices where mages were busy plotting and scheming. Ferelden media always portrayed them as a ragtag group of disorganized thugs but she was seeing up close that they were much more organized than that.

"What are you going to do with me now?"

Quentin had disappeared, she was being escorted by the two scarier mages, whose rough jokes and passing remarks about her looks had made Aida cringe during their journey. One of them hissed into her ear as he kept a firm grip on her upper arm. "If we had any say in it, we'd be taking turns bending you over a desk, giving you a proper fucking with our Vint cocks. But you're a high asset prisoner, so for now, we're taking you to the nicest cell we have."

A heavy iron door was swung open before her, revealing an empty room. - no cot, no toilet, no windows or ventilation. They unlocked her handcuffs and flung her into the cell with a rough push. She rubbed her wrists, looking up at them from the floor.

"Thanks guys. Great hospitality. I'll be sure to write an online review when - "
They slammed the door after her and the room went pitch black. With a slow inhale and exhale, Aida realized they were probably testing her. How long could she last in the dark? Longer than they think. She had someone she could think of - and she could think about him for days on end, as she had since she had been trapped on the other side of the Veil.

She felt her way in the dark to a corner and sat down, her back against the wall. Aida closed her eyes and willed herself to dream of Cullen.

* * * * *

Aida was unable to tell how much time had passed before the door to her cell creaked open. They had been feeding her bread and water through a slot in that door but Aida had not heard a human voice during the entirety of her confinement. She was unbathed, using the opposite corner of her cell as the bathroom - but what they did not know is they could not break her. Having her life ripped away from her not once, but twice, had already done that.

She felt herself pulled to her feet, which gave out under her immediately. She couldn't even look at her captors in her exhausted state, but she moistened her lips enough to speak. "Sorry. Can't walk."

The two strong arms dragged her down the hallway as she faded in and out of consciousness. She felt herself being placed in a chair in an air conditioned room and then a female voice spoke to her.

"Creators, why is she in this condition? Who told you this is how we were to take care of her?"

Aida blinked open her eyes and saw a blonde Elven woman before her, stern and authoritative.

"We can't put her on camera like this."
"Yes we can, it will show them we mean business. A pampered hostage means we are weak."

Aida heard the woman make a sound of exasperation. "Fine. Get her some water. This is the last time I leave you in charge of anything." She felt her head pulled back by her hair and then someone slapped her hard, two times, to fully wake her up.

"You will read the lines we have written for you, yes?"
"Yes. I will do whatever you want me to do. May I ask - what's your name?"

The elf blinked at her a few times in surprise, the tight lines around her mouth loosening a little.
"Calpernia."
"I'm Aida. Nice to meet you."

This made Calpernia raise an eyebrow. "Nice to meet you too, Miss Trevelyan. Enough with the pleasantries for now."

Aida quickly found herself facing a camera under lights that were much too bright after her dark confinement. She picked up the piece of paper on the table in front of her and read in a shaky but clear voice.

"My name is Aida Lyanna Trevelyan. I was taken captive 6 days ago south of Fairel after Venatori troops stormed my Healers Without Borders mobile hospital. In exchange for my life, Corypheus asks for 20 million gold sovereigns, to be deposited into an unmarked Free Marches bank account - or for control over the Trevelyan Enterprise oil pipeline that runs between here and Tevinter, which is rightly the property of the Tevene people. Father, please do what they say. If you, or the
government of Fereldan do not comply - "

Aida's hands shook as she read the next line. "They will behead me in one week's time."

She paused, swallowing for a moment, and then looked into the camera. "Despite this threat, I want to assure you the mages have taken good care of me..."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw one the Venatori soldiers look at Calpernia in alarm. Aida was off-script now. Calpernia put a finger up to silence him, waiting for her to continue.

"As a mage myself, I have always been horrified by the grave injustices magic users face on a daily basis all over Thedas. Our blood is strong, our skills useful, and not something to be locked away or legislated into nonexistence."

Aida could feel everyone in the room with her standing up straighter as she continued, gaining confidence. "Regardless of whether you pay my ransom - I will have you know this - I am now dedicated to this cause. Mage rule is not a radical concept, but rather a logical one. I have spent a lifetime ashamed of who I am, and what I am capable of. And I will do so no longer."

The lights shut off and the little red light next to the camera's lens stopped blinking. No one said anything and Aida wondered if they were going to turn the camera back on and take her head right there on the spot.

Calpernia stepped forward, amazement still written all over her face.

"Miss Trevelyan, I think we should sit down and have a talk, don't you?"

Aida gave her back a little crack, adjusting to not being curled up in a corner of a basement. "You have to buy me dinner first."

The elf turned to her minions. "Have dinner sent to my quarters. Something hearty, and a bottle of wine."

Aida raised a hand now. "Two."

"Two bottles of wine."
"And a pack of Camels."

* * * * *

Half an hour later, Aida was dining with Calpernia in her spartan quarters, tearing into half a roast chicken with her fingers. The two women ate in silence as Aida devoured everything offered to her and drank all of the fine dry wine she was served. The elf did not speak until Aida was leaning back in her chair, lighting a cigarette with a contented sigh.

"Tell me what you want, Aida Trevelyan. I sense a great deal of longing on your behalf. Ambition. Big ideas. You are like lightning about to strike."

Aida exhaled, letting the nicotine work its magic. She thought about the last time she was truly happy, wrapped in Cullen's arms in a king-sized bed at the Minrathrous Ritz, his lips pursed around one of her nipples.

"I want to meet Corypheus. I want to give him something."
Calpernia refilled her wine glass for her. "And what is that something?"

"I want to bring him the head of the Nightingale, on a silver platter."

Chapter End Notes

(pats self on the back for that Stranger Things reference)
Cullen-of-the-Fade felt like someone had sucked all the air out of the room. From where he was sitting he could not see his boss's face, but he could feel Varric's eyes on him as they all watched Aida's hostage video, which had been replaying almost continuously on the 24 hour news channel. He had to blink a few times before he even could focus on the headline beneath her face.

**MISSING DAUGHTER OF REAL ESTATE OLIGARCH PLEDGES SELF TO CORYPHEUS’S CAUSE**

The conference room tilted and wobbled around him. Aida had disappeared out of his life only three or four weeks ago and now she here she was, expressing opinions he had never heard her say, on a video shot in a mysterious bunker hundreds of miles away. Despite the rather dire and dramatic circumstances Aida seemed to be in, all he could think about at this very moment was how good it had felt to bury his face in her hair, that date at the museum that he had replayed in his head over and again, and the elegant scroll of her handwriting in her goodbye letter to him.

Cullen had never intended to develop feelings for Aida - but seeing her face on the TV screen in a corner of a city hall conference room stunned him into the realization he was madly in love with her. So would he ever see her again?

Someone was talking to him. He shook his head and focused.

"Cullen! Are you listening?"

He made eye contact with Cassandra across the room. "Ah, no, sorry. Wh-what - "

Cass was giving him a concerned look as she continued. "Ferelden Homeland Security wishes to speak to you, and Leliana - alone. Miss Trevelyan's condo unit has already been searched, and both of you are mentioned extensively in her journals, and notes found in her laptop. We believe she is a major security threat to the mayor - and possibly you too, Cullen."

He clenched his jaw before answering. "There is no way she would ever hurt me. Or anyone. She's a nurse, an artist, and - "

His coworkers and the rest of the city officials waited for him to finish his sentence. " - my dog loved her, man."

Cullen heard the ripple of light laughter but it didn't register with him. Cass was already leading him by an elbow out of the room to where he would be interrogated by federal officials.
"He's in shock, isn't he."

Varric kept quiet in a corner of the room where Homeland Security was watching Cullen through a one-way mirror as he combed through Aida's notebooks. They had spent almost two hours asking him to recall anything he knew about her. When they were done, they gave him a pair of rubber gloves and honored his request to look at what she had written about him, in the name of wanting to protect his mayor, but Varric knew the man was lovesick and confused. He knew his old friend very well.

Cass stood in the opposite corner, looking as concerned as Varric. He watched Cullen's face crumple as he turned pages in her journal and even from the other side of the mirror, Varric could see her intricate drawings of some of the dragon bone knives he had discussed with Aida. There was a mystery afoot for sure. Why did a nice upper class girl like Aida Trevelyan go rogue mage out of nowhere?

He asked Cullen this question as they had a drink in their favorite dive bar around the corner from city hall, the very one where they had once caught Aida sketching in a booth in the back.

"I don't think she went _rogue mage_, Varric. I could tell you what I really think but you wouldn't believe me."

Varric pushed a shot of tequila closer to him. "Tell me."

"You really won't believe me. You'll start to think I'm slipping. You'll tell Cass I'm back on the lyrium."

"Come on, Cullen. I'm a natural storyteller - but a damn good listener too. Even if I think you're nuts, I won't let on about it."

Cullen took a deep breath before he started.

"She's not from here. Like - she's from another world, Varric. One just like this one. She just wants to get home. For some reason, she thinks blood magic is her ticket back to where she came from..."

Cullen downed the alcohol and flagged the bartender down for another.

"This other world - she said there's another Cullen there, waiting for her. According to her journals, blood magic performed on him is what transported her to our world."

Cullen's hands shook as he downed another shot of tequila. "And, according to some stuff she scribbled in one of her notebooks...it seems like doing the same - ritual - to _me_ - could send her home, she doesn't want to do it. She - wants to kill our boss instead. This is why she was asking you about the dragon bone daggers, man. She needs one of those, and just a few magic words, to get back to the other side. And the other me that's waiting for her there."

Varric's face went a little funny. "Do you mean to tell me that..." He rubbed his face a little before speaking again. "To Aida - this place, isn't real? This isn't her life? She belongs somewhere else, with another you? Does this mean there could be another me out there in the great beyond?"

Cullen cracked a half-smile. "Two Varrics? Can the universe handle such a thing?"

The two friends sat in silence for a while, watching people come and go past the bar's front window. When Cullen spoke again, his voice was somber. "I wish she knew I'd do anything for her. I want us to be together - _anywhere_ we can be together. You don't even know what I would do for ten more
minutes in her company."

* * * * *

Aida's performance in her hostage tape was a big morale booster among Corypheus's ranks. There is nothing terrorists love more than cheap publicity, she mused to herself while tending a rebel mage's gunshot wounds. They had stopped locking her up and keeping her shackled and were letting her tend to the mages injured in battle. She was earning their trust, even though she had told Calpernia she had rules of her own that she would not bend.

*I won't take active part in anything that hurts innocent people.*

*But I will do whatever it takes to take down the mayor of Haven. She is no innocent.*

Aida was pulled out of her reverie by the sounds of shouting coming from the other end of their compound. She raced down a hall toward the clamor, knowing a hapless mage could use her help, but she felt someone grab her by the arm to stop her.

"Aida! Wonderful news!"
"Cal, I should go see if someone needs my help, can it wait?"

The elf had a victorious glow in her eyes. "It can, at least for two minutes. I've been wondering how I can safely transport you to meet Corypheus. We can't exactly cross miles upon miles of disputed Orlesian territory without losing significant numbers of our mages. Come with me."

She followed her deeper into the compound, where the more senior mages had their comfortable quarters. Aida looked at the object in the middle of Calpernia's room.

"What is it?"
"An eluvian - Elvish technology, the last vestiges of my culture - and we liberated it from an Orlesian duke's summer mansion. Nothing but a bauble to him, like an end table, or a rug. But it is not a mere trophy. It is handiwork of my people."

Aida had grown to be sympathetic toward some of Calpernia's talk about the treatment of elves throughout Thedas's history. She was right, the eluvian was beautiful, a true work of art, and inexplicable power. She fingered the gilded frame around the object, and watched with some incredulity as the surface of the mirror rippled lightly.

"When can we go? I am so excited to meet our great leader."

Calpernia turned toward Aida, a sincere smile spreading across her face. "Always so eager. First, let's see who's come back needing your help after that last raid. Then we can get cleaned up - and depart before dinner if you wish. He has told me himself that he is ready to welcome you to our cause, with open arms."

* * * * *

Aida closed her eyes as she and Calpernia held hands and stepped through the eluvian together. When she opened them, they were standing in a large hall in a crumbling villa in the Arbor Wilds, flanked by a small legion of curious mages. The crowd parted before her and Aida's eyes landed on the Tevene magister - the terrorist, a man willing to bring apocalypse across the face of the earth to get what he wanted.
She swallowed to calm herself. Red crystals ran up and down Corypheus's arms, and up his neck. They twisted his jawline and covered his knuckles, sparkled with menace from the corners of his mouth. He was the most red lyrium-addicted person she had ever seen during all her years as a nurse and Aida had to steady her nerves as Calpernia lead her closer to where he held court over his rebels.

"Aida. Lyanna. Trevelyan. How I have heard about you. Youngest daughter of the Bann, mage, nurse, artist, and more beautiful in person than she was when she pledged her life to me on video."

He bowed over her offered hand in an old fashioned gesture. Aida felt everyone watching them intently. She needed to make an impact in this moment.

Aida dropped to her knees and kissed the hem of his robe.

Surprise rippled through the crowd. Aida pressed her forehead to his foot and willed herself to cry. When she looked up at the magister above her, two perfect tears rolled down her cheeks.

"The Maker has brought me to you, imperator. Let me be your weapon. I can be your blade that sings."

Corypheus clapped twice, and the room cleared out. Aida looked around and saw that only two other people remained in the room, Calpernia - and Corypheus's bombmaker, the man who had stolen her sweetest memories, Anders. He had his feet up on the dining table and was examining his cuticles with nonchalance.

Corypheus circled Aida, still on her knees.

"So, my little actress, now that we are alone, we can dispense with the theatrics, as flattering and - convincing as they are."

Aida felt him grab her a handful of hair, pulling her roughly.

"What are you really doing here, you rich Free Marcher cunt? Who sent you? Celene? Alistair? What is your game?"

She didn't have to fake the next set of tears rolling down her face. "No one sent me, I am here because I hate Leliana, the Chantry, the Templars, and everyone else on this planet that hates mages."

The magister shoved her away and she dropped to her hands and knees. She shot a quick glance at Cal and Anders, but they did not intervene.

"Why should I trust you? I told Calpernia she should have put a bullet in your head months ago instead of feed you and shelter you. This cause of ours does not need tumors growing from within. So tell me why you are really here and I won't cut your neck from ear to ear."

Aida sighed and decided a little truth might actually save her right now - well, a version of it, at least.

"I was in love with a Templar - an ex-Templar now. I loved him with every inch of my being. And Leliana... She came between us. She poisoned him against me, now he warms her sheets at night. She will marry him before she runs for Senate and bear a child with him and they will look like Thedas's happiest couple. And my reward for my steadfast devotion to this man is that I am in agony, every day. I have no reason to live or breathe anymore except to destroy them both. I want their blood: to enhance my weakened mana and become the mage I should have always been. But I can't do this unless both of them die, so if I can serve your cause as I do so, then - all the better for you, right?"
Corypheus stopped his pacing. Aida felt her fate hanging in the air. She heard Anders fidgeting with something on the dining table but did not dare take her eyes off the tiles beneath her.

"A decent story. I believe you, it was maybe a little cliched but love stories are always cliched. But I hear the heartbreak in your voice. Of course, Templars are just another species of scum I intend of cleansing from this world. I do not approve of your relationship, but in the long run, my dear, you will discover that love with a mage is much more fulfilling. Stand up, Lady Trevelyan."

Aida scrambled to her feet and looked at him.

"Are you on birth control?"

The question shocked her a little. "I, ah - I was. My pills and the rest of my personal belongings are in a bunker somewhere in the Hissing Wastes. Calpernia will tell you I left with her willingly."

"I have heard. And while you are here working for me, you will remain - 'openly fertile'. The world needs more mages, and there's only one place where they come from. Isn't that right, Anders?"

She heard someone flick a cigarette lighter. Anders leaned back and exhaled and Aida stared at him, fervently wishing the man would give her a smoke. "Corypheus, you are something else. You hold the world in the palm of your hand and here you are - matchmaking."

Cal and Anders laughed together while Corypheus cracked his knuckles and ground his teeth a little.

"Friend, I think - I think I'm ready for another dose."

Anders snapped to attention. "Are you sure, my lord? You wanted to try to wait 4 hours between - "

"No, I need it now. And I have an idea. If Miss Trevelyan wishes to prove herself to me even more than with her pretty words, she should join me. What do you think?"

Calpernia blanched. Anders stood up and unfurled a surgeon's roll, the kind of thing that usually held scalpels and other operating equipment. Aida saw syringes, pre-loaded with glowing, red fluid.

Corypheus dropped himself onto his makeshift throne with a weary sigh and Anders approached him.

"No, friend. Ladies first. Come sit by my side, Aida. I want to watch you - as you take your first taste."

Anders placed a wooden bench by Corypheus's seat and patted the little velvet pillow on top of it. He took her hand in a gallant gesture and lead her to sit down. He rolled up the sleeve of her thermal and looked for a vein. Aida cried silently, not wanting to anger anyone further. Anders knelt at her feet, readying a syringe. He reached a hand up and brushed a tear off her cheek. Aida looked at him for a long time. She hated to admit it, but in person, he was quite handsome. There was a quiet elegance to his gestures and he had long, steady fingers.

"Don't be scared. Don't fight it. It's normal for users to hallucinate. Just surrender to it, and how it makes you feel. I will take care of you, Miss Trevelyan."

She turned her arm toward him to be helpful. "Call me Aida."

Anders held her wrist gently and Aida looked away as the needle pricked her skin. The drug flooded her system and warmed all of her extremities, like drinking a barrel of whiskey on an icy cold day. All the stress left her body. Every inhale and exhale felt like a deep, honeyed sigh of relief. No pain, no past, no future. She felt herself leaning backward and Anders had to catch her to keep her from
hitting her head on the floor behind her.

The last thing she heard before her eyes rolled back in her head and she passed out was Corypheus's brittle laughter.

* * * * *

Aida dreamed.

When she opened her eyes, she was watching Cullen getting ready for his day. At the moment she could not tell if she was dreaming of her real world lover or the one she had met in this second Thedas, but it didn't matter. It felt good to watch him without him knowing she was there. It allowed her to notice the little ways he did things. She hovered behind him as he brushed his teeth, chose a suit for his workday, ate breakfast standing up in his kitchen. She wanted to tell him to sit down, that she'd make another pot of coffee, but she found her mouth could form no words.

She watched him stare at a picture of the two of them he had pinned up on his fridge - a date she could remember now, a picnic on a blanket in the park, his kisses that tasted of the wine they were sharing. Cullen reached a finger out to touch Aida's lips and she knew he was thinking of the same things she was. It made her believe this was indeed her real Cullen. He put his jacket on and gave Barkley a few goodbye pets before grabbing his keys and heading to the garage.

Aida followed him to work, getting into his Corvette with him. She watched him all day long, rolling calls, taking meetings, and joking with Krem. In terms of drug trips this was a pretty tame one, Aida opined to herself as she watched Cullen stop at a gas station after work to refill his tank. Aida tried to look at herself in the shiny reflection of his car but saw nothing. When she looked up, Cullen was getting back into his 'Vette and heading to his next location. Aida had no idea where he could be going - home? To O'Hara's to have a post-work drink?

Aida had her answer soon enough - Cullen was on his way to his support group. It was a small affair, only 5 or 6 patients and their therapist, a very deadpan Adaar woman who moderated their remarks and encourage the patients to interact with each other for support. They were all people who had loved ones go missing - a wife who never came home after her afternoon jog, a fiancee who might have owed money to a shady figure for his secret drug habit, a 12 year old girl who went to summer camp and never returned after a walk around the lake. Cullen seemed to be the only one who had something supernatural happen to his loved one- but despite the improbability of his story, he had the undivided attention of a pretty blonde with sad grey eyes who sat across from him. Her name was Sierra.

Aida listened closely to her story. Sierra Amell, 31 years old, a Warden on psychiatric leave - missing one husband. She didn't believe that he "went out for smokes". Theirs was a happy marriage.

Cullen and Sierra stood together outside the therapy session and talked a little more.

Cullen and Sierra went out for coffee. Cullen's face was all sympathy and concern as Sierra began to cry over her cappuccino.

Cullen gave Sierra a ride home.

Cullen walked Sierra to her front door.

Aida held her breath as the blonde with the sad grey eyes reached for one of Cullen's hands. They
stood there like that, shyly, a little afraid to go any further. Cullen's other hand cupped the blonde's face and Aida felt pain searing through her being.

He did not kiss her, but Aida knew he was thinking about it. He was thinking about letting Aida go.

* * * * *

Aida woke up sobbing, in the dark.

She heard someone sit up in bed across the way and fumble around until a lamp at her bedside switched on. It was Anders, who had been sleeping on a fold-up cot on the other side of her room.

"I'm sorry - we all agreed you shouldn't be alone tonight. We figured you'd try to make a break for it tonight, if you weren't sincere about your loyalty to us. The effects of red lyrium either turn people into docile pets - or causes them great distress."

Anders put his glasses on and brushed the hair off her face.

"So. What did you see?"
"The man who used to love me. Moving on with his life."

Anders lit a cigarette and handed it to her.

"Not the most fun hallucination. But red lyrium has a way of playing with the things you are obsessed with, bringing them to life - so you can see they have no hold over you."

Aida let his words sink in as she shivered, holding herself. "Anders, I feel so cold, is that normal?"

He took the blanket off his cot and laid it across her legs. "Yes, as soon as the drug works its way through your system, your body needs more. But it's too soon for you to have another dose. We don't want to kill you, after all. You are a valuable asset. Cal and I are currently fighting over you - I could use a steady pair of hands in my work, she's fond of you because you stop people from bleeding. I think I'll win though. Corypheus knows we can always make a bigger impact with my bombs."

Anders lit a smoke for himself now, pulling his cot closer to her bed and sitting on the edge of it.

"But Cal tells me you don't want to hurt innocent people, so my guess is - "

Aida took a long drag off her cigarette. "No, I take that back. Nothing matters anymore. I'll do whatever you want. I'll shove a bomb up Celene's ass personally. Put me to work, Anders."

Anders smiled at her, his eyes devious and scheming, deadly and playful at the same time.

"Want to get coffee sometime?"

Aida smiled at him, unable to keep a flirtatious note out of her voice. "Where - are we going to get coffee around here?"

"Not here. In Haven. You've arrived just in time for my next big mission."

"Alright. Consider it a date."

Chapter End Notes
WHY

WHY MUST I MAKE THINGS MORE COMPLICATED

IS THIS A DISEASE??? SOMEONE HELP ME
The Bomb Maker's Apprentice

Chapter Notes

There's a bit of #CullenSmut in here because I think we deserve it. And I'm trying to get this story rolling and pushing forward. I think there will be one more plot-heavy chapter and then HELLOOOOOO - the REAL Cullen is going to have something to say about all of this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aida and Anders were almost inseparable after her first hit of red lyrium, so much so that Corypheus's highest ranking mages gave her a nickname, The Little Shadow. When no one was around, Anders called her "Kitten", unaware that was one of Cullen's endearments for her. He was fond of cats already, and Aida's sweet devotion to him reminded him an orphaned feline, hungry for love and validation. In truth, Aida was beyond heartbroken. Ever since she had heard the name Sierra Amell, she had been trying to find her bearings, trying desperately to shift her devotion for Cullen onto this new man. The drug helped in this impossible task. Anders doled out the right amount of red lyrium to her only at night so she could be sober and by his side in his workshop during the day. She needed him, if only for this transaction. Aida never shot up on her own, having come to cherish the small moment of intimacy she shared with Anders right before he put the needle into one of her veins. The drug made her feel no pain, and anchored her to the present.

Aida was aware there was something pointedly wrong about this new fixation of hers. The Anders of the real world was one of many little reasons she was trapped here in this Thedas-2. And here she was, fixated on him, if only to lessen the pain of being abandoned by Cullen. She often wandered the compound in a melancholy state, feeling more trapped than ever.

But despite all the longing looks she shot his way, Anders did not respond to her advances. Aida quickly realized things were different in the Arbor Wilds camp. "The Cause" was the only thing that mattered to anyone - chaos, anarchy, death and destruction were the sole fruits of their labor. Corypheus might have joked about mage procreation during their first meeting but it was not a priority. They needed more serious things: RPGs, improvised bombs, an unending supply of bullets for their Kalashnikovs, and most importantly - souls. They needed recruits, angry young men and women - they were their true quarry. Anders made frequent trips into the nearby villages and towns, looking for lost kids who had dropped out of life, and then spent a lot of time with them once he lured them back to their compound. Aida had to take second place to these fresh young faces, something she bore with quiet resentment, especially since it left her with very little time to get to know him.

One afternoon, Aida was helping Anders wire a complicated piece of machinery, requiring her to stand near him and hand him instruments he needed. At some point she had to slip beneath one of his arms to hold one wire with tweezers while he delicately wove another one into place.

"Anders, why don't you like me," she asked in a soft voice, framed by both of his arms.

He did not waver in his concentration even as he answered her. "You think I don't like you?"

"You come to my tent, every night, for my dose - and you don't..."
"- I don't try anything. Does it wound your vanity, Aida Lyanna Trevelyan?"

They both held their breath as he threaded the end of the wire into place. When he was done he swept his bare hands down her arms. His hands were the opposite of Cullen's - smooth and unmarked. He pulled her closer and nuzzled Aida near her ear.

"Kitten, I keep away from you for good reason. If the other mages knew that you were allowing me to... Some of them might get ideas. I have never liked sharing. I would not share you with anyone else in this camp."

He turned her around and looked her in the eyes. "And that includes Corypheus himself. I see the way he looks at you."

Aida took his hand and pressed a kiss to his palm, but he only swept away from her in response, looking for a screwdriver.

"I also know you're in love with someone else. I admit that wounds my vanity as well. Now, enough flirtation. You need to remember how to assemble the four parts of this bomb, in under 2 minutes. With your eyes closed. In the dark. We will practice until you do it perfectly."

Aida sighed, ignoring the hunger for red lyrium gnawing away at a corner of her thoughts. "Yes, Anders. And then, our coffee date in Haven?"

Anders looked away while answering her. "Sadly no, the plans have changed. You are going on on this mission on your own."

"But -"

"It's been decided. Corypheus wishes to test you. Patching up a few wounded mages and batting those lashes of yours at me has not fully earned his trust. And if you fly back to Haven and inform on us all - well. Things will definitely get messy."

Aida stared at the part of the bomb she would detonate in Haven. "You promised."

Anders stepped closer to her and wrapped her in his arms, dipping his head to kiss her - but before she could get used to him, how his lips were new and different, he pulled away. "There. Hopefully that wasn't too disappointing. Now back to work."

* * * * *

Aida relaxed as soon as she stepped off the plane.

"Home," she thought to herself. "Well, sort of."

She caught a glimpse of herself in the reflection of a store window and did not see herself there - instead, the face of a stranger. Among Corypheus's ranks were some mage innovators - they had slid something that felt like a breathable silk stocking over her face and then cast a rare spell on it, giving her a new face. "Incognito!" the mage had declared with a victorious chuckle as Aida had smiled and frowned at her new visage in a mirror, amazed to see a different woman making faces back at her. To match her new appearance, they had forged an ID for her so she could pass through the Val Firmin airport and then fabricated credentials for her, so she could slip through city hall security posing as an accountant in the comptroller's office. All she would need to do is sit tight for a da or two in Haven while the bomb's components were shipped to her - in the guise of harmless children's toys. Aida had spent days at Anders's side learning how to break down the parts and re-assemble
them again. Deep cover contacts working in the building would help her get the 4 pieces into the building, and then -

*Tick tick tick tick - boom,* Anders had whispered into her ear as he hugged her goodbye that morning.

Aida checked into her modest room at a traveller's hotel near the Haven airport and sat down on the edge of the bed with a sigh. She had been instructed by Calpernia and Anders to keep a low profile - but did it really matter, if she had a different face? Why not get a little air? What harm could it do.

She took a cab into town and had the driver take her to the park in the middle of the city. It was a Saturday so she found herself wandering through the farmer's market, people watching and looking at the piles of fresh fruits and vegetables. The red lyrium had a way of lessening your usual hunger - and replacing it with a new one. She was thinking about buying a tart green apple just to have something to hold inside of her coat pocket when she spotted him -

Cullen of the Fade, on a rare day off, in jeans and a white t-shirt, and a dark navy blue pea coat. He was looking at a pile of produce with a slightly sad look on his face as he seemingly ignored the flirtations of the girl selling lettuce.

*Why does he look so sad? He looks like he needs sleep - maybe his lyrium withdrawals have returned. The nightmares.*

He ran a hand through his hair in a nervous gesture, pushing an errant golden curl back into place - and Aida shivered, thinking of his hands on her body. She could remember them so clearly it gave her goosebumps.

As if he felt her gaze on him, Cullen turned around and looked right at her. Aida gasped and turned on her heel, disappearing into the crowd.

*That was close - too close.*

Aida strode out of the farmer's market toward the edge of the park, brushing aside the memories of the times she had spent in this park with her real Cullen. She hadn't realized how hard it would be to come back to Haven, even the phony one. There would be no forgetting her real life, or the second one she was also living. There was no losing herself in a terrible cause or in a romance with a new man. She could never run from -

"Aida?"

She did not turn to look at him, but quickened her pace. If she could make it to the street and turn right, she could head into the mall and lose him there. She darted in front of a nanny dealing with a stroller and two toddlers and slipped into a bookstore. She slipped deep into the stacks, her heart pounding, hoping he did not follow her. She had wandered into the military history section - Aida grabbed and book and turned her back to the aisle, hoping to blend in.

"That's not the best book on the history of the Blights by far. I could recommend another to you if - "

Aida did not turn around. She whispered back to him in the best fake Orlesian accent she could muster.

"I'm fine, thank you, mister."

She heard him clear his throat. "I'm - sorry if I...I saw you in the farmer's market, and you reminded me of someone I used to know. But..."
Aida turned around slowly as Cullen continued. "You're not her, are you."

"Sorry to disappoint someone so - handsome."

Aida had to hold back a sigh as a smile spread across his face. "Have a drink with me at the bar around the corner? What's your name?"

She answered without thinking. "Gabrielle Legrand. Pleased to meet you."

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later they were sitting in the corner of a pub that had old Ferelden swords and shields on the walls for decoration. Cullen seemed very much at home among these items and Aida was reminded of what he had looked like in the dream Solas had conjured for her. Aida ordered something out of character for her - a fruity cocktail, while he ordered a very big pilsner. They clinked their glasses together, Aida avoiding making direct eye contact with him.

"So, Miss Legrand, what do you do for a living?"
"I'm an accountant at city hall."

It made Cullen raise an eyebrow. "Really? I feel like I would have noticed you."

Aida glanced at herself a mirror hanging on the nearby wall that had a beer logo on it. He was lying. Cal and Anders had made sure her mask had been enchanted with a very plain-Jane sort of face, topped with a boxy haircut. She took a sip of her Cosmo and winced a little at its too-sweet taste and then did not ask him anything in return, letting the conversation die quickly.

"You don't say much."
"I don't have much to say. Sorry I'm not better company. Then again you followed me into a bookstore hoping I was some other woman."

Aida nibbled on some of the nuts in a bowl on the table, hoping he'd grow bored of talking to her as soon as possible. No, I don't hope that at all, do I?

"Yeah, I don't know what it was about you. I just got this feeling she was watching me, but when I turned around it was you."

She stared at the cherry sitting at the bottom of her drink. "What was she like, this woman you were hoping to see..."

"She ah. Well, sounds crazy but, she's wanted by Ferelden Homeland Security at the moment. We were neighbors and occasional lovers. She's smart. Funny. Beautiful. Strange. Talented. Gentle. Strong. Sexy. Powerful. And, very kind. I miss her. I know it makes no sense."

Aida steadied her hand before picking up her glass. "Why does it make no sense?"

"She loves someone else. And now she's a terrorist. But I can't stop thinking about her."

Aida stood up, reaching for some cash in her pocket. "I gotta go, I didn't realize what time it w-"

Cullen reached out and grabbed her hand. "Aida, I know it's you, I know your voice. I'd know it anywhere."

She turned - and ran.
Fuck. I'm fucked. It's over. Mission compromised.

She sprinted down city streets, not thinking about where she was going, just trying to lose him as fast as she could. She ran through one end of a bank and out its other door onto the next block over. She dashed into traffic, cars barely missing her. Aida bolted diagonally across the city, not stopping for a moment to listen for Cullen's footsteps behind her. She rushed so hard and so fast that she thought her heart would burst.

She found herself standing in front of the Chantry on the edge of downtown Haven, before the neighborhood grew posher and more exclusive. She pushed open the door and sat down in a pew to catch her breath. As soon as she got her pulse under control she began to cry, an uncomfortable activity with the mask over her face. She sobbed in the comforting silence of the holy space.

Nowhere to go, no one to turn to. Cullen had probably already called the feds. She waited to hear sirens.

The door of the Chantry creaked open behind her and she scrambled quickly into a nearby confessional.

"Aida?"

She held her breath as she heard Cullen's footsteps heading down the main aisle. Aida ground her teeth in irritation. Stubborn man. Why couldn't he move on and forget about her like his real world counterpart was currently doing?

"Aida, I just want to talk - I, didn't call the cops if that's what you think. I wouldn't do that to you."

She dropped her head back against the wall of the confessional, weighing her options. If he was lying and the feds were on their way, it didn't matter anymore, she had botched up everything. And if he wasn't lying... Aida thought about the last time they were together, and his hands sliding up her inner thighs. Before she could puzzle over her feelings and priorities, Cullen slipped into the other side of the confessional.

"Please don't leave, Aida. Just talk to me. I thought I'd never see you again."

She answered him in a tiny, defeated voice. "I thought I'd never see you again too. But - I guess I wanted to run into you."

He laughed to himself. "Run into me and then from me. You're fast, did you know that?"

They made as much eye contact as they could through the screen. "How - what'd you do to your face?"

"It's just magic. My other face is under here."

He smiled at her with such sincerity it made her wish she could reach out and squeeze his hand. "Oh, that's good. I was worried you had done something permanent." His voice dropped, growing more intimate. "I would have missed those lips of yours."

"Cullen, don't - "

"Don't what?"

It was her turn to laugh to herself now. "Don't make me want you so much."

He shrugged, confident and cocky. "Hey, don't blame me. I'm just sitting here, trying to get a girl to follow me back to my place."
"Cullen, I shouldn't. I wasn't even supposed to leave the hotel for two days."
"Why are you here in Haven anyway?"
"There is no way I'm telling you that - it's for your own safety."

He leaned closer to the partition. "Fine. I understand, but -"
"But? -"

"Come over. I need to be with you again. Please."

He touched the screen with a few fingers and Aida pressed hers to his. *Please* was indeed a magic word.

* * * * *

Aida arrived twenty minutes later than she said she would, feeling paranoid that she could also be under surveillance by some of Corypheus's shadowy undercover goons. Cullen opened swung his front door open and Aida could tell he had tidied up and changed just for their rendezvous.

"Hey, come in, I thought you were going to ditch me there for a second."

He helped her take off her coat and Aida stepped into his living room, noticing what he had playing on his TV - one of those streaming videos of a roaring fireplace.

"Cute. Also, did you put that sweater on for me?"

Cullen looked down at the cream-colored cable knit sweater he had chosen. "Does it look stupid? I was worried I looked - a little - stupid."

Aida smiled, genuine and wide. *Oh, doodlebug."

"Doodlebug?! Is that me?"

She dashed into his arms, throwing her arms around his neck. "It sure is!"

They laughed together, and in the security of his embrace Aida could almost let herself forget why she was in Haven and what her real mission was. He stepped back from her hug and put a finger under her chin, tilting her face toward his.

"Can you take this thing off?"

Aida nodded and then turned away from him to peel the strange mask off of her. When she faced him once more, she was Aida again - and his mouth was on hers before she could react.

Cullen kissed her so deeply and hungrily that she was clutching his sweater with two fists just to hold on.

"Golly," she panted, when he finally pulled back.

Cullen shook his head at her, threading his fingers through her hair. "I missed you like crazy. Did that convince you?"

She hopped up and he held her under her knees as she gave him a kiss of her own, soft and gentle, giving him a little bite right on his scar. "Are you going to make love to me in front of 'the fire'?"

Cullen grinned at her. "OK, when you say it all sarcastically like that, it no longer sounds like a good
idea. Bedroom it is."

He carried her down the hallway as they continued kissing. Cullen sometimes stopping to press her up against the wall to grind his hips against hers to make her groan, while his lips wandered up and down her neck. They worked their way like this all the way to his bedroom, where Cullen laid her down on the bed - right next to Barkley.

"Barkley! Get off the bed!" Aida giggled as the Mabari went nuts, wiggling and and yipping at her in glee. "No, seriously: down, boy!" Cullen had to scoop him up with two arms and take him to his spare room to calm him down. Aida took the chance to disrobe and pull back the comforter to lie belly down on his sheets in a provocative pin-up style pose. When he reappeared in the doorway, he came to a halt.

"You're so beautiful. I wish I could draw like you - I wish I could capture what I see."

His words gave her an intense case of deja vu - they were the exact same words the real Cullen had said to her the last time he had managed to dream his way into the Fade. The more and more she interacted with This Cullen, the more he became like the Real One. Aida had to control the emotions surging through her before she spoke again. "Are you going to stand there and stare or are you going to join me?" Aida rolled over on her back, looking at him upside down now, arching her back to present her breasts to him.

She bit her lower lip watching him shed his clothes until he was standing there naked before her. In the light and shadows in his room, he looked like something out of the pages of a glossy fashion magazine. This man wasn't real - on more than one level. Aida practically drooled as Cullen began stroking his cock, his eyes roving up and down her body.

"Hands and knees, Trevelyan - now. Let me see that ass I have longed for."

Aida obeyed, already quivering with delight. She pushed her hips up for him, and then sighed when she felt him rubbing his rough hands all over her skin. Aida squealed when he gave her right butt cheek a saucy little bite, and then she felt his breath moving closer toward her cunt. The anticipation was killing her. When his fingers finally parted her folds, it made her gasp. She let her knees slide open wider to give him more access.

"What's this?" Cullen whispered to himself, studying her womanhood close up, and Aida's pussy pulsed in response, longing for his mouth. He groaned, and Aida thought she heard him even lick his lips. "Baby please," she whined into the mattress beneath her, wiggling closer to his mouth.

"Please, what?" he responded, right into her pussy. "Kiss it. Lick it. Put your tongue in it."

He slapped both of his hands against the globes of her ass, grasping them firmly, opening her up even more. "I live to follow your precise instructions, Trevelyan."

He kissed her right on the clit, making her cry out. He licked five wide circles around it, making her eyes roll back in her head. He pushed his tongue into her depths, making her tremble and beg for more.

Aida grabbed the sheets beside her as his tongue sped up and made her wetter and wetter. He made her whole body hum with erotic abandon as he sometimes swiped his tongue toward her other entrance. And then suddenly his mouth was gone, replaced by the head of his cock. Cullen rubbed it all over her folds and shook it against her pearl, making them both moan at the same time. He stopped playing and started pushing forward, gliding his thick manhood into her until he could go no
further. He gave her a few slow thrusts, murmuring something to himself about how tight she was.

"Did you miss me?"

"Yes, baby yes!" she moaned as he began to rut into her, filling the room with the sound of his hips slapping against her ass. "Tell me what you want," he hissed at her between thrusts.

Aida had to swallow before speaking again, caught up in moment. "Be - rough with me. I want it."

She heard him growl behind her before he grabbed her arms and folded them behind her back, holding them in place with one strong hand gripping her wrists. He pushed her flat against the mattress so she couldn't move, and began fucking her even harder. "Like this? Do you want more?"

Aida tried to nod but all she could think about was how transcendental it always was to be on the receiving end of his cock. She felt his other hand slipping between her thighs as he flicked at her hot, swollen clit, making her buck and twitch underneath him - and then he surprised her by sliding one of his newly-moistened fingers into her ass. Aida was now whimpering, helpless, squirming, swearing and babbling endearments at him. *Baby, honey, sweetie, darling, my love - fuck-fuckfuckfuckfuck-FUCK.*

He let go of her arms and pulled out for a moment, flipping her over onto her back. Aida was panting in ecstasy, as limp as rag doll. She giggled at him, "Hi! Nice to see you. Come here often?"

Cullen smirked at her as she opened her legs wide before him. "Come here often? Not as often as I'd like. We'd never leave the bedroom if I had my way." He leaned down over her, hands on either side of her head. They stared into each other's eyes for a moment as he slid back into her. "Aida - I don't want to be rough anymore. I want -"

She shushed him by raising her head to kiss him. "It's alright. Love me how you want. Just keep loving me."

They took their time after this, moving slowly and languidly. Aida spread her arms above her and rode the waves of Cullen's lovemaking, the slow roll of his hips, his fingers toying with her pearl, his tongue laving her nipples and dipping into her mouth to taste her. Aida felt ravenous for his attention, having been deprived of it for weeks. Being with him again was like stumbling into a lush oasis after an eternity walking in a wasteland. She wanted to drown in him.

Aida pressed on his shoulders, encouraging him to roll over onto his back, wanting to watch his face as she rode him to their mutual climax. She leaned forward, holding on to his shoulders, and began to bounce on his cock.

Aida whispered to him. "Come for me baby, I want to feel you come inside me."

He gasped back at her, kneading her tits with two strong hands, "Ladies - first."

Cullen pulled her down to him and wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight as he thrusted up and into her with a renewed sense of urgency. And then, like a hit of hot red lyrium, Aida felt her orgasm racing through her veins. Her sheath clenched around his rigid cock as he unloaded his seed deep into her with a long, satisfied exhale.

She didn't get off of him right away. They lay there in silence, holding each other.

"What are you thinking about?"

Cullen wrapped a lock of her hair around a finger. "You don't want to hear it."

"Tell me."
He gently rolled her onto her side so they could face each other.

"You ever think, that maybe - you could just stay here with me? And forget about, the, uh, the other guy. The other me. I'm here. You don't have to do crazy things to get back to that other world."

"But, Cullen."
"I know, this isn't 'real' to you - this is bizarro Thedas in your book. But I know I'm as good as he is."

Aida brushed her fingers down his jaw line. "Oh, Maker."
He grabbed that hand and pressed it to his heart. "I can love you too. Just, don't leave. We can run away together. Think about it."

She couldn't tell him that she had already thought about this idea, plenty of times, while lying on her cot in the Arbor Wilds, bombed out of her mind and heartsick.

"It's too late, Cullen. I need my revenge. I want to hurt the woman who put me here in the first place. I don't care about getting back to there anymore. I sort of found out... The other you? He's not waiting for me anymore."

Cullen pulled such a face of disbelief that it made her laugh. "Nah. I don't believe that for a second. If he's even an 1/8th like me, he's dying on the inside for you."

He trailed his finger tips across her shoulder and down her arm. Aida instinctively stopped his hand before he could reach the marks that were the signs of her red lyrium addiction. Instead, she placed his hand on her hip and nestled closer to him so she could look for the little gold flecks in his whiskey-colored eyes.

"I love you, Aida."

She teared up faster than she thought she would. There was a part of her that was ready to never think again about the real Thedas - and another part of her that was growing to believe that this Cullen was the demon trapping her here. His sweet words, his body, the pleasure he evoked in her - it was not love, but torture. Even as all these conflicting thoughts danced through her mind, she still found herself saying the words back to him: "I love you too."

Cullen pulled her closer to plant a sweet kiss on her forehead. "You're going to be gone when I wake up, aren't you."

Aida touched her fingertips to his lips to silence him.

* * * * *

He got his answer in the morning. Cullen rolled over, reaching an arm out for her but she was long gone. He walked down the hall, foolishly hoping she'd be eating a bowl of cereal on his couch, naked, watching the morning local news, but he only found Barkley lying on the rug. The Mabari got up and padded over to him, pushing a head against his leg.

"Thanks, Barks. I know you always know when I'm sad."

The loyal dog followed him around as Cullen checked the dining table, the kitchen counter, the magnets on the fridge door. Aida left no letter this time. It was like everything yesterday hadn't really happened.
He went out onto his patio and looked at the Frostbacks. He swore he saw the sky flicker and grow pixelated before it came back into focus.

Cullen had known many women but Aida Trevelyan was the first one who made him question reality. He chuckled to himself. A once in a lifetime woman. A twice in a lifetime woman?

* * * * *

Aida returned to the Arbor Wilds, triumphant. The entire camp was celebrating the news. Aida had successfully blown up the top three floors of Haven's City Hall.

She had also rewritten her own history, she was now a drug addict and a terrorist. She now hurt people, and didn't help them, and she had walked away from Cullen's love, something she would have never done before. Aida of the Fade was her own person now.

Corypheus, Calpernia and Anders took her aside when she got back to tell her they were now confidently moving forward with her plan to behead Leliana. They would even find a way to get her the exact blade she wanted, and Anders was working on a new magic-based detonation device as well. Not only would they cut off her head, but they'd also show the world exactly how cowardly Leliana was. Corypheus knew she'd chose her life over the lives of her citizens - and everyone would pay in the end for her decisions.

Aida slipped away from the celebrations and into her new quarters. The Bomb Maker's Apprentice could not sleep in a mere tent, she deserved a roof over her head. She sat on the edge of her bed and reached into her pocket, feeling for the two syringes she had nicked from Anders' supply.

She didn't need him anymore. She tied off her arm with a short length of medical tubing and flicked at her arm until a vein popped.

Double the dose for double the pain.

She pushed the plunger down on the first syringe and then waited as the drug spread through her system, taking deep inhales and exhales of luxuriant pleasure.

Anders opened her door in time to see her taking the second hit.

"Aida... You didn't wait for me."

She flopped back on the bed, higher than she had ever been. He darted to her side, checking her pulse. "That's too much, you could overdose. Kitten, what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking - nothing. I - don't want to think tonight. Kiss me."

She sat up with some difficulty and tried to pull him closer but he shook his head at her and pried her hand off his jacket. "No, my love. I'll not have you like this. And - I don't think you want me anyhow."

She shook her head back, reaching for him, but he was already in the middle of her room.

"Not true, Anders...come back."

"I will - but later, to check on you."

He left without looking back at her once. Aida realized the man was too much of a gentleman and she was now - a mess.
She slumped back onto the bed with a long, deep sigh. Aida closed her eyes and thought of Cullen - the one who had been last to touch her.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, as always. I can also be found at: thetemplarandtherogue.tumblr.com
It was snowing.

The Real Cullen looked out of his balcony door at the light layer of white flakes covering his one patio chair. He stared at it for a long time, thinking about the 8 months that had gone by without Aida, and how he still thought about her every day. He was also pondering to sell his unit in this building and move. There were simply too many memories of her lingering everywhere, even in the most innocuous places. He used to bump into her near their mailboxes, see her appealing, curvy arse poking out of the backseat of her truck in the garage as she dug around looking for something, see her making the doorman laugh with her quick and easy wit - and those were just the memories of her from before their romance bloomed. How many times had he stared at that red 'STOP' button in the elevator, recalling their entire first date night and how infatuated he was with her from the start?

There was one thing about their first date that always needled him - Varric had been the one to swipe on Aida's profile for him that night. If Aida ever returned, he would not waste another minute being meek or hesitant with her. He was going to grab her and never stop running.

Cullen sighed and continued getting ready for dinner. Aida's sister Emilia rang him up a few days earlier to invite him to Skyhold, claiming she had something important to tell him. The Bann had taken him in as one of his own, and it brought Cullen a little joy to spend time with her family, and Aida's nieces and nephews always looked forward to playing fetch with Barkley after dessert. Cullen threw on a tie and tried not to think about how it would be Satinalia soon enough. He'd be back at the bottom of the beautiful staircase of Skyhold, waiting for a woman who was long gone, who he could not even find in his dreams anymore.

He put a leash on Barkley and dug around in the closet for a warmer jacket, and then paused when his hand landed on one of Aida's old coats that had been pushed to the far side. He moved aside his jackets to look at the one she had left at his place - a classic knee-length black trench. Cullen couldn't help but smile at the little pin affixed to the lapel, in the shape of a pink Valentine heart - with shiny black letters reading "FUCK U" in wobbly printing. He swept his fingers down a shoulder of the coat and then felt for the pack of smokes she had left in the left pocket. He held them in the palm of his hands for a moment, knowing she had done the same the last time she wore this coat.

"Come back, Aida. Come back to me."

These were the seven little words that had been his daily prayer since she disappeared into the Fade, a mantra his therapist and Sierra had told him to stop repeating. Cullen had begun lying to the people in his life about the extent of his ability to move on and forget about Aida Lyanna Trevely.
Cullen revved the engine of his Stingray and let the car warm up while he smirked to himself. *They have no idea how stubborn I can be, do they?*

* * * * *

Cullen took his seat next to Emilia - next to the chair they kept empty in her memory. Aida's two brothers, Eddie and Maxwell, had come this week without their wives but with their kids, each of them struggling to keep their offspring under control at the Bann's expansive dining table. Edward Trevelyan didn't care - he liked watching his grandchildren squirming and shouting over each other. Cullen knew the man wanted to keep his mind off his business empire that needed his constant oversight - and his daughter that had gone missing.

Emilia clearly had something on her mind though. She adopted the same clipped, faux-polite tone that Aida used when she wasn't quite getting her way. She had finally hit her own internal tipping point when Cullen asked her to pass the sweet potatoes.

"Cullen, I've been - "

The Bann interrupted. "Emilia, you promised."

The table came to a halt, including the four youngest Trevelyans. Emilia turned to them with a warm smile and a bribe. "If you don't finish your veggies, you won't get tiramisu!" Once they had dug back into their food, Emilia refocused on the adults.

"Daddy, I just think Cullen should - "

"You promised me you wouldn't discuss this at the dinner table. If you want to talk to Cullen about - the utter foolish nonsense you've been researching then do it where the rest of us can't hear it. I will not condone this."

Cullen put his fork down and wiped his mouth before speaking carefully. "Researching? Researching what? And this has something to do with me?"

Emilia tried to answer him but the Bann cut her off again. "I think it's quite cruel of you to undo all the good work Cullen has been engaging in the last few months. He deserves to move on with his life, and be happy again. Even if that means that eventually he'd drift away from us. It would only be natural."

Eddie's oldest, a precocious 10 year old girl named Scout, hadn't stopped listening to their conversation. "Where's Uncle Cullen going?"

The air at the dinner table grew more uncomfortable. Her father decided he'd try to answer her question. "Scout, maybe one day soon Uncle Cullen will meet a new lady, and he'll start spending more time with her, and her family."

Scout rolled a brussel sprout off her plate and onto the table, and then pushed it onto her brother's plate. "But what about Auntie Aida? You told me she was coming home." Her little brother, Tommy, put a forkful of his peas onto her plate in retaliation. "Mom said she wasn't ever coming home. You guys are suppposed-ta make sure you're telling us all the same stuff."

Damon piped up now, Maxwell's moody preteen, who was molding his mashed potatoes into a mountain shape on his plate. "It's called consistency. Kids need consistency. So which one is it, she's coming home or she's not?"
The adults sat in stunned silence. The last little Trevelyan grandchild, Taylor, broke the silence. "If you don't know the answer, you can just say that too."

Cullen stood up. "Would you all excuse me for a moment? I could use a little air. Just - continue without me."

* * * * *

Emilia followed him out to the gazebo in the middle of the Bann's enormous manicured gardens.

"Cullen, I'm sorry - sorry for all of that."

Cullen leaned against one of the pillars of the small structure, watching Emilia light up a cigarette from across the way.

"Why is your father so keen on me forgetting your sister? I find it very...off-putting. I come here every week to eat dinner with all of you, to stay part of your family - Aida's family - and yet..."

Emilia looked up at the stars. "I think he sees a lot of himself in you. When he lost my mother, he was depressed for a very, very long time. I hate to even say this but, I don't think he began to pull himself together until Aida had her accident and had to move home. Her needing his help really woke him up, for the first time in almost twenty years." Emilia tapped a bit of her ash off the smoke. "Maybe there's a part of him that regrets his own choices. He could have remarried - moved on, had even more children. Maybe he wants that for you."

Emilia waited for a moment before speaking again. "How's... What's-her-name again?"

"Sierra."

"Well, how is she?"

Cullen clenched a fist shut in his pocket, cracking the knuckles. "She's...fine. I see her once a week after our therapy group and..."

Emilia moved closer now, trying to look at his face in the moonlight that was struggling to peek through the clouds. "And?"

"I like her. And I want to like her. But every time we're sitting on her couch, and she's, she's kissing me, and, I'm trying to kiss her back...I can't. I can't do it, Emilia. I still love your sister too much."

Emilia made a choked sound and flung her cigarette away, taking two steps forward toward him to give him a playful shove.

"Yes! That's exactly what I wanted to hear!"

Cullen watched with some amazement as Emilia did a little victory dance as she giggled. "Em, what's all this about? What'd you want to tell me?"

Emilia clutched his forearm with a strong hand. "Cullen, have you ever heard of - Oneiromancy?"

She didn't let him answer, she continued in the same excited tone. "A oneiromancer - is a special kind of mage - they can induce dreams, and interpret them."

Cullen chuckled. "No wonder your father scoffed at this."

Emilia grabbed his other forearm now. "You told me you hadn't dreamed of Aida in months - and I
believed you when you said you actually made contact with her before. Can't you see, waiting around and hoping your subconscious finds her in the Fade isn't working. Something's - something's gone wrong. She's up to something. I could always feel it, even as children, when she was in trouble." Emilia let go of him and shivered a little, hugging herself tight. Cullen was silent. He had felt like Aida was in trouble too, but he had learned very few people around him wanted to hear his paranoid theories. There were only two souls on this planet who believed Aida was still alive out there somewhere - Solas, her doctor and one-time mage trainer, and headstrong Emilia.

"Alright, tell me more about this oneiromancer, Emilia. But, you should know - "

Emilia adopted his tone, mimicking him with affection. " - I'm a little uncomfortable with magic. But I'm getting used to it."

* * * * *

A few days later, Emilia drove Cullen to the east side of Haven, which was a little grittier and more bohemian than the downtown area where he lived. They pulled up at a red light and Cullen watched a pack of sullen hipsters congregating outside of a bar. He didn't like them. They reminded him of Samson, Aida's old beau who had given her the lifetime of trust issues. Cullen shrugged off thoughts of the past and even had to distract himself from thoughts of the immediate future, specifically what would happen this evening. If you removed the mystical oneiromancy aspect of it, all he'd be doing this evening would be drinking down a big cup of hallucinogenic tea. And he'd be lying if he said he had nothing to worry about - just all the memories of his military service that continued to haunt him. Cullen wanted to see Aida again, but was anxious that all would be waiting for him in that other world would be the faces of his fallen brethren, tortured and flayed alive at the hands of rebel mages.

Emilia pulled up in front of a charming cottage, whose exterior was almost completely covered with twining ivy and lush, overgrown plants. Emilia started to get out of the car but Cullen didn't move.

"You OK?"

"I'm - I'll just admit it, I'm a little scared."

Emilia gave him a "come on" sort of look. "You've - done drugs before, haven't you?"

Cullen scoffed at her. "Come on, kind of a mean question. You know I have. Both - as an addict, and...recreationally, as your sister's boyfriend. You know how she is."

"Oh, I do. Her three favorite things all start with W and are four letters long: Weed, Wine, and W."

Cullen cut her off by raising a hand. "Alright, okay, I know what the third thing is, I don't need to 'go there' with my sister-in-law today."

They laughed together and then Emilia's face grew serious. "Sister-in-law?"

"That's how I feel about you already, Emilia. And, that's what you'll be - one day. Hopefully sooner than later."

* * * * *

The two headed for the oneiromancer's front door, trying to maintain the positive spirit they had cultivated in the car. Cullen rang her doorbell and a deep, mystical chime sounded from somewhere inside the house. "Not creepy at all," Cullen mumbled to himself before Emilia could shush him. An
elegant, ageless brunette answered the door. She looked like the type of woman who owned more than one tarot deck and believed "Mercury in retrograde" had caused her car to break down that morning, but he forced himself to not be cynical as Emilia greeted her.

"Corrine? I'm Emilia, we spoke on the phone."

The mage pulled her cashmere wrap around her shoulders and peered at Cullen. "And you must be Cullen, the heartbroken hero of this narrative."

Cullen made eye contact with a black cat sitting on top of a bookcase behind her. "Ah yeah, guess that's me. Nice to meet you, Corrine."

She moved aside to let them in. "Please make yourself at home - oh, but do take your shoes off."

Emilia gave Cullen a look that told him to obey before they followed the mysterious woman into her living room. Cullen sat down on a nearby bench to pull off his shoes, revealing the goofy pair of purple and pink argyle socks he had chosen that day. Emilia stared at him. "What? They're a gift from Aida," he stage-whispered at her with a pout.

"The chaise lounge will be for the gentleman, who will need to lie down when our journey begins. Emilia, you sit here near him, in case he needs anything. I'm going to serve the tea."

Cullen watched her pour the strange green liquid into his tea cup. "This is for you. Emilia and I will stick to peppermint tea."

He cupped the mug in his hands and gave it a sniff. It smelled like earth, and strange herbs. "Let it cool down first. We need to talk before you drink it. I want you to tell me three memories you have of Aida - the clearest ones you can remember - they needn't be long stories, they can be images, or just something small you remember about her, a gesture, a fleeting moment. Give me details."

The black cat hopped down off his perch, stretched, and then headed for his mistress's lap. He had yellow, knowing eyes that fixed on him while he settled into a comfortable position. Cullen looked back at him while he sorted through everything he had mentally catalogued about Aida since she had disappeared. Cullen cleared his throat before he spoke, and he addressed the cat, feeling a little nervous pouring his heart out to these two women.

"I remember the first time Aida helped me. I was having a bad night, lyrium addiction was tearing me up. Couldn't sleep. Couldn't concentrate. I trashed my condo, looking for some hidden packet of the blue stuff that I might have forgotten. She heard me through the wall our condos shared, and she stepped over the gap between our balconies and into my life - she was wearing those tiny little cotton athletic shorts I love, green, with white piping, and a white t-shirt. No bra. Sorry, you said you wanted details. She stopped me from tearing up my place, wanted to clean up the cuts all over my hands. And I remember, so clearly, she was looking at the back of one of my hands and she saw one of my old scars there, from my Templar days in the field. She rubbed it with her thumb. I don't know why, maybe she thought it was a new cut - doesn't matter really. I just remember how gentle she was with me that night, and knew that this is how gentle she must be at work, that this was her spirit on display. And the moonlight was very silvery that night."

The cat on the oneiromancer's lap blinked at him slowly, as if accepting his story. Corrine gestured to him to start drinking the tea now, and also to continue. He took a sip. It didn't taste as bad as it smelled, so he drank a little more.

"I think about her bottom lip, every day. It's - perfect. Full. So soft to kiss. Her upper lip isn't bad either, has this beautiful arch in the middle. She'd always go on and on about my own lips, but, she
always seemed a little oblivious to how lovely she could be, especially when she wasn't trying. Some Sunday mornings we'd get ready to go to brunch and she'd come out in these tight black jeans and a black tank top, and just red lipstick. And, I swear, I'd feel a little faint. I'd get all that lipstick all over me before we even got to the restaurant, because I could never stop kissing her in the elevator."

The cat flicked his tail from side to side. Cullen swore he was smiling at him.

"One more memory, Cullen. Don't think this time. Tell me the first thing that comes to mind."

He was beginning to savor his inhales and exhales. It felt like the books in the bookcases around them were breathing in and out with him too. He felt the cat's purring deep inside his chest. He was having trouble speaking now but he wanted to convey that third memory to her before he passed out.

"I remember - going to this dive bar, around the corner from our condos. Dark, windowless pub. Old wooden Chantry pews instead of booths. Sports playing on the two TVs in the corners - basketball. Great Bears. We were winning - heading to the playoffs. Aida could drink everyone I ever have known under the table - drink tequila like it was water. I remember - she would turn her shot glass over and place it rim down on the table, followed by a little proud smile on her face. And she had this sparkly ring, on her right hand. That night, sometimes when she'd slam that shot glass down, the light would catch that ring and it would twinkle for a second, just a little flash. I was feeling shy that night, so I kept watching for it, every time she did it. Maker, I was so in love with her already. Every thing she did, every time she touched me - it felt like magic."

Emilia eased him to lying down. The last thing he saw in the real world was that Emilia had been crying, but she had a small, encouraging smile on her face.

"Say hello to her for me, please."

* * * * *

Cullen's eyes snapped open - and he found himself on horseback. The shock of it almost caused him to tip off his mount. He grabbed the reins and hoped the horse knew more about this than he did.

"Cullen, are you all right?"

Cullen began to take in the details in rapid succession. There were rows of soldiers flanking him, a banner man at the front of their column carried a flag emblazoned with a flaming eye. He looked down at his arms and saw he was wearing a full suit of armor. He remembered that Aida had described him wearing such an outfit in a dream of her own - and that someone was currently talking to him. He looked to his left. Cassandra of all people, was riding next to him, in her own incredible suit of armor, and looking as noble as Joan of Arc - if not much, much grumpier.

"What are you staring at, Commander?"

Cullen's eyes widened at his new title. "Ah, nothing. Just..."

"Worried about the Inquisitor?"

Dorian pulled his horse up next to Cass. "We all are, Cullen. I hope this intel we received about Aida's possible location is -"

Now Cullen burst out laughing, he couldn't stop it from pouring out of him. Dorian scowled, getting angrier and angrier. "And what's so blighted hilarious, Commander!"
He wiped a tear from his eye, trying to control himself. "It's just - what - are you wearing?"

Dorian looked down at his robes in total confusion. "What I always wear, the finest silks and velvets the Inquisition can buy."

Cullen felt a heavy palm land on his armored shoulder. Bull, his other old coworker, had pulled up on the other side of him. "I'll thank you to not laugh at my lover's sartorial choices. Well, any more than you already have."

He looked over at his friend and saw the great expanse of the Qunari's muscled chest. "Jeeze, Bull, you're ripped like crazy. What do you lift nowadays?"

Everyone looked at him funny now. Sera flanked Iron Bull and chimed in. "You gonna laugh at me next, Commander Stick Up the Arse?"

Cullen looked at her and shrugged. "You look exactly the same. Didn't you wear something like that for Halloween one year? I've seen the pictures of you and Aida, wasn't she was dressed as -"

He stopped. He knew he sounded crazy, in whatever corner of the multiverse he had found himself in. *That tea is something else.* "Cullen, do you want to stop for a moment, we've been riding for days. And you seem to have some sort of - cerebral malfunction. Do you want to rest?"

Cullen was about to answer Dorian when one of his troops spoke up. "Ser, the Shrine of Dumat is just up ahead."

He nodded at the man in return. His hand landed on the pommel of his sword, and it felt like second nature to him.

* * * * *

When they got to the strange, abandoned temple everyone spread out in groups, but Cullen wanted to be on his own. He needed to see Aida again, it didn't matter about the circumstances. He sensed from all their banter on the way to the shrine that the Aida in this world was missing as well, and possibly in a significant amount of danger. He kept calm as he made his way down an empty hallway, littered with rubble - and then heard it...a haunting, sad melody. Sad but seductive. It called to him, and he started to hear it inside his head too.

"Cullen..."

He heard her anguished cry and it felt like a blade pushed into his side. He quickened his pace and called back to her, "Aida! Are you all right, where are you? Speak to me again!"

"Cullen..."

The strange music grew louder as he approached a large, ornate double door at the end of a long hallway. "Cullen! Please help me!"

He kicked open the doors in front of him and gasped. Red crystals shot out of the ground and out of the ceiling, the walls were punctured with ruby shards - and on an altar completely made of ominous red lyrium, lay Aida, writhing in pain and calling out his name.

He ran to the center of the room, not worrying about his own health or safety. Cullen yanked off his gloves and cast them aside, brushing the hair from her face. Her skin was fever-hot - and then he took a step back when he saw the huge red lyrium crystal growing out of her chest, where her heart
should be. Crystals ran up and down her arms along her veins. They sprouted from her head like an ominous, but beautiful jeweled crown.

"Aida, darling, wh-what - I don't understand?"

Her heated eyes tried to concentrate on him. "Is this real?"

Cullen tried to scoop her closer to him, tears now rolling down his face. "No, I don't know. Maybe. Who did this to you?"

Her head lolled back against his arm. "I did. I did it to myself."
"What is it? What did you do?"

She licked her lips, trying to speak clearly. "Red lyrium. I put it in my veins, baby. Because - "

He rubbed away one of his own tears that had landed on her cheek, waiting for her to finish. " - you don't love me anymore."

Cullen shook his head, holding her tighter. "How could you say such a thing to me? All I've ever done, every day since we've been parted, is think of you, and long for you."

A third voice in the room interrupted - *his voice, but demonic and warped.*

Cullen tore his attention away from Aida only to look right at a twisted, red-lyrium addled version of himself, in the same full suit of armor, hovering over her on the other side of the altar.

"She's mine, now, fool. She loves only me. She stopped thinking about YOU, a long time ago. She now sides with your former enemies, the men who tortured you, and murdered your friends. She is one of US now."

The dream around him was shifting into a nightmare, he looked around the room and saw ranks and ranks of angry, scowling rebel mages filling the room - their battlestaffs pointed at him, ready to shoot. Cullen's pulse began to race as the other-him scooped Aida closer to him, her back against his breast plate and a protective arm wrapped around her waist. He tried to reach for her to pull her back toward him. "Aida, no, whatever's going on, wherever you are - please know, I love you, I'm waiting for you."

Her eyes snapped open to look right at him and Cullen felt like he was suddenly falling, deep into her chocolate brown eyes.

"You're a liar," she hissed at him. *Who's Sierra Amell?"

* * * *

Cullen sat up with a gasp, back on Corinne's soft couch. Emilia was holding his hand, squeezing it tight.

"Cullen! You were mumbling in your sleep but I couldn't understand you."

He ran a hand through his hair and gulped down the glass of water Corrine gave him. He breathed deeply, as once Aida had taught him to calm down. Emilia asked in a tentative voice, "What did you see?"

Cullen opened his mouth to answer but couldn't find the words. Corrine sat down on the other side of the room, in the lotus position, and calmly answered Emilia.
"Aida believes she has lost her anchor to this world... She is adrift, but trying to get her bearings."

Cullen and Emilia waited for Corrine to continue. The woman closed her eyes, meditative.

"She has gone rogue. She does not want to dance with her demon. She seeks her own path now -"

Cullen interrupted her. "Will she come home? Has she given up on returning to us?"
"I am sorry, Mr. Rutherford. I can only interpret what you saw, I cannot see the future..."

Cullen began squeezing Emilia's hand now, growing more upset. "Please. I'm not asking you to lie to me, but - I need to leave here knowing something new. I need something to cling to."

Corrine crossed the room and picked up his mug of strange tea. She tilted it toward her, looking at the remnants at the bottom. Emilia whispered at him, "Tasseography!", a little too excited. Corrine placed the mug back in Cullen's palm.

"She will return to you - but she will be forever marked by her journey back to our world. She will never be the same, and your relationship will never be the same again."

Cullen could feel Emilia staring at him, but he could not look back at her. He was already thinking about how much it would hurt to have her back if she didn't want him anymore. It would be his own Void, worse than the one he was in already.

There was one thing he could do to feel better. And it had to be done - today.

* * * * *

Two hours later, it was snowing again, and Cullen was standing on Sierra's doormat, knocking on her front door. He had stopped at a bar for a few drinks before driving to her house, needing something in his system to steady his nerves. She opened the door, wearing a cotton nightgown - almost the exact same kind that Aida used to prefer, loose and soft, with an old robe thrown over it.

She smiled at him, tender and sincere. "Cullen! This is a surprise. Come in out of the snow, I was just about to make some tea."

Cullen put a hand up, "I've had enough tea for today. But, we need to talk."

The smile began to slip from her face and Cullen started to feel terrible. "We need to talk but you won't come in?"

Cullen began speaking, trying to get this over with. "I made a decision today. I'm not going to back to my therapist anymore, or our group sessions with him. And - I can't see you anymore too."

She pulled her robe closed, shivering in the cold he was letting into her home. "What? I don't understand. I thought we were both making progress letting go of our loved ones - and I thought we liked each other too. I thought we were building something new, rather than holding on to something old."

He shook his head, remembering how awkward it felt to kiss her, how relieved he was that they never took it too far. "I'm so sorry. I just - can't make myself feel something that isn't there, especially when I still love someone else so much."

Sierra's expression changed, her grey eyes dark and stormy. "You're sorry? I'm fucking sorry. You lead me on. I thought you liked me. I started to make plans - "
Cullen began to fight back now. "That's not fair, I never promised you anything. We were just trying to get through the shit we were going through. If you thought we had some kind of grandiose future together, that was not because of anything I ever did or said to you."

She wiped away an angry tear or two. "I think you're making a huge mistake. I think you'll be back. You wanted me, I know this, I felt it."

"I'm sorry. That's all I can say. Have a good night, Sierra."

He turned to step down off her porch without another look at her. She followed him out onto the sidewalk, barefoot and desperate, trying to stop him from getting into his car.

"Cullen, no, don't give up on us, please. Kiss me - "

She grabbed him by an arm, trying to embrace him, but he shrugged her off, as cruel as it was. He got into his 'Vette and drove off, Sierra's face twisted into a mask of dark, angry resentment.

Something about her in that very moment reminded him of someone Cullen used to know, but he could not put his finger on it.

At the next light he pulled up to, he stopped worrying about Sierra. Instead, he remembered Aida, with a heart made of red lyrium.

It began snowing even harder.

"Come back, Aida. Come back to me."

Chapter End Notes

NEXT WEEK: Aida's plot really gets moving so stay tuned!
The dining hall held its breath as Aida opened the small, rectangular gift Anders had handed her. It was almost the size of a tie box, but wider, wrapped in thick, ruby-colored paper. She glanced at Anders, who was sporting a cat-like, anticipatory grin.

"Anders, what is this, what have you -"

"Just open it, don't ask questions."

She tore the pretty paper, opened the box and gasped. Two seats away Corypheus smiled from ear to ear, bearing all his jagged teeth. The last time Aida had seen this dragon bone dagger, it had been sitting under two inches of thick glass in the Natural History Museum in Haven. She picked it up by its jeweled handle and was about to test the blade against the skin of her thumb when Anders stopped her.

"Careful, kitten, it's sharp - very sharp."

Corypheus stood up, addressing the room now, "Sharp enough to behead a Nightingale. Your wishes have been granted, Trevelyan. You will finally become my blade that sings."

"But, how did you get it?"

"Ah, I've forgotten that the news doesn't always quite make it all the way to our compound - unless we are making it ourselves." He gestured to a serving girl who brought something over to Aida, on a silver tray. It was a week-old Haven Times newspaper, with the rubber band still around it. She grabbed it and unfolded it, revealing the headline:

**THIEVES MAKE OFF WITH RARE HAVEN TREASURES**

**Museum Staff Mourn Fallen Colleagues**

Aida put the paper down and squeezed the handle of the blade, realizing that part of her plan was actually clicking into place. She tuned back into what Corypheus was saying. "Your beloved, he was the one who master-minded that heist. His expertise is not limited to bombs, Anders is always a credit to our cause."

The mages issued sounds of approval, and Aida was about to turn and thank him but Corypheus
wasn't finished. "I am proud to announce, when you return from this most important mission, Aida - you shall wed Anders. I am beyond proud to marry my finest assassin to my greatest architect of destruction. And from their bloodlines, mighty mages will be born. As many as Aida wants, at least, right?"

The magister's inner circle began to applaud, raising their glasses of stolen red wine and clinking them together. Aida stared at her new fiancee in disbelief. "Anders?"

He held her hand under the table, giving her a sympathetic look. "I know. This isn't how I wanted it to play out. Clearly I would have preferred to ask you myself. Alone. And with a proper ring, not a dagger."

Aida shook her head at him, lowering her voice to a whisper. "That's not what I'm talking about and you know this. You've made it very clear to me that you don't feel that way about m-"

He squeezed her hand now. "Not here. Not now. Later. Give me a kiss, it'll make everyone happy."

Aida leaned forward and Anders pressed his lips to hers. His kisses were always too polite, they lacked the smoldering sizzle of Cullen's touch. She smiled at him gamely. She wanted to love him, she had been trying to do so for how long now? Maybe within the bonds of holy matrimony, their bond would grow and blossom.

After dinner, Aida wandered the Arbor Wilds camp, smoking a cigarette, her thoughts darting between how good it would feel to separate Leliana's head from her body and how terrifying it was to be so deep in this pack of villains. She found herself meandering toward a tent where Anders often spent time with new recruits, wondering if he would follow her back to her room and help her shoot up for old time's sake. We should spend more time together if we are going to build a life together.

She paused outside the tent flap, hearing voices within. She recognized the wavering, nervous voice of one of the camp's elfen healers, a lovely lass with jade green eyes and ashen white hair. What was her name, Elara? Elafain? Ela-something. She was sniffling and Aida leaned closer, hearing Anders speaking to her in a soothing tone. It was hard to hear what they were saying, Aida could only catch bits of it as the wind whipped around her.

" - but you told me, you didn't..."
"It isn't personal, you don't have to worry -"
"And what am I supposed to do when you -"

Elara raised her voice. "I cannot sit idly by while you marry a woman you do not love - when I know you love me."

Aida threw back the flap of the tent and stepped in, making the girl gasp and stand up, moving away from Anders.

"Sorry to interrupt. I just heard someone speaking to my fiancee in an overly familiar way."

Anders stood up, quickly positioning himself between the two women. "Aida, I guess I should explain."

"Yes, start with: why get married, if your heart isn't in it?"

His girlfriend sniffled behind him, trying to wipe her nose on a disintegrating tissue. Anders spoke gently, as though they were both standing at his work bench as they dealt with one of his own delicate explosive devices. "Can't you see, our union would mean so much to our movement? That City Hall mission was just the beginning of everything we can do together: I make the bombs, you
plant them. I give you the knife - you strike with it."

He cupped her face with one of his smooth, steady hands. "Besides. We both know it will be a symbolic kind of marriage. I do love Elara, and only Elara. But let's be candid here, Aida - when you're high on red lyrium - you mumble one name and one name alone: Cullen."

A small flicker of a gloating smile appeared on Elara's lips before she composed her face back into one of rejection and heartbreak. She could never tell anyone around her what was really going on - that her joining their sacred cause was just a way for her to run away from her own feelings about Cullen - both the real one who had abandoned her, and the Fade-Cullen she was now very much in love with. Anders stepped back toward Elara, holding her hand now, everyone ruminating about their love rectangle. Aida put a hand on her new dragon bone dagger, now sheathed and attached to her belt loop. Its magic pulsed against her palm, reminding her of her revenge.

"Elara - what do you think? Should Anders marry me to make everyone else happy? And the rest of us miserable?"

Elara looked at Anders, devotion in her eyes. "I want whatever Anders wants, even if that means...this arrangement."

The elf winced as Aida dropped her cigarette on the ground and stepped on it in her tent. "Even if it means he has to fuck me and impregnate me to make Corypheus happy?"

Elara answered in a meek voice. "I wouldn't like that but..." She couldn't bear to finish, and began crying again. Anders gathered her into his arms and cooed into her ear, his back to Aida. She left them alone, stepping into the dense forest that protected their encampment. Aida scrambled over some tree roots as she made her way between the ancient thicket until she found a clearing lit only by the moonlight. She unsheathed her dagger and took an offensive stance, swiping left and right, making the dragon bone blade sing through the air. Would Leliana fight during her last moments? Would it be easy to push a blade into someone's flesh, even someone she loathed and held responsible for so much pain in her life?

She spun on a heel and aimed the dagger at the trunk of a tree near by with a deft flick of her wrist. It sunk into the bark and stuck in deep, at least three inches. One of the sapphires on the handle glittered at her like a wink, or a promise. It made her forget about her hunger for red lyrium, her hunger for Cullen's touch.

Blood. She now longed for it.

* * * * *

A few weeks later, Cullen of the Fade trailed behind his boss as she worked the crowd at her latest senate campaign fundraiser in Denerim. He could only think about one thing - the black and white image of Aida, under her magic mask, waltzing through city hall security with a piece of a bomb in her briefcase. Ferelden Homeland Security was looking for that icy blonde, and not Aida Trevelyan - but he still was. He would take any chance he could get to touch her again.

Varric spoke into his ear piece, startling him into the present. "Curly, don't lag behind. You should be a foot away from Leliana at all times." Cullen realized she had wandered deeper into the crowd of potential donors. Cullen nudged a few of them aside to rejoin her side - and then he heard a yelp and the shattering of glass near his feet.

"Look at the mess you just made! And I just bought this dress."
Cullen stepped back and looked at the Elven woman in the tight white dress, where red wine splashed against her right thigh and was now running down her leg. The tips of her pointed ears poked through an unbelievable mane of lavender-tinted hair and two icy blue eyes blinked at him surprise. The crowd around them gave them some space as Cullen stammered his way into conversation with her.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am."
"Miss!" she corrected him.
"I'm - I'm on duty at the moment, I didn't see you there."

She shook her head in disbelief, looking at the stain. "Well, someone will have to pay for my dry cleaning bill."

Cullen sensed Leliana hovering at the edge of his vision but he kept talking to the woman, a little mesmerized by her. "I'd buy you a whole new dress, if you'd let me."

The next thing happened so quickly Cullen had no chance to react. The elf put an intimate hand on the lapel of his suit jacket and murmured in a low voice: "Room 832. Front desk will have a key for you."

Cullen made his way back to Leliana's side, following her to the next end of the ballroom where she could schmooze up some more campaign contributions. Varric laughed over their linked comm device. "That lady has been watching you all night like you are the one running for the Senate."

Bull added, droll and playful: "Or like you were dipped in chocolate."

Blackwall passed him in the crowd, and didn't need to talk into their devices to be heard. "Clumsy Cullen."

Cullen squinted at Blackwall and ignored his coworkers' banter.

8-3-2. Room 832. 2 hours until this event was over.

* * * *

Aida paced around her suite, working herself into an anticipatory frenzy. She was waiting in Denerim for one of Corypheus's rogues to deliver the blueprints for Leliana's mansion, stolen from her architect's office. She was also cruising some soft targets for Anders - a small chemicals factory with cheap rent-a-cops for security, a high end jewelry store that could lead to a dramatic hostage crisis, an unguarded blood bank - something those creepier mages back in the Arbor Wilds would drool over. She found her work as a spy for the rogue mages strangely satisfying. It was certainly easier than tending to the injuries of mages who were resentful that they hadn't died in combat for "The Cause."

Aida took off her enchanted mask and removed the pendant from around her neck that also altered her voice. She couldn't be sure Cullen would show up, her fake identity was very convincing for this leg of her mission. Before she peeled off her stained dress, she slipped off her new engagement ring and put it down next to the necklace. She looked at her left hand - a light tan line already circled her fourth finger. She imagined Anders sneaking into Elara's tent tonight - and prayed Cullen would knock on her hotel room door soon. She decided to take an indulgent hot shower to take her mind off the waiting - something she wanted to savor because the plumbing in the Arbor Wilds was notoriously inconsistent.
As Cullen kept her waiting, the shower turned into a hot bath. Aida dunked herself into the bubbles with a sigh, and then froze when she heard her hotel room door click.

"Miss? It's - me. The uh, guy from the fundraiser? From earlier?"

Aida put a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggle.

"I - don't know your name, but I spilled wine all over you at that fundraiser downstairs, because sometimes - I'm a - dork?"

Aida did her best imitating the voice her magic pendant supplied. "I'm in here, vhenan."

She heard his footsteps approaching the bathroom door. He paused and coughed, awkward and hesitant.

"Don't be shy."

He cleared his throat again. She knew he was rubbing the back of his neck on the other side of that door, and it made her smile. "Ah, I just wanted to do something about your dress. I - have a girlfriend."

She giggled harder now, ending with a snort, unable to hold back, and then Cullen pushed open the bathroom door.

"Aida Trevelyan, I'd know that little snort of yours anywhere."

Aida grinned, placing a leg on the edge of the tub in a beckoning fashion. "Monsieur Clumsy."

Cullen started pulling his tie off. "Thought I wouldn't see you again - or at least not for a long time. What brings you to Denerim? Business or pleasure?"

Her eyes were locked on his golden ones, darkening with lust as he stared at her with open desire. "First one, then the other."

Cullen sat down on the edge of the tub, and leaned forward, cupping her face with one of his hands, his thumb on her chin. He rubbed that thumb over her bottom lip, gazing at her with devotion. With a quick tilt of her jaw, Aida slipped his thumb into her mouth and sucked on it, laving it with her tongue. It made Cullen curl his upper lip at her in obvious lust before he pulled his thumb out of her mouth and let his hand travel south, under the water. The two kept staring at each other, saying nothing. His hand swept past her nipples, stopping to touch them both, before she felt his fingers parting her folds and feeling for her clit. Cullen watched her face as he rubbed her pearl with two fingers, drawing little circles around it. Aida let her head fall back against the tile behind her with an emphatic moan. His shirt sleeve was getting wet but he didn't care. His fingers started moving faster, making Aida's eyes roll back in her head until she grabbed his arm, making him stop.

"Baby, please - "
"Please what?"

She swiped that hand at the buttons on his shirt, tearing a few of them off. "Get in here with me, now."

He got undressed so fast he was practically a blur, and then he lowered himself into the water on top of her, his mouth meeting hers in a hungry kiss. She pulled on a handful of his curls, directing his mouth back toward her breasts. With a groan of pleasure, he sucked a brown nipple into his mouth.
"Mmm, your mouth is so good, you make me feel good, all over." She cued him to give the same attention to her other nipple. This time Cullen stared at her as he licked it, working the sensitive bud, rolling it around and around on the tip of his pink tongue. Aida felt her pussy respond with a pulse as she got even wetter.

"Maker, everything you do to me, it makes me want to - " Aida felt herself blushing, but unable to finish her dirty thought. One of Cullen's hands was under the water again as he felt for her swollen pearl. "Tell me what you were going to say."

He smiled, smoldering at her, rolling her clit around again with two fingers. "Look at you, so shy. Tell me!"

"I want to ahhh, document. Everything we do together. So I have something to look at when we can't be together."

Now it was Cullen's turn to blush. "Document? What, like - film ourselves?"

Aida hid her face against his neck, giving him a few kisses too. "Why'd you make me say that, it's so stupid."

He surprised her by standing up and holding a hand out. "Come along, Trevelyan, let's rinse off. We have a movie to make."

* * * * *

Aida came out of the bathroom a few seconds later to find Cullen wearing a hotel bath robe and fiddling with the lamps in the room, filling the room with soft lighting. He had pulled back the bed's comforter and fluffed the pillows for them.

"Ah, my star has arrived on set."

Aida hid her face in her hands and giggled. "You can't - you can't talk like that. It just makes me laugh."

She felt him undoing the towel around her body, letting it fall to the floor. "But I like making you laugh. I like watching your face change. You're so strong and confident - but when I say something stupid just to make you laugh...you soften up, light up from the inside."

Cullen's robe joined her towel on the floor, and then he cupped her ass, pulling her closer. Cullen kissed a trail up her neck and whispered into her ear, "I love making you laugh. And I love the look on your face when my cock - makes you come."

"Mmm, you just gave me a great idea for first scene. Lie down. I want the camera first."

Aida walked him backward toward the bed and pushed him down on it. He spread out, putting a pillow under his head as Aida grabbed her phone and started shooting.

"Alright, so, some - background. This - is my lover. Look how hot he is. Those abs, those pecs - and look at that cock. Touch it baby, stroke it for me."

Cullen bit his lip as he obeyed her. The camera gave Aida a jolt of power that was making her very wet. "Open your legs a little more, let me see those perfect balls of yours. Touch them too."
He groaned as he fondled his balls with one hand, still stroking his cock with the other. Aida wanted to watch - and also wanted to taste, but it was always nice to be *commanded* too.

"What do you want, baby? Tell me."

Cullen looked at the camera - he was less shy than she expected him to be and it was an incredible turn on. "Come suck my cock, it wants that hot little mouth of yours."

Aida handed him the phone and knelt between his legs, gripping his cock with a firm hand. He pointed her phone at her and Aida pulled her hair back before drawing him deep into her mouth. He hissed with pleasure as she licked around his head - and then promptly dropped the phone on his own face. Aida fell back on the bed, laughing hard.

"Ow, that hurt!" Cullen rubbed his forehead and gave her a half-bemused, half-annoyed look.

Aida crawled toward him. "Oh, come here, let me make it better."

They forgot about the video for a moment as Aida cradled his head and kissed his forehead in several places - and then moved on to his lips. After a few deep kisses Cullen rolled her onto the mattress beneath him, and onto the phone.

"Oh, that's right, we were doing something, weren't we?" Cullen picked up the phone and aimed it back at his still erect cock with a jaunty look on his face. Aida kissed a path down his body and got back to work, sucking and licking his shaft all over, testing how far she could push him into her mouth. Cullen gripped himself and slapped the head of his cock against her tongue and rubbed it all over her lips, before putting a hand on the back of her head and making her deep-throat him again.

"Fucking-fuck, Aida, that's enough. Your turn now."

Aida switches places with him on the bed, but kept her knees glued together. "No, I'm - now I'm feeling shy."

"Aida, let me see. I can't lick it unless you show it to me."

Aida let her legs slide open, her cheeks burning now with both lust and bashfulness. "Come on, babe. Show me." Aida parted her folds with two fingers, keeping her eyes shut for the moment. She listened to Cullen's feedback, not feeling bold enough to look at him or through the lens.

"So wet. And so soft. I just want to - "

He gave her a coy look, pushing the phone back into her hand, and then lowered his head back between her thighs. He kept his eyes on hers through the camera as his tongue swirled against her sensitive bud. Cullen dipped two fingers into her vagina and then tasted her wetness with a moan. "You're sweet. Better than dessert. I could stay here all night - "

"As - amazing - as that would be, I have other requests. Come here, please."

The camera was growing less and less important as their desire for each other began to take over. Aida leaned the phone against the lamp on the night stand and aimed it toward the bed - and then straddled Cullen before he could offer any of his own feedback. He held onto her hips as she slid back and forth against his cock, grinding on the length of his hardness, covering him in her slick arousal.

"Come on baby, stop teasing me."

Aida smiled as she continued stimulating herself against him. "Is this considered teasing?"
Cullen smirked at her. "You're not - moving the plot forward. It's -"

She circled his hips, making Cullen squeeze her flesh even more. "It's filler. It's smut for smut's sake."

Aida leaned forward to kiss him, pressing her breasts to his muscled chest. "Oh, is it now? Didn't know you had such a flair for - narrative thrust."

"Thrust? Narrative thrust?"

"Yes, that's what I said - thrust."

Cullen grinned at her, which always made her heart soar - regardless of which Cullen it was. "I can take a hint, babe."

With that, she was groaning as she felt him entering her, inch by inch, his lips against her throat, his curls brushing against her face. She forgot about the sex video they were supposed to be making and just savored the sensation of being filled and stretched by him. He pinned her wrists to the mattress and Aida looked over his shoulder to watch the mesmerizing rise and fall of his perfect buttocks as he rolled his hips against hers, over and over again.

"Mmm, fuck, you're so good tonight, Cullen, so fucking good," she murmured right into his ear. Cullen began pumping into her hard now, making her cry out. "It makes me want to fuck. Your. Brains out."

The three fingers pressed to her clit began moving fast and Aida started to feel like they were coupling like wild animals. His lips were everywhere, his teeth sunk into her shoulder, her earlobe, he kept a hand on her cunt, another kneading a breasts. She prompted him to roll once again, this time so she could be belly-down and he was now behind her. He knelt between her thighs and kept up his deep, measured thrusts, holding her buttocks open so he could watch his cock plunging into her over and over again. Aida pressed her cheek to the soft, luxurious sheets beneath her and dug her fingernails into the pillow nearby as every slap of his skin against hers brought her closer and closer to oblivion.

Cullen leaned forward now, pressing their bodies together and she could tell by the emphatic, hard, deep thrusts he was giving her that he was so close to his release. Aida managed to gasp out a few words to him over her shoulder. "H-how's the video?"

Cullen laughed, deep and low and sexy. "Phone fell off the nightstand a few minutes ago and I couldn't be bothered. Baby, please. Roll over, I want to see your face."

They switched positions quickly, and before she could blink he was back on top of her, pumping his hips madly - and her body responded, from deep within. She had wanted to draw out their lovemaking, or at least, this first round in the night, but it was too late. She clenched around him, hard, just as he pushed himself in as deeply as he could, emptying himself into her with a satisfied, trembling sigh.

They laid there, panting next to each other for a few minutes, and then Aida picked her phone up off the floor. The last fifteen minutes picked up nothing as the phone had landed camera side down - and even the sounds of their passion were muffled. Cullen nestled in next to her and they snickered together as she scanned through their shaky camera work.

"Well, we were no good at that. Not that it wasn't any GOOD, it was very good - "
Cullen kissed her on the shoulder, and then rested his chin there. "It's just that we don't have a promising future as pornographers."

Hearing Cullen of the Fade even joke about any kind of future together sent her slamming back to what was really happening - this might be the last time they get to be like this together. Cullen saw the change in her expression became serious as well.

"Aida. Run away with me. You don't have to do whatever you're planning to do to be happy, can't you see?"

She felt woozy. She always worried his love was a fabrication, another way to keep her imprisoned in the Fade. Or maybe she still couldn't trust her own feelings when it came to these issues of the heart. Solas called him a shadow on the wall - can you move with a shadow to Antiva and open a sidewalk bistro? Why not be the first woman to find out?

Aida thought about these things while she idly traced her fingertips over his chest. Cullen stopped her hand by pressing his over hers, right over his heart.

"We know Corypheus is gearing up for another attack in Haven, homeland security picked up the chatter. I know you can't tell me what you're planning. But you do realize, if it came down to it, and you were threatening my boss..."

Aida waited for it. He was too good, even this Fade version of him. A man of duty, with a code.

"...how we feel about each other has now compromised both of us - I could never hurt you and I know you could never hurt me. So - fuck it, fuck everything. Let's go back to Haven, grab Barkley - and then disappear together."

Aida sat up and thought about it. If they ran away with each other tonight, Corypheus and his evil doers would chase them forever, and they'd never be able to relax anywhere in Thedas. But if she planned the assassination mission just right, she could get her revenge - and maybe escape with Cullen in the aftermath of her chaos.

"So, what do you think?"
"I do want to run away with you Cullen. It just can't be tonight. I've got to extricate myself from my... organization, or we'd never feel safe."

Cullen sighed. Aida crawled on top him, straddling him quickly. "Don't look so down, Cullen. Technically what we shot earlier was take one. There can always be a take two. And if you don't have to report back for duty right away - "

He slid his hands up her thighs. "Maybe a take three, and take four?"

* * * *

Aida returned to the Arbor Wilds, to her fiancee and her drug habit. She now could not make it more than forty-eight hours without red lyrium, and it also took the edge off of walking through camp holding Anders hand when she knew he was barely putting up with her. There was an upside to Anders' lack of romantic passion for her - to make up for it, he seemed doubly keen to pull off her grand scheme. Anders, Calpernia and Corypheus all believed that killing the Nightingale with the knife they had looted - wielded by the aristocratic young lady who embraced their ideology - would be a mighty blow indeed.
"We're going to have quite a team on the ground with you. We're going to flood the streets of Haven, causing chaos at several distraction points throughout the city, spreading their response teams as thin as possible and then you can strike."

Anders told her this as they sat on the bed in her quarters after dinner one night, going through the motions of being engaged mostly for the other mages who approved of their romance. Aida thought about Cullen of the Fade, and how he was probably waiting to hear from her, with one bag packed and ready to go anywhere with her in Thedas-2.

"Are you going to tell me any details? Like - at least, when we are going to do this thing?"

"The next full moon. Corypheus is poetic like that. We are the wolves baying at her door."

Aida wished he'd go sit in the chair by her bed so she could stretch out. "Do we have a clever mission name? I know you and Cal like those."

Anders shot her a grimace. "Yeah, we've been calling it 'The Prenup'. Cal thinks it's funny - because if you don't pull this off - either because you botched it and get arrested, or are killed during the mission - we're obviously not getting married."

"I bet you'd like that," Aida mumbled as she lit a cigarette.

Anders took his glasses off and looked at her, a sign he was being very serious. "I don't want anything bad to happen to you. I might have feelings for Elara - but I care for you as well."

Aida gave him a tiny, begrudging smile and offered him a smoke. They leaned against her headboard together, platonic friends, bound by the same path.

"When is the next full moon?"

"In a week."

* * * * *

Aida would later look back on the days between that conversation and the day of the mission and marvel at how benign they seemed at the time. One night over dinner Corypheus told them a story from his childhood - which of course, had been - aeons ago? Everyone had sat so quietly as he gave them a glimpse of a flash of a memory of when he had been a child. He had had a mother, he remembered the color of her hair - copper, laced with spun gold - catching in the sunlight as they enjoyed a warm summer day on his family's estate. He had once been a child sitting in a grassy meadow, trying to catch grasshoppers. Even monsters have mothers, a simple revelation, now ingrained into her memory.

She also remembered walked past Elara's tent one night, and hearing the girl singing to herself in Dalish. Aida had peeked through a gap in her tent's canvas covering, and seen the beautiful girl with her head bowed over an old shirt of Anders' she was, patching it up with needle and thread. The moment had made her jealous - Elara had someone to care for - but the artist in her would never forget what she looked like in the dim lantern light, her healer's hands moving with graceful precision.

She remembered the brilliant sunrises over their encampment, how tart and sweet a wild apple could be, plucked from the untended orchard that lay only a few clicks behind her part of the compound.

She'd also never forget how strong Leliana was as she fought back against Aida and her sharpened
dragon dagger.

That night had started out like the low, humming note orchestras tune to before they begin to play. Anders had not exaggerated - at least five squads of rebel mages, rogues and roughnecks had descended upon Haven. A trio held up a busy convenience store and took hostages. A big rig carrying a load of gasoline blocked four lanes of traffic on an important freeway. A mysterious package was left at the airport, ticking ominously as two bomb robots worked their way toward it. They stole, smashed windows, they started fires - no crime was too small on this night. The lights flickered on and off all over the city, as a two-pronged team attacked the city's unsecured power grid - and the magical barrier around Leliana's property.

When it came to the final blow, Aida slipped into her mansion through a forgotten service entrance, alone. The mages working on the barrier were her backup, but it was understood that Aida would undertake her task without assistance, bringing her head back to Corypheus.

They worked the plan down to the seconds.

Aida crawled through an air duct and dropped into Leliana's walk in closet. She held her breath and listened at the door, waiting for Corypheus to call her personal line. Aida slipped the dragon dagger blade from its sheath and kissed the handle - and once she heard Leliana's tone grow more pitched, more anxious - she sprung from her hiding place.

Before Leliana could even react, the two were locked together, the red head fighting back, possibly remembering some long-ago self defense class. And the Nightingale could YELL, Aida couldn't get a hand around her head to silence her.

Cullen, Varric, and a bevy of Haven PD officers she did not recognize came bursting into her bedroom. Aida was down to her last moments of her revenge scheme. She grabbed a handful of the mayor's hair and yanked as hard as she could. With a swift, vicious kick to the back of her leg she had the Nightingale on her knees.

Aida would also never forget way Varric and Cullen's faces changed as they realized - it was her, the tip of her knife pointed right toward the artery in their boss's neck.

"Aida, don't."

She watched Cullen give his coworkers a silent look as he took a half step forward. Aida dug the tip of her blade into Leliana's skin, making her cry.

"Cullen, I have to. And I'm going to."

She took a deep breath and drove the knife deep into her nemesis's neck, pushing hard through her flesh, tearing and ripping into her, blood cascading over her hands, making the blade hard to hang on to.

Everything happened so quickly as soon as Leliana fell forward out of her grip.

Varric and the cops aimed their guns at Aida - and Cullen stepped between them. Their bullets hit Cullen instead of her.

Aida saw his caramel eyes open wide as he stumbled into her arms. He fell on her blade, shaking his head at her.

"No, no no no no no", she sobbed as they collapsed onto the carpet together.
He was whispering something into her ear.

"Say the words."

Out of the corner of her eye, Aida felt Varric and the cop edging closer to them. Cullen pulled the blade from his side and pressed it into her hands.

"The words, in your notebook. The magic words. I'll be waiting for you - on the other side."

Aida pressed her lips to his and murmured the Tevene phrase he had seen written in the pages of her notebooks over and over again.

Transcribed into Common, they meant: "There's no place like home."

She said the words over and over again and watched in heartbroken horror as he faded away and disappeared from her arms. The world around her flickered, pixelated - Aida blinked her eyes in amazement as a new setting came into focus around her. It was a fantastical landscape, full of strange craggy rock formations, the sky glowing a portentous shade of green.

Aida heard seductive laughter - dark, feminine laughter.

She was still covered in Leliana's and Cullen's blood, and to her surprise, she still had the dagger. Aida jumped to her feet and spun around. A desire demon was standing ten feet away.

"Hello?" Aida squeaked at her.

"Ahhh, Aida, what a pleasure to meet you in the flesh. It's been - entertaining - keeping you here against your will. Your dreams, your wishes, your hopes, your desires - have been among the richest I have ever fed upon."

The two circled each other. The dagger was humming like crazy now.

"You loved him, and he wasn't even real. Do you feel like a fool now, Aida?"

The demon swiped at her with her claws, but Aida was fast to dodge her attacks.

"He was very, very real, you bitch, and he definitely loved me back - "

Aida dodged left, right, left again, and rolled out of the way. The beautiful temptress snarled at her. "Not true. He was exactly what your friend said he was - a shadow on the wall. And worse yet, you'll never return to the real man. What a dreadful mess. But it was so much fun to play with you. Mmmm, how you responded, your lust - your love - it was like clear, cool water to me."

Aida tested her mana - she felt it sparking inside of her but it was like starting a campfire with no kindling. She did observe that the desire demon could only swipe at her four or five times before she tired herself and her attacks slowed down before she regained her strength.

They dodged and danced together. Aida only needed one opportunity with her sharp, sharp dagger.

*One, two, three, four, five.* Sometimes the demon got close enough for to nick her but her anger made her feel no pain.

"You tiresome cunt, when I dispense with you - guess who I'll come for next: the real Cullen. He has been seeking a way to step into the Fade to look for you, and as soon as he does - "
The demon hissed and lashed out at her hard - Aida screamed as she felt the impact rip across her cheek and forehead. She staggered backward and landed on her back, all the wind knocked out of her.

She heard the demon's foot falls coming closer to her, Aida played as though she had been knocked unconscious. She waited an excruciating amount of time until she was sure the creature was right above her.

Aida stabbed upward, right into the desire demon's stomach. She stabbed her in a blind rage, sobbing and slashing. The desire demon's corpse laid heavy upon her and she pushed it off of her. It wasn't enough. She needed more.

She raised her knife high above her head and brought it down on the desire demon's heart. The blade pierced the creature's ribcage and sunk into her body.

Aida's ears were filled with the sound of rushing wind, the earth beneath her began to tremble and shake.

The green sky over her head grew brighter and brighter until she could look at it no longer -

She felt like she was plummeting off a high cliff...

* * * * *

Aida hit the surface of the water hard, and then she was quickly sinking into an icy cold abyss. She kicked a few times but the surface felt like it was moving farther and farther away from her.

Fuck. I must drowning.

She kept trying to reach the surface when something began to lift her out of the water - a net that wasn't moving fast enough. She tried to relax her pulse and conserve her last seconds of oxygen...

Little flickers of green light surrounded her - it took her a moment to realize they were tiny, luminescent fish.

Fuck. I must be dying.

Her mind searched her medical training for how long you could survive in freezing water but she could recall no facts at the moment. Instead, Aida felt her mana soaring back to life inside her, but the surface still felt too far away and she knew no spell that could save her.

She had fought enough. It was time to surrender.

With every atom in her being, she closed her eyes and sent a message to Cullen.

"I love you more than life itself."

* * * * *
In his room, on the other side of Thedas, Cullen woke from his sleep with a sharp, intense inhalation.

Chapter End Notes

CLIFFHANGER!!!!!!!!!!! Sorry, I love em too too much.

Follow me on tumblr: thetemplarandtherogue.tumblr.com
Cullen tried to listen to Rylen on the far end of the conference table, droning on about all the new properties being added to the Trevelyan portfolio, but he could only concentrate on two things - that annoying little t-t-t-tick noise the office ventilation was making at the moment, and how he had heard Aida's voice so clearly the other night, as though she had been kneeling at his bedside. He didn't know what to do about it, or know what it meant, but he had been unable to go back to sleep.

And, odder yet - he hadn't been feeling like himself lately - or was it that he was feeling even more like himself? Sometimes he found himself daydreaming at his desk, his thoughts naturally turning to Aida and the times they had been together. He would be almost 3 minutes deep into that dirty reverie to realize he didn't actually remember this particular steamy moment in the history of their relationship. He would get flashes of standing and posing for her so she could draw him, he'd remember her sliding a hand through his hair and giving him one of her trademark "I want you deep inside me" looks - but it synced up with no real memory of his. Yet there they were in his mind's eye, he could almost hear her moan in his ear as he took her, hard and rough, against the wall of the spare room that served as her art studio. And then he'd remember the picture she drew of him. He flipped through her sketchbooks over and over again but there was no drawing like this in any of them, rendered with Aida's sensitivity in black and terra cotta-colored charcoals. It made no sense. How could he remember something he couldn't remember?

He had no one to talk about about this. He imagined trying to explain this to Emilia, but he knew she'd just take it as yet another swoon-worthy sign of their enduring love for each other, and then she'd go "ew, no, don't tell me the details, she's my little sister for Maker's sake." These strange, fleeting feelings were making him think he was maybe working too hard and finally in need a vacation.

After the meeting he strolled over to Krem's desk outside of his office. His assistant closed a browser window as innocently as possible and then pivoted in his chair to face his boss.

"Ser, what's up? Anything I can help you with?"
"Yeah, let's go talk in my office."

Krem pulled a face of surprise. "Really? You actually need me to help you with something?"

Cullen cleared his throat, feeling awkward. It was true, he always preferred to do all his grunt work and Krem lucked out, getting to overdose on the internet for 8 hours a day.

"Yes, but it's a personal matter, so I'd prefer for us to - "

Two Trevelyan Enterprises executives walked past, the pair of women shooting both of them hungry, playful looks.
Hi assistant trailed him into his office and sat down attentively in the guest chair in front of Cullen's desk, notepad and pen in hand.

"What can I help you with today?"

Cullen straightened his desk blotter and also gave his framed picture of Aida and Barkley a corrective nudge as well. "I would like to go on vacation."

Krem looked around in confusion. "I'm sure an executive of your standing can just uh, go on vacation. Do you want me to notify the Bann for you?"

"No, that won't be necessary. It's just that - "

His assistant leaned forward just a little, waiting for the kicker.

"I don't know where to go. There, I said it."

Krem's eyes opened wide. "You don't know where to go - on vacation?"

"No, life has just always put me in this place where I could never get away. I did the standard family vacation stuff when I was living at home, then went straight from high school to the Templars, four tours of duty... Then back to Haven, joined the Mayor's office - then, life with Aida, but we didn't have a chance to plan any kind of couples getaway. Then, she was gone. And now, here I am - a grown man in front of you not knowing where I can go to unwind and enjoy myself."

Krem's sat up straight, beaming confidence and eagerness. "Let's see if we can narrow it down for you. My girlfriend and I happen to love travelling, and I did quite a bit of it when I was in college, instead of - well, going to college. Let's start with an obvious one: do you want to lie around on a beautiful beach and do nothing?"

Cullen imagined himself on a white sandy beach, book in one hand, beer in the other. He turned and looked to his left and saw Aida sunbathing lying belly down on her towel next to him - sweat beading on her brown skin, her bikini top strap undone as she dozed in the tropical sun. But then he blinked and she was gone.

"No, a little too - indulgent for me. I do like to be active."

"I can see that. How about - some place with a lot of cultural activities? Museums? Everything dripping with history?"

Cullen caught a flash of Aida in his imagination. She was leaning closer to an old Orlesian oil painting, studying the brush strokes. She stood up and looked at him, with a warm, content smile on her face, beckoning him to come see what she had observed.

Cullen shook his head. "I'll be frank with you, buddy. That's just - too Aida. It'd be hard to not think of her constantly."

Krem clicked his pen as he thought more. "Hmmm, nothing that would remind you too much of the boss's daughter. Alright, that's a good place to start."

They spent another twenty minutes going back and forth. Cullen nixed skiing in Nevarra, boating off the coast of Rivan, rafting down the Hafter river in Amaranthine. He hated speaking Orlesian, knew very little Tevene and didn't like the weather there either. Kirkwall would always be out of the question, and Tantervale as well, what with being too close to Kirkwall. Krem was running out of
ideas but Cullen wasn't giving up.

"Come on, Aclassi. You're being too clinical. You're thinking too much about how I'm your boss, a decorated war hero, who can fire you at any second. Treat me like one of your friends."

At Cullen's teasing, Krem dropped his pad and paper on Cullen's desk in a casual way. "Alright, alright, one of my friends, one of my friends. Let me think. A drink would help, you know."

Cullen smirked at him, it was often Krem's job to offer his stressed out boss a cocktail. Cullen headed over to his office bar cart to make them both a gin and tonic with a twist of lime while the young man kept brainstorming. He handed him and drink and they raised them in the air for a moment.

"To Miss Trevelyan, of course," Krem intoned with respect.
"Of course."

Krem took three big sips while Cullen watched him with some disbelief. "You want another one, guy?"

His face lit up. "I've thought of something. Mind if I use your computer?"

Cullen sipped his drink while Krem logged on to his Facebook page and navigated to a friend's account. Cullen raised an eyebrow at the guy's show-offy yoga pose in his profile picture. Another photo showed him bundled up and grinning triumphantly on top of an icy mountain summit, arms spread wide.

"Who's this douchehandle?"

"Max, an old roommate - who of course still has not paid me the 350 gold sovereigns he owes me in back rent. He is indeed a terrible 'douchehandle' as you said - but the guy is also a serious adventurer. Let's see what he's been up to."

He navigated from his profile to his blog and then one click deeper sent them to his photo archives. Cullen and Krem grew silent for a while as he clicked through his high def pictures. Cullen hated to admit it, but the man was a great photographer. He had a sensitivity for when to use a close up, a natural eye for framing landscapes, how to take breathtaking pictures of the stars in the sky over an alpine lake. Cullen was about to ask him for details about a safari Max had enjoyed in Par Vollen when he saw something on screen that made him grab Krem's shoulder.

"Go back. No, two more."

Krem's friend had taken a picture of a mountaintop plum orchard, the trees heavy with fruit. Chantry sisters were working their way up and down the rows with big wicker baskets. Cullen focussed on a nun in the background of the picture, leaning against a tree and biting into a pear while her sisters continued working. Krem furrowed his brow, confused.

"Cullen?"
"Where was your friend, where is this?"

"Let's go back to his blog. Hmm, looks like he was visiting this place - oh, just a few weeks ago. Max was heading to the Throat of the World, the second highest peak in the Hunterhorn Mountains, after Mount Ambrosia. This little village, Loftet, is the last piece of civilization before you begin your final ascent, is untouched by modernity and is accessible only by foot. Let's look it up. Sounds like a popular destination for Andristian pilgrims who believe the site to be sacred, as apparently fruit should not be able to grow at this elevation. A Chantry convent was established there before the
Second Blight and ooh, nice, the sisters make a very strong pear brandy, when they are not tending to the poor of the village as well as injured hikers. Hmm, pretty lake nearby, full of fish as well. Looks like Max got stuck there for a week while they waited for a bout of bad weather to clear up at the peak. Why'd you ask, Cullen?"

Cullen had broken out in a light sweat. "Go back to his photos again. Can we look at just the ones from this trip? Go slowly."

Krem started from the beginning of the photoset. Max had documented every corner of this tiny village and they had to sift through countless photos of barefoot children playing soccer in cobblestone side streets, the usual arty pics of paper lanterns dangling over the square at midnight.

"What are we looking for, Cullen?"
"There. Stop. Go back to the market."

It was a snap of the same piazza, during daylight it was lined with food stalls and stands selling handmade religious tchotchkes. A small group of Chantry nuns were making their way through a pack of beggars congregating on some steps, handing out pears and apples to the hungry.

"Can you zoom in?"
"This isn't TV spy thriller. I mean, I can a little."

Cullen pointed to one of the sisters. She was out of focus as she knelt near a homeless woman who had a baby in her arms. The nun had a hand outstretched as she touched the child's forehead.

"It's her, Krem. It's her."

Krem looked at his boss's profile and knew who he was talking about and that he was dead serious. "But you can barely see her face, she's so out of focus. How do you know it's Miss Trevelyan?"

"Yes, but that's her jawline, that's her - that's her hand, her - gentleness. Alright fine, I sound like a besotted boyfriend. Your friend was quite the shutterbug and he was there for days. Let's see if we can find her again."

They combed Max's pictures. There were two more of the nuns feeding and tending to the poor, but no Aida. But Cullen swore a picture of a nun lighting a candle in the village's Chantry was her, but her back was to the camera. Unlike the other nuns, she had a long black braid slipping loose from under her veil.

"It is sort of a decent clue. Chantry nuns shave their heads the day they take their vows, and here's one with hair down to the small of her back. He's still got fifty more photos in this set, let's keep looking."

Cullen was about to lose hope again when Krem stopped his clicking and made a choked noise. There was Aida, in focus, in the third to last photo, working on a mural behind Chantry's rustic altar, working on an intricate pattern with a long paintbrush. Krem clicked forward one more and there she was, looking right at the photographer with a blush on her cheeks, and a little gold paint on her chin.

The two men were silent for a long time. Krem picked up his glass to sip from it, even though he had finished his gin and tonic. He was also the one to speak first.

"Cullen. I don't understand. Did - Aida fake her death?"

Cullen realized he had tears in his eyes. "No, Krem. She's back. She came back!"
"But how?"
"No clue, bro."
"Bro?"
"Sorry, haven't felt like myself lately and I can't explain that either."

Krem opened another browser tab and started typing at whirlwind speed. "Well, we solved your vacation problem. Hope you can hike, because it's a long, long walk to the Throat of the World. When would you like to leave?"

Cullen reeled. This was happening very fast. He wanted it to happen very fast. He wanted to march up there tomorrow, find Aida, tear that Chantry nun outfit off her and -

"Cullen?"
"Sorry, sorry, my mind drifted. I guess need to shuffle some of my work load around, get the right supplies and equipment for the big hike, um, you know - tell Aida's family she didn't die and she's very much alive... That one's going to be kind of intense."

Krem had a travel website open and was already plotting his itinerary. "I think you can do all of that in two days at the most. The other Miss Trevelyan and the Bann will even be back from their investments meeting in half an hour. That's plenty of time to figure out how you're going to tell them the unbelievable news."

He clapped a thankful hand on Krem's shoulder. "Send me those photos, I'm going to need to show them to her family. And can we look at that last one again?"

Krem flipped back to the other tab. He felt a rush of joyful adrenaline looking at a new picture of his lover. She looked well, except for a new scar across her forehead that arced toward one of her eyebrows. Cullen chuckled to himself.

"Your fucking friend. He was flirting with her, I can tell by the smile on her face. Send me his address too. I'm going to strangle that guy."

They shared a laugh while Krem went back to the airline's website and hit the 'confirm' button on the booking page - but Cullen didn't want to strangle him, he wanted to spend the rest of his life thanking Krem's friend.

It was fate - and for once, it was tilting in his favor.

* * * * *

That night Cullen had the Bann summon Aida's siblings to Skyhold for dinner, and after dessert he showed them the pictures on his laptop. They went from shock to disbelief to joy to - a sort of hysteria. How do they prove to the government that she was alive with just a few photos? How can they cross the Orlesian border when Aida had no ID?

Emilia began to brainstorm the other issues that could arise. "And if we don't control this situation properly... Aida's return could cause a panic. People don't come back from the dead every day. If the press got word of this, even when we explain what happened..."

"I could see the Divine and her army of clerics getting worked up about this too. They might consider it blasphemy for someone to admit they passed through the Fade and returned to the land of the living," Eddie added.
Maxwell grabbed the decanter on the table and refilled his father's wine glass for him. "I know it isn't important, but I bet people will say she never got sucked into the Fade, she just - ran away from home. And by people, I mean - the rest of our judge-y family."

Cullen clenched his jaw. All of these scenarios were possible, but he was too scared to tell him the one that worried him the most - that Aida would not want to come home, or that she had amnesia again and wouldn't remember him. The oneiromancer's words haunted him - that nothing between them would ever be the same again.

The Bann stood up and looked at Cullen who was seated across from him.

"Satinalia is soon. Please find her, we'll figure the rest of it out."

Cullen stood up too and looked Aida's father in the eye. "I swear to you, I won't come home without her."

***

The journey to the Throat of the World was the most physically vigorous thing Cullen had done since his days in the Templar service. He had always kept in shape, but this hike was not just physically challenging, but it also pushed him mentally. So much of the ascent was composed of soul-crushing switchbacks and once he passed the cloud line there was little to look at besides the trail ahead of him and the unforgiving mountain above. It was also a spiritual experience - every time he felt exhausted, an Andrastian pilgrim would pass him on the trail, seemingly unaffected by the conditions.

It took almost a week of hiking and camping before he reached the tiny village that was the last stop for hikers heading to the top of the mountain. Krem's friend had documented it so well that Cullen felt like he had already been there. He wanted to call Bann Trevelyan to tell him he had made it but predictably there was no cell phone reception - or electricity, things he discovered once he checked into the village's tiny inn. He dropped his pack on the floor of his room and looked for the packet of photos of Aida he had brought with him to show the locals. Cullen took a quick look at himself in the mirror hanging in the bathroom. He had a slight beard from the days he had spent on the trail and his curls were out of control, but he didn't want to spend time on preening for Aida - he just wanted to find her.

He went straight for the convent behind the Chantry, but a caretaker at the gate told him the sisters never admitted visitors, and he refused to look at the photos he offered him. "Ser, if she is behind these walls it means she has rejected her previous life in service of the Maker."

Cullen clenched his jaw but controlled his temper. "She didn't arrive here to join the Sisters - she may have been, lost, or confused."

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The man shut the big wooden door in his face. Cullen checked the Chantry but found only pilgrims praying and intoning in the candlelit interior. He looked at the murals on the wall - all of them were old and fading except the one behind the altar, which was new, an intricate design, a knot whose lines wove between each other in a dizzy pattern. Cullen stared at it, knowing she had painted it. She was so close, he could feel her presence and it was killing him.

Cullen tried showing her photo to anyone who would look, but they waved him off, voicing similar sentiments to the caretaker at the convent. People came to the Throat of the World for two reasons, to make it to the top of the mountain - or to never leave. He went to the village's only pub, looking for solace, and found the village's fisherman gathered there, after a long day of work. He made the
rounds, buying ale for anyone who would look at his photos. One of the oldest men squinted at his photo and almost choked on his free beer.

"Aye, we've seen her. That's the Lady of the Fade! Show that to young Albert, he's quite heartbroken over her."

The younger fisherman approached him and Cullen showed him the small stack of photos. He made a moon-faced face over all of them and sighed at the last picture, of Aida sitting on a blanket in the sunshine in the park near their condos.

"We were fishing one night - I know that must sound strange to you, but the fish the Maker provides us here - they glow, and you can seek them out at night. The weather was very turbulent that night, but the catch is always bountiful during such conditions. I saw the sky open up in a bright green flash, but nobody believed me. A few minutes later, we pulled her out of the water in one of our nets, naked and bleeding. You will pardon me - but she was so beautiful, I - "

The young man stammered and the older men laughed at him. "Albert wanted to keep her, the fool. But we took her to the nuns, and they patched her up and have been taking care of her. We've only seen her once or twice since that night, when the sisters come out to distribute food and aid to our beggars and urchins."

Cullen stared at the rim of his glass, a worrying thought now crossing his mind. "How long has she been here?"

"I'd say that was weeks ago."

Strangely enough, it was Albert to see the look on his face and take pity on him. "She was very disoriented when we got her warmed up. She kept asking us if this was real."

"This?"
"You know - all of this."
"And what did you tell her?"

Albert looked at him in confusion. "Well, of course it's real. I'm real, aren't you?"

Cullen almost tumbled into an existential spiral. How to tell this lovesick young man that there had been another him somewhere else, so maybe there was another Albert out there too, married to Aida and coming home to her every night after a day casting his nets. Cullen shook off these thoughts and looked at the fisherman again.

"You try to talk to her since you found her?"
"It's quite difficult - the sisters only focus on those who need their help. The rest of the village is not important to them."

One of the other men interrupted now. "Poor Albert, he can't get one of our plain village girls to talk to him twice - and he expects a magical woman who fell from the sky to fall in love with him?"

They all laughed at him, but Cullen put a hand on the guy's shoulder as he flagged down the pub owner to buy him another drink.

"I have some bad news for you, Albert. That magical woman happens to be the love of my life, and I'm here to take her home."

* * * * *
Cullen had only one route to speak to Aida, and he knew what he had to do. He waited the next morning in the town's little square with a pack of beggars who were always stationed near the Chantry's front doors. He pulled the hood up on his parka and posted up against a nearby wall, trying to look worn out and hungry. He didn't have to play it up, he wanted to see her so bad it felt like real hunger.

He nodded off as the nearby market came to life. He was vaguely aware of hikers and pilgrims passing him on the street, but fatigue from the previous day's hike overcame him. He wasn't sure how much time had passed when the sound of the beggars around him shuffling to their feet woke him. "They're here - Sister! Please! Food! Food for my child - "

Cullen felt someone touching him on the shoulder. He blinked his eyes open and focused on the nun's face. "Aida? Do you, do you know an Aida?"

He scrambled to his feet, looking at the other nuns who were working their way through the needy. Maker please, please let her be here today.

His heart was thumping in his chest before he even saw her.

The crowd parted for a moment and there she was, wearing a freshly pressed Chantry sister's habit and wimple, handing fruit to children who were surrounding her.

"Aida!"

Cullen approached her, throwing the hood back on his parka.

She froze, a pear in her hand. She blanched and wobbled on her feet.

"Cullen?"

"It's me, Aida, it's me. I'm - "

He didn't get to finish his sentence. Aida's eyes rolled back in her head and she fainted - the fruit from her basket cascaded everywhere, causing a little chaos as the hungry dove for her apples, plums and pears. Aida's fellow sisters blocked his view of her, and then he realized the other beggars were pulling him away.

"What did you say to the Lady of the Fade? You upset her!"

"Let go of me, I need to speak to her! Aida! It's me! Aida! Aida! Please!"

He watched in chagrin as a few nuns managed to prop her up between them and they escorted her back to the gates of the convent. He pushed off the beggars and followed in their wake, at a respectful distance.

"Please, Sisters, I know this woman - I must speak to her. Please, I have proof that I know her."

He kept repeating himself until they made it to the big wooden door where he had been turned away yesterday. The last nun in their group turned and took pity on him.

"Give me one of those photos. I will show it to our Abbess. Perhaps she will believe your story and allow you to speak to Sister Aida - but for now, she needs to rest. Your friend has her moments of strength and clarity - but she also seems to have been through an incredible experience that clearly still upsets her."
Cullen grabbed the nun's hands. "I beg you, I just want to speak to her for five minutes. We can be chaperoned if you wish."

The nun pulled away from him in surprise, but her eyes were still kind and understanding. "I'll see what I can do."

* * * * *

The next morning Cullen woke up and found a note on the floor of his room, pushed under the door. In very tidy printing, the Abbess had given him permission to come speak to Aida at 10 am that morning. She urged him to be prompt - and to be gentle with her, "for she was still in a tender condition."

Cullen steadied his excited hands and shaved and put on the cleanest t-shirt from his hiking pack. He had packed a few things for her too, hopeful that she would be hiking back down with him. He took out the brand new boots he had brought for her and put them on the tiled floor near the door as a symbolic gesture before he left for his appointment to see Aida.

The caretaker gave him a withering look as he let him pass through the convent's gates. The same nun who had spoken to him yesterday met him there and led him to the convent's gardens. Aida was seated on a bench under the spreading branches of a huge cherry tree, her hands folded in her lap. She stood up when she saw him.

"Please try not to upset her."
"I will, I promise."

Cullen took a step forward but the nun put a hand on his arm. "And - whether she decides to stay or leave with you - you must let her make that choice. If you need anything, I will be nearby."

Cullen watched the nun head toward a bench on the far end of the garden, where she picked up a book and started to read, giving them a little privacy. He rubbed the back of head and began to approach Aida. He walked all the way up to her, studying her face as he got closer. She was as nervous as he was.

"Hello."

Cullen couldn't help himself, he laughed. She blushed and pouted at him. "What's so funny?"

"After everything, this is - so surreal. And you just said hello to me like it was just an ordinary Tuesday morning."

Aida pulled the end of her braid out from her wimple, playing with it in a familiar gesture. "Isn't it an ordinary Tuesday morning?"

"No, it's the greatest Tuesday morning I've ever known, now that I've found you." They stood there, waves upon waves of emotion rolling over both of them.

"Maker, I want to kiss you."

Aida touched one of her cheeks and looked away shyly. "I think they'd chuck you over the convent walls if you tried that."

"Can we sit down?"
"Are you well?"
"The sisters took care of me. I had a bad gash - and I guess I'll have this scar now."

She touched the thin pale line that now intersected with one of her eyebrows and continued down to mark her cheekbone. Cullen stared at her, visually devouring her since he could not reach out and hold her.

"It doesn't bother me. You are still as beautiful as the first moment I saw you."

Aida made eye contact with him. Cullen was shocked to find her dark brown eyes were now flecked with emerald green highlights. It made him inhale a little in surprise.

"How long have you been here?"
"I'm not sure, I was healing and sleeping for a while. I've only been on my feet for a week or two."

Cullen gripped the edge of the stone bench. "Why - why didn't you try to contact us?"

Aida looked anguished at this. "Cullen - I wasn't sure this place was... I wasn't sure I was back. I thought maybe I had just fallen into another world, a new life. I had no idea if you were alive - since..."

Tears formed in her eyes. Cullen glanced toward where the old nun was seated and saw she had slipped into a nap in the sun. He felt bold enough to reach out and hold her hand.

"The last time I saw the other you, Cullen - you were dying in my arms."

He squeezed her hand. "I'm very much alive, and I've come a very long way to see you again. It's almost Satinalia - "

Aida nodded. "I know. I was - considering taking my official vows on Satinalia's Eve."

Cullen let go of her hand now. "I see."

They sat in silence, listening to the wind rustling the branches of the tree above them. "I swore to your father before I left that I would bring you home. I, ah, didn't even discuss with him that there would be a possibility you would want to stay wherever I found you."

He glanced at her and found she had two big tears rolling down her face. "So much happened to me in the Fade. Can I go back to being normal? Will anything be normal ever again?"

"How will you know unless you give it a chance? You could always come back here if - if you wanted. Although wow, it is not easy to get up here. Unless you just fall out of the sky."

He coaxed a smile from her and it made him feel so alive. "Baby please, come home with me. We - I..."

Cullen rubbed his neck, searching for the right words. "I know you've been through a lot, so I'm not expecting us to just pick up where we left off. We can take everything real slow, okay?"

Aida's face lit up with relief. "Yes, I'm, I... It's just th-that - "

Cullen put a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, I'm supposed to be the stammerer. Don't worry so much, we'll talk and you can tell me what you want to tell me when you feel like it. Just please, agree to come home with me. Your family misses you, your friends want you back - and well, you must
know how I feel."

She stood up, looking down at him.

"Alright. May I spend one more night here with the sisters, and then we can leave tomorrow morning?"

He glanced at the nun chaperoning them, still napping in the sunshine, her book forgotten on her lap. Cullen reached out and pulled her to him, resting his head against her body. It gave him goosebumps when she ran two hands through his curls.

* * * * *

Cullen was waiting for her at the gates of the convent the next morning. She stepped out of the convent, in simple black linen pants and a cotton shirt, her wimple now gone. Cullen put his pack down and fished out the things he had brought for her - a dark green parka that he had rolled up tight at the bottom of his pack, and her new hiking boots. He lead her over to a nearby bench and helped her put on the boots, tying them up tight. He gave her ankle a reassuring squeeze which brought a new blush to her cheeks. *So shy around me. And here I am, already wishing she was writhing underneath me. Control yourself, man!*  

Cullen looked up at Aida who was blushing even harder now, as though she could read his thoughts. "So, shall we? Hiking down will be considerably easier than the journey here. We will have to camp one or two nights along the trail between villages."

"Yes, let's go. I'm ready."

Near the edge of the village they found Albert waiting for them, holding a small bouquet of flowers tied up with a ribbon.

"Goodbye, my lady. Safe travels. Please - don't forget about us."

Aida pressed her palm to his cheek. "I would never do such a thing, and if you need anything ever, you only need write and I shall try to help you."

Cullen passed the young man his business card, with the address of Trevelyan Tower embossed on it. The two men exchanged a hearty handshake before Aida and Cullen walked away.

Cullen looked at her. "You know, he wanted to keep you, that night you fell out of the sky."

Aida smiled but kept her eyes on the trail. "Oh yes, I know. Thankfully for you, the closest I want to get to that much raw fish is Nobu in downtown Haven."

Cullen thought about her beautiful hands handling her chopsticks, and how good it would feel to touch her knee under their table. "Is that a request?"

She reached out and held his hand as they walked. "One of many."

* * * * *

Her openness outside of the gates of Loftet faded away as night fell and they had to make camp on near the trail down to the next village. Aida grew withdrawn and nervous around the campfire but Cullen did not push her to speak. He watched use his portable one burner stove to brew a strange tea
she took out of a paper packet from a small woven bag the Chantry nuns must have given her.

"Aida, what is that?"
"Um, the sisters gave it to me. It helps me sleep, and feel better."

She didn't offer more explanation than that, and the tea looked pretty murky and terrible. They ate a few rations from Cullen's bag and then crawled into the two person tent he had been lugging around with him. Aida watched him set everything up as she shivered in the cold mountain air.

"I'm not trying to pull anything, but - it'd probably be best if we zipped our sleeping bags together."

Aida nodded, rubbing her hands together. "It's alright, I know you're not - trying to try to pull anything."

She watched him struggled with the sleeping bags for a moment until he got them zipped together. The two wriggled into the sleeping bag in and laid on their sides, looking at each other.

"I can't believe you're here."
"Neither can I. Is this real?"
"As far as I know. Baby, you're shivering real bad, do you want another pair of socks, or put on an extra sweater?"

He reached out and held her hands. They were ice cold even though it was warm and comfy inside the sleeping bag. "You're not well."

Aida gave him a pained look. "I haven't been well in a while. I..."

She trailed off for a bit. He wished she would let him scoop her closer but he didn't want to push himself on her. "Cullen, there's no way to explain this but - I was imprisoned in the Fade by a desire demon. And - everything that happened to me... really happened to me. I thought she was just in my mind, but - what she did to me, was real in a certain way. I know the other you loved me. And the choices I made there, were real too. Including this one - "

She rolled up her sleeve and showed him the puncture marks from her red lyrium addiction. He felt like she had punched him in the gut. What he had seen in the dream he experienced in Corrine's living room ended up being true.

"I'm a recovering addict now, just like you. And, I'm still going through withdrawal. The sisters were taking care of me, they didn't ask me any questions."

Aida clenched her jaw hard, squeezing herself tight trying to control her shakes.

"Please, let me hold you, Aida. Please. You're going to freeze to death."

He drew her closer to him and wrapped himself around her, gathering the sleeping bag tight around them both. "Aida, I don't care what you did, wherever you are. You could have murdered someone - "

She mumbled against his neck. "I did."

Cullen coughed a little but just squeezed her harder. "OK, cool, that's cool. Love you!"

His tone made her giggle - and it made his heart hum with contentment.
They hiked hard the next day, wanting to sleep in any kind of bed after the rather primitive night they had spent camping near the trail. He got her to speak about what she had been through a little more, but she was still shy around him, always looking away when they made eye contact. They made it down to the village, a hamlet called Windwatch, and took refuge in another tiny four room inn, a lot like the one he had stayed in in Loften.

Cullen listened to her showering, growing more nervous. Was she going to make him sleep on the floor? Maybe he should go back downstairs and find out if there was another room available. He didn't want to pressure her in any way that would make her hike back up to that convent and lock herself away again. Their closeness the night before had been a necessity. He heard the shower switch off and decided in a panic that he'd find out if the room across the way was available.

When he came back from chatting with the innkeep, Aida was buried under the covers, just her nose and eyes peeping out. "Where did you go? I was worried."

"Sorry, I went downstairs for a moment."

He felt her eyes on him as he fussed with their gear, pretending to organize it a bit. "I wanted to find out if there was another room available. A sleeping bag is one thing - "

Aida pulled back the edge of the comforter, beckoning to him. "A bed is the exact same thing, so stop playing noble knight and get in."

"How are you feeling tonight?"
"Fine so far. My withdrawals take all kinds of forms. Sometimes I just shake, sometimes I get migraines. Sometimes I dream, and... it feels like the demon is still fucking with me. Maybe she's still inside me. So go on, get into bed, don't be scared."

The new green highlights in her eyes glowed in the candlelight. He had never been afraid of Aida, and he wasn't going to start now when she was so vulnerable. He slipped into bed next to her and then felt her hand reaching out to hold his.

"Good night, babe."
"He used to call me babe."

He looked over at her and her eyes were closed already. Cullen blew out the candle next to the bed. The hike today had been tiring, even though they were winding their way down the mountain. He heard her say one last thing before slipping into a deeper sleep.

"Good night, doodlebug."

* * * * *

Cullen woke two hours later when he realized Aida's hand, still gripped in his, was very warm and clammy. She was mumbling and moving around next to him. He felt around in the darkness and lit the candle near the bed. He pulled back the comforter to find she was sweating heavily, the simple cotton nightgown the nuns must have given her was stuck to her body in places. He pressed a palm to her forehead and was shocked by how hot her skin was.

"Maker, Aida - you're burning up. Aida, can you hear me?"

She opened her eyes but it felt like she was looking right through him. "Will you find Anders, and
tell him I need him? He's probably in his workshop on the other side of the camp..."

Cullen shook his head. Wasn't Anders the name of the bombmaker who had torn their lives apart to begin with? Aida grabbed Cullen's arm - hard. "Tell him I need doubles tonight. He's going to say no, but..." Aida descended into mad laughter that frightened Cullen.

He got out of bed and dug through his pack, looking at the medicines he had with him. He remembered her strange tea and set about brewing her a dose of it. While it was steeping, he crumbled up an aspirin and added it to the mug. The problem was Aida was in a state now, and he wasn't sure he could get her to calm down and sit up to drink her medicine. That fever was worrying him. He could go out and rouse a few villagers and find out if there was a healer among them but that could take too much time. He took a deep breath and convinced himself what he was about to do, he was doing to help her, and not because he wanted to do it - so very badly.

Cullen took one of the inn's scratchy washcloths and soaked it through with cool water. He climbed onto the bed and began undoing the tiny buttons that ran down the front of Aida's nightgown. He parted the fabric and the cool air hit Aida's skin, pulling her attention away from her hallucinations for a moment. She tried to look at him, but her eyes were still feverish.

"Hi, baby, mmmm, what are you doing here? If they find you, they're going to kill you..."

Cullen realized she thought he was the other him, and it twisted his heart a little. She sat up and wrapped her arms around his neck and tried to kiss him. "Oh, I missed you, I missed your touch..."

Had she been in love with him when she was in the Fade? He gently released her arms from around him, ignored this troubling thought and began wiping her face down, and then moved down her neck to her shoulders and arms. He avoided her breasts, even though he couldn't keep his eyes off the tight little buds he wanted to suck into his mouth. He swabbed her all over with the cool washcloth and then went back to the bathroom to wet it down again. He ran it up and down her legs - wanting to run it over her cunt - but choosing to sweep it over the curve of her hip and over her soft belly. He managed to roll her over and swept the washcloth over her back, down to the dip of her buttocks. By the fifth time he had wet down the cloth, Aida was calming down. When he returned, she was on her back and waiting for him, propped up on an elbow. He averted his eyes from her nudity.

"Feel better? Do you think you could drink your tea?"

She nodded at him. He brought it over to the bed and watched her drink it down in a few gulps. He took the mug away from her and blew out the candle again, getting into bed next to her - and giving her plenty of space, hoping she hadn't noticed the erection in his thermal pants.

"Thank you, Cullen. I felt very far away there for a moment."
"Rest now, we've got another long hike tomorrow."

He heard rustling next to him but he stayed on his side, facing away from her. He began calculating how much more time he'd have to spend with her. There were two more villages below this one before they could get back to something resembling civilization, so maybe four or five more days of hiking. Once they got down to the bottom of the mountain, he'd be able to contact the Bann from there and perhaps a helicopter could be sent for her. She'd be back in Val Royeaux soon enough, Vivienne had volunteered to take her in while they figured out how to get Aida a valid ID and passport. He'd let her travel alone at that point, and he'd make his way back to Haven on his own. And then maybe he'd take that promotion Mr. Trevelyon had been offering him, and move to Denerim - and start a new life without her.

Cullen felt her hand touching his arm. At least her temperature had come down. "Cullen, are you
"OK?"
"Yeah, just tired."

He moved away from her touch as much as it hurt to do so. He felt her scoot closer to him on the bed. "You don't seem OK..."

Cullen was on the edge of the bed now. She moved over three more inches and suddenly Cullen was out of bed, standing on his feet.

"Cullen! What's wrong?"
"Nothing, you're taking up the entire bed. Do you want me to sleep on the floor? I can manage."
"No, don't be stupid, get back in bed please."

He climbed back into bed next to her, avoiding looking at her still. He felt her fingers trace over his bicep and down his arm and still he would not look at her. Her hand swept under his t-shirt and ran over his abs and touched his nipples.

"Aida..."
"Hmmm?"

Her hand travelled south now, feeling for the erection he still had.

"I won't...I will not be with you tonight when you think I'm...that other me."
"Who said I thought that?"

She was now right next to him on the bed, looking down at him. He could see that her face was no longer feverish, and she was indeed here in this room with him at the moment. Before he could object, she was kissing him deeply, making both of them moan. She straddled him as they devoured each other, helping him pull off his shirt. Cullen kicked off his thermals and then rolled her to the mattress beneath him.

"Oh fuck, Aida. I don't think I can control myself..."
"I don't want you to."

Aida parted her knees for him, wide. "I've been wet since you were touching my body - everywhere except where I wanted you to touch."

She grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him down on top of her, pushing her tongue into his mouth. Cullen broke the kiss to object - "But I wanted to be gentle with you, take my time, taste you, lick you -"

Aida slapped a hand on one of his butt cheeks with an earthy laugh. "No, baby, fuck me. Fuck me hard."

He growled at her and began feeding his cock into her tight, wet sheath. Aida arched her back and moaned, loud, digging her fingernails into his shoulders. Cullen pushed himself in deep without further fanfare and also clapped a hand to her mouth. "Aida, I woke up the innkeep to ask about a spare room - so he can definitely hear you downstairs. Did your time in the Fade make you even more of a wanton slut?"

He felt her giggle against his palm but she also gave him an obedient look, trying to pry his hand off her face. He shook his head, grinding his hips into hers. "Nuh uh. Don't trust you one bit. You've got a demon between your legs, and I'm going to tame it."
Cullen began thrusting into her, hard and fast, and he felt her pussy gush in response as she grew even wetter. He let go of her mouth and pushed her knees up as far as they would go, almost bending her in half as he pumped into her with all the pent up lust and passion he had accumulated inside of him.

"You're mine, you're all mine," he groaned at her, now pinning her wrists to the mattress above her head and dipping his head to kiss and bite her neck. "More, more, harder" she whispered into his ear.

Cullen got back onto his knees and wrapped her legs around him so he could give her sharp little thrusts and see exactly where he was connected to her. He reached down and began rubbing her clit with an insistent thumb. Aida responded, twitching hard, shaking, and clenching him tight inside of her - but Cullen didn't stop. He rubbed her faster, harder, just wanting to please her - and make her forget about the other version of him.

"All I've wanted since you went away, was to see you come, with my cock deep inside you." He slapped both her breasts, giving her a frisson of shock and delight and making her open her brown-green eyes wide. "But once will not be enough. Are you going to come for me again?"

She could only babble back at him, Aida's wetness was all over balls, soaking into the sheets beneath them. "Yes, baby, I want to, pleasepleaseplease." He surprised her by pulling all the way out, but he still played with her pussy and kept one hand constantly stroking his cock. Aida whined and writhed closer to him on the bed. "Don't stop, why are you stopping!"

"Just thinking about exactly how am I going to make you come again. I'm trying to be strategic."

Aida pressed her head back against the pillow in frustration. "Your mouth, damn it. Use that pretty mouth of yours."

Cullen kept working himself in his fist, a rebellious smirk on his face. "I'd like to see you make me."

He didn't have a chance to tease her twice, Aida was on him, faster than he expected she could move, especially after being so feverish just an hour ago. Aida knocked him onto his back and kissed and bit at any inch of his flesh near her mouth, her long midnight mane brushing all over his body. He was now lying with his head near the foot of the bed - and quickly found his wrists tied to the foot board - with magical restraints.

"Hey! What the - " Aida had never used her powers in the bedroom before, but she had a glow in her eyes, and all over her body, that spoke of a new-found confidence.

"The more you fight, the tighter the knots get. Are you going to be a good boy and eat my pussy?"

Cullen found he was now the one begging and no longer in charge. "Yes, baby, put it right here, I want you dripping in my mouth." She flipped around and lowered herself onto his face, just as she lowered her mouth onto his throbbing penis. He grinned into her pussy, his lips and mouth lapping away at her soft, swollen cunt. And to think he was worried a few weeks with Chantry sisters was going to tame the lust that was always bubbling way inside of her. He almost couldn't breathe, but he was ready to die making her come again. He flicked at her clit from side to side as fast as he could, taking little breaks to purse his lips and suck and kiss it with noisy gusto. She was dripping her sweet arousal down his chin now and he knew she was close but he just worked her pearl even faster. Aida sat up as she rode his face to her second climax, swearing loud - and in her distracted state, her magic spell slipped and Cullen found his wrists unbound again. He grabbed her by the two
gloves of her ass and pushed her off him, wrestling and giggling together again.

"Get back here, you insatiable little harlot, I'm not done with you -"
"No, baby, that's enough, it's too sensi-"

He silenced her with his mouth as he slipped the middle and ring finger of his right hand into her still pulsing quim. He crooked his fingers and began vibrating that hand against her, rough and hard. She grabbed on to his shoulder.

"Ughh, what are you doing to me?"

Cullen didn't answer, he just sucked and nibbled at one of her nipples and kept stimulating her with a steady rhythm, his whole palm shaking against her pussy. "Cullen, please, I - I'm going to -"

Cullen stopped sucking on her nipple and looked right at her, commanding her with his amber eyes to surrender herself to him. Aida made a sound almost like a sob, pressed her head into the pillow and then howled as her pussy let go and squirted all over his hand and arm.

She flopped back against the bed in a daze. Cullen looked down at her, a little worried. "Babe? You alright?"

"I've - never done that before, in all my life," Aida said in a small, awed voice.
"Fuck, you are incredibly wet now. I need to fill you up again -"

Aida sighed, she was so limp and relaxed in his arms as he pulled her against him and entered her from behind, the two of them lying on their sides. Aida reached an arm back and grabbed onto his hair and holding on to him as he gave her deep, thorough thrusts. She reached between her legs and felt him sliding in and out of her.

"Mmmm baby, you're so hard tonight, Maker, I love it, I -"

Cullen couldn't hold on any longer, he gasped and released his load into her sheath as he pushed himself in all the way to the hilt. His orgasm was so intense that when he pulled out he was still spurting, covering her pussy in his cream. They collapsed together, wrapped in each other's arms, and Cullen buried his nose in her hair and inhaled her scent.

"So... welcome back. Do you still love me?"

"Yes, Cullen very much so."

He felt her nestle in next to him, despite how sticky and sweaty their bodies were after that vigorous round of lovemaking.

"And... will you tie me up again?"

Aida laughed, husky and low. "Yes, definitely."

They passed out in a tangle of limbs, holding on to each other - and neither was tormented by their demons that night.

Chapter End Notes
More to come - sure these two horndogs are reunited but there's still more drama to come AND a few *LOOSE ENDS* to tie up

[HEH HEH HEH she muttered in a devious way to herself]
Sorry for the delay! Fricken holidays interrupted my writing schedule.

I changed up my usual "story-smut-story" formula. This time it goes "smut-story-smut-WHAT THE FUCK?" so enjoy please!

Aida woke up first, a beam of mountain sunshine creeping in from the window nearby. The mornings since she "got back" were always disorienting, she found it hard to trust her surroundings. For weeks she had risen in her nun's cell well before sunrise for prayers - her knees still ached recalling that unforgiving stone Chantry floor - but now, on this glorious morning, she opened her eyes and found the real Cullen Stanton Rutherford lying in her arms. Golden curls, soft, sweet lips made for sin, and his body stretching out before her like a countryside she wanted to ravage and conquer. She traced the line of his shoulder down to his bicep and then swept to his wrist, enjoying the goosebumps her fingertip left behind. He smiled in his sleep. She never wanted to leave this bed. They could start a new life here in this alpine village. She could learn how to embroider dirndls and sell them to tourists, and Cullen would become a lumberjack! Aida brushed her fingers over his chest hair now. Being with this man always made her think crazy things, made her want to do crazy things.

Her hand crept under the blanket.

"Mmmm?"
"Mmm."  
Cullen's eyes blinked open and he quirked a sweet, lazy grin at her that made her want to sink her teeth into him. Her hand under the blanket gripped his cock. He responded quickly, his face changing from sleepy to aroused, with just a sexy curl of his upper lip. Aida felt the blood rushing through his member in little enthusiastic pulses.

"Aida, baby - "
"Shhh, let me look at you, while I - "

She pulled back the blanket and gave his cock a few slow, thorough strokes, working his sensitive skin up and down, up and down, until he was solid in her hand. Cullen kept looking into her eyes as he moaned his approval, opening his mouth so slightly and Aida could see his soft, pink tongue, just beckoning to her. She dipped her head and reached her tongue out, parting his lips, swiping at his mouth. He gasped when she ran a thumb over the head of his cock, spreading his pre-come all over it. Cullen swallowed as she let go of him for a moment, moving her hand to his balls. She rolled them around on her fingers, heavy and soft. With feather-light touches she stimulated the sensitive orbs, making Cullen nestle into her more so he could groan against her ear. She returned to his member now, which was seeping fluid. Cullen dropped his head back on the pillow and watched her collect some of his stickiness on side of her hand. She made eye contact with him as licked it up.

"You're trying to kill me, aren't you," he whispered. She shook her head at him with a coy smile and then kissed him again, returning to stroking his cock, gripping him harder now and moving faster.
Aida observed, mesmerized, as his abs flexed and he rolled his hips up to meet the strokes of her hand. For a moment, she released him and watched as his member wobbled in the air, still erect and rock hard.

"Have I - roused you, from your slumber?"
"I am - very - much - roused."

Aida trailed her fingertips up and down his shaft, enjoying the almost helpless look on Cullen's face. "Did you miss me, while I was away?"

She gripped him and went back to pumping his cock. "That's a fucked up question and you know it."

"Tell me what you want to do to me."

Cullen looked at her with lust-filled anguish. "Can't I just do those things to you?"
"No, I want to hear you say them. I miss your voice. Tell me what you thought about we were separated."

He swore under his breath as she slowed down her hand, illustrating her very real threat to stop pleasing him. "OK, OK, I'll talk. Let me think, let me think - I uh, I jacked myself off every morning in the shower, thinking about what we did in in the Denerim Four Seasons together..."

Aida went back to stroking him again. "Be specific. Be detailed."

Cullen moaned and reached back to grab the bed post behind him. "I tied you up, I fucked you in the ass, so deep, you were so hot and tight and you let me put it all the way in - you came so hard." His cock emitted more fluid, and Aida knew he was close but she was determined to make him last. She slowed down her stimulation of him, murmuring right into his ear now. "Do you want to do that again? Do you want my ass again?"

"Fuck yes, baby, right now, please -"

She bit his earlobe. "Later. I want to hear more. Tell me something - new. Tell me something good."

Even in the state he was in, Cullen blushed. "I ah..." She saw a distinctly guilty look pass over his face that was downright intriguing. "Tell me or I won't let you come."

"I sometimes hoped when I dreamed my way into the Fade - that I would catch you with me. But I wouldn't interrupt, I just wanted to listen to you fucking me. I wanted to hear you gagging on my dick, whining as you rode me hard..."

Aida hadn't told him this yet, but her time in the Fade had given her some strange new layer of intuition. She knew this wasn't what he wanted to say, that he was still holding back. She let go of his cock and rolled onto her back with a disappointed sigh. He huffed and tried to grab her wrist to turn her toward him.

"Hey, what in the Void?"
"I guess you don't feel like talking dirty to me today. It's just the first time we're waking up in a bed together after a long time apart. Should I shower first or do you want to go?"

He grabbed her around the waist before she could get out of bed, pulling her hard against his frame, a strong arm locked around her and a hand on her breast. She couldn't move now, as much as she squirmed and fought back.

"Oh ho, the tables have turned, and so easily too. You cocktease. You're going to get it now."
Aida bit back a smile and pretended to be overwhelmed by him as he gave her a bite on the neck. With his other hand he guided himself into her pussy, already slick with desire from just playing with him earlier. He could now speak right into ear as he rocked his hips against hers.

"You want to know what I thought about, during the five days it took me to hike this fucking mountain? I wondered if maybe you had found other pleasures behind the walls of that convent. I thought about you kissing another beautiful young thing like you, soft and sweet, her lips tasting like sacramental wine... And so innocent too. Or in this case, are you the innocent one?"

She could only gasp in return as he pumped into her with a steady rhythm. "Hmmm? Have you ever been curious, Aida? Did you try something new, down on your knees in a corner of that pear orchard?"

"Cullen!" Her little whine made him reach around her to feel for her clit, which he rolled between two aggressive fingers.

"Did you take communal baths together? Did you see a pair of tits you wanted to touch? Little pink nipples, different from yours? Did she touch you first? You're such an insatiable slut, I bet those baths were torture for you. Did you get caught touching yourself? You're so wet right now, I know it's true. Let me ask you, and tell the truth- was her tongue better than mine?" He licked her neck for emphasis, and Aida felt as always, high on his lovemaking. Once you got his spark going, it was like being consumed in an inferno. Cullen pushed himself in deep and held himself there, flicking at her pearl.

"Were you scared to part those knees of yours? Worried you'd like it more than being with me? Oh Aida, I wish I had been there - see your breasts pressed against hers, watch you suck her tits for the first time, grind your pussy against hers, clit against clit..."

Aida whimpered again as he picked up the pace and continued pouring a steady stream of dirty thoughts right into her ear. "Were you satisfied with only one girlfriend, Aida? Did you eat pussy while another sister ate yours? Such a slut. I know how you are, I know how you can come two, three times in a row, fingers in your ass, in your pussy, two mouths working your sensitive tits, licking and sucking."

Aida was melting, sizzling, Cullen's body was so hot pressed against hers as he stoked the fires within both of them, his voice was a spell that was scorching all of her nerve endings in exquisite pleasure. His carnal monologue kept tumbling out of him, his momentary shyness utterly forgotten. "It wouldn't ever be enough for you though, I know you need cock, I know you need a - big - thick - cock, thrusting in and out of your cunt, just like right now. Mmmm, I thought about climbing those convent walls and finding you grinding your cunt on a girl's face while your head was between her legs - and how I would slide into your tight pussy behind you, so she could keep licking you while I fuck you senseless."

Cullen's breath was ragged, he was worked up into a frenzy and she was gushing all over him. He had never felt so deep inside her, and the air was thick with the smell of her juices that were all over both of them. "Cullen, I love it when you talk this way to me, never stop, please, fuck me hard, fuck me, fuck me - "

He grabbed on to her shoulder, pumping hard now, the other hand in her hair, yanking her hair. She was only conscious of one thing, his manhood plunging into her over and over again and she reached down between her legs to feel him there. Aida cried out as her orgasm landed on her like a bomb. In her hazy ecstasy, she heard him continuing his litany of lust: "I want that, Aida. I want it so bad. Eat pussy for me, baby. Eat it while I seed you, fill you with my - "
Aida pushed away from him, turning quickly on the bed just in time for him to spend himself on her face, on her tits. He came hard, it was on his belly and in her hair. She began to lick it up where she could, making him hiss as he slapped his cock against her lips, making a sloppy, sticky, erotic sound. She licked him clean and then dropped herself onto the bed next to him, where he was still catching his breath.

"Maker's fucking sake, Aida. The things you make me do to you. The things you make me say to you."

She propped her chin on one of his pecs, grinning at him. "And to think you were worried I'd go chaste on you up there at the convent."

Cullen gave her a sharp, puzzled look. "I never said that to you, I..."

"Oh, I - I'm sure you did. Last night, maybe?"
"No, we were, very busy, I assure you."

Aida didn't want to scare him too much. There were still many things about returning to her real life that she could not tell him about quite yet, especially what she had done in the Fade to get back to him. Adding "I think I can read minds now" would be too much, and she couldn't believe it herself. Besides, it wasn't a steady stream of information. It came to her in little bursts, like Cullen's passing thought about her sex drive last night, when he had his face between her thighs. She changed the subject before he could contradict her.

"I don't want to go back home, Cullen. I just want to go from inn to inn all over western Orlais, making love to you every morning and every night and just, napping in between all of it."

Aida kissed him, sweet and gentle now. Cullen brushed the hair from her face and looked at her. "Sounds like a great early retirement plan."

"No, I mean it. I don't want to go home. I - I just have a bad feeling that..." She trailed off, looking away from him. Cullen turned her face back toward him.

"Don't do that. Don't ever think there's anything you can't say to me. After what we've been through, I want to protect you, always."

Aida still bore the worried look on her face. He rubbed his thumb along her chin and her bottom lip like he always used to. "Since I've been back, I've had these dreams - you're dying in my arms again, bleeding out. But each time, I know it's real. It isn't a flashback, or just a bad dream - it's a premonition. And, it's because someone is waiting for me in Haven. She wants to hurt us again. Don't forget what she told me, she'd rather you be dead, than be happy with me."

Cullen drew her closer. "She doesn't get a choice, does she?"

They held each other, kissing when they felt like it, just reveling in each other's presence. Cullen cleared his throat before he spoke again. "If you are this concerned about Leliana, I can look into what she's been up to when we get back. I can have her followed. And I can get you a pair of security guards to escort you when you need them."

"No, don't you get it? It's YOU I want protected! You must swear to me that you will inquire for a security detail, but for yourself, and especially when I can't be with you."

They stared at each other for a while until Cullen drew her in for another kiss. "OK, Aida, I promise. I'll do it for you, when we get back to Haven. And when we get back, we will have plenty of - other items - to discuss in general."
Aida raised an eyebrow at his serious, determined tone. "OK? Am I in trouble?"
"So much trouble. I have many plans in store for you, Trevelyan."

She could tell by the glow in his eyes he was ready to go again. Aida forced herself to stop worrying as his lips were on hers again and she felt Cullen's fingers brushing up her inner thighs.

She smiled to herself, conjuring Dorian's dry tone in her head: "You're back from the dead, Aida. Do try and enjoy it."

* * * * *

But Aida was always prone to anxiety, fretting, overthinking. The long hike to the base of the mountain gave her plenty of time to think, especially during the long stretches where the only thing to focus on was Cullen's backpack in front of her. She had convinced herself for a few hours today that she couldn't do anything about the Leliana situation at the moment, so therefore she should not trouble herself with dark, twisted thoughts of how the Nightingale could strike at her resumed romance. Rather she fixated on something else.

What if I had never been sucked into the Fade, and there had been no amnesia bomb to interrupt our lives - would we still be with each other today?

What if the only thing holding our relationship together was all this ridiculous drama?

And what if I hadn't come back, would he be in Sierra Amell's bed right now?

She pondered these questions while they ate lunch in the next village down the trail. They sat side by side on a low stone wall, eating meat skewers they had bought from a sidewalk vendor, chased with dry pita bread. Cullen was chirping on and on about something that had happened while she was away, but Aida had zoned him out, choosing to sink into her restless thoughts. She tuned back in because Cullen was snorting in a very dorky, carefree way.

"I'm sorry sweetie. I wasn't listening."

He pouted as he flicked away a piece of meat to a street dog that had been following them around. "I know, because you too should have been laughing about Barkley pulling Varric's pants off in the park right as 7 elderly women jogged by. It was the only time I laughed over the last few months."

He was still snorting to himself when Aida hit him with the next question. "So, when are we going to talk about Sierra Amell?"

Cullen threw one of his entire meat sticks to the hungry dog now, a look of distaste on his face, as though saying her name robbed him of his appetite.

"Aida, how do you even know that name? How... Before I even begin to explain, it's not even possible for you to know who she is. You were away."

She looked at the back of her left hand, where the desire demon had left her a scar as a souvenir of their fight. "You know how you could dream, and luck out, and visit me from time to time? I discovered I could see you back sometimes, when I was high on red lyrium."

"How much - did you see."
"Enough."
Cullen cleared his throat and kept his eyes on a two hikers who were pausing under a tree. The girl leaned on her companion's arm as she adjusted one of her boot laces.

"I got real lonely while you were away. I didn't want to see anyone I didn't have to see. Sierra was the first person who - reached through that fog and made me feel more present in my own life." He grabbed her hand and squeezed it hard. "Can I blame your dad for this? Please let me blame him for this. He was worried I was going to turn into him, grief-stricken for a lifetime over a woman who wasn't coming back."

Aida made herself sick, thinking of Cullen walking around Sierra's kitchen in his boxers, knowing where she kept the coffee mugs, which drawer had the spoons... He interrupted her sullen silence.

"Aida, it's not exactly fair you know. You had the other-me for company. You were never really alone."

"I was alone. Don't fool yourself."

Now Cullen seemed to be the one torturing himself. "Yes, but, the other night, when your fever was high, you thought I was him. You missed him, I heard it in your voice."

"Cullen... I won't lie, I developed feelings for him. If I hadn't grown to love him, I don't think I'd have been able to escape the trap I was in. That desire demon played a sick game with me, the love I felt for the other-you was used against me in the end. And by the way, when I was with him - was I really coupling with a demon? I try not to think about it for more than ten seconds because it makes me feel like puking."

Cullen took her scarred hand and pressed a kiss to her palm. "Baby, if we're telling each other everything now - I confess I only ended my relationship with Sierra after your sister and I hired an oneiromancer to make any kind of contact with you. In my dream, I saw you with a heart made of red lyrium, and were upset with me because you knew about Sierra. Even though I couldn't be sure if what I had seen and experienced was any kind of true contact with you, I didn't want you to think, wherever you were, that I was in love with someone else. I broke up with her that night."

Aida watched as the couple under the tree across the way shared an intimate moment together. The man seemed to be soothing his companion, rubbing her shoulders before they restarted their hike. Aida envied them, in what looked like a relationship unencumbered by traumas or separations.

"So, were you in love with her?"
"I was trying to be. Maybe if I had more time to try, it would have come naturally to me in time - but... it doesn't matter now, Aida! All the 'what-ifs' in the world are null and void, now that you're back."

Aida wiped away a tear. "What did you like about her? I need to know."

"I don't want to talk about her anymore. She's just a woman I met. She could have been any woman in that support group, she was sweet and kind and tried to make me feel better. And she was nothing like you, alright? She wasn't sexy, she wasn't creative, she didn't make me laugh. I didn't burn for her, Aida."

Cullen put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer, singing into her ear. "I'm burning, I'm burning, I'm burning for you..."

It made Aida smile.
Had she ever heard him sing before?

And just like that, her heart felt free, like a bird taking flight. There were still plenty of new memories to be made with this man.

* * * * *

After lunch, they pushed themselves to hike faster to get down to the next town at the foot of the Throat of the World. Cullen promised her a hotel room with a bathtub, wifi, a hot meal in an actual restaurant - and a phone call home. From Stormreach, Cullen would drive them back to Val Royeaux.

When the town came into view, Aida stopped on the trail, taking in her first glimpse of civilization.

"Is this real?"
"It is."

She watched the tiny cars zooming up and down the distant highway that threaded toward another mountain range. "A whole year of my life, gone, in pieces. I lost my memory, then my freedom."

Cullen kept a hand on her shoulder. "I didn't miss anything really big while I was away, huh? They don't have phones that are in your eyes now, or flying cars?"

"Nope, nothing too exciting. You also may not believe this, but Dorian and Iron Bull haven't gotten married. Dorian claims it's because they can't settle on a venue, or a guest list size, or a theme, or colors, or a menu, but I've always suspected he was hoping you'd come back in time. He never said it to me, because, you know - "

"Dorian's too cool to admit he wuvs his cousin, I know." Aida kept her eyes on the town below them. "I'm scared, Cullen. Scared to go back to my life. Scared I'll just be disappointing to everyone. Scared I was always disappointing, for some reason. Wow, what's up with my self esteem?"

His hand moved to the back of her neck, his fingers in her hair. "I don't know, doesn't make any sense to me. As far as I'm concerned, you're my queen. You walk on water. You came back to me. And I can't keep my eyes off of you."

Aida turned to him with an emotional squeak, burrowing into his arms and raising her face to his for a passionate kiss. It's time to stop worrying - time to start living again.

Cullen lead her down into the town, Aida feeling joy at looking at simple things, the ramshackle taxis, street vendors moving up and down the columns of cars on the two lane road. Everything was real, and therefore felt new again. And everywhere they went, Aida saw the way people looked at Cullen while he spoke to them or interacted with them. He could project authority with a simple shift in in the tone of his voice, he could be warm and friendly with a gentle half-smile, he carried himself with a soldier's posture, and he tended to her as though she were a precious flame he was cradling in his hands. She had been thinking deeply about how she could blow his mind later while they wolfed down a hearty dinner at tiny cafe, when Cullen interrupted her brainstorming.

"Aida, you were so hungry that I didn't want to stop to suggest otherwise, but - do you want to call your father tonight?"

Aida flagged down the waiter, now wanting to rush through dessert. "First thing tomorrow morning, I promise. I'm dying to get into that nice, normal bed in that budget hotel with you, and - "
The check came just as Aida finished her sentence. "- wrap you around my little finger."

Cullen fumbled and dropped his wallet, his face flushed because the waiter had given him a "lucky boy" look. Aida got a good look at his ass as he rummaged under the table. How did he never know how good he looked, from top to bottom? His butt was tight and toned, his pants cupped the two round muscled cheeks in such a manner that made her feel warm all over. She had drawn those perfect globes on many a lazy morning, as he lay face down on her bed sheets, mumbling to her that he wished she'd sketch a little faster.

She knew what she was going to do to him now. Aida beamed at him as he overtipped the waiter. "What's that smile for?" Cullen asked, looking like the innocent quarry he was.

"You'll see."

* * * * *

They tumbled into their simple hotel room, all arms, groping hands, hungry lips. He tasted like the ale he had at dinner, and the spicy curry dish they had shared. She pushed him backwards toward the bathroom, pulling off his shirt and undoing his belt buckle.

"Aida..." he moaned against her neck. "Why are we in the bathroom?"
"We didn't shower before dinner. Let's clean up."

She peeled her sweater off, and Cullen undid her bra with a quick flick of a finger and flung it away. They shed everything else and moaned together as skin met skin, while Aida reached down and turned on the tap, warming up the water. As soon as it was steamy hot, Cullen lifted them both into the tub. As soon as they were in, his hands swept up and down her curves as he pushed her against the tiled wall behind her. She let him suck on both her nipples before she stopped him. "Baby, please, as nice as that is - can I - take care of you tonight?"

He took a step back from her, pushing some of his wet hair off his forehead. "But... Well, OK - "

"Shhh. You climbed a mountain for me. You never stopped loving me. Can I just please touch your body all over, however I want, and wherever I want?"

She took some glee in the almost nervous look that passed over his face. "I said OK, didn't I? So, uh, what should I do?"

Aida guided him to switch places with her. "Hands on the tile, soldier."

She hummed to herself as she worked shampoo into his curls, giving him a scalp massage that made him sigh. She pulled him back into the spray of the shower to rinse off, her arms around him from behind. She reached around him and felt for his manhood to give him a few anticipatory tugs. "Aida, baby, can't we just - "

She shushed him, soaping up his muscles now, rubbing his strong back. She gave him a little push so he'd lean forward a little more and then began working suds all over his ass. She dug her fingers into his flesh, delighting in how firm and toned he was. Aida took the bar of soap and reached between his legs to swipe it over his dick and his balls. It made him relax more, pressing his forearms to the tile. Aida grinned to herself as she ran the bar of soap over his tight little hole, pushing the rounded edge of it into him just a little. She got the reaction she wanted, he both moaned and twitched at the same time.

"Babe, please be...nice."
"Tsk tsk, relax."

She soaped him up, letting her hands slide all over his stiff manhood, suds rolling down his thighs. She leaned forward and rubbed her breasts on his flesh, wishing she had the proper equipment to take him against the shower wall. Without warning, she moved away from the spray of the shower behind her so the steamy water would hit him and rinse him off. Before he could turn around, Aida was on her knees, parting his buttocks with two insistent hands. With a sigh she pushed her face between his cheeks and began licking his ass with broad, circular swipes of her tongue.

"Aida! Ah, fuck, WOW, that's, that's incredible."

Aida grabbed one of his hands and guided it to his own cock, prompting him to jack himself off while she ate him with gusto, listening to his moans and groans echoing in the shower.

"Keep going, baby! Fuck!"

She gave him a few more licks before standing back up, and soaped him back up again. With a gentle finger, she began probing into him.

"How's that, hmm?"
"It's -"

She breached him deeper, making him gasp and the hand working his cock move faster.

"Well?"
"It's good, but it's not as good as -"

Aida interrupted him by finding his prostate and pressing on it with just a crook of her finger. Cullen cried out, his cheek now against the tile in front of him, his legs spread wide for her. She fucked him with that finger, pressing on that sensitive spot with every thrust. Cullen could barely speak, he could only make noises and grunts. Aida removed her finger and gave him a sharp smack on his right butt cheek.

"You're so fucking hot, Cullen. All I can ever think about are the things I want to do to you - hold your butt open for me, show me how much you want my fingers again."

He obeyed, all out of resistance. Aida returned to licking his hole, while she soaped up one of her hands again. "Keep it open for me, let's see if you can take two fingers, hmm?"

She worked one finger back into him, twisting it around, feeling for that sweet spot, before she gently added another finger, scissoring them open and making him hiss. "That's it baby, you're so good. How does that feel?"

"You're trying to kill me again, aren't you? That's two times in one day!"

Aida stood up now, two fingers still stuffed in his ass. "I'm going to make you come so hard, watch."

With her other soapy hand, she began jerking him off. She watched his profile as he gasped and swore and she fucked him harder and hard with her fingers. "I'm so close, baby -"
"Tell me, tell when you're going to come."
"Aida, I -"

His whole body went stiff, his mouth open and eyes squinted shut. His cock began spurting seed hard, landing in thick, milky-white gobs on the tile in front of him. She kept jerking him until he made her let go of his cock and Aida could only watch in fascination as he continued to throb and
squirt. She removed her fingers from his ass and gave his balls one more soft caress as his orgasm ebbed away. He turned around to face her, on wobbly legs.

"I - can barely talk."
"Mmm, good."

Aida rubbed the very helpful bar of soap over her tits, smiling at him with contentment.

"But what about you, baby? I want to - "
"Oh, you can reciprocate, if you insist. You've got fingers and a mouth, don't you?"
"I certainly do. Let's get out of the shower."

A few minutes later, Aida had him flat on his back on the bed as she straddled his head and rode his tongue to her own sweet orgasm. It didn't take long to make her come, she was still worked up from playing with his ass. As she circled her hips on his face, she told him all the other things she intended to do to his ass, once she bought a toy or two, hopefully in Val Royeaux, in just a few days. Aida shook all over, thinking about all the delights they were going to experience.

After her climax, as they cuddled together, Cullen pressed his lips to her forehead.

"Everything is perfect now. I couldn't be happier. You're all I need in this world, Aida."
"I love you, Cullen. I'd do anything for you. Anything."

* * * * *

The next morning, Cullen was still asleep when Aida felt a sudden wave of nausea hit her. She scrambled out of bed, almost tripping on the bedsheets tangled around her legs, making it to the bathroom just in time.

She held on to the rim of the toilet as she wretched up everything in her stomach, and gagged hard when nothing was left.

Cullen appeared in the doorway behind her, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes but looking very concerned.

"Kitten, you alright?"
"No, I still feel bad, nothing to throw up - "

Cullen poured her a glass of water and wetted down a washcloth. He got down on the floor next to her and wiped her mouth for her. "Withdrawal symptoms again, huh? I remember them. They'll get easier as time goes by, baby. I'm here for you."

Aida leaned on the toilet, very woozy. She knew it wasn't withdrawals - it was something else, something new - something she didn't know how to deal with at the moment.

She was pregnant - her new intuitions told her the truth.

And her medical training told her there was no way she could have morning sickness only a few days after having sex with Cullen upon her return, it was much, much too soon. She could be almost one or two months into her first trimester.

It was the other Cullen's baby. Cullen of the Fade, "the shadow on the wall".
Or was it the demon's baby?

Aida began to sob, overcome with conflicting emotions. Cullen's happy words from last night were still hanging in her memory. Would everything still be perfect now? Would he still love her if she was carrying another man's child?

Or, worse yet - would he still want her if the thing inside of her was an abomination?

"Aida, sweetie, what's wrong?"

She couldn't tell him, not quite yet.

Chapter End Notes

Some of you predicted THAT was going to happen! Pat yourselves on the back.

Thanks for reading, dear Cullenites! A reminder: I can also be found at: thetemplarandtherogue.tumblr.com!

(For those of you who also love The Witcher, I have a fic in store for that fandom, so stay tuned and follow me on tumblr for updates.)
Aida rested her chin on the edge of the hotel toilet bowl and sighed. Her morning sickness had been interrupting the pleasant flow of her road trip with Cullen, as they chose to drive back through Orlais rather than use the Trevelyan Corp helicopter to fly home. She told her father she wanted to spend some extra alone time with the man who had loved her through time and space, although she didn't use those exact words. She needed this week alone with him, this road trip could be the last bit of happiness she'd have with him. Cullen was the kindest, bravest man she had ever known, but maybe raising a child that was not his would be the line he could not cross. There were too many scenarios - what if it was some kind of half-human half-demon? Or just full demon? What if upon gestation it just came bursting out of her body to murder everyone nearby? This baby inside of her was the proverbial ticking time bomb. It was either going to ruin the best relationship she had ever known or - something far, far worse: it could be the death of her. She centered her intuitions and sent this energy all over her body. She didn't feel like she was gestating a demon baby inside of her, although how could she tell from that soft heartbeat. There was definitely something - someone - growing inside of her.

She washed out her mouth and her face and returned to the luxurious suite they had rented in Ghislain. Cullen was still asleep and she didn't want to bother him since he had insisted on doing all the driving. She gave him a feather-light kiss on his cheek and then tip toed around the room, looking for the TV remote. She dumped a few extra pillows on the floor and settled in to channel surf. Almost a thousand channels to watch and nothing could take her mind off her problems. Aida slouched onto the floor, still feeling queasy -

Wait. Who was that?

She clicked back two channels and gasped, scrambling onto her knees. She turned up the volume, forgetting about the sleeping boyfriend in the bed behind her.

*Leliana.*

She's back. With a rapt audience in front of her podium.

Aida, a little unaccustomed to watching TV after a year trapped in a demon's nightmare, had to scan everything on the screen to understand what was happening. Every word on the news crawl made her feel sicker and sicker.

**ANTI-MAGE FUROR ON THE RISE**
HAVEN'S FORMER MAYOR TAKES THE HELM OF A NEW INDEPENDENT POLITICAL PARTY

LIVE FROM HER RALLY IN LOTHERIN: THE NIGHTINGALE PROMISES TO 'MAKE FERELDEN GREAT AGAIN'

The footage cut to the people in the stands, looks of hope - and hatred - written all over their faces. She turned up the rally even louder, now that she heard the rustling of Cullen's bed sheets behind her. Leliana was off-teleprompter, speaking in a casual yet charismatic tone.

"So, here we are - with Corypheus and his goons opening dangerous Fade rifts in Tevinter, in Orlais - and now the threat is pouring over our borders. And what does Alistair Therin do about it? Nothing."

She shrugged, pouting her lips, looking around the venue.

"They tell us we're safe, but let me ask you this - do you feel safe?"

The crowd yelled back at her, "NO!"

"Is the Prime Minister going to do anything about these refugees flooding our streets?"

"NO!"

Leliana paused, letting the audience mumble and churn and yell their deepest, darkest bigoted thoughts about mages out loud in a room where they would not be judged.

"FUCK MAGIC! FUCK MAGES!"

"Burn them all!"

"Lock them up! Lock them up!"

"Build a wall!"

Leliana pointed toward where she had heard that last sentiment. "And who's going to pay for that wall?"

"ORLAIS!"

Raucous applause swept over the crowd until Leliana raised her arms, and they fell into an obedient silence.

"Let me tell you something. Nobody's looking out for us. We can't just let anyone into our country - and what are we to do about the mages who are radicalized right under our noses? They need to be registered, they need to be vetted, we need to put them on a LIST."

Aida held herself, shaking slightly now. She felt Cullen sit down next to her and put an arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer.

"Our country needs strong leadership, and who are we going to get it from? Prime Minister Therin, who - where is he right now, anyone know where he is right now?"

The Nightingale looked at a few of the people in the front row, listening for their answers. "That's right - he's probably frolicking on the beach with that wife of his in Par Vollen. He's on his way out, who can blame him? Well WE CAN. Ferelden used to have a strong economy, and now we're struggling - our jobs are shipped to Seheron, to Rivain. We're saddled with millions of immigrants, our infrastructure is failing, our health care system is in shambles, red lyrium is devastating our inner cities. But guess what, YOU can do something about this. YOU can sweep the elites from our parliament. This country is still the greatest country in Thedas - and we can make Ferelden GREAT
AGAIN."

The crowd stood up, cheering and shouting so loud it was hard to hear what the anchorwoman in back in the news studio was saying. Cullen took the remote from her and turned the TV off. Aida rested her head on his shoulder, letting a single tear slip down her face.

"When were you going to tell me?"
"Aida, I'm being honest - I've been so fixated on getting you back, finding you, loving you, and treasuring and every moment I've been given with you... it just slipped my mind to sit down and tell you what's been going on in politics lately."
"Do you think she could be Prime Minister next year?"

Cullen pulled her onto his lap. "I don't know, baby. Does it matter? I won't let them put you on some list. I just want to get you home for the holidays. I have so many plans for you. So many."

They kissed and Aida relaxed, just a bit.

"Were you sick again this morning?"
"Yes. I'm sorry."
"Don't apologize. But when we get to Val Royeaux, I want you to see a doctor, the best one Vivienne knows."

Aida straddled him, facing him. She traced the lines of his face, his brow, down his jawline, across those lips and that scar. "I love you so much. But - "

Cullen pressed a finger to her lips now, stopping her mid-thought. "Stop. That's all I wanted to hear."

Aida wrapped her arms around his neck and held him close. They'd be in Val Royeaux tomorrow, in Haven in a few days. She made a decision - she'd tell Cullen after Satinalia, so they could have at least one carefree holiday together.

And she'd tell Doctor de Fer when they got to Val Royeaux. It was killing her to have to keep this secret to herself.

* * * * *

Aida watched Vivienne's face process her news. She had given Cullen a difficult errand, to go out into Val Royeaux to look for the rare herbs that had been in the tea the Chantry sisters had given her, just so she could have some private time with her old boss.

"Dear, are you sure? About the timing that is?"

Aida took out a cheap paper calendar she had bought in a convenience store somewhere on the road, when Cullen hadn't been looking.

"I disappeared into the Fade last year, on this date. I 'came back' and the sisters took me in right around these dates -and the real Cullen found me here. Yes, we have been remarkably sexually active since my return - "

Vivienne didn't say anything, choosing to raise an aristocratic eyebrow in response. "Now while I can't be sure my experience of time matched up with real time - but...I did have sex with the other Cullen at least two weeks before my return. Putting me at - "
Vivienne put a finger down on her calendar, on today's date. "You're at least two to three months pregnant."

They sat in silence, listening to the grandfather clock ticking away in the corner of Vivienne's sitting room. Aida fretted, cracking her knuckles. When she spoke again, it was almost at a whisper.
"Vivienne...could the baby be a demon? It was a desire demon who had me locked away there, in a simulation of my own life. I - made love with that other Cullen, more than once, on no birth control. Was I - really making love with...it? What's inside me?"

Vivienne shook her head, taking a sip of her tea. "I have no idea. I've never read of such a thing, possession upon childbirth or during pregnancy. Dr. Solas might know more but... Let's not worry until we , and confirm that you're truly pregnant and not just paranoid."

Aida felt tears building in her eyes but didn't want to cry in front of one of the strongest women she had ever known. Vivienne reached out and put a hand on top of Aida's, resting on her lap.

"Here's a tough question. Should I...terminate this pregnancy and just - make sure Cullen never knows? Even if it isn't a demon child..."

Vivienne squeezed her hand now. "Keeping big secrets from the man you love, is hard, if not impossible. You - demean your love - when you have things to hide. This isn't to say that the only way to be happy in a relationship is total transparency! But honesty, honesty is a strong foundation for a long-lasting relationship - honesty, respect, and fire. You've got plenty of that third thing, according to this."

Vivienne flicked a finger against the calendar nearby, where Aida had meticulously put Xs on the days she had had sex with Cullen. A few days on the calendar had 3 Xs on them. Aida felt a smile building on her face that she allowed to bloom when Doctor de Fer giggled behind her hand. Aida sighed and nibbled on a cookie.

"This - Leliana situation. How bad is it back in Ferelden?"
"Darling, why do you think I'm here and not back at Haven General? I don't like the pitched tone her campaign has taken on. Hate crimes against mages are on the rise, because this woman runs her mouth off and says whatever she wants to say, just for the retweets and TV coverage. She's dangerous and I never liked her, after what happened to us. We can never pin the bombings on her directly but your Cullen and his security detail always said something was off about that day."

"What can we do about any of this? I feel so powerless."
"I'm not sure, dear, but some things in life transcend politics. We must focus on the immediate matter at hand, this Fade-baby that is possibly gestating inside of you. I'll send Albert out to buy you a test at the drugstore, and make a call or two to get you an appointment for an ultrasound right away."

"Oh, no, not...not your butler. How embarrassing for him!"
"Please, darling. He lives to be helpful. He'll think it's funny!"

* * * * *

The secret Aida told Vivienne made its way to Emilia. Aida needed to keep Cullen busy for another day and he was being so stubborn about accompanying her to the doctor that Aida had no choice but to call her sister and get her to put a little extra work on Cullen's plate so he'd be busy running around from Trevelyan site to site for at least an afternoon. Emilia was overjoyed at Aida's news, even as Aida poured out her anxieties to her.
"Oh come on, a demon baby? I never took you for someone who believes horror movies are real!"
"But Emilia - "

"Aida, it's CULLEN'S BABY. I just know it and I'm always right, aren't I? It'll come out looking like Cullen and Cullen won't care that it was some other Cullen. Wow, your life is not normal."
"Shut up. And thank you, I'll be home soon enough."

The next morning Emilia's workload landed on Cullen, much to his chagrin. Aida saw him off to work, standing on the steps of Vivienne's mansion.

"Please call me if you need me, call me when you get to the doctor, and when you get out - and then when you get back here, just so I know you're safe."
"Cullen, it's just a doctor's appointment, please don't get so worked up. You have other things to focus on."

Cullen grimaced and pouted but Aida couldn't help but grin at him, because even when he was upset he managed to be absolutely lovable. "Don't see why I've suddenly got to run around the snotty Orlesian capital doing trivial things your sister was going to do in a month or two when she was scheduled to be here. Strikes me as odd. You literally stepped out of a Fade rift and back into all of our lives and - "

"Doodlebug, I'm sure it's important, why wouldn't they ask for your help? It's just - good business, isn't it? You're here already, aren't you?" Aida hated lying to him but she got through it by imagining Cullen as a little boy, being denied another cookie. He kissed her goodbye, soft and gentle enough to make her sigh as she watched his rental car pull away.

If the child inside of her wasn't an abomination, Aida hoped he or she would have his brow, his eyes - and his goodness, his loyalty.

* She hoped it didn't have claws. *

For an hour after the appointment, Aida wandered the streets of Val Royeaux, the blurry black and white photograph of her ultrasound tucked into a pocket in her purse. The whole procedure had gone by in a blur, and the staff had been so kind to her at the obstetrician's office, everything taken care of by Vivienne.

She definitely was two and a half months pregnant.

So far, the child was healthy. They'd have to wait until she was farther into the pregnancy to know more, but nobody on staff questioned her anxiety, taking it for normal motherhood jitters.

Aida found herself standing in front of a children's clothing store. Beyond the fanciful display in the window, she could see the mothers shopping within, a few of them much farther into their pregnancies than she. Despite their glowing complexions, the serenity on their faces, Aida mused that they must have their own worries. Maybe one or two of them might be raising their children on their own. Until someone told her otherwise, she was one of them, despite the circumstances of how, when and where she conceived this child.

Aida paused in the doorway of the shop, unable to go in. The clothes were on the fussy side, would Cullen - either version of him - dress their child up like a tiny Orlesian dandy? She snorted, and
turned on her heel.

She kept meandering around the capital, ignoring the buzzing of the phone in her bag for now. Cullen had let her take his phone since she had none of her own, and was making due without it, but she was certain it was him calling her asking for an update. In the wake of her news, these days between today and Satinalia were now very important. She hungered to spend every moment with him for once they got back to Haven, everything was going to change. They were returning to a country where the loyalty of 'her kind' was being called into question, she was carrying a child that Cullen may not want to claim as his own. Aida had come plummeting back into her life, and as always, she only ever seemed to generate chaos.

Aida was so deep in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed the neighborhood change around her. She had wandered into the gay quarter of Val Royeaux, and even though it wasn't quite 5 PM, a lot of the bars were already blasting music and serving happy hour drinks. She smiled at a cluster of handsome, easy-going young men who ignored her in return. A few turns deeper into this vibrant neighborhood and Aida found herself walking down a dead-end street, a "discreet" sex shop tucked away where the road stopped. Aida grinned to herself, looking at the display in the window - a Satinalia tree made up entirely of big, green dildos.

Perhaps she would have two surprises for Cullen later - one, that she had decided to move them out of Vivienne's drafty, antique-laden chateau and check them into the Val Royeaux Four Seasons, where they had once spent a few passionate nights together the last time they were in the city, and her second surprise? She had a feeling she'd find something inside this shop.

Aida pushed open the door to the boutique, causing the androgynous sales boy behind the counter to snap to attention. Aida's Orlesian was pretty good, and she could understand every teasing word he tossed at her.

"Ah, mademoiselle, smiling already, before she's even bought a thing? That's the look of a woman who knows what she wants and what she's going to do."

* * * * *

Aida opened the door of their suite, expecting it to be empty, but Cullen was inside, room service waiting on a cart nearby. He sat on the edge of the bed watching the news in a bathrobe, his hair wet from a recent shower. He had an angry scowl on his face as he watched Leliana being interviewed on a conservative news outlet. Aida caught a little bit of the vindictive woman's banter before he was able to click it off -

" - no, I'm not saying we should deport millions of mages, or even that that would be possible, but they must be monitored, they must be tracked..."

Aida put down her mysterious shopping bag and walked into his open arms.

"Sorry, I had just flipped on the TV, and there she was. Getting back into the Game, right in prime time too."

She buried her face in his fluffy bathrobe, inhaling his clean scent. "It's all right. You can't control what's on TV."

"I'm glad it has an off button at least. Where have you been all evening? I get back to Vivienne's after not hearing from you all day long to find out you moved all of our stuff and checked us into the presidential suite at the most expensive hotel in town. So, what did the doctor say?"
Aida looked away while she answered him. "She said I was perfectly healthy, nothing to be worried about." It wasn't a lie, Vivienne's obstetrician friend did say that.

Cullen blinked at her a few times. She knew he was analyzing her tone, her expressions. *Oh just please relax so we can get on to the more important part of the night.*

He looked at her even more intently, Aida worrying he was on the verge of interrogating her thoroughly - but then he smiled, and squeezed her shoulders.

"I didn't know where you were, so I just ordered dinner. I hope you don't mind?"
"Of course not, but I'm not too hungry. I just want to take a quick shower, get into bed with you - and show you what I bought today."

Cullen glanced over her shoulder to where the black shopping bag was sitting on the nearby armchair, an eyebrow raised. "Oh?"

She parted his robe, and cupped his manhood with a hand. "Be ready when I get out of the shower."

His eyes traveled to the bag again, but Aida turned his chin back toward her so she could kiss him again. "Ah ah ah - no peeking."

A few minutes later, Aida returned to the bedroom, wearing her plain cotton nightgown. Cullen had rolled away the room service cart and turned down the bed sheets. He waited for her on the edge of the bed with a worried look on his face which melted away once he saw her.

"Oh, wow. I thought you were going to come out in - some sort of startling dominatrix outfit."

Aida vamped in the very normal nightgown, "Sorry to disappoint, but here you go, you can finally look at what I bought you today."

She sat down next to him, feeling giddy as he opened the bag and looked inside. He handed it back to her.

"You seem to be mistaken, Aida - this is an item for your enjoyment, not mine."

She cuddled up to him, undoing the knot of his robe. "No, you're the one who's mistaken. Didn't you like what I did to you in the shower the other night? It certainly looked and sounded like you did?"

Why was it so fun to make this man blush? Cullen had to swallow before he answered her: "I did."

Aida kissed a trail up his neck until her lips were against his velvet-soft earlobe. "Baby. I want to fuck you tonight."

"Well, I thought that was what you were going to do, you know, what we were, already going to - "

She pushed the robe off his shoulders now. "No, not like that. I want to fuck you - with what's in that bag. I want to take you."

Before he could object, she straddled him and slipped her tongue into his mouth, pushing him flat onto the mattress. She broke the kiss to take her nightgown off, which gave Cullen a chance to respond to her request.

"You want to WHAT?"

Aida swept her hands all over his pecs and abs, trying to be soothing. "I want to put that thing on, and fuck you with it, in your ass. Is that OK?"

He opened his mouth but she silenced him again by rubbing her pussy on his hardening cock. He
gasped and grabbed her ass, sinking his fingers into her flesh. She rolled her hips, grinding against him and making his eyes roll back in his head.

"So, can I?"
"Aida..."
"If you don't like it, I'll stop, OK? Pick a safe word."

Cullen laughed. She loved making him blush, and making him laugh - and making him come, good and hard. "A safe word? Hmm. How about: 'Checkmate'?"

Aida fell forward on him with a delighted giggle, pushing her tongue into his mouth to taste him until he broke the kiss, that nervous little look still on his face.

"So, how do we begin?"
"Well, I wouldn't like it if you just rushed right to the big finale with me, so - we will start slow."

She kissed him again, still lying on top of him, feeling safe and secure and rooted onto him. She kept sending him a thought - "relax, relax, baby" - until she felt him both relax and grow more confident, at the same time. Cullen rolled her onto the mattress beneath him, their mouths never parting. She concentrated on him, the emotions churning deep inside of him. Once she had discovered that she could catch glimpses of people's thoughts, she had never wanted to use her ability on Cullen, but tonight she was too curious. She sent her warm, loving energy pouring over all his nerve endings, and then zoomed in on what he was thinking about.

Butter. She's like hot, melting butter in my mouth.

She smiled as Cullen pressed kisses up and down her neck and then made his way south to her breasts. Aida's pregnancy hormones made them so sensitive that when he sucked one of her nipples into his mouth, she cried out, grabbing him him by a handful of hair.

"Baby! You okay?"
"Yes, yes, you just - you always make me feel so good, so fucking good. More. But don't suck, lick."

She felt Cullen's other hand slip between her legs. "Someone's very, very wet - and I've barely touched her." He flicked his tongue against her nipple again, while sliding two fingers into her. She bit into his shoulder with a moan. Aida was feeling everything so keenly that she knew he could make her come with very little effort tonight. He worked his two fingers around her pearl in lazy circles, watching her reaction.

"How's that?"
"Not enough."

Cullen stopped to lick his fingers. "Maker, you're so sweet tonight. Taste yourself."

He dipped his fingers into her and then swiped them across her lips before kissing her, mingling the taste of her in their mouths. "Mmmm, get on my face, baby. I know it's your favorite."

Aida scrambled around on the bed with an excited giggle, straddling his face and then crawling forward to drop her mouth onto his stiff member. She kept a hand wrapped around his cock while sucked and licked him, while she felt him pushing and rolling her clit around on the tip of his tongue. Cullen was right, it was her favorite position in all of their sexual history. The taste of his thick, delicious manhood in her mouth always amplified all the things he did to her at the same time, with just his mouth. She was hanging on to the edge of her first orgasm, trying to make the pleasure last,
when she felt Cullen reach forward and grab on to her sensitive breasts, kneading her flesh with his palms. Aida felt him moan into her pussy, at the same time she moaned with his cock deep in her mouth. The sound of their mutual pleasure, almost in stereo, made her sit down on his face, arch her back and climax with a sweet hiss and a moan. Aida rolled off of him, staring at the ceiling for a moment.

"Mmmm how was that?"
"Exquisite. And now, it's your turn."

Cullen chuckled to himself, rubbing his face. "You are a persistent woman."

"Baby, don't be scared. I'm going to make you feel as good as you always make me feel. If you're still this nervous, how about I give you a massage?"

Cullen rolled over onto his belly, pushing a pillow under his head and landing in a pose of his she used to love drawing. "I would never turn that down, you've got the most incredible hands."

Aida sprung from the bed and grabbed the scented bottle of massage oil she had bought with her Orlesian sex toy. She rubbed some between her hands and let its sweet citrus smell fill the air.

"Smells good."
"Mmm. And - it's edible."

Aida rubbed some of the oil on his broad shoulders. "Edible?"
"As in -"

Aida leaned forward and licked his shoulder blade. Cullen purred into the pillow beneath him. "Are you going to lick me all over?"
"You'll see."

She worked and kneaded his muscles, sometimes stopping to bite and lick him and make him smile, working her way down his back to those two globes of flesh she had recently become very obsessed about. She grabbed two handfuls of his ass and rubbed them, soothing the knots in his lower back she knew were both from their long hike together and too many hours at his desk. Without cuing him further, she got him up onto his hands and knees, giving him two pillows to lean against. Aida gave him a sharp smack with her right palm, before parting his buttocks to lick his tight ring of flesh with broad swipes of her tongue.

"Aida, Maker, fffuck."

He pressed back against her mouth and almost writhed when she reached between his legs to caress his balls and stroke his rock solid cock.

"Do you like that? When I eat your ass?"

Cullen couldn't answer, but Aida took pleasure in seeing him grip the sheets underneath him. She poured more oil right onto his crack, letting it trickle down lower. She kept one hand on his cock as two fingers of her other hand gently probed into him. Cullen groaned louder into the pillow in front of him, biting into it when she pushed them in further to press on his sweet spot. Aida felt a ping of sexual adrenaline surge through her when he brushed aside her hand so he could work his own cock. She worked a second finger into him, gently pulsing them in and out of his ass. The symphony of moans slipping from Cullen's lips were sweeter than any dessert she could order from room service. She twisted and scissored the fingers around, getting him to loosen up as she massaged his prostate and rolled his balls around with her free hand.
"Do it, Aida. I want it."

Aida bit her lip, extracted her fingers, and reached for the shopping bag again. The playful store clerk had helped her find just the right thing - a special pair of black panties she only had to slip on, that had the toy (not too big, not too small) attached to it already.

"We'll go slow, do you remember your safe w-"
"Aida, stop talking. Don't make me beg."
"Maybe I should..."

Aida worked just the head into him and held herself still while Cullen got used to the sensation of something bigger. She brushed her fingertips over his lower back and over his ass, and then sent him another message internally. *I want you baby, I want every inch of you. You're mine, you're mine...*

As though responding to her thoughts, Cullen wriggled his hips, bringing her in deeper. He swore louder when Aida reached for his cock and found it hot, and stiff. She slid in another inch and Cullen nearly howled.

"I'm sorry, is that -"
"No, it's, incredible. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*, I - more, Aida. A little more."
"Show me, show me how you want it."

Cullen pushed back against her, fucking himself on her dildo with shallow, pleasing thrusts. She hissed with satisfaction, watching his firm booty almost bouncing on her toy, his hand working his cock. Cullen sat back on his heels, and Aida pressed her forehead against his shoulder, wrapping her arms around him as much as she could.

"That's it baby, do you like it?"
He laughed and moaned at the same time. "More than I care to admit."

She put her hand over his, just enjoying feeling him pleasure himself. She reached down further and cupped his balls again, and he dropped his head back against her.

"I don't think I can hang on much longer, it's too much. Is this what it feels like when I fuck you?"


Cullen growled, the fist on his cock moving faster and faster. Aida was about to get a cramp in her back but she wanted to see him climax. She kept a hand on his ball sac as he worked the dildo deeper and deeper into his ass - and then he exploded with a roar, his milky, thick come shooting on his chest, on his hand and hers. And he kept coming, even after she pulled out and he flopped onto the bed. Cullen laid there, panting, as Aida discreetly slipped out of her panties and snuggled into his side.

"How was that?"
"Can't talk. Too intense. Love you."

Aida got up and got a washcloth to wipe them both down. Cullen let her do so, giving her a sleepy, loving puppy dog sort of look. After they were both cleaned up, she pulled the sheets over them and turned off the light.

She heard Cullen sigh as he pulled her closer.

"I have a question."
"Oh, you can talk now?"
"Are you going to take that thing through airport security or - "

Aida began giggling. "If you want me to! If not, we can leave it here for the maids to deal with."

Cullen joined her, the two of them sharing an intimate laugh, holding each other. Aida slipped off into sleep, having forgotten her anxieties from earlier that day.

***

The next morning, Aida woke up and rolled over in bed to see Cullen getting dressed for the day and packing up their stray belongings.

"It's so early, why are you up already..."
"It actually isn't that early, but you seemed exhausted, so I let you sleep. Our flight is in a few hours."

Cullen fussed around in one of his bags and came to her bed side with a large envelope in hand. "Your father shipped this to me yesterday. I was going to give it to you but - you had your gift to give me first."

Aida stretched and grinned at him. "That's right. Did you like it?"
"Stop asking me. I think you literally asked me if I liked it in your sleep last night."

He sat down on the bed next to her and she caressed his bicep. "Well, did you? "Yes, of course I did. You...you saw how much I liked it." He blushed deeply again and she felt it down in her toes.

"Alright, what's in this envelope."

Aida slid her passport out of the envelope. She flipped it open, past the blank pages to the ID section. They had stopped during their road trip to get her a new passport photo, and her father and sister must have pulled many bureaucratic strings to get it renewed for her.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Aida Lyanna Trevelyan. And now I want to get you home for Satinalia tomorrow. I've already packed most of your things for you - including, the ah..."
"The dildo I fucked you with last night."

"AIDA. Please, just...OK, I can tell by that smile that anything I say will have no effect on you so, why bother. Come eat breakfast, we should get to the airport. I'm a little too excited to get the Void out of Orlais."

Despite her passport being perfectly legitimate, both Aida and Cullen held their breath while the airport agent scanned and examined it. They both exhaled together when she told them their terminal was on the right, and that they should hurry, they'd be boarding soon.

The flight was not too long. Aida spent all of it tucked under Cullen's arm, napping, while he managed to get some work done on his laptop with just one hand. Aida didn't wake up until she felt the plane touch down and heard the passengers around them jostling for their luggage in the bin above them.

Aida slowly became aware of the stewardesses at the front of the plane, whispering with each other, one of them using a walkie talkie. She noticed them looking toward the two of them frequently.

"Cullen, what's going on?"
"I'm not sure, probably has nothing to do with us."
"But look -"

The stewardess who seemed to be in charge of the rest of them made their way down the aisle to Cullen and Aida, who were seated in the last row of the first class section.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rutherford, Miss Trevelyan - there's, a bit of a disturbance in the terminal, at the gate. I don't know how to put this but - there's a throng of people waiting for you? We would like you to deplane last while airport security tries to deal with this - they're making quite a scene, and interfering with airport protocols."

Cullen made a face at her while turning on his cell phone. "A throng? Of people?"

A second, much more excited stewardess came up behind her. "Media! TV news! You're HER, aren't you? The woman who came back from the Fade?"

Aida opened her mouth but couldn't form any words. "H-how, how could you possibly know this?"

Cullen sat back in his chair with sigh. He handed Aida his phone. She stared in mute shock at the homepage of famous celebrity gossip website. The picture was a screenshot of the grainy security footage of her last moments in that lab in Tevinter Tech, when she had disappeared into the Fade. Aida had to read the headline over and over again:

**BACK FROM THE DEAD?**

The subheadlines read: **IS SHE DANGEROUS? OR IS SHE "THE HERALD OF ANDRASTE"?**

"The Herald - of Andraste?"

Aida sputtered, shaking her head as she clicked into the story. The video loaded and there was Albert, who had fished her out of the water, being peppered with questions from reporters who must have hiked all the way in to his village.

"Oh, she most certainly fell through a Fade rift, that was her alright. But nay, she was not dangerous or strange or possessed like you keep askin', she was as gentle as could be, and sweet. Will you tell her I miss her, for me?"

Cullen had pulled up a few more news websites. Right on the homepage was a live video feed from one of the big cable news channels, stationed at the terminal gate, waiting for them. It didn't feel real at all - they were waiting for her?

"What are we going to do?" she whimpered.

The stewardess put a kind hand on her shoulder. "Airport security has pushed them back from the gate all the way to the sidewalk. You should go now, before the crowd gets unruly again."

Cullen stood up, a determined look on his face.

"Let's go. Let's just get it over with, we'll be back at Skyhold as quickly as possible."

A third steward popped up out of nowhere, holding his cell phone. "Can I get a selfie before you leave?"

Cullen glared at him until he turned and skittered back to the galley area.
The walk from the plane to the sidewalk where her father and sister were waiting for her in a Trevelyan company limo was both surreal and stressful. Aida heard the shouted questions of the reporters but did not respond to them. Cullen's broad shoulders blocked the bright flashbulbs, he pushed away a few dogged cameramen who jammed their lenses in her face and barked back answers to the reporters who were asking ruder questions about the veracity of her story.

But worse than the media were the believers.

She felt their hands reach for her and brush her arms, her hair. They were just trying to touch her, and it was the most eerie experience of them all. She heard their prayers, the pleading tone in their voices. It reminded her of the beggars on the steps in Loften, but those people wanted food, not salvation or divine intervention.

"Aida! My child, she is very sick, will you pray for her?"
"What did Andraste tell you, is this the end of days?"
"Can you cure my cancer, Herald? Touch me, just once - "

Once the limo was in sight, Cullen tried to usher her in but Aida stood in utter shock.

Across the street - were the non-believers.

They were waving signs: "DEATH TO BLOOD MAGIC USERS!"
"HERESY IS A SIN! YE REAP WHAT YE SOW!"
"DEPORT ALL MAGES! MAKE FERELDEN GREAT AGAIN!"

Cullen had to push her into the limo, right into her father's and sister's waiting arms. She sobbed with relief, feeling their tears mingling with hers as she held them close.

"Daddy, what happened, why do they know about me?"

The Bann knocked on the window of the limo to get the driver to leave. Cullen looked out the back window, watching several news vans following them in pursuit.

"I don't know, somehow someone at the state department must have put it together, while we were trying to get your papers in order. You know, one person tells one person, and then on and on and on. People might have known at our company, our own servants at Skyhold knew you were coming home. It's a mess, a total mess."

Emilia clutched Aida's hand, the one that was not being held by Cullen.

"It's Satinalia Eve. You came home just in time. Let's not think about it now. We have a big dinner to eat, and gifts to exchange."

Cullen squeezed her hand. "And the greatest gift of them all has come home."

The three stared at her, love pouring from their faces.

Aida couldn't wait any longer. She had to say it.

"I'm pregnant. I got pregnant in the Fade, somehow. I don't know if it's a human baby or a demon
Baby, I can't tell you what's inside of me, or who the father is - or whether the demon inside me will kill me before it has gestated, or when I give birth to it."

Everyone grew very quiet. Aida heard the limo driver swear from the front seat and press on his horn, trying to get them away from the reporters who were following them. Aida's father and sister began talking at the same time. She heard discussions of finding the best doctors, maybe sending her back to Tevinter where they'd maybe know more about such things, getting a room ready for a nursery, finding prenatal classes for Aida to take. Her family was jumping ahead and not thinking about the scarier parts of her story. She heard her father musing how he'd be a grandfather for 5th time now.

But Cullen said nothing. He stared out the window, a furrow in his brow.

They got all the way to Skyhold where he helped her out of the limo and onto the steps of her home. Her father and sister gave them some space, going inside to hold back the other family members who were waiting for her while she had a moment with her boyfriend.

"Cullen. You haven't said a word to me. You won't even look at me."

"Aida, I'm - shell-shocked right now. Between hearing people calling my lover, the Herald of Andraste - and now this news..."

Aida began to cry, trying not to sob, trying to control herself. "You, you don't love me anymore, do you, you're going to leave me, you're - "

He cupped her face with a hand, finally looking at her. Aida felt herself calm down a little as his warm brown eyes met hers. "Shhhh. I never said any of those things, did I? But...I do just want to pick up Barkley from Varric's place and, just rest. I'm...suddenly very tired." He gave her a kiss on the cheek before turning to step back into the limo. Aida wiped away her tears and followed him.

"But, why not bring Barkley back here, stay at Skyhold with me tonight, please?"

"Aida, your family wants to spend time with you too, your brothers and sister, and all the kids, everyone's waiting for you. So go to them."

Aida stopped him from closing the limo door.

"You'll be here tomorrow, for Satinalia, right?"

He took the hand that was holding the door in his, and gave it a peck on the knuckles. "I promise I will. I wouldn't miss it."

She felt soothed - until she got a small glimpse of his face right before the door closed. He looked pensive again, as soon as he thought he was out of her sight.

She watched the limo pull out of the gates of Skyhold. The news vans weren't allowed into the gated community where the Trevelyans lived, but a helicopter flew overhead and hovered above her once it had spotted her. She turned to head into her home and was immediately almost knocked over by her nieces and nephews in the foyer.

Aida endured their hugs and kisses, the happiness shining from everyone's eyes, but all she could keep repeating to herself was one question.

"He wouldn't break up with me on Satinalia, right?"

"RIGHT?"
Chapter End Notes

I swear to the Maker I'll update this before Xmas, aka our Satinalia!

As always, thank you for continuing to read and you can follow me at thetemplarandtherogue.tumblr.com. I'm a friendly reblogger of all Dragon Age fan art and fics!

(And the first chapter of my Witcher smut is coming very very soon.)
All I Want for Satinalia Is You

Chapter Notes

I'm so pleased that the FORTIETH CHAPTER of this behemoth lands on a Satinalia chapter - because the previous Satinalia chapter I wrote is one of my favorite parts of this entire fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After leaving Aida with her family, Cullen returned to his condo with Barkley, and sunk onto his couch to methodically drink the bottom three inches of a bottle of whiskey and brood with his dog at his side. He couldn't even sit at his own dining table or stand too close to his patio window as he had a feeling paparazzi and other disreputable photo journalists with telephoto lenses were dying for a picture of "Herald of Andraste's hunky boyfriend". He took a long sip of his liquor. That dream weaver woman warned me that nothing would ever be the same again. I sort of wish she had said, "No, really. I really fucking mean it. Everything is going to change."

Cullen couldn't concentrate on a single anxious thought currently dancing through his mind. For a start, it worried him that she could be risking her health and her life, and then it also frustrated him to know he could not rightly encourage her to terminate the pregnancy. And Cullen couldn't admit it to anyone out loud but, he was jealous. The woman he adored so deeply, so intensely - was pregnant, and he had nothing to do with it. Every time he thought of her loving that other-him, kissing him, pining for him, lying in his arms, a burning jolt of envy shot throughout his body. But he also thought of her imprisoned by a monster, unknowingly mating with it, and felt sick for her on her behalf.

He swept those apprehensions aside for a moment. He knew many men raised children that were not their own, and treasured and loved them and were loved in return, but it was hard to focus on that. Was he even ready to be a father? He knew how to storm a fortified citadel, full of militant mages pointing guns at hostages, reload his Sig Sauer with his eyes closed, deadlift an injured soldier out of danger - and nowadays, he could stand in front of a boardroom of Trevelyan Enterprises executives and give a presentation without stammering too much. But when was the last time he even held a baby in his arms?

Cullen needed to talk to someone but it was too late to call anyone who could reassure him. He fell asleep on the couch, the empty whiskey bottle lying on its side on the floor nearby, and Barkley curled up at his feet.

* * * *

Barkley and Cullen slept late the next morning, although he was woken up by the dog tapping him with an insistent paw.

"You need to go walkies, don't you. I wonder if the damn photographers are still out there."

Cullen called down to the doorman downstairs. Jimmy told him there were at least 10 of them posted at the condo's front doors, and according to his bank of security cameras, at least 8 of them waiting at the back door.
"They're looking at me, man. I swear these guys have some kind of evil intuition and they know I'm talking to you. After I had to call the cops last night, they've backed up onto the sidewalk though."

Cullen sighed as Barkley whimpered in the background. Jimmy's tone grew conspiratorial. "You know, it snowed again this morning, so tenants coming and going past my desk have been bundled all the way up to their noses."

"James, you are Maker sent. See you in a bit."

Cullen came downstairs a few minutes later wearing a scarf wrapped around his face, a wool beanie pulled down over his ears and the biggest coat he owned, hoping everything disguised him well enough. To his relief, he and Barkley slipped past the cameramen unnoticed as they headed to the park.

Cullen stood under an old oak tree, watching Barkley rolling around in the snow, but his thoughts stayed with Aida. Did she sleep in too, was she sick this morning, was she happy to be home or had he brought her back to a life she had never planned for? He pulled out her phone to google her name, hoping everyone had already forgotten about her - but it was a futile wish. If anything, their dash through the Val Royeaux airport made them look even more like a pair of glamorous, beleaguered celebrities. A few clicks deeper sent Cullen's heart pounding - the anti-mage sentiment that was surging through Ferelden was zooming in on Aida. She was a heretic, a mage of unfathomable power whose father's money and stature made her even more threatening.

He heard footsteps in the snow approaching him. Cullen pivoted around, defensive, ready to whistle to Barkley to bring him to his side, but the loyal Mabari was already there, and growling ominously.

A woman in a black wool coat and furry hat was making her way through the snow toward him, flanked by two men. She too was bundled up against the cold and Cullen could not see her face as she gestured to the two men to hang back. Cullen backed up a foot as she walked all the way up to him. She pulled down her scarf and Cullen felt a shiver shoot down his spine that had nothing to do with the weather.

"Leliana, what do you want?"

"Tsk tsk, no hello, how are you? Did we part on such terrible terms?"

Cullen scowled at her, so elegant in her winter wear, unaffected by all the chaos she sowed. "Yes, I quit, remember? My girlfriend was hurt in the bombings you could not stop. And you showed very little sorrow or regret afterward? They dragged you in the press and you didn't get re-elected? Any of this sound familiar to you?"

Leliana rolled her eyes with a sigh. "I was very sorry about what happened, you know it's not in character for me to go on camera and shed tears for the public? How would that have helped anything?"

Cullen shook his head and attached Barkley's leash to his collar. Without another word, he began to walk away from the ex-mayor.

"Cullen. You asked me what I wanted but I didn't get a chance to answer."

He turned around and looked at her, still saying nothing.

"I want you. I've always wanted you. I haven't stopped. I think about you every day and how you are not at my side."

Cullen swallowed. It was uncanny how the words she was saying to him were things he and Aida
had said to each other. Her feelings mirrored theirs, but were unmet with any equal passion - and would remain so.

"I've known you for a long time and I know you don't respond to threats, but..."

Cullen narrowed his eyes, pulling up his collar around his neck against the cold. Barkley stayed close at his side.

"I could make life hard for Miss Trevelyan. Very hard. I still have my friends and connections. Does the name Sierra Amell mean anything to you?"

That shiver Cullen had felt earlier turned into ice in his veins. "You - stay away from her. She is a dear friend of mine."

Leliana's voice took on a sickening, playful tone. "And yet you broke her heart. Poor Sierra. Oh, but - did you know she is so high up at Ferelden Homeland Security? Did you bother to find out what she even did for a living before you used her as an emotional crutch and then cast her aside when you didn't need her anymore?"

Cullen began to feel panicked. He rushed through all his memories of their conversations, and realized she had only described herself as an office worker, something at the State department, but he had never inquired further. Leliana was right, he had done so much of the talking during that relationship but he had been too selfish to get to know her better.

"Sierra's still angry at how you dumped her, Cullen. And her department is maintaining a handy little list of mages suspected of undermining Ferelden democracy. You must face the truth: she had the power to return from the Fade, which makes her dangerous, as dangerous as Corypheus could ever be. Can she open and close Fade rifts, Cullen? What unfathomable powers did she gain on the other side of the Veil?"

Leliana stepped closer, as her sinister thoughts came tumbling out of her. "Do you know what I've heard? She's in league with the Venitori Independence State. She drinks blood. Her family drinks blood. They funnel company profits into Corypheus's bank accounts. The Trevelyans want to rule over both the Free Marches and Ferelden. They long for a mage-ocracy. They hate Templars, the Chantry - "

Cullen grabbed her by the arms and shook her. "Stop, stop your disgusting lies - "

Leliana smiled up at him, enjoying their closeness even if Cullen was upset with her. She snuck her hand under his jacket and around his waist, drawing him closer.

"I could destroy Aida with a TV appearance, every night, for one week. It would just take seven little interviews. In the meantime, Sierra has Aida under constant surveillance. All she needs to do is slip up once - exhibit some sign of her new magical capabilities - and Ferelden Homeland Security will throw her into a high security mage detention center. No trial, no lawyers, no cameras. No Aida."

Leliana slid a hand up his chest. It landed on the back of his neck.

"Or you could give yourself to me. Come back to me, Cullen. My political party is going to sweep the Parliamentary elections next spring. I want you by my side."

Cullen found himself responding even though it made him ill to do so. "And what about Sierra? What does she gain if I return to YOU and not her?"
"Oh, I've already promised her an even cushier government position, and a more luxurious life in the
capital. She's no fool, she knows without my sponsorship she's going nowhere on her own. Besides,
she's just like me."

Leliana's eyes glittered up at him. - "We both hate Aida Trevelyan, and everything she represents."

She pulled him down into a kiss, forcing her lips onto his. Cullen crushed her in a tight embrace, not
because he wanted to, but because his body was wracked with fear over Aida's future. Leliana
moaned against his ear. "Maker, I want you so bad. I'd let you fuck me right here, right now. Please,
come back to my place with me. I want your mouth all over my body."

Cullen let her kiss him again. He had to make a decision here, on the spot.

"I have a previous social engagement I cannot break. But - I will be at your mansion by midnight."

Leliana smiled at him. "Oh Cullen, you terrible romantic. You'd hurt her and push her away, just to
save her?"

This time, Cullen dipped his head to brush his lips against hers. "I would do anything for Aida."

* * * * *

Satinalia at Trevelyan Manor was a little more - frantic - this year. Aida received their guests,
standing between her father and her sister, but everyone was in an uproar to meet her, so much so
that family and friends who had turned down their invitation had shown up anyway, hoping to meet
the Herald of Andraste in the flesh - even though she was still just cousin Aida, as she reminded
everyone, over and over.

She was so caught up in reconnecting with Sera and Dorian that it took her a while to realize Cullen
was late. The excitement of the party had helped Aida forget how they had parted the day before,
and that look of apprehension on her lover's face, but now that it was getting closer to dinner, her
anxieties grew again. She didn't even know if he was the kind of man who wanted children, she had
heard him mention his own nieces and nephews only a few times.

"Oh, Maker, Aida - what if it's bloody twins! What if you're having twin demon babies?" Sera
giggled, delighting in Dorian's shocked face.

"This is nothing to joke about, Sera. I've never heard of demonic possession upon childbirth but -
there's a first time for everything. And leave it to you to get yourself into this terrible mess."

Aida pouted at them both. "You know, you guys were real assholes on the other side of the Veil. I
had to deal with the jerk-versions of each of you and it didn't help at all. And you're not helping
now!"

"Nonsense, we're being perfectly helpful. And when this baby comes, we'll be here for you.
Especially if - "

Dorian pursed his lips, looking around the room, but Sera finished his thought for him. "Especially if
you're going to be a single mom."

Sera couldn't help herself. "Let's make a bet. I bet he DOES turn up."

Dorian took a sip of his champagne and drawled back at her, "That's not what you were saying
earlier when Aida wasn't standing right here. Alright, I'll take Cullen's side for once." Dorian put a
hand on Aida's shoulder. "Aida, he never gave up on you. His devotion to you was like something out of a fairy tale. He's not going to stop all of a sudden because - "

The sound of chimes interrupted him, and Aida heard their butler announce, "Dinner is served."

Aida morosely sipped her soup, sitting next to Cullen's empty chair. Before the second course could arrive, her niece Scout appeared at her side.

"Daddy said it'd be nice if I sat next to you, Auntie, is that OK?"
"Of course, kiddo, it'd be real nice."

Aida made eye contact with her brother a few seats down, who gave her a sympathetic look. She nodded back at him with a small smile.

She would always have Skyhold. She would always have her family. One of the servants set a plate down before her - one of her favorite dishes, crispy little potato pancakes topped with caviar and sour cream. And she had been given an extra serving.

* * * * *

After dinner, Aida sat with her youngest niece under the Satinalia tree and held her in her arms as Taylor piloted a tiny drone around the living room. They giggled together as the adults had to dodge the toy as it swooped around their heads.

"Don't do that to grandpa! Didn't he buy this for you?"
"Yes. But I wanted a big one! Like the ones they use to fight Corypheus."

Aida squeezed the little girl tight. "My, you're growing up fast. How do you know that name?"
"I hear it on the news, right before mommy or daddy changes the channel. Hey look, it's Uncle Cullen!"

Aida felt her heart skip a beat as Cullen stepped into the living room, clad in a dapper dark blue suit with black velvet lapels. Taylor flew the drone over to him and easily snatched it out of the air before she could fly it into his face.

"Aw."
"Taylor, is this yours?"
"Yeah, Auntie Aida was no good at flying it. She almost crashed it into the tree."
"Did she now?"

Aida felt her cheeks burning as she looked up at him. He was so dashing, and there was a real part of her that believed maybe she would never see him again once he had heard about her condition.

"Taylor, do you mind if I borrow your Auntie for a moment? I'd like to speak to her in the library."
"No, we're having fun."

Aida grinned, giving the little girl a kiss on the side of her head.

"Guess that's a no, Cullen. Sorry."
"Aida, I must speak to you, it's very important."

She looked up and saw Cullen smoothing down his suit, a nervous look on his face.

"Is this something that we need to talk about today? Can't it wait? Today is a happy day, and I'd like it to remain as such."
Their attention was diverted for a moment when Emilia wheeled in a cart of cookies and hot cocoa. It made Taylor scramble off of Aida's lap so fast she nearly stepped on her to get away. Cullen held out a hand and helped her to her feet.

"Aida, please. It's - like I said, very important."

Aida blinked at him a few times, feeling tears pricking at her eyes. "If you insist."

* * * * *

Aida felt a strong sense of déjà vu as Cullen lead her to her father's opulent study. A fire was already roaring away as she sat down on the chaise lounge. A year ago she had confronted Cullen in this very room and rekindled their romance. And now, that little furrow in Cullen's brow seemed to signal their relationship was about to change again.

She watched with her hands folded in her lap as Cullen poured himself a drink from the Bann's bar cart. Aida smoothed out the plaid silk of her gown and fiddled with the bow tied around her waist.

"You look so beautiful tonight, Aida. I haven't seen you in a dress like that in quite some time."

"Thank you. Where were you at dinner?"

He took a big sip of his whiskey and did not look at her when he answered. "I had to run some last minute errands. Kind of difficult to do on such a snowy day, and with so many businesses closed. Thankfully your last name unlocks a lot of doors, but I was delayed."

He sat down next to her on the chaise lounge. He smelled good, he was wearing some expensive cologne she had never known him to wear. She just wanted to sit on this sofa and make out with him a little, run her fingers through his hair and muss his curls, instead of talk about whatever he found so pressing.

"I have to ask you a few things, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead."

He reached out and took one of her hands in his, and pressed a kiss to the back of it before he composed himself.

"Why do you want to keep this baby?"

Aida took a deep breath and looked at the fire. "Because - if it isn't a demon - then this child is a miracle. I know every mother believes their baby could grow up to do something important, but I do feel like Andraste is - speaking through me somehow. I don't think I'm the 'Herald of Andraste', but, it does feel divine to me, what happened to me. It must have happened for a reason."

Before Cullen could speak again, she added. "Also. I confess I told Emilia a week ago that I was pregnant. She didn't hear it for the first time in that limo. And she said to me, 'Aida, that is Cullen's baby and you know it.' And, she's right. I believe it is your child. He or she will come out into this world and look like you and sound like you, and best yet - be like you. And I want to raise that child."

She let her tears fall now. "And I understand if you want nothing to do with me anymore. You didn't ask for this. My father told me earlier today he offered you a senior vice president position in Denerim. Take the job and go, Cullen. You deserve it. Whatever happens to me, it will be my choice, and you don't have to - shoulder this burden - if you do not want to."
Aida gathered the courage to look at him. She could see the reflection of the fire in his eyes.

"Aida - marry me. And run away with me."

She looked down at her left hand, he was already sliding the ring onto her fourth finger. It was a twinkling emerald, surrounded by three concentric circles of diamonds.

"Cullen! It's beautiful, I - "
"No, listen to me. You're in danger - everything you worried about, in regards to Leliana, is true. I should have taken you more seriously, we should have never come back to Ferelden. She plots to put you in an internment center, and she may very well have the means to pull off her scheme, before she even becomes prime minister."

Aida felt his hand squeezing hers harder now. "Marry me, tonight, and run away with me - tonight."

"Cullen! I want to, but, my family - I just got back, and now..."

She lowered her head, feeling shy and silly. "Also you know. Maybe I wanted that big Chantry wedding. Hundreds of guests. Lots of photos, with you in a nice tux."

"Aida, everyone who matters is already here tonight, and look, I'm already in a tux. Baby, please. Let me protect you. Leliana is not the only one with a plan."

She looked at her ring. It made her heart surge with a joy that was spreading all over her body. When she looked back at Cullen, he was gazing at her with devotion.

"Aida - if...the other me, was even a little bit like me - my guess is he probably wanted to run away with you too, but you had to tell him no, didn't you?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck and offered her lips to him. "I did - and I hated saying no to him. So I say yes to you, Cullen - I accept your offer. But who can officiate the ceremony?"

On cue, the library doors swung open, revealing Varric, in a dapper green velvet suit.

"So Curly, did she say yes or what? I think I've forgotten a lot of the words but I am still licensed to do the ceremony. Shall I go rally the troops?"

* * * * *

Varric married them in front of the Satinalia tree, with her entire family watching and Barkley at Cullen's side, wearing a little bow tie. Sera cried more than expected but Dorian was an utter mess by the end of the simple ceremony. As he embraced her afterward, Dorian whispered into Aida's ear. "You bitch, I can't believe you got married before me."

The party roared back to life after that, and it was well past midnight before the last guest left the gates of Skyhold. Cullen and Aida retired to her room for their first night as husband and wife.

While Cullen got ready for bed, Aida dug through her belongings, looking for any kind of sexy lingerie to put on. She came out in a mint green, see-through nightie, and posed in the doorway for him, but her face fell when she saw him lying in bed already, an exhausted look on his face.

"Babe, I am - so tired. I know you probably - definitely? - wanted to consummate this marriage tonight, but - we need to be on the road early tomorrow morning, before your family or the press can find out."
She slipped into the sheets next to him. "It's fine, sweetie - there's a part of me that didn't want my honeymoon night to happen in the bed where I slept when I was a sullen teenager."

Cullen pulled her close, spooning her and wrapping her in his arms.

"Do you still insist they can't know where we're going?"
"Right now, I don't even want you to know where we're going. I - kinda want it to be a surprise."

Aida felt him kissing her neck and she leaned into his touch. "Tell me one thing, are you excited? I don't even think I can sleep tonight. I'm - just excited to be married to you. We almost lost each other, forever, and now -"

"Aida Lyanna Trevelyan Rutherford - I am going to make sure no one will ever separate us again."

* * * * *

The next morning Emilia waited as long as she could before knocking on Aida's door for breakfast. "Guys, I hope I'm not interrupting, but, it's almost noon, do you still want breakfast?"

There was no answer, nor any giggling or murmured discussion coming from behind the door. Emilia held her breath and opened her sister's bedroom door. She was shocked to find the place a little ransacked. She began walking around the room, taking in the details. Aida had packed up clothes and a few books and personal mementos, but not her fancier dresses or her more expensive pieces of jewelry. There was a letter on her pillow. Emilia ripped it open:

"My guess is, Emilia, you will find this note first as all my life, you have always been concerned with whether I've eaten breakfast or not.

Cullen and I are gone, and we cannot tell you where we went quite yet. Please know we are safe, Cullen has everything under control. I'm not coming back until Leliana's political career has permanently been destroyed, but I'm not sure what that will take. Perhaps, dear sister, you and father can counter-scheme against her on my behalf?

I will find a way to send word when the baby comes. For now, Emilia - the official story is this: You don't know where we went, and you don't know when we will be back.

But please know - we are happy and safe - and free.

With love, Aida Rutherford."

Emilia smiled at the flourish at the end of her new signature.

Chapter End Notes

Where did Aida and Cullen go? Place your bets as the adventure continues!

Thanks for reading as always, my lovelies. Happy holidays to all the Cullenheads out there and you can follow me at thetemplarandtherogue.tumblr.com
The In-Laws

The day after Satinalia, Aida watched Cullen coming out of a convenience store from the front seat of their RV. He wore an uncharacteristic baseball hat pulled low over a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses and a puffy Great Bears parka. It was "a disguise" of sorts and it only made her laugh. He scowled at her when she saw her behind the wheel of their temporary home on wheels, making a gesture to her that meant "You were supposed to stay in the back and out of sight." In retaliation, Aida honked the horn, startling him badly and making Barkley yip at her side. He burst into the RV, dropped the bag of her requested junk food goodies on the RV's small kitchen counter top and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her out of the driver's seat.

"You're in trouble now, missy."
"That's MRS. to you now. Hey, ow, that hurts!"
"You need discipline, Trevelyan, so much discipline..."

Cullen pushed her toward "the bedroom" of their modest RV, which was just a small bed at the end of a short hallway at the back of the vehicle. Cullen shed his silly sports-related parka but kept an iron grip on her arm before he roughly shoved her onto the mattress. They tussled together, Cullen pretending to be angry and Aida pretending she didn't like it when he was angry. Cullen positioned her across his knee, pulling her leggings down as she wriggled.

"Cullen!"
"Take your punishment, you deserve it."

He spanked her until she was squirming and Aida had forgotten about the salty and sweet snacks she had been craving. They were soon pawing at each other on the bed, Cullen's hungry hands pulling her t-shirt up and the cups of her bra down. She whined when he sucked one of her nipples into his mouth.

"Baby..."
"What," he answered, before switching to her other breast.

"I don't want to do it like this - "

Cullen propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at her, adorable confusion all over his face. "What? Are you talking about."

Aida twirled a lock of his hair around a finger and then let it go, knowing it would curl up with very little effort. "We didn't consummate our marriage last night. And I want it to be special - tonight. I
don't want to remember how you rutted me in the parking lot of a 7-11."

He clenched his jaw, grinding his erection against her thigh, just once. "But..."

"You're waiting until tonight."

He rolled off of her with a dissatisfied grunt. "Fine. But, you must admit you were told to stay out of sight and you disobeyed me and just yesterday you swore to honor and obey me."

Aida socked him on the arm which only made him roll back on top of her and kiss her deeply. He framed her face with his two, strong hands. "Maker's breath. I love you like crazy. I would tear anyone apart who would hurt you. Anyone."

She wrapped her arms around him and gave him a squeeze. "I'm sorry. I know you told me to stay in the back."

"You didn't have to apologize, Kitten. Let me bring you your snacks. You can stay back here and rest until we stop again."

"Are you going to tell me where we're going now? I can tell we're headed toward Redcliffe."

Cullen got up to retrieve the bag of treats for her, along with the carton of cold, chocolate milk she had been specifically craving.

"I will say this much for now: We will pull off the road in the Hinterlands for one night. Then we are stopping in South Reach - so you can meet my oldest sister."

Aida almost choked. "Cullen! Y-you...you... I wish you had- "

He rubbed her back. "Don't worry. She's going to love you. I was closest to her because we were the two in the middle."

It still made Aida nervous, meeting one of his family members. Her family adored him, would his feel the same way about her? In her moment of self-doubt, she wanted to know what he was thinking, so she sent a little of her Fade magic toward him, sitting on the bed next to her. Cullen put his arm around her, squeezing her around the waist and bringing them thigh to thigh. "I wish you wouldn't do that."

Aida froze. "Do what?"

"I can - feel you - in my head. Most of my Templar skills have weakened without the lyrium, but some of them have never left me, they must be in my blood now. I've felt it every time you've used it, since I found you on top of that mountain."

Aida put her drink down and turned toward him. "I'm sorry. I know it was wrong for me to do that - it's worse than reading your journal, or looking through your phone, I know. The first time it happened it scared me, it was just an accident."

"What is it you want to know? Just ask me."

Aida played with the new ring on her left hand. "You've been worried about something and you're burying it deep. What is it?"

He took a deep breath. "Aida, there are going to be times when I can't tell you something, because I'm trying to protect you. You must trust me." He turned to look at her. Aida reached up and rubbed the little line between his eyes that had appeared there once their conversation had grown serious.
She kissed him on the cheek. "I trust you."

"No more mind reading, please."
"I promise."

Cullen watched Aida eat a handful of spicy chips and wash them down with chocolate milk. "Hmm, my son likes a lot of strange flavor combinations."

"Your daughter wants to know, did they have the teriyaki beef jerky?"

She dug through the bag but didn't find any. Aida shot him her begging puppy dog eyes, learned straight from Barkley. Cullen shook his head, standing up to head to the front of the RV. "Fine. I'll stop the next convenience store. You're incorrigible."

She called to him as he started up the RV. "You love me and you know it!"

* * * * *

Cullen pulled off the highway deep in the Hinterlands. He passed the family campgrounds and all the side roads with too many tire tracks on them and drove them deep into the heart of the forest. Aida got dinner ready as her husband collected firewood. It was vastly satisfying to see him out in the wilderness. She had known Cullen the condo dweller, the man in a suit, who wore driving gloves behind the wheel of his vintage Corvette, and now she watched him start a roaring campfire without much fuss.

"Hot dogs for dinner. This is our life now. Aren't you glad you married me?" Aida passed him a hot dog on a long skewer. He took it from her, and also took hers out of her hand, holding them both over the fire.

"Once we get settled, things will be different. Besides - you, this fire, the stars, and these all-beef hot dogs are all I need in this world. Some mustard would be nice though."

Aida darted to her feet. "I'll get it for you, baby. Sit tight."

She headed for the RV to dig around in its small kitchen. She found the mustard but paused before returning to the fire. Her eyes landed on the simple bed at the back of the vehicle.

This won't do.

She stepped outside and left the jar on Cullen's knee.

"You stay here, finish dinner. I have some things to do in the RV, but then I will page you for turn down service."

Aida delighted in the way his face changed when she merely mentioned what was still to come tonight. "Th-thanks for the mustard."

She grinned to herself before shutting the RV door.

* * * * *

The fire was dying down and Cullen was getting antsy. What was she doing in there? He shifted in his chair. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't aroused already, it had been three entire days since they had been together. He rubbed a hand over his face, knowing how that sounded, like he was an
insatiable sex addict, but ever since she had returned all he wanted to do was be with her. His treasure, his anchor, his wife.

"Cullen, I'm ready -"

He heard her calling from inside the RV and stood up so fast he knocked over the chair behind him and nearly tripped over it. He forced himself to calm down before stepping inside. Barkley was napping in the passenger seat, Aida had put away all the supplies from dinner, and had hung up one of her beautiful silk scarves to serve as a gauzy curtain between the bedroom and the rest of the RV.

He approached it. Through the patterned fabric, he could see the outline of her body, sitting on the bed.

"Cullen, before you come in... I have a request. I hope you don't think it's..."

Her voice was low and intimate and sweet. He felt his cock twinge in his jeans. "What is it, Aida?"

"Just a little roleplaying. I know we have been together, many, many times, but tonight - I want you to pretend, that it's the first time we're going to be together. And that it's my first time."

Through the fine silk, he saw her shake out her mane of midnight black hair - and ghost her fingertips over her breasts. Cullen kicked off his boots, slipped out of his jacket and shirt and took his pants off so he was just in his boxers. He exhaled, jagged, trying to control himself as he slid the fabric aside. Aida was wearing a white silk nightgown, and a simple black velvet ribbon around her neck. She had managed to make the RV's little bedroom into a romantic nook by changing the sheets, fluffing up the pillows into a luxuriant pile, and filling the space with glowing candlelight.

Cullen licked his lips before speaking. "Hello." She blinked her big brown eyes at him as he took one step forward. "Sweetheart, are you ready for bed?" Aida nodded at him. She was very good at this innocent little angel routine as she moved over to accommodate him on the mattress.

"May I kiss you?" She nodded again, managing to even blush as he leaned forward to press his lips against hers. Cullen had to bite back a groan, she was wearing some kind of strawberry flavored lip gloss. He had to control himself though, so he lost himself in the simple sensation of just kissing her. He changed the angle of his head and gently parted her lips to brush the tip of his tongue against hers. He did it a few times, until she did it back. He paused for a moment, his hand on the back of her head. "Is that okay? Do you like that?" Aida's cheeks were flushed, and he could tell she was struggling to slow herself down too. "Yes, I like it. More please?"

Cullen gently guided her to lie down flat as he kissed her neck down to her collarbone and slipped the strap of her nightgown off her shoulder. He did the same thing on her other shoulder, as she twined her fingers in his hair. He propped up on an elbow and slid the top of her gown off, sweeping his eyes all over her breasts. They were fuller than usual, her nipples a little darker. Cullen was hit with a vision of her nursing their child and he was a little surprised to find that it gave him a frisson of sexual delight. Her body was going to change but apparently his lust for her would not -

"May I touch you?"
"Yes please."

He started with just fingertips, tracing circles around her nipples, watching her mouth part with a sigh. Aida kept her eyes locked to his as he began to palm her breasts. He knew what she wanted, so he reached out the tip of his tongue to touch one of her pert nipples. She gasped and grabbed a handful of his hair as he began to suck and lick and feast on her sensitive breasts. Soon she was writhing beneath him, a flush blooming on her cheeks. He pulled back from his work to look at her
face and he almost snorted - Aida was clearly frustrated and very aroused. *She should have thought about this more!* Playing "first time on my honeymoon night" was clearly not her preferred speed.

"You taste so good and your skin is so soft. May I touch you more?"
"Yes, damn it. I mean, yes, please. Go ahead."

She shimmied out of her nightgown and parted her thighs for him. He brushed a hand up her leg until it landed on her mound. Cullen kept kissing her but not doing much more with his hand. Aida bit at his bottom lip and whispered at him hoarsely, "Come on, touch me, you said you -"

He grinned, not even bothering to hide his mirth at this very quick reversal. "I don't want to move too fast, my lovely wife. This being your first time and all."

Aida looked like she was about to cry as he went back to alternating between kissing her and sucking on her nipples. He stretched this out as long as he could before letting one finger slip between her folds. She was incredibly wet already and she hissed as he let that finger explore her a little deeper. He steadied himself before asking, "May I - kiss you down there?" Aida couldn't even speak, she just nodded before he crawled down the bed to lie on his belly between her thighs. He parted her with two fingers and then just observed what he saw. Her pearl was swollen, begging to be licked and sucked. She was wet and growing wetter with every breath she took, emitting the smell of sex and longing and desire. Cullen licked his lips and then kissed her right on the clit.

"Ah, ffffuck!"
"Mmmhhmm. Did you like that?"

Aida swore again and then composed herself, falling back into her virgin act. "Oh yes, please, more more more -"

Cullen dipped his head with a smile and commenced sucking, licking, swirling and flicking his tongue against her hot center. So far Virgin Aida was acting just like Slutty Everyday Aida, pushing him onto her cunt with an aggressive hand as she grinded upwards against his face. It was enough to make him laugh, right against her clit.

"What is so fucking funny?"
Cullen looked up at her, over her mound. "I don't know, you're - you're not acting in character."
"Pfft. Even the most virginal of virgins would respond to your tongue like that. Come on, you wouldn't know how it feels."

He gave her a rakish grin. "That's true. Would my new bride like to learn how to please me?"

Aida rolled her eyes. Cullen gave her a stubborn look. "Play along. You asked for it. Had it been a standard Monday night rutting, you would have come three times by now."

Aida stared at the ceiling of the RV, swearing to herself. "Oh alright. Yes, baby, teach me how to make you feel good."

Cullen bit back another grin as he scrambled onto the bed next to her, discarding his boxers along the way. Aida crawled into position, between his knees now. With a sarcastic tinge in her voice, she purred at him, "OK, husband, how do I begin?"

"Put your mouth on me."
"Like this?" Aida put her lips against the head of his stiff cock like she was talking too closely into a microphone. It made him laugh, but it wasn't what he wanted.

"Lick me."
"Like this?" She gave him a tentative swipe of her tongue, as though she were tasting an ice cream cone whose flavor was unfamiliar to her.

"More, more of that."

"Like this..?" Aida's voice dropped as she stopped teasing him and her mouth enveloped his cock. It was now Cullen's turn to keep an insistent hand on the back of her head, feeling her head bobbing up and down. Once she drew him into her mouth deep, he pushed her down even more, wanting to feel himself all the way in her mouth. He hissed with intense satisfaction as she deep-throated him. He chuckled to himself. "You are no virgin, Trevelyan. I am beginning to think you are the opposite. Your virtue is - " He had to stop to emit a groan as she sucked one of his balls into her mouth, pumping his staff with her other hand. "Your virtue is nowhere to be found."

Aida looked up at him, playing the innocent again. "Not true, ser. I've never been with a man before."
"I'll have to be the judge of that. Lie down, wife."

They kept their eyes trained on each other as she obeyed him, lying back on the pillows and opening her knees wide for him. Cullen went back to kissing her gently as he rubbed the cock against her wetness. He sat back on his heels, staring at her pussy. "I'm going to put it in now," he whispered at her thickly, completely engrossed in the moment as though it was not just her first time, but his too. He pushed his manhood into her an inch, watching her face. Her breath was coming in little pants now.

"Is that alright? Am I hurting you?"
"No, baby, it's nice, I like it..."

Cullen was sweating down his back, just trying to keep it together. *It's amazing what a little roleplaying can do,* he mused to himself as a bead of perspiration rolled down his face to drop on one of her full breasts. He dipped his head to suck on that nipple as he slid into her a little deeper. Aida squirmed underneath him, trying to get more of him into her. "No, love, we must go slow." Besides, he wanted to go slow because it was torturing her a little.

"Maker, you are so beautiful - "
"Cullen, please - harder!"
"But you're so sweet, I just want to take my time..."

He rolled his hips into hers, leisurely, giving her deep, thorough thrusts. It made Aida put the her heels against the small of his back to try to encourage him to hump her harder but he was stronger than her and he resisted her cues.

"Cullen, don't make me - "
"Don't make you what?"
"Use my magic."

He gave it to her a little harder but still not as hard as he knew she'd like. "I'm not afraid of you. You'd never hurt me."

Aida closed her eyes, her cheeks flushed, her hair spilling over the pillows beneath her. She made such a pretty picture he made sure to remember it - even though what she did next practically guaranteed he'd never forget this moment. Aida focused her magical energy and *levitated the two of them off the mattress.*

"Maker's merkin, Aida, we're fl-"
Aida giggled and while they were weightless together, his strength became less of an issue. She could quickly flip him onto his back and now be astride him. She opened her eyes and they dropped to the mattress and Aida began to bounce on top of him.

"Baby, you've never done that before!"

Her eyes glowed Fade-green down at him, and Cullen felt his pulse quicken. He felt like a young Templar again, being told mages were dangerous and unpredictable, and a woman with mana in her veins could seduce and kill with all the tricks in her fingertips, but instead of being afraid, he felt free and liberated of those old opinions. Aida sensed the adrenaline rushing through his body and took advantage of it - casting another spell with just a blink of her eyes. Cullen felt a phantom hand caressing his balls, tongues licking at both his nipples at once. He heard her moans right in his ear but Aida was not leaning forward, she was still upright and riding him hard. Cullen reached out to cup her breasts, but also thought about pressing a thumb to her clit. To his surprise, Aida reacted as though he had had been able to do both things.

"I feel high, what's going on - "
"You are high - high on me."

They were fogging up the windows of the RV, heating up the entire bedroom. Aida was pure magic, how many times had they made love and yet she could make it new all over again -

"Babe, will you float for me again, just you this time - I want to make you come in zero gravity -" 
"OK, I think I like the sound of that..."

Cullen rolled her onto her back and then stood at the foot of the bed, waiting for her to center herself again. She closed her eyes, grew still and floated five inches off the mattress. Cullen grabbed her by the feet and drew her close to him, inserting himself into her good and deep as she hovered before him.

"Oh, fuck, Cullen, that's incredible!"

Cullen put a foot up on the bed to brace himself as he rutted straight and up into her. Aida arched her back until she was almost the shape of a bow and her hands were pressed to the mattress behind her. Maker's breath, this woman is flexible. Beautiful. Strong. And utterly fucking sexy. From this angle, Cullen had a good view of his cock plunging into her pussy. He knew what he wished he could do - rut her and lick her clit at the same time. Under the effects of her sex magick, thinking it was good as doing it, and Aida began to go wild. Cullen let his imagination run free, putting magic hands all over her body, holding on to her breasts, squeezing her ass, pulling her hair -

"That's it, Cullen! Please!"
"Tell me, tell me you're coming -"
"I'm, I'm - "

Cullen felt her clench down on him hard and then she exploded. Her orgasm manifested itself, filling the air around them with sparkles of light. Cullen gasped as he spurted into her, pulling out in time to spend himself all over her pussy. With a long sigh, Aida lowered herself onto the mattress. He watched in a helpless daze as she let her knees fall open and she rubbed his come all over her folds with four fingers.

"Mmm, that was nice."
"H-how did you do that? How did you know you could do that?"

She stretched her arms above her with a mighty yawn. "Can't explain it. My mana has done nothing
but surge and grow stronger since I got back from the Fade. But I didn't know I could do any of that until I started doing it."

Cullen laid down on the bed next to her and scooped her close with one arm. With his other hand he reached out to touch one of the little sparkles that she had conjured out of thin air. It popped and fizzled gently, like a bubble.

"Just when I thought I knew just about everything about you."

Aida yawned again. "Sweetie, I'm real tired. Like more tired than I've ever been in my life. I'm just going to - "

Her eyes fluttered shut and her face relaxed. He stared at her as she drifted off to sleep - and began snoring, in her usual, inelegant fashion. It made him laugh, but she didn't hear him. He wrapped the comforter around them both and held her tight until he joined her in slumber.

* * * *

Aida slept like she was under deep sedation until past noon the next day. She awoke to Barkley licking her face and Cullen standing over her, looking worried.

"Jeeze, Aida, you wouldn't wake up, I was starting to worry something was legitimately wrong."

"Oh, sorry. I guess, uhm, sex magic, is very exhausting. I feel great though! Like I could eat - a barn."
"Eat a barn? What does that even mean?"
"You know, I'd eat all the animals in it, and the hay and the, uh, farming equipment too I guess. I could eat a tractor right now."

Cullen brushed some of the hair off her face. "How about a pizza instead? I stopped to get gas but there's an Italian place across the street. I can see if they have meatballs and garlic bread too."

"Are you trying to fatten me up? How am I going to get into bow pose so you can fuck my brains out again - "

Cullen put his hands over Barkley's ears. "Hey, not in front of - the children. We should practice being less - "

"Incredibly horny for each other all the time? What a shame."

She smoldered at him and let the comforter slip from her breasts. Cullen stared at her as though she were a strange creature from outer space, albeit one he loved deeply.

"Sleeps for almost 12 hours and wakes up horny. Food first, Mrs. Rutherford, then I can see to your other needs."

* * * *

The little Italian trattoria was full of cheerful office workers on their lunch breaks. Cullen ordered "a barn's worth" of garlicky food and felt embarrassed to ask if they also had a carton of chocolate milk available. "My wife's pregnant, and ravenous."
The matron running the place gave him a friendly smack on the arm, "Hey congrats. I'll see if we have the chocolate milk and maybe a few spare biscotti to dunk in it, how's that?"

She left him standing in the waiting area of the restaurant. Cullen relaxed. Since he and Aida had decided to run away together, he had also ditched his phone and he truly felt like a man on vacation, not just from his life, but the demands of needing to be anywhere, or know what was going on in the real world. Aida was his world now. He was beyond smitten, beyond besotted, and the idea of being absolutely alone with her as they awaited the arrival of their first child filled his heart to the brim with unfettered joy.

Until he heard that name again.

*Leliana.*

Cullen took two steps to the left to look at the TV that was hanging in the corner of the restaurant's dining room. He had to stop himself from gasping audibly, even though everyone else in the room was fixated on the TV too and wouldn't have heard him.

This can't be happening.

The chyron at the bottom of the screen read: **HAVEN'S FORMER MAYOR FOUND MURDERED - MAIN SUSPECT AT LARGE**

Cullen sunk into a chair when footage of their run through Haven's airport began to play. He slowed his breathing and forced himself to listen to what the anchor was saying.

"The former mayor and current head of the controversial New Chantry Party was found stabbed to death in her Haven mansion. Fingerprintst found at the crime scene belong to one Aida Trevelyan, the youngest daughter of the construction oligarch Bann Edward Trevelyan. At a press conference this morning, her family vehemently rejected Miss Trevelyan's involvement in the crime, saying she and her new husband, Cullen Rutherford, a former Knight-Captain of the Templars, were nowhere in the area when the crime was committed."

The report cut to a chaotic press conference outside of the Haven police department. Emilia handled the shouted questions with confidence, although worry was written all over her face.

"I cannot say where my sister is, but I categorically reject the notion that she is a murderer. This is a frame-up, pure and simple, and my family and our lawyer are going to prove it. NO! I cannot tell you where my sister or her husband are, they went on their honeymoon with the specific idea that they would be unreachable - YES, I do think it's possible this is political payback - my family has its enemies, and Leliana has threatened more than one of us before. Someone is MAKING it look like Aida did this, and we are going to find them."

Cullen felt his heart beating. Nobody was looking at him in the restaurant and he was lucky the report didn't feature a close up picture of him, but he wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. He put his sunglasses on when he saw the restaurant's owner return with his pizza and bag of food.

"Thank you so much, here - " He gave her a hundred sovereign bill and turned to leave.
"Ser, your change!"
"Keep it. Have a great day."

He had to stop himself from sprinting into traffic, knowing the woman was probably watching him with some puzzlement, holding the extra money he had given her in her hand. He dashed into the RV, startling both Barkley and Aida who were lounging in the back. He dumped their food on the
passenger seat and fired up the RV.

"Cullen, what's wrong? Darling, you look sick!"
"Stay in the back. We need to drive. We need to get out of town. Something very bad has happened."

Aida stood up in the doorway of the bedroom. "You have to tell me, you're scaring me - is my family alright?"

Cullen pulled into the left lane, waiting for his turn to to get onto the highway. He looked over his shoulder at her.

"Leliana is dead. And the cops think you killed her."

Aida's mouth opened and closed. She sat down on the edge of the bed behind her, her breath stuttering in and out of her.

"You know I didn't...I couldn't have! I've been with you the entire time. We must go back, I have to clear my name, I - "

Aida jumped when Cullen slammed his hand on the dashboard, stopping her from continuing.
"Baby. They have your prints on the knife. There's bad magic afoot. You can't go back there, you're being framed. I'm the only person who can testify that you weren't anywhere near that woman, but I'm not a credible witness. Husbands lie for their wives all the time. They'll separate us, you'll have to have the baby in jail. I won't allow that. I won't. I can't."

Aida was almost hyperventilating as they stared at each other. She began to cry as the car behind them honked to get Cullen to make his left hand turn.

"Aida, please don't panic. I'll just feel better once we're out of the city. It's just three hours to my sister's house, we'll be there by nightfall."

Cullen heard Barkley's dog tags jingling and knew the dog was nuzzling closer to her to comfort her. As Cullen pulled out onto the highway, Aida asked in a tiny voice, "What does your sister do for a living again? She's not a criminal defense lawyer, is she?"

Cullen made eye contact with her in the rear view mirror. "She's a farmer."

* * * * *

Aida cleaned herself up, getting ready to meet Cullen's oldest sister Mia. Her hands hadn't stopped shaking since she had heard the news that her old nemesis was dead. She'd be lying if she said there wasn't a huge part of her that was relieved, but her being so abruptly and violently removed from her life wasn't causing less chaos - it was doing the very opposite. Aida pressed her hand to her lower belly. She would start showing soon, how many more weeks until she would feel the baby kick against her hand. Cullen was right, she didn't want to be in an orange prison jumpsuit when this life-changing event happened.

Now that they were far out in the country on a vacant, dusty road, Aida could ride in the passenger seat next to him. They were driving down a one lane path surrounded by fields of wheat and rye. Cullen looked out of his window, slowing down to look at the fields of grain.

"Everything looks great. Can't believe Mia is managing all of this on her own. After my parents died, she re-settled here."
"She's the one with kids though, right?"

Cullen inhaled, clearly nervous too. "Yeah, Ben is probably - 17 now? And Val is 10 or 11. I haven't been a very attentive uncle. Not even sure those ages are right."

The road came to a stop at a metal gate. Cullen killed the engine and then looked at Aida. "I'll see if it's open. If it isn't, I'm going to hop it and walk up to the house. Stay here please."

Cullen got out of the RV and approached the gate, and then turned around to look back at Aida. "It's locked, I'm going to - "

He froze, holding his hands up next to him and standing very still. Mia Rutherford stepped into the headlights shining from the RV, holding a shotgun. She had Cullen's unruly hair, braided up tight behind her, his same pensive brow, but a set of brilliant blue eyes instead of his gold and brown hair.

"Who's there? This is private property!"

Cullen put his hands on the back of his head and did not move, keeping eye contact with Aida. "Mia, I'd know that itchy trigger finger anywhere..."

"CULLEN?"
"Can I turn around now?"

The woman's frown lines loosened up as she lowered the barrel of the intimidating shotgun when Cullen faced her. Aida teared up watching them hug, even as Cullen muttered something about being still afraid that thing in her hands was going to go off. They examined each other a little more from arm's length before Cullen gestured to the RV, where Aida offered her a tentative but friendly wave. Mia did not light up at the sight of her brother's new bride, like she hoped she would - but instead, the pensive look returned to her face. Mia and Cullen lowered their voices and murmured to each for a while, before Cullen lead her over to the RV.

Mia stepped inside and Aida stood up, trying to brush herself off a little. Mia smiled at her and Aida relaxed a bit.

"The famous Miss Trevelyen, the boss's daughter. I'm the one who overnighted his yearbook to you, so you'd forgive him after one of your spats."

"I remember that. And I'm not Miss Trevelyen anymore."

This made Mia hug her hard and Cullen put his arms around the two of them.

"I'm only sorry we have to meet like this - and that I can't invite either of you up to the house. The police came by to interrogate me a few hours ago. I'm just glad the kids were at school."

Cullen's face fell, genuinely hurt. "But I wanted Aida to meet Ben and Valerie..."

"But Cullen, it's easier for them to know nothing and stay as far away from this as possible. I'm already worried about how their friends and teachers are going to treat them after this, they were already overwhelmed with all the attention once everyone realized their new uncle was dating 'the lady who came back from the dead'. Plus, they're children. We can't trust them to not blab it to one of their friends or put it on Snapchat and then the cops will be back on my front porch again."

Aida clutched her new sister-in-law's hand. "I need you to know, yes - I did come back from the
Fade, but I would have never murdered anyone, even someone who had threatened my life more than once. I am definitely being framed - and Cullen certainly had nothing to do with this."

She patted her hand in response. "I know, Cullen's never been involved with bad women. At least, not for too long."

Cullen gave her such a stern look that it made both women laugh. Aida returned to being nervous, wanting to impress her sister-in-law with anything at this point. "Can I offer you something to drink? Our kitchen is a little on the small side but, I can make tea perhaps? D-do you drink...tea?"

Mia just smiled at her. "You're sweet. You two seem happy, despite the consequences. What are you going to do about this mess? Will you...turn yourself in? Where will you go?"

Aida was as anxious as Mia was to hear the answer. Cullen still had not revealed their ultimate destination where he had intended to take them off the grid, where they could drop out of life for as long as they wanted.

"Aida is not going to turn herself in - I'm absolutely certain she will not receive a fair trial in Haven."

"So you're just going to go be fugitives together, forever then?"

Cullen ran a nervous hand through his hair. "My plan was to take Aida to a cabin in the the Breceilian Forest, south of Denerim. If you can be a homesteader, so can I. I was -"

Mia cut him off, putting a hand on his arm. "Oh, sweetie. You are many things, but it's been a long time since you've had to take care of yourself that way."

Aida spoke up for him in a small voice. "I saw him build a fire yesterday?"

"How many supplies can this thing hold? My guess is you would have been able to hole up together for two months at the most."

Cullen began arguing with her now. "We have cash, I would have been able to drive into the next town and -"

"Not anymore, not with an accessory to murder charge on your head."

Cullen tried to open his mouth but Mia was ready with more evidence that they were not ready. "Alright, so you run out of the food you bring with you. Then what? I know you can hunt and shoot but when's the last time you did so, and had to break down a carcass? Did you think about bringing animals with you? Something to provide more sustenance? You should think about raising chickens, a few goats for milk and cheese. Exactly WHERE in the forest were you going to go? What about water? What's the weather going to be like in a few months, what if you get snowed under?"

Aida sat down, hopeless. The romanticism of their plans now seemed childish. Cullen ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath.

"So what do you suggest? We're not going back to Haven."

She approached her brother, her hands on his shoulders.

"Go to the Korcari Wilds. Go to Branson and Rosalie. They know what they're doing. They've been living off the grid for decades, much longer than you. They'll help you."

Aida watched Cullen clench his jaw and he cracked the knuckles of his right hand as he squeezed his
"The past is the past. You need shelter. Branson will understand."

* * * * *

It took more days to head south and Cullen retreated deeper and deeper into his thoughts as they got closer to where his brother and youngest sister lived. Aida had never seen him like this - or any version of him she had encountered. She tried asking him what Mia had meant, why she brought up the past and why it seemed to fill Cullen with brooding anxiety, but he kept telling her two things and two things only: it was complicated, and he'd explain when they got there. Sometimes he would add, we don't have to stay either, I just need some time to think of something else, but it didn't make her feel better. She wanted to be alone with him, until the baby came - and then they'd figure out a way to get out of Ferelden completely. Maybe a new life was waiting for them somewhere else - but instead they were driving toward Cullen's past, and something uncomfortable.

Cullen pulled off the bumpy path that was drawing them deeper and deeper into the woods to consult a map he laid out on a huge tree stump. Aida came to his side, wrapped up in a warm sweater. The forest was misty and chilly, but Aida sensed in the summertime this place was going to be humid and hot.

"Branson doesn't have an address. He just - lives...down here. Mia had the coordinates though."

Cullen glanced at her and Aida could see a sparkle of guilt in his eyes. She grabbed the map from in front of him and clutched it to her body.

"You have to tell me why you haven't been yourself for the last two days, or I won't get back into that RV."

He looked away, toward the sound of an owl hooting in a nearby tree. "Aida..."

"You know I mean it. I can be more stubborn than you."

They stared at each other for a while until he took a deep breath and sat down on the stump.

"I never told you much about my family. We were busy. At the beginning of our relationship were the months I couldn't pin you down, I was lucky if you called me back - "

"Yes, you bring that up a lot, and I've apologized every time."

"Then we were busy being in love, but Leliana was separating us. And then, you were gone, and then you were back. All this time I've been just fixated on you, on us. My not talking about my family wasn't on purpose..."

She held his hand and sat down next to him. "But I want to know about them now. You have to tell me something before we get there. Mia was kind, and pragmatic. What are Branson and Rosalie like?"

He squeezed her hand back. "They are more like my parents than Mia and I are. The Rutherfords, for many generations, have been fiercely independent, anti-government, anti-war - anti-society, honestly. And Mia and Branson continued the tradition. They make their clothes, they forage and grow their own food. No TV, no cell phones, not even newspapers."

Aida opened her mouth to respond but he kept going as he cleared his mind. "Branson never approved of me leaving home to join the Templars. We were in Honnleath then, and our family was
not as 'crazy' as they seem to people now. I went to a regular high school, my parents had a car, we were relatively normal except for I never know what anyone was talking about because I grew up without a television. But after they died, Branson returned to the way our grandparents had lived. He filed for conscientious objector status and now pays no taxes, doesn't have an address and doesn't vote. Rosalie has always been a bit of a romantic, and she's like you - an artist - so she likes the solitude. She's a weaver - they sell her blankets and tapestries in Gwaren for cash when someone in the commune might need medicine, or if a piece of vital farm equipment has broken and needs a new part."

"The commune?"

"Yes, Branson has...followers. You'll see soon enough."

Aida poked her chin at him in faux-defiance. "I have followers too. You're talking to the Herald of Andraste."

"And a wanted criminal and known sex demon." He grinned at her for what felt like the first time in the last few days. Aida stood up to stand between his legs and kiss him, giving him the map back.

"We can leave if we don't feel like staying."

* * * * *

Cullen drove the RV as far as he could before the path disappeared entirely. He backed it into a protective thicket to keep it out of sight but they were so far out in the Korcari Wilds Aida was convinced commercial planes didn't even fly over this part of the country. Cullen put a leash on Barkley and gave Aida a brave look, holding his hand out.

"Well, come on, let's get this over with."

"Gee, you make it sound like it's going to be amazing."

They traipsed through the underbrush, Cullen leading the way with a flashlight as the forest grew more dense. Aida was about to suggest turning around when she finally smelled something smoky and sweet.

"That's a peat fire. Lots of it about around here and it's easier to collect than felling one of these ancient trees."

Cullen lead her under the limb of a tree almost four stories tall and then Aida gasped. In the middle of this damp wilderness, glowing with lantern light, was a beautiful home, not unlike Mia's farm house in South Reach - but this one was on stilts, about five feet off the ground.

"The nearby creek can flood in the spring and summer."

Aida's stomach growled as the smell of something roasting came wafting toward them. They had been eating so much take-out and junk food on the road that she longed for her own kitchen, or a home-cooked meal. Cullen gave her a little courtly bow and gestured toward the home's front steps.

"Shall we?"

She felt him gripping her hand harder as they made it to the front door. For a moment, Cullen looked panicked, like he was ready to turn and run but it was too late, the door swung open.
"It's dinner time, who's coming by for a social call at this hour?"

The woman in the doorway was Aida's age, red-headed and blue-eyed, pretty freckles scattered across her face. She paled when she saw who was on her porch - and then fainted dead away. Aida couldn't help but remember that this was her exact reaction when she first saw Cullen at the Throat of the World, when she thought she would never see him again.

A voice called from around the corner, and then a man who could almost be Cullen's twin - but taller and more rugged, came swinging around the corner, a soup spoon in hand. "Katya, what happened!"

Branson froze in his tracks as Aida knelt down to help her right away.

"Cullen. What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

"I'll tell you in a second, let's get her onto the sofa."

Aida heard more footsteps running across the second floor of the house that eventually grew closer until Cullen's little sister appeared at the top of the staircase. Aida had all of a few moments to take her in. She was the only Rutherford with chestnut brown hair, although it was as curly as everyone else's. "Cullen's here? Katya! What the - "

Branson scooped up Katya and put her on the sofa in the living room. Aida gently pushed her way through everyone to the woman's side to take her vitals.

"Pulse is fine, racing a bit. She's a little warm. Can someone get me a washcloth run under the tap?"

She stood up and turned around. All the Rutherfords were staring at her.

"I'm Aida. I'm a nurse...and I'm Cullen's wife. We got married a few days ago."

A voice spoke up from behind her. Katya was sitting up on the couch, making a quick recovery, a hand pressed to her forehead.

"And I'm Katya, Branson's wife. And there is no TAP WATER. We have to draw water from a well around here. And it smells like my dinner is burning. Excuse me."

She stood up and brushed past Aida back into the kitchen, gruff and aggressive.

* * * * *

Everyone picked over the burned roast in sullen silence. Aida wanted to tell Katya the soup was good but the woman would not so much as glance at her, even as she had passed her the basket of bread rolls. Rosalie was the only friendly one, but her chipper tone made every else's awkwardness stand out even further. Someone had to be the adult around here, and it was the person who knew everyone the least about what was going on.

"Since nobody will talk I guess I'll start. I'm being framed for murder, that's why we're here."

Cullen scooted his chair back in shock. "Aida, don't - "

"I didn't do it, I'm being framed! But if I go back and try to prove it, they might still lock me away and - there's a little Rutherford on the way."

Katya stood up now, pushing her chair away from her, cheeks flushed. "You can't stay here. Get out."
Both of you.

Branson put a hand to his forehead in a gesture of frustration Aida had seen Cullen make thousands of time. "Katya, please calm down, you know it's not exactly like taking an off-ramp and pulling into the driveway, we can't turn them out when they've come this far."

"There's only one reason they are here, and it's because Cullen clearly hasn't told her WHY it would be so fucking terrible for him to just show up for dinner. I will not spend a single night in my own home with these people under my roof - unless HE tells HER the truth."

That last word dangled in the air between all of them. Branson looked at his brother for a long time.

"She's right, Cullen. You shouldn't be standing here."

Rosalie handed Aida a cup of tea and stayed at her side. "H-how about this? I can take a lantern over to Owen's old cabin, see what kind of condition it's in. Aida and Cullen can stay there, and uhm, we can avoid any more ugliness for the rest of the night."

"OR, Cullen can talk to her, right now."

Cullen wouldn't look at Aida. He wouldn't look at anyone.

"Fine, I'll do it. But all of you don't need to be in the room, do you?"

Aida pushed the mug of tea away. "Just out with it. There's no transforming this moment into something magical and nice. It can only get worse." Rosalie retreated to the doorway, trying to leave, until Katya grabbed her hand. "No, I need you here. I need someone on my side."

Cullen took a sip of his tea and then started.

"Katya - is not just Branson's wife. She was my high school sweetheart. When I went off to join the Templars, I left her behind."

Aida looked at a scratch on the table in front of her. A part of her was already disassociating from this moment. Did Branson make this table with his own hands? It was so lovely and smooth, and the grain was beautiful. Katya continued Cullen's story when he seemed unable to finish.

"But when he left I was pregnant. And Branson married me, because he was in love with me too, because he's a good man, who doesn't run away from his family or the trouble he's caused."

Aida traced the scratch with the tip of her finger. "And then..."

"I miscarried. And that was it, no more babies for me. And this is why I don't want either of you anywhere near me. I won't have your joy poison my joy. Branson and I are happy here - "

Cullen tried to interject, "I'm glad, Katya, you both deserve to be happy, and you must know I'm sorry for everything that's happened."

Kaya laughed in a dark tone. "That's funny, since that's the first time I've ever heard those words come out of your mouth."

Aida stood up.

"I'm going back to the RV. You can sleep here tonight, Cullen, with your absolutely wonderful,
welcoming family. Really, thank you for dinner. It was terrible."

She stormed out. Cullen was quick to catch up to her on the porch.

"You can't walk back on your own."
"I have the flash light."
"You don't know the way -"
"I do, I'm not as helpless as you think I am."

She took the steps down to the forest floor fast, pulling her sweater collar high up against the cold. Cullen called after her. "Aida, I'm sorry, please. I knew it was going to be bad but - "

"We're leaving in the morning. They hate me."
"That's not true, I can tell Rosalie likes you!"

She didn't hear him, she was deep into the forest by then. Cullen whistled to Barkley who scooted through the open door behind him to stop at his side.

"Stay with our lady. You'll protect her, right?"

* * * * *

The next morning, Aida sobbed when the RV wouldn't start. Cullen tried over and over again and then got out to peer into the engine.

"I, um... I don't know what's wrong with it."

Aida felt a well of emotion bubbling up that she couldn't stop. The night she had spent alone with Barkley in the RV was the loneliest night of her life.

"I wish I had never come back."

The words made Cullen look up from the engine. The shock on his face was like he was staggering from a heavy blow. "You don't mean that."

"I do. I could have found some way to be happy there, on the other side of the Veil. Or maybe that Cullen was going to disappoint me too. There's no way of knowing, I guess. But I'm not mad that you left your high school girlfriend behind, you were a different man then, you wanted to be a Templar so you left home and didn't look back. I'm mad that you brought me here, knowing all of this was waiting."

"I know, I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid you wouldn't want to come down here, and I panicked. Baby, please, I'll figure out how to get it fixed, and we'll leave, right away. It was just, Mia seemed so certain we could make it work, and I -"

Aida turned and without another word began walking down the bumpy, long road that would eventually lead back to the highway.

"Where are you going?"
"Back to Haven. To face the music. I can do it. I can do it on my own."
"Aida stop, you can't walk all the way there -"

She shook off his arm and tried to keep walking but he pulled on her other arm. "You can't go, I won't let you, please -"
Aida did something she almost could not control - she held her palm out at him and used magic to push him away from her. He didn't trip and fall, but the force made him take three steps back. He looked devastated once he realized what she had done.

Cullen shook his head, heartbroken. "You've never done that to me before."

Tears began tumbling down her face and Aida turned and ran off the path into the forest, not caring where she was going. She ran fast and hard, like when Cullen of the Fade had chased her through downtown Haven. She dodged tree limbs and roots but still he pursued her, pulling herself deeper into the imposing thicket. Stubborn, stubborn man -

She felt his hand on her arm again, gripping her painfully. He yanked her toward him, making her face him. They caught their breath, just looking at each other. Cullen wiped the tears off her cheeks as they both trembled together in the moment.

"You can't do that..."
"Do what?"
"Run from me like that. I'll always chase you. And I'll always catch you - because you're mine."

He pressed his lips to hers hard, making her gasp. Cullen pushed her up against the tree behind her, not being gentle, his tongue twisting against hers as he tore her t-shirt away from her, from the neckline to its hem, revealing her breasts to him. She undid his belt and unzipped his pants, passion overtaking their pain and wiping it away like a tidal wave. Aida yanked his boxers down and pumped his cock as they pushed aside their clothes as much as they had to. He turned her around and with an insistent nudge made her take a wider stance, and he then wrapped her tightly in his arms as he penetrated her from behind with one smooth push.

She cried out as he impaled her deeply, and she held on to the tree in front of her just to keep her balance. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, baby," he murmured into her ear as rutted her from behind while rubbing her clit with his free hand. Aida couldn't respond, she just succumbed to him as she reached back and held on to the back of his neck. He squeezed her tighter and tighter, reclaiming her.

"I'm sorry too, I'm - " Aida yelped when he bit her shoulder and she yanked on his hair in response. Cullen was taking her like a wild animal, every time he plunged into her it felt possessive and raw and Aida was enjoying every second of it. She inhaled the deep, wet smell of the forest around her as squeezed one of her breasts, kneading it greedily. He growled right into her ear, "I want to seed you, over and over again, until you're full of it..."

Cullen pushed her forward until her forearms were braced against the tree so he could hold onto her hips with two hands. He braced himself with one foot against the tree's roots so he could thrust into her with all the power in his hips. Each push he gave her made Aida howl with hunger. The bark was scratching her arms but she couldn't feel it, she only felt his hard cock gliding deeper and deeper into her. Aida imagined what they must look like to someone stumbling upon this corner of the woods, her clothing in tatters and hair askew, Cullen raking his fingernails down her back before reaching around her to press four fingers to her cunt. He began to vibrate that hand against her, practically slapping her clit and dragging her toward her climax.

"That's it, baby, Maker, you're so wet, fuck - "
"I'm so close, so close, Cullen, I'm going to - "
"Yell, baby, scream, nobody can hear you but me..."

Aida threw her head back and roared, clenching around him. She heard Cullen grunt and swear behind her, his hips hammering into her faster and faster until he spurted and let go inside of her with one anguished moan.
He slipped out of her with a sad sound. "Andraste's infinite compassion. That was amazing."

Cullen turned her around and kissed her deeply. "Are you alright? Was I too rough?"

She ghosted her fingertips over those lips of his. "No, baby. It was good. Real good. I guess we needed that."

Aida gave him a bit of a doleful look as she tried to put on what was left of her clothes. "Now what?"

Cullen ran a hand through his hair, nervous. "It's up to you. We sort of don't have a lot of choice about where we're going right now, we're going to have to figure out how to get the RV fixed. And...I want you to be part of my family. Your family took me in. Clearly we're going to have to work through a lot of the past but, it's something I need to do. Will you help me?"

Cullen gave her a soft smile as he tied the front of her t-shirt back together for her, giving her some semblance of modesty. Aida smiled back at him and touched her shoulder where he had bit her. He had actually drawn a little blood, but the pain was already fading away.

"I will. We can stay. I - want to stay. It's beautiful here."

The sun broke through the gloomy, grey clouds, sending shards of light down on them. The moment was enchanting, and Aida felt like they were the couple who lived in that fortress in the mountains she had seen in her dreams in the Fade.

There were a thousand Aidas and Cullens in the universe, and they fought and forgave each other over and over again, because they were in love.
After her rocky introduction to the rest of the Rutherford family, Aida had planned to be stubborn and not leave the RV unless she needed to, but Cullen's baby sister had other plans for the two of them. It had been Aida's intention to stay far away from Katya, but it was hard to justify staying in the dead vehicle when just up the creek from Branson and Katya's homestead sat a newly abandoned cabin. The small community of eccentric loners and wanna-be Luddites often lost members, some people quickly found the romanticism of living in the woods outweighed the obvious inconveniences. Others simply woke up one morning and realized the apocalypse was not coming next Tuesday and decided to return to society.

The Rutherfords' closest neighbor had been a crotchety old man whose dementia had been worsening and Cullen's siblings had watched from behind their curtains as the man's family came to collect him. His home had been on the Rutherford property, and they had let the recluse stay for free, which was part of Branson's personal manifesto - nobody could own the land beneath one's feet, and you certainly didn't have to pay some bureaucrats in Denerim for the privilege of living deep in the heart of the wilderness and not taking more from mother nature than you needed.

Aida had smiled to herself when Rosalie had spoken of her eldest brother's philosophies. It was refreshing to hear such things. Her father owned hotels, apartment buildings, factories, and even a few small islands, and now she was going to live among people who shared everything they had and opened their hearts to strangers. *Well, everyone except my other sister-in-law.* Aida nudged aside the anxiety she felt thinking about Katya and Cullen's past and chose to focus on Rosalie, now paddling them in a canoe toward the cabin she was going to move into. Aida was nervous with excitement as they floated downstream. The house was connected to the land via a dirt pathway, but during the rainy season when the waters rise, she and Cullen would be living on their own little island. It was just what they had always wanted. Life here wasn't going to be idyllic, Aida had many skills to learn if she was even going to be able to feed the two of them, but out here she felt safe.

Rosalie and Cullen chatted while she tied up the canoe at the end of a small dock and lead them down the path to the cabin. Aida lingered a step or two behind them, taking in the nature around them, and also savoring the way Cullen looked, now reunited with his family. He was so different - lighter, more animated, he had even stopped fretting over his hair and was letting his curls fly free, matching his siblings'. Maybe this was how he was before the Templars and the trauma of Kirkwall, before drug addiction and torture. She looked forward to getting to know yet another version of him, the one that was about become a father too. She was buzzing with anticipation to live a simpler life with him. No phones, no TV, no cars, no jobs except to feed and shelter themselves - it meant they'd also have a lot of spare time. *Whatever could they get up to out here in the middle of the forest,* she mused while gazing at how his jeans were cupping his ass. That heavy haze of lust she always felt for him made her wish Rosalie would just get back in the canoe and paddle away instead of give them "the grand tour" of their two room cabin.
"Here we are, no keys. You don't need em. Not out here. It's got a latch on the inside, if you feel like my six foot three inch tall brother can't protect you." Cullen wrapped a brotherly arm around his little sister and gave her a peck on the forehead as she lead them inside. The cabin was one large room, with a ladder leading to a loft above the living space. Aida's eyes went straight for the bed - and then at the roof above it.

"There's - a hole in the roof."

Vines had run up the side of the house and had begun winding their way inside, making it feel like the forest was cupping the cabin in the palm of its hand. Rosalie peered at it in disbelief. "We always knew Howard was a bit of a character but living in here with a hole right over the bed is downright uncomfortable. I mean, it rains here quite a bit!"

The buoyant expression didn't slip from Cullen's face. "I like it."

Aida stared at him. "You like it?"

"It's - romantic."

Cullen was now giving her a heated look that let her know he too had been "wondering" how they'd spend all their new spare time together. The corner of Aida's mouth twitched a little but she turned her attention back to Rosalie who was nosing around the small, rustic kitchen.

"There's a wood stove upstairs near the bed, and you're going to need it if you're going to keep that hole in the roof for...artistic reasons. You've got another one down here, to cook on, but I warn you ahead of time, it's tricky to cook over a fire if you're not used to it. But if the two of you are ever starving for a proper meal, you should just come by the house, Branson and..." Rosalie drifted off, things were awkward and probably would stay so for quite some time. Cullen squeezed her shoulder. "Thank you Ro. We appreciate your help. If Aida and I need anything, we'll be sure to come and ask you."

Aida put a hand on the kitchen island. No electricity, no running water - there was an outhouse behind the cabin and they'd have to bathe in the creek nearby. But they had walls, and most of a roof. She smiled at the two of them.

"We'll take it. Shall we sign the paperwork?"

"No paperwork needed. Just give me a hug!"

Aida hugged the petite brunette and looked at her husband over Rosalie's shoulder. "Looks like we're sleeping here tonight. Let's move our things in!"

They spent the rest of that day trudging back and forth from the RV to the cabin, Branson helping Cullen with the mattress, the piece of furniture Aida considered to be the most important. That night, they ate a simple meal of canned soup while Barkley snored away in front of the stone fireplace.

"What will we do about food when our supplies run out? If we are reasonable, we can live for a few weeks on what we brought with us, but after that..."

Cullen held her hand on the table. "We're going to have to learn from my family. They do some trading in town, which is of course, off limits to you and me - but they mostly live off what is around all of us. I'm going to hunt with Branson in the mornings to put meat on the table, and you're going to forage. Mushrooms, fruit - I don't know, strange roots. Rosalie will teach you."
Aida gave him a sly smile. "Why don't I hunt, and you do the foraging."
"Aida, I'd just prefer my pregnant wife to not be around anyone wielding crossbows. If anyone's going to get accidentally shot through the shoulder, it's going to be me."

Aida made sure to eat every last bit of her soup, tilting the bowl against her lips. "I know it sounds silly of me, but I'm only now realizing we're not even going to have simple things, like flour or eggs or sugar."

"We will learn to live without it, and learn how to do some new things. In all your years of fancy schools, did you ever harvest your own honey?"
"Oh come on, you know I didn't."
"I wager you know what to do with the tiniest fork at a formal dinner setting though."

Aida felt a nostalgic pang over those rich meals around her father's dining table. "They're for oysters, come on, everyone knows that."

Cullen's knee rubbed against hers under the table. "I am sorry we can't - live in the way you are accustomed to."

"Cullen..."

He looked so earnestly sorry that it broke her heart. "It's MY fault we have to hide here, make no mistake. I should apologize. It's my fault for - definitely not murdering your old boss and the ex-mayor of Haven."

He shook his head at her before bursting out laughing. "Let's go upstairs, Trevelyan. I'm exhausted but I bet you're not."

A few heartbeats later, Aida was on her back on their new bed while Cullen unbuttoned the front of that simple cotton convent nightgown she still liked to wear. The cool night filtering in through the hole in the roof gave her goosebumps, especially as she felt his hot breath against her skin right before he sucked a nipple into his mouth. The way Cullen made love to her tonight felt significant, as though he was blessing this new bed and their new life. He moved with purpose, sweeping his hands up and down her body, sometimes using just his finger tips to touch her, sometimes kneading her flesh and making her moan. He consumed her like the dessert they didn't get to have, his face deep between her legs, his tongue lapping up her sweetness and flicking at her pearl with broad strokes as though her sex was covered in whipped cream. Aida could see the stars through the hole in the roof as the pleasure he gave her went humming through all her nerve endings. He kept his eyes glued to hers as he slid his thick manhood into her.

"Are you happy, Aida?"

She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him in even closer. He dropped down onto his elbows so she could kiss him, and answer him.

"I can live without a lot of things, but not without you."

* * * * *

Cullen rolled over in the middle of the night, his body instinctively seeking Aida's. The chill in the room was more pronounced now, and the moon was peeking through the hole above the bed. A pulse of adrenaline woke him up when he realized not only was she not next to him, but the bed was not warm where she should have been.
"Aida?"

Cullen pulled on his sweats and threw on a shirt before heading down the stairs. Barkley was missing too and now his heart was pounding in a panic. He ran out of the front door of the cabin without even thinking about a flashlight. Outside his eyes tried to adapt to the darkness of the forest but he could barely see past the edge of their plot of land, half surrounded by the creek. He called her name out into the silence but heard nothing but the wind in return. Cullen swore to himself and crossed the bridge in his bare feet. On the opposite bank, he calmed himself and methodically scanned around him.

There - a glimmer of something, a soft and mysterious green light.

Cullen called for her again and began weaving his way between the trees, his path illuminated by the pale moon above. As he drew closer to the light, it grew brighter, until he ducked around a tree and finally spotted the source: it was Aida, walking barefoot in the forest just like him, her back to him - and the light emanating from her left hand she kept raised in front of her as though it were a lantern. Barkley was walking a few paces in front of her, stopping to look at her with concern. When he caught the sent of his master in the wind, he ran toward him. Cullen was in shock, why was she glowing? HOW was she glowing?

"Aida, stop, where are you going?"

She kept walking, murmuring something to herself he could not hear. Cullen almost tripped catching up to her but he got in her way, trying to get her to stop. When he saw her face, he realized - she was sleepwalking. He wondered if that adage about not waking a sleepwalker was true or just an urban legend, but he couldn't allow himself to wonder for long, he had to get her to stop before they walked too far away from their settlement, especially since he had not thought about which direction he had went after leaving their cabin. He touched her bare arm and her skin felt cold.

"Aida, baby, let's go back to the cabin. Let's go back to sleep, OK?"

She opened her eyes and looked right at him, but she wasn't there. It was her voice, but it wasn't her.

"Is that you, darling? Is it really you?"

Aida reached for his face with her glowing hand and Cullen winced involuntarily, moving away. The look on her face was so hurt that Cullen forced himself to be brave, closing his eyes before grabbing her left hand and pressing it to his cheek. It did not burn him, like he expected. It simply felt like her hand.

"It's me..."

Aida smiled. "I've missed you. I miss you every day - when I think about what happened, the last time I saw you..."

She stepped closer to him, lifting his shirt to feel for a wound that was not there. That was exactly when Cullen realized that she did not think it was him, but rather that other-him she had known in the Fade, the one that had sacrificed himself so she could escape. But that Cullen wasn't real, didn't she remember?

"I have to tell you something, I have to - "

Her face was anguished now as she tried to put together her sentence. He had no choice but to keep pretending he was the Cullen of the Fade. "Is that why you're out here, Aida? Were you looking for me?"
A cold wind rustled her silky hair about her shoulders. "Yes, you were calling for me, I heard your voice and remembered that you don't know..."

"Know what, Aida?"

She smiled again, touching her belly that had barely begun to swell. "I'm carrying your child. It's yours. Do you remember, that last time we were together? We made love all night long..." Aida blushed and Cullen had to stop himself from turning to punch the tree behind him. He knew it made no sense, how jealous he felt in that moment. If he had to be honest, it made him want to walk all the back to his condo in Haven, to that bottle of expensive rye he had left behind on his bar cart.

"Are you upset? Do you not want -"

"No, I'm not upset, I've overjoyed at this news, but I think we should walk back to the cabin."

She blinked at him and the softness in her eyes disappeared to be replaced with blank hostility. She then surprised him by yanking her arm out of his gentle grip. Without another word, she turned and kept walking.

"You have to stop, I don't know where you're going -"

Aida turned around with a sharp look. "I'm looking for Cullen, and he's looking for me."

Cullen found himself struggling with his temper. "But I'm HIM, I'm the only him that matters now, you need to come back to bed before we both freeze to death."

"No. You're not him, you'll never be him."

It was an echo of the painful words he had said to her long ago in her father's library, when Aida was stricken with amnesia. They came back to haunt him and sizzled into his skin like a hot brand that had been resting in a fire for too long. Aida started walking again, into a deeper, darker part of the forest.

He made a decision. Cullen closed his eyes and concentrated, centering himself, drawing together all the lost atoms of his long-ago Templar training. He hoped what he was about to do would be like riding a bicycle, just something you never forget.

He enfolded her in his arms and smited her.

It was a very weak charge, without its usual lyrium bite, but it made Aida gasp and her eyes open wide. Her legs almost gave up from under her and she grasped his arms in a panic, now fully awake.

"Cullen! What are we doing outside? Why -"

He squeezed her back hard, feeling a little breathless after using his Templar skills after a decade out of the service. "I'm sorry, Aida, I'm so sorry. I smited you, you wouldn't wake up, you were..."

"You what?"

"I - drained your mana, as much as I could. You were sleep-walking, you were not yourself, almost like you were under a spell. You were talking about - the other-me."

Tears shimmering in her eyes. "Cullen, I'm scared."

He scooped Aida into his arms, kissing her on the forehead. He looked for Barkley, sitting nearby, waiting patiently. "Boy, do you know the way back? Back to the cabin?"
He turned, sniffing the wind, and began leading them back toward the cabin. Cullen looked at Aida's face as she curled up in his arms. She was worried, confused, disoriented. He prayed it was just stress, building up for the last few days since they left Skyhold.

"Do you forgive me?"
"Cullen - forgive you for what?"
"What I did to you - it was practically a slap in the face. I know mages and Templars..."

He carried her over the threshold of the cabin but she kept her hands around his waist, slipping them under his shirt, putting her now warm hands on his flesh and making him shudder.

"I forgive you, but you don't need forgiving, you were trying to help me."

Cullen cupped her face and realized his hands were shaking. "I haven't done that to someone in a long time, I feel a little woozy."

She pressed herself back into his arms. "Hopefully you won't have to do it again any time soon."

* * * * *

It was a futile wish. Aida slept-walk for the next three nights, and each time Cullen had to smite her to make her stop. But every night his ability to smite her grew weaker and weaker and on the third night he could barely do it. Aida woke from her stupor with a gasp to find Cullen passed out at her feet. These nighttime excursions put the two of them on edge, especially Cullen, who felt like Aida was keeping a secret from him, and that secret was simple - she was still in love with Cullen of the Fade and was literally trying to walk back to him.

Cullen was thinking about Aida as he sat next to his brother on top of one of his hunting platforms early one morning, just a few hours after he had stopped her from walking out into the wilderness. They were waiting for deer, sipping the strong, bitter tea that Katya grew and harvested herself. Cullen had flashbacks to when he and Branson would go hunting in a similar manner with their grandfather, who had taught the boys how to hunt with bows and arrows. Today, they had more modern crossbows with easy-loading bolts, and he had a lot more on his mind than he had as a ten year old. Branson glanced at him and spoke in a low tone, so as not to alert any possible prey in the area.

"What's going on, Cullen. You look tired. Most people look pretty refreshed after three days out here with no modern conveniences."
"Can't tell you, you'd never believe me."

A rustle in the underbrush nearby snapped them to attention, but no creature emerged. Cullen hoped the distraction was enough to end their conversation but Branson was persistent. "Go ahead, try me. Tell me this story I couldn't believe"

"You're going to think we came out here because we're...'touched in the head', like mother used to say."
"There are crazies living up stream from us. Doesn't bother me."
"Nothing bothers you though."

Cullen smiled when his older brother smiled. It was good to spend time with him, specifically because he didn't know about the constant hurricane of drama one petite, raven-haired mage had brought into his life. Part of him didn't want to share because it meant Branson might want to shoulder some of that burden, and he didn't deserve that. He deserved to be worry free, letting the gentle rhythms of nature be his only guide.
"If you don't tell me what's bothering you, I won't let you shoot the stag, we've been waiting for all morning."

Branson sat back against the tree behind them and began rolling himself a joint, pulling loose weed out of a leather pouch he had tied to his belt.

"Grow your own?"
"Hey, it's a plant like all the other plants around us. And it's the perfect thing to smoke while listening to a long, improbable story." Branson held up the joint with one hand, and measured its length between two fingers of the other. "Your tale must last at least this long."

Cullen took a deep breath and started at the very beginning. "It was a Saturday morning, more than a year ago. I went out onto the balcony of my condo and looked to my left, and standing on her balcony was this gorgeous woman, her hair in a braid over her shoulder, in front of her easel. She was painting a landscape..."

He paused and swallowed. In his imagination that moment was a crystal clear snapshot, frozen in time, Aida's paintbrush hovering right above her canvas. If he could go back to this moment, how many things would he do differently? If he could have saved her from that bomb blast, he also wouldn't be sitting here, enjoying this moment with his brother. Branson nudged him out of his thoughts. "Come on, space case, keep going. You stopped after one sentence."

Cullen went through every beat of the story, how he longed for her while she dodged him, how she let him into her life and how they fell in love despite Leliana's schemes to keep them apart. He told him about the horrors of that day of the bombings, and how Aida was so different afterward, but he couldn't move on, he kept on loving her nonetheless. He explained how the machine at Tevinter Tech worked, and how it had backfired and pulled Aida into the Fade, where she was stranded in a copy of their world. And this was when his story became harder to tell. Branson was no longer watching the forest in front of them, but staring at his younger brother.

"She met another me there. And Aida and that Cullen fell in love, just like we did. The child she is carrying - it's not really mine. Even though she believes a demon had created that world and that it never really existed - she somehow conceived while she was on the other side of the Veil."

Branson's joint was down to a stub, and his face told Cullen he was clearly flabbergasted.

"I'm sorry, what?"
"But let's not get stuck on that particular idea, I've got to finish my story. I had to climb the Throat of the World to find her, where she was about to join an order of Chantry sisters. Brought her home in time for Satinalia, then my old boss threatened us again - and you know the rest."

His brother flicked away the rest of the smoke, and slumped down a little. "So uhm...what's the recent trouble about then? Besides the being framed for murder part."

"She's been sleep-walking at night. It feels like some kind of hypnosis, as if someone is trying to pull her away from here. She always claims she hears my voice calling to her - the other me, the father of her child. It only started once we got out here. I can't explain it."

The two settled back into watching the forest but Cullen had one more thought to set free. "Maybe it doesn't mean anything. Maybe she just loves that other Cullen. Maybe she's just trying to walk all the way back to Tevinter Tech and turn on that machine again so she can return to him."

There was a long pause as Branson's head turned toward a sound that Cullen hadn't even caught. When he spoke again, it was in the low tone they had started using earlier. "I don't know about that. I
can tell that she is deeply in love with you. It takes a certain kind of woman to follow a man out here into the wilderness. And I would know."

Cullen wanted to respond, wanted to ask him about Katya and whether they were happy, but Branson stretched out a hand in a 'stay still' gesture and said one word. "Javelinas."

"What?"
"Wild boars. Small herd, less than a dozen of them, coming this way."

Before Cullen could ask any follow up questions the two men were aiming and shooting. Cullen took down only one, while Branson took down three. Branson chuckled and clapped a hand on Cullen's shoulder. "You'll get better. And I have an idea about this Aida situation. Let's get the boars back to the homestead and I'll tell you on the way."

* * * * *

When Cullen returned to their cabin, Aida was sitting on one of the few pieces of furniture the cabin came with, a rocking chair that faced a window overlooking the nearby creek. She was flipping through a dog-eared copy of What to Expect When You're Expecting that Cullen had found in a thrift store during their abbreviated road trip, but she was finding it hard to concentrate. She had spent the last few days trying to make the cabin feel more like their home, but they had only brought two suitcases of belongings with them and unpacking everything took only a few hours. After that, she had walked all over their half an island, venturing close to Branson and Katya's home but never drawing close enough to be spotted. She had spent a little time with Rosalie, who showed her a few basic survival skills, pointing out where the berry bushes were and how to spot the non-poisonous mushrooms that grew everywhere. Before fleeing Haven, Aida had been lucky to remember to grab a stack of sketchbooks and some pencils and had wiled away some time drawing as much as she wanted, but something was still bothering her. The sleepwalking. She couldn't stop, and she hated how much it concerned Cullen - who had swung open the front door of the cabin the moment she had thought about him.

She stood up abruptly when she saw the blood on his clothes.

"Maker, are you all right?"
"Oh, it's not my blood, Branson and I snagged a few boars today. I'm getting better with that crossbow."

Aida helped him take off his ruined flannel shirt and gave him a snide look. "Oh great hunter, how many did you kill?"

"Just one, but it's ours. And -" He turned away from her for a moment to hang up his jacket. "You're coming to dinner at my brother's house tonight, no excuses."

When he turned back to face her, Aida had her arms crossed. "I won't go."

"You have to. Branson has invited a guest to dinner and it's possible he can help you."

"Help me with what."

Cullen stepped out of his muddied and bloodied pants. "With your sleep-walking."

Aida threw up her hands and walked away from him, dropping his dirty shirt on a chair in the kitchen before sitting back down in the rocking chair. "I've said it before, it's nothing, I'm sure it will pass, it's just a phase - " Aida felt a prick of guilt as she lied to her husband.
"Then if it's nothing, come to dinner and meet this man who lives up river. Rosalie has done a little trading with him before and they rarely see him, but Rosalie hiked over there today and got him to agree to come for dinner and at least look at you."

Aida looked out her kitchen window. About two miles in that direction was Katya's own kitchen window too, facing right back at hers. When they had moved in a few days ago, Aida had been glad of the foliage that blocked the view.

"Let me guess, you're not going to let me stay home and eat crackers by myself in the dark."

"That would be a no. Besides, wouldn't you like a nice wild boar roast? A little sip of Katya's berry wine? Just a little one of course."

Aida sighed. Didn't he know by now she'd do anything he asked her to do - if he asked her at least twice? She turned around to face him and he was standing naked in their kitchen, stretching, the rest of his dirty clothes in a pile on the floor.

"Well?"

Aida stared. Why'd he have to be so Maker-damned beautiful?

"Well what?"
"Dinner tonight, yes?"
"Yes, darling."

She picked up his clothes in one armload and then looked around, unsure of what to do with them. Yet another thing to get used to - no washing machine. She put it all down in a corner near the door and shrugged her shoulders at him. "Guess I'll deal with that tomorrow, somehow."

He took a step closer to her and Aida felt her cheeks burning. "Come take a bath with me in the creek? Then we can get ready together."

She saw the expression on his face and knew once they were thigh deep in the water he'd be standing behind her, rubbing her ass with the bar of soap, reaching between her legs to wipe it against her clit. His free hand would knead one breast, and then the other, as he warmed up with a few thrusts of his cock between her soapy ass cheeks. He'd press two fingers to either side of her pearl and massage it with circular movements, and she'd get to moan as loud as she wanted, for there were no more thin walls to worry about. She knew he wanted to rut into her from behind, making her reach forward and hold on to a boulder at the edge of the creek as he bent her even more forward so his cock could stimulate that magic spot deep inside her. He was going to say perverted things to her, call her terrible names, claim he owned her from top to bottom, that her tits and her ass and her cunt were his and his alone, until she'd shudder in his arms and -

"Hey space case - do you want to go or not?"

Cullen beamed down at her with one of his crooked smiles.

"Yes! Of course, where was my mind..."

* * * * *

Aida and Cullen walked hand in hand down the little path that lead back toward Branson's home, Barkley trailing behind them. The canoe and the creek were always faster but Aida had wanted to walk this time, delaying the inevitable tension that awaited them at her brother in law's house. Aida
had spent some time after their bath collecting wildflowers to bring to dinner. She didn't want to be empty-handed on her difficult sister-in-law's doorstep.

They arrived at Branson and Katya's home to find the place aglow, candles burning bright in the living room. Rosalie let them in with little formalities.

"Get in here, Katya's in an uproar getting dinner ready. Come help, Aida, she'll appreciate it."

Aida found herself pulled into Katya's kitchen before she could object. The brassy red-head was bustling around, her cheeks flushed and sweat upon her brow. "Aida's going to help, Katya. Give her something to do."

Katya stopped and rubbed a bead of sweat off her forehead with the back of a hand. She looked at Aida standing there helplessly, the flowers in her hand. "Those are nice, put them in a jar and get to work. He'll be here any moment, Maker knows that man is always on time."

Her flowers were taken away and an old potato masher put in her hand and Rosalie steered her over to a large stock pot where a hefty mountain of little golden potatoes was waiting for her. "No lumps or Katya will scold you," Ro murmured in her ear before she joined Katya at the kitchen counter to chop mushrooms. The three women worked in amiable silence and Aida was glad Katya seemed distracted enough tonight to forget to hate her. She relaxed enough to venture a question.

"Who is our dinner guest?"

She watched her sisters pause and give each other a look she could not read, but both of them blushed. "A neighbor. We don't see him too often." Ro darted a look at her over her shoulder. "He seems to be making an exception to meet you."

Aida was quickly sweating as much as the other two women as the wild boar baking in Katya's wood-fired oven crackled away. She leaned into the masher, trying to win some points by getting the potatoes right. "Cullen told me he might be able to help me with my condition. He is some kind of doctor?"

Katya left Ro with the mushrooms and crossed the kitchen to peer into Aida's pot. She dropped a stick of pale goat's milk butter on top of the potatoes and chased it with a generous dose of flaky salt. "We don't really know what he is. Just try not to stare at him when he gets here. Mash that up harder, come on, put your arm into it." Katya gave her a small pat on the arm before checking on her roast.

"Everything smells wonderful, ladies. He must be quite the - whatever he is - to deserve such a dinner and so much attention."

Nobody responded, everyone returning to their kitchen tasks. "I've been noticing those little looks you've been giving each other. Can I take a guess, is our neighbor is - cute?"

Ro and Katya looked at each other again, Katya blushing even harder. Ro had to be the one to answer. "Cute is not the right word."

* * * * *

Geralt was taller than Cullen, and even taller than Branson. He stepped into the foyer, ducking his head of long, white hair beneath the lintel to do so. Aida felt a sizzle in the air she had only experienced a few times in her life, in the presence of powerful mages like Vivienne - and with Calpernia and Corypheus, in Thedas-2 where she had once had allied with them for her own purposes. But Geralt was different - whatever was running through his veins was older, and
completely unknown to her. What was certain was he was a man of few words. He tersely asked Branson about how hunting was going in this corner of the forest, complimented the fine meal placed before him, and offered everyone some old brandy from a bottle he had brought with him, but other than that, he had little to say. Throughout dinner Aida often found his strange, cat-like eyes watching her, and she could tell his attention was vexing her always-jealous sister-in-law who clearly found Geralt attractive even though she was a happily married woman. Aida found herself thinking, *stop staring at me, you're going to get me in trouble.*

Aida almost choked on her small taste of brandy when he answered her, inside her head, his as voice gravelly and low as it was when he spoke out loud. *Sorry. Can't help it. You remind me of someone I used to know. She was raven-haired just like you, just about your height, and a powerful mage too.*

Cullen was looking at her curiously now and Aida gave him a reassuring smile to put him at ease. She pretended to be listening to Rosalie talking about the things she had seen the last time she had made the trek into town so she could keep talking to Geralt using her Fade magic.

*What *are* you? Where I am from, they called me a Witcher. I am not a mage, but I know how to wield some magic.*

*Where are you from? Not here. Far away. A different sphere, if you can believe such a thing.*

*I can indeed. I - have been to other spheres.*

Katya was back to fussing over him, giving him a choice piece of meat from the roasted boar. *Can you help me with the sleep walking? What do you think it is?*

*Can't tell yet, not just from sitting here across from you. Nothing seems to be particularly wrong with you, I do not sense the presence of a curse or that you are under any undue strain. Was thinking I might have to follow you one night, see where you're going. That is, if that husband of yours wouldn't mind. He seems like the jealous type.*

Katya and Cullen were staring at the two, staring at each other. Aida flashed everyone one of her winning smiles. "What a wonderful dinner. I don't think I shall eat like that for quite some time. Branson and Katya, thank you for your hospitality."

"And may I be allowed to echo that lovely sentiment," Geralt added, with an almost feline indifference, never taking his eyes off of Aida.

Katya scowled at Aida in distrust. Whatever light camaraderie they had felt preparing dinner dissolved in a flash, with Geralt's almost imperceptible smile.

* * * * *

Geralt could not come to Aida and Cullen's cabin that night after dinner, he had something to prepare that he did not elaborate on, so the two returned to their island alone with Barkley in tow. Cullen was worried about the entire project, especially since the witcher had suggested he stay with his brother and sister-in-law on the night he intended to follow Aida on her midnight ramble.

"But baby, it makes sense. Clearly sleep-me doesn't believe you're her-Cullen, when she sees you, you said she gets more upset."

"Sleep-you, real-me, awake-you, fake-me. This is getting very confusing."
Cullen threw another log into the wood stove near their bed, getting their loft ready for bed that night. He could hear Barkley gnawing away on his boar rib downstairs, near his own fire. Aida sat up in bed, pulling back the comforter for him. Once he slid into bed next to her, she wiggled into his arms, resting her chin on his chest.

"Cullen. Look at me. I love you. When I loved the other Cullen, I was loving you. The child inside of me is yours. I need you to know something, I am not trying to walk back to him, no matter what I say when I'm sleep-walking."

Cullen brushed a thumb over her bottom lip. "Have you been reading my thoughts again, Aida Lyanna Rutherford?"

"No, I can just see it in your face. You're hurt, and I'm sorry. I apologize for everything I might do or say when I'm in my state."

She kissed him, soft and gentle and then pulled back when she remembered something. "Last night it was hard for you to smite me, so what are we going to do tonight?"

Cullen blushed in a very delicious way. "Well, I had an idea, but you might just think I'm a - that I - "

He reached under the pillow next to her and brought out one of her scarves, and two of his simple leather belts. "You can say no, Aida, but...uh, Branson and Geralt also thought it was a good idea."

"What's all this for?"

Cullen looked both nervous and excited at the same time. "I ah, we... I was thinking I'd tie you up tonight. We lucked out that Howard left his sturdy old bed frame behind."

"You...want to tie me up tonight, and you spoke to your brother and a strange man you just met about this?"

Cullen blushed and stammered, and Aida enjoyed it, because he was acting just like he used to before their romance had started, back in Haven when she would startle him in the lobby near their mailboxes. "I didn't - discuss it with them in great detail! We had just been standing on the porch after dessert, and I said I wasn't sure how to stop you from sleep-walking tonight, and it just slipped out of my mouth, maybe I should just tie her up, and they uh, they - "

Aida was enjoying watching Cullen squirm. "They what?"

"They laughed and said it sounded like a good plan to them." Cullen held one of the belts between his hands and tested it with a snap, giving her a smoldering look.

She rubbed her leg against his. "What if I put up a fight?"
"I can pin you down and you know it. You - like it, if I remember correctly."

He kissed her on the neck, his stubble tickling her and giving her gooseflesh. "And what was that scarf for?"
"I figured...maybe you'd be calmer if I blindfolded you too."

At this Aida fell back against the pillow, guffawing. "This is the worst ploy ever to get me tied up and blindfolded. Why not just ask me?"
"Because it's not just about that, I'm worried about your safety, can't you see?"

Aida yawned and edged closer to him. "I know. I love you. It's just - you also have set me up to be taken advantage of, if the idea should strike you."
Cullen kissed her, soft and sweet. "How does a man 'take advantage' of a woman who is constantly begging for it?" They laughed together until they were kissing again.

"I don't beg. But... If you weren't too tired, we could - practice, if you wish?" The way his face changed from playful to full of purpose was always too good. She feigned being asleep, and then pretended to get out of bed, swinging her feet to the floor. "Mmm, I have some place to be tonight, I should go there, right now."

She felt an arm wrap around her waist, pulling her back into bed before she could even fight. Aida found herself on her back, with one of his heavy thighs thrown over hers to pin her down, and one of his hands encircling her wrists easily in his strong grip.

"But I need to go," she whined as he nipped at one of her bare shoulders. For such a strong man, he was fast. Aida found one of her arms tied to the headboard and as he devoured her mouth, her other arm joined it.

"Let me go, Ser. I do not belong to you."

His hands and his lips did not agree with her. He unbuttoned the front of her nightgown and sucked on the nipple closest to him with noisy gusto as his fingers toyed with the other, twisting and working it until she was squirming and panting. Aida felt him yanking her knee toward him, opening her thighs so her cunt was bared to him.

"You little mage troublemaker, you need to be bound and punished, did you know that?" She couldn't answer, his tongue was in her mouth and his fingers toying with her clit. "Do you admit you need to be punished? Say it. Say it for me."

She shook her head at him in defiance. "I will not. Untie me, now."

Aida felt his hard cock rubbing against her thigh, he was so stiff. A sweet man by day, a dominating sexual presence at night. It made her incredibly devoted to him, to know he was both her gentle soulmate - and the only man who could master her. She wanted to look into those amber eyes of his but he was slipping one of her scarves over her eyes, blocking out the view. All she could focus on was his voice, deep and low in her ear.

"So you do not succumb to me? I will make you pay."

She felt him shifting around on the bed but then all was silent - until she cried out, as Cullen sucked her clit between his soft lips and Aida pulled on the restraints so hard she wondered if she had bruised herself.

"Fuck, don't stop, please - "
"But you're being punished, Mrs. Rutherford, which means..."

Aida whimpered when his tongue stopped drawing lazy figure eights up and around and against her pearl. Aida humped the air, feeling that she had already soaked the sheets beneath her with her aroused juiciness.

"Cullen, please, I'm not playing anymore, this isn't nice."

She listened carefully, realizing that he was kneeling on the mattress next to her. "Cullen, what - "

Aida felt his cockhead brushing against her lips. "Open. Open your mouth. If you bite me, I'll slap you."
He moaned as she allowed him to dip his cock deep within her mouth. "That's it, good girl, trying to make it up to me for always being so headstrong. Take it all, all of it, that's it..."

Cullen stopped edging into her when she gagged, two tears rolling down her face. She felt him kissing them off her cheeks. "So sweet, so accommodating. I can't get enough..."

Aida let him fuck her mouth even though her pleasure was being unmet. Instead she breathed in the primal scent of him, savoring the taste of his flesh. She let her saliva run free, drooling all over his staff and his balls, down the side of her face. She felt him holding on to the back of her head, as he got harder and harder on her tongue - what oblivion it was, pleasing him. She forgot to worry about her sleep walking, about her family who were surely worrying about her. The altar of their lovemaking was heaven on earth, and she would give herself to him over and over again. She opened her mouth wide so he could maneuver his balls closer and she could gently draw one of them into her mouth, and then the other.

"Maker, Aida, you have no idea what you look like right now, all tied up, I can do whatever I want - "

With a gasp Cullen pushed himself back into her mouth and spent himself there. His luscious, satiated moan vibrated through every fiber of her being.

"Baby?"

She felt him settling onto the bed next to her. "Yes?"

"What about - me?"

Cullen yawned and she knew he was stretching, all the way down to his toes. "What about you?"

"Cullen, that's not funny. Please..."
"Please what?"
"I need your mouth."
"To do what? Do this?"

She felt his breath skating across one of her nipples but he stopped short of sucking or licking and just breathed on her. She whined, arching her back to try to get closer to him. "Stop it."

"Are you sure 'stop it' is what you want to say? Because I've had a very long day, I could just close my eyes and - " Cullen laid his head down on her chest and imitated the sound of her snoring. She nudged him with her hips because that was the only thing she could do at the moment. "Wake up and eat my pussy, you cruel asshole."

She felt him get up and move around on the bed. "That's all you ever need to do, Aida. Just ask. You know I would do anything for you."

Finally, he brought blessed relief on the tip of his tongue. This is where he became the artist and she his blank canvas. He knew how to move, every swipe against her swollen, begging pearl made her feel more complete as he painted his little brushstrokes all over her most sensitive, soft flesh. And then when he added in his fingers, he became a sculptor, her pleasure becoming something tangible he could mold and hold in his hands. He cupped the entirety of her, his ring finger working its way deeper into her ass, two fingers in her pussy. She wanted to touch him back, grab a handful of curls so she could press his face deeper into her but all she could do is lift her hips higher, offering more of her to him. She was so wet, and she felt his fingers slide into her even farther, his tongue moving faster.
Aida pulled hard on her restraints and bucked against his face as her orgasm dropped on her, an orchestra sounding its final, grand note.

She lay there quivering, as he rested his head against one of her thighs for a moment. They listened to the silence around them together, the wind through the trees outside, the crackle of the fire. Somewhere not too far from their front door, an owl hooted, calling to its mate. Cullen sighed and then untied her wrists and slipped the scarf from her eyes. He drew her closer and pressed his forehead to hers.

"How can it be so good, every time, Cullen?"
"I don't know. I just thank the Maker every day, for everything about you. The mind-blowing sex, your strength and your kindness -"

He kissed her deeply and then she watched him looping the scarf into a set of improvised handcuffs, tying her right wrist to his left. "There. Now you can't just walk off without me not knowing. I won't let you get away from me."

* * * * *

After midnight, Aida woke up and tried to leave but this time she roused Cullen in the process. He had restrain her again but there was nothing fun or sexy about it the second time. Aida had struggled with him once she realized she could not just walk out of the cabin and he had to forcibly hold her down and tie her to the bed. It broke his heart to do these things to her without her waking consent, when she kicked and swore at him it gave him flashbacks to his time as a Templar, chasing down apostates who were accused of misusing magic for criminal ends or political purposes. This time his captive mage was his one true love, carrying his child - sobbing and begging to be set free, so much so that Cullen had to sleep downstairs on the rug next to the fireplace to get any rest.

The next day he had no qualms about staying at Katya and Branson's so Geralt could track her movements without distractions. He stood on his brother's porch after dinner as the sun set, looking toward his cabin. He had been there earlier when Geralt had arrived, a sleeping bag under one arm and carrying a strange wooden case. Geralt opened up the case's many drawers, revealing row after row of strange potions and herbs, foraged from the forest around them.

"What are these for?"
"They all do something different, depending on what I'm dealing with."

Aida picked up one of the small potions and shook it. It glowed neon blue before settling back into being nearly black. "This is not even magic from this realm is it?"

"It is spellcraft and alchemy, from another time and place yes. But much of it can be replicated here, with what can be found all around us."
"Fascinating. Have you ever subjected them to modern scientific study? What if you have the cure for cancer among your vials and bottles?"

Aida had hung on his every word as he answered, giving her some vague reasons as to why magic and science can never intermingle, although Cullen had the feeling his real answer was something more like I just don't want to have to deal with the world more than I have to. He watched them poking through his strange herbs and dried flowers until he found himself yawning uncontrollably. He realized he didn't want to leave Aida with him, but he knew he had to. She walked him out to the foot bridge near their cabin that connected them to the main land.

"I'll be fine. Geralt will take care of me."
"I know, my siblings all trust him and say he's a good man. It's just - we've only spent one night apart from each other since you returned. I swore to myself when you were taken from me that when I got you back, I would be by your side - well, forever."

He enfolded her in his arms, delaying his exit. He heard her answering from inside his embrace, her voice muffled because he was squeezing her so tight. "Baby, it's just one night - hopefully no more than that. If we need you, we'll - shout?"

Cullen kissed her hard now, doing everything a little emphatically, just so she'd remember him after he left. "No, send Barkley. He can come get me."

The two looked deeply into each other's eyes. Aida started her familiar refrain: "I love you more..."

And Cullen finished it, "- than life itself."

* * * * *

Sometime after midnight, Cullen awoke and found himself in Branson and Katya's guest room. He had opened his eyes at the usual time Aida usually started her sleep-walking. He tossed and turned, trying not to fret about what Aida and Geralt were up to. An impossible task, what if she was in trouble? What if this witcher could not protect her? He did not mention any expertise with demons or blood magic. Aida had been through the Veil and returned an even more powerful mage than she had been before - what if she hadn't vanquished that demon who had held her captive, what if it was coming for her again?

Cullen got out of bed and got dressed in the dark. He took a flashlight with him, and was about to step out into the night unarmed when he had a second thought. He returned inside and looked for one of Branson's crossbows. With shaking hands he loaded the weapon with a handful of bolts, and then slung it over his shoulder. Hanging on the hook near the front door was Branson's leather satchel that he always took with him when they went hunting. He knew it had a few basic survival items in it - matches, a knife, a few rolls of cotton bandages, a few twists of venison jerky. He grabbed the bag too, having no idea what condition Aida could be in once he caught up to her.

Cullen headed for the cabin but then swung south in the same direction she had headed the previous three nights. He picked his way through the forest, his mind racing with terrible possibilities. He walked farther into the forest than they walked before, passing the point where he'd usually wake her and drag her back to the cabin. He walked for nearly an hour and then began to panic. Maybe tonight she had walked north and not south. Maybe she hadn't slept walk at all. Maybe they had never left the cozy cabin. Aida could be so alluring and she always seemed unaware of her charms. Cullen walked faster.

The air in the forest around him changed, as did the vegetation. The ground grew soggier and there was the smell of the sea in the air. He thought of the last time he had last looked at the map when he and Aida were on their way to Branson's settlement. It made sense, the coastline wasn't too far from their home and he had been walking for at least an hour. He came to the edge of the forest and spotted a green glowing dot off in the distance - Aida. He began to jog, and then his instincts kicked in. He ran, trying to close the distance between them.

Everything unfolded as though it were a dream. He ran toward the light and as it grew closer he realized Geralt was running after her too. Then came the realization - they were on a piece of land overlooking the rocky coast below. In a few hundred feet, Aida was going to walk right off the precipice.
Whatever was making her do this - it wanted to kill her.

"Geralt, what do we do?" Cullen shouted against the sound of the crashing waves below.

"I just need to catch up to her..."

The witcher picked up speed, sprinting much faster than Cullen could. The ground grew wetter and wetter under their feet and then the heavens opened up above them as it began to rain hard. Cullen watched as Geralt slid and skidded on the grass. In a graceful motion, he dropped to one knee and a circle of pulsing purple glyphs appeared around him and Aida. She came to a stop and turned around to face him with glowing, green eyes. He had seen that shade of green before, since her return it was a signal of her unfathomable powers.

"Geralt, please don't hurt her!"

Geralt took a step back and so did Cullen, on the other side of the circle. What happened next was something Cullen would never forget.

Aida raised her right arm, and a glowing golden sword appeared in her hand. The voice that came out of her mouth was not hers. It was distorted and had an eerie echo to it, as though the person who was speaking through her was not only far away, but in a large, cavernous space.

"Do not cross me, witcher. I must die tonight."

Chapter End Notes

CLIFFHANGER!!!!!!!
The Inquisitor

Chapter Notes

All story, no smut (for now). And sorry for the delay, I need to get this train back on the tracks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cullen tried to keep an eye on Aida and Geralt as the storm unleashed itself on the rocky cliff, but right through the thunder he heard the sound of two swords clashing together. The witcher had a sword? Cullen had to squint into the rain that now pelted all three of them. There were three hard clangs, the impacts causing sparks even in the inclement weather, and then Geralt parried against her, making her take two steps back.

"All right, I think that's enough for now, Aida," Geralt said in a weary voice. He parried and danced with her a little more until he had a chance to make some odd symbols in the air before him with his free hand. Aida dropped her arm, the magic sword disappearing with a hissing sound. She calmed down, although her eyes kept glowing green. She wobbled on her feet, as though she was going to topple over.

"Cullen, smite her now."
"I can't, I - don't have it in me anymore. I need - "

The witcher kept one eye on the mage before him but fiddled with something at his belt. He tossed it toward Cullen who caught it with two hands. The potion bottle was filled with something - and it was lyrium blue.

"Geralt, it's a drug, I was an addict, I - "
"It's not lyrium, it's my formulation. And it's what I was working on last night. It's herbal - and should be non-addictive."

"Should be?"

"Don't exactly have a testing facility out here in the middle of nowhere. You have two choices, drink it or not. I don't want to fight her again and risk injuring your child. And you certainly don't want her to walk off that cliff."

Cullen uncorked the round bottle and took a sniff. It smelled like eucalyptus and sage and something earthy and strange and nothing like the drug he used to long for.

"All of it?"
"All of it."

Cullen let the foreign liquid slide down his throat. If it had had a little vodka in it, back in Haven he would have paid 15 sovereigns for it at an upscale bar. While he had a fleeting moment to think about how nice and relatively undramatic it would be to sit next to Aida in a sophisticated five-star restaurant as she ordered a drink for him, whatever was in that bottle kicked in. He felt his old Templar skills surging back through his veins, although at half capacity, not as strong as they used to
when he was on the real stuff.

He stepped into the ring of glyphs, put an arm around Aida and smited her. She fainted away in his arms but he was there to catch her. The glyphs disappeared and the two men relaxed as Aida seemed to be only gently napping in his arms.

"Long walk back. Think you can carry her?"
"For now. I'll ask you for help if need be."

They started trekking back toward their homes. Cullen tried not to stare at the silver sword at the man's back.

"So...any clue what - all of that was."

Geralt cracked his knuckles, a thoughtful furrow in his brow.

"Powerful magic. Someone is tuning into her, using her mana, or maybe her blood - sort of like sending a signal to a satellite. Now that they know her frequency, they're - trying to lead her to her doom. Do you know anyone out there who would want to hurt her?"

Cullen inhaled, remembering his last moment with Leliana, when she forced him to kiss her. But she was dead, they had no reason to fear her. He also thought of a series of other faces - the terrorist Corypheus, the woman at the helm of his operation, Calpernia, and the cold-hearted bombmaker Anders. Perhaps these villains had heard about her return from the Fade and wanted her as a hostage or a bargaining chip, or as something worse - a symbol for their cause - but it seemed improbable. *How could they want his Aida?*

"I do, but, we had hoped that coming this far out here would make Aida untrackable."

Geralt grew silent for a while and Cullen didn't mind. He had never been much for small talk either, even though he felt like this strange man might know a lot about inexplicable things, mages and curses. As they began to pick their way back through the forest, Cullen grew curious again.

"Where'd you get that sword?"
"From where I came from.

Cullen couldn't help but smile to himself at the man's total inability to share.

"Why'd Aida have - a magic sword?"
"That surprised me as much as it surprised you. Not unheard of for mages to be able to conjure such weaponry, but - unnecessary in these times."

Aida murmured in his arms as she tucked herself against his body. Cullen squeezed her tightly as they re-entered the forest. "How can we stop her from sleepwalking?"

Geralt stopped to pick some innocuous flowers at the base of a tree. "I'm going to forge a rune for her to wear, it will shield her from whoever is out there and throw them off her trail. And if for some reason that doesn't work, I can make you more of the herbal lyrium."

Cullen watched him nosing around a fallen log, before he picked a few odd mushrooms. "I feel strange taking that stuff. What if I get addicted again?"

"You won't, because it isn't really lyrium, it's something from where I'm from."
"Same place as you got that silver sword. And those... eyes."
Geralt chuckled a little, the mood lightening - only a little.

"You want me to carry her?"

Cullen felt a flash of childish possessiveness, although his shoulders were tiring. "Ah, I think I can manage."

"I'm not going to pull anything, I'm just going to carry Aida while you rest."

Cullen let Geralt gather up Aida in his arms. She stirred a little, before nestling into him as though she were more comfortable now.

"All right, that's enough, give 'er back."

* * * * *

Aida woke up in her own bed - at least she thought she did.

She sat up and rubbed her face, why hadn't Cullen woken her? Rosalie had brought them a few duck eggs the other day she had stashed away in their larder and she wanted to make him breakfast before he went off to hunt with his brother. She stretched and yawned and wondered how bad her sleepwalking had been - and then her eyes came into focus.

She was back in that castle, the one she had seen in her dream, when she was stranded in the Fade. Unlike that other visit, the stone fort seemed eerily quiet. She swung herself out of bed and started walking, even though she was just in a linen shift. *Sleep-walking IN my sleep?* The floor was icy cold under her feet. She wanted desperately to find a pair of boots but she was already heading down the stairs to the empty keep. With alarm she realized she was going to step outside in just her nightgown. As she pushed through the big wooden doors in front of her, she was hit with a blast of frigid mountain air - but still her body urged her to keep walking.

She shivered, her arms wrapped around her against the icy cold, her bare feet picking across the courtyard toward an unknown destination. With relief she realized she was headed indoors, but dread also began to flood her body when she heard a strange, low humming. It grew to a crescendo as she stepped through a door, half in the shadows.

Aida wobbled on her feet, deja vu prickling her all over. In the center of the small room stood an elliguan, the same elven instrument that had sped her way toward the Corypheus in the Fade. She watched her reflection wobble and distort before her, before a woman stepped into view behind her - a sultry, mysterious brunette.

"Who are you?"

"Aida Trevelyan, we have not had the pleasure of meeting - yet. But I've come to tell you something: your destiny is greater than anything you could have imagined. You are no ordinary nurse, no mere artist. You are an enchanter knight, destined to battle against an unfathomable evil."

Even in a dream state, Aida couldn't fight her own personality. "And what if I don't want to?"

"Then you will help usher *doom upon all the world.*"

The woman behind her lifted her arm toward the magic mirror so that the tip of one of her fingers caused the mirror to ripple before her. "When you are ready, you must look for me."
"But I don't even know your name."

It was too late, the woman made her take a step forward, into the elluvian.

* * * * *

Aida jolted upright, covered in sweat.

She glanced at the hole in the ceiling above their bed and knew it was after noon already just by the way the light looked. She looked at her hands which were shaking, her mana pulsing in a steady rhythm inside of her as though it wanted to escape through her fingertips. She took a few deep breaths and then realized the pulsing wasn't just inside her, there was also someone tapping on her front door. She dragged herself out of bed and down the stairs, trying to steady herself. That sense of dread from the dream had followed her to this world too.

Aida opened the door and found Katya standing on the other side, worry-worn and anxious.

"Aida, sorry to bother you but, did Cullen return from hunting? Branson would usually be home by now, that man is as reliable as the sunrise."

"Are you sure he -"

Katya fidgeted with one of her sleeves and raised her eyes to look at her in a rare moment of candor. "He's always home by lunch. Always. I'm worried. Something has happened." Aida glanced over Katya's shoulder and saw Rosalie near the little dock where they tied up a canoe. She was looking off into the distance, hoping to spot some sort of clue, or just to see one of her brothers to appear on the horizon line. Aida's heart was still racing from her dream, and she decided she should put it to good use.

"Let's go looking for them."

Katya nodded in relief, reaching out to grab Aida's wrist in solidarity. "Thank you! Rosalie wanted to just sit in the kitchen and wait for them, but - "

Aida put her hand on Katya's, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "Let's go armed."

* * * * *

The three Rutherford women went back to Katya's homestead and rustled up what they could take with them. Branson had only one spare crossbow, but Katya knew where he kept a shotgun he didn't like using, plus two boxes of ammunition. This left Rosalie with a machete her brother used for clearing brush. Katya handed it to Ro with a bemused but still worried look on her face. "I don't think we should let the pregnant lady take the machete."

"But she can have the crossbow?"

"Yes, because she also shouldn't have the shotgun either."

The three headed out toward Branson's usual hunting grounds. The blinds were empty, and they hadn't left any sign of themselves. They stood underneath the hunting platform that stood farthest from Branson and Katya's homestead, on the verge of panic.

"This isn't like them. This isn't like them at all." Rosalie squeezed Katya's hand for support while Aida thought hard about what they should do next.
"Barkley."

Ro's eyes lit up. "Barkley?"

The three women began yelling for the loyal Mabari, until Katya gave up and made Aida and Rosalie gasp with a two fingered whistle that was louder than expected. Softly, off in the distance to the east, they heard Barkley barking back at them. Without further discussion, the three went tearing off in that direction, until a sound two of them hadn't heard before began to fill the air - but Aida had heard it, once before.

*Otherworldly growls, angry hisses, the gnashing of teeth.*

Demons.

"Katya, stop!"

Aida tried to grab her sister-in-law's elbow but she was in a frenzy - Katya burst into the forest clearing, shaking off her grip. Two steps later they had all come to a halt, shell-shocked by the scene in front of them. Branson was on the ground, his back against a fallen log and bleeding heavily from a long gash down his thigh, Cullen stood over him defensively, reloading his crossbow. Geralt was holding off the three rage demons that were circling them with broad swipes of an improbably huge silver sword, and some of magic of his own, in the form of signs he drew in the air with his free hand.

"Geralt! Why do you have a sword?!" Ro called out to him in a tone that was half astonished, half genuinely amused. He bellowed back at them, "Stay back! Don't draw their attention further, in fact - leave! Go back to Branson's and - "

Geralt couldn't finish his sentence, he was busy dodging an aggressive lashing from one of the demons while pushing back a second one. Katya was sobbing as Ro pulled her behind a tree, out of sight of the otherworldly monsters. Aida kept one hand on her belly, and the child inside of her, while she watched the demons sliding around underneath a green glowing gash in the sky above them.

A strange instinct flooded her system - she had been here before.

*"Your destiny is greater than anything you could have imagined."

She knew what to do.

Aida was pulled from her momentary reverie by the sound of Geralt grunting as he ran through one of the rage demons - but this only seemed to make the remaining two even angrier. Aida stepped forward into the clearing and began marching toward the pair that were sandwiching the three men closer and closer together.

Never removing one protective hand from her stomach, Aida raised her left arm in the air and summoned the mana inside of her. With a shriek of surprise she conjured two bolts of lightning that landed precisely on top of each demon, causing them to sizzle and jerk in place. Geralt and Cullen seized the opportunity at the same time, as Cullen unloaded his crossbow into the head of the demon looming over him and his injured brother, while Geralt pirouetted with precision and cut the beast in half.

This left the last one, and it had turned its attention solely on her. Aida took a step back as the creature grew two feet taller and growled at her as a wall of fire separated her from her loved ones.
She didn’t hear her family or the Witcher shouting at her, she could only hear her heart beat pounding in her own ears. A strange sense of serenity overcame her as she raised her right hand in front of her and this time, found a magic sword gleaming in her grip. She looked up in time to see the demon lunging at her and she dodged it with a swift sidestep - and then drove her conjured blade deep into the monster's back.

It flopped over at her feet and the wall of fire died away - but the green crack in the sky remained above the clearing, crackling away with the power of the Fade. She looked over her shoulder at Ro and Katya who were both inching around the tree carefully, but Aida stopped them with the ice in her voice.

"Stop. I'm not finished yet."

The women froze and Aida faced the strange phenomena in the sky above them and lifted her left hand toward it. A surge of power came flowing out of her, making contact with the fissure and dragging her a few feet closer. She heard Cullen shouting at her to stop, be careful, don't go, don't die, he was hysterical with the fear of losing her again - but he didn't know that she was in control. With a snap of her wrist the gap in the sky disappeared into itself and the forest was silent again.

Ro and Katya burst out of the bushes toward Branson, who was groaning in pain and turning a little grey from the lack of blood and possibly by what he had just saw. When Aida approached him, he cowered away from her as she knelt at his side.

"Who - what - are you?"

"Right now, I'm just a registered nurse who's going to patch you up. And you're going into shock."

Aida parted the ripped portion of Branson's jeans to look at the wound directly, Geralt hovering over her shoulder. "The wound is deep, it will need to be cleaned thoroughly and I'm going to have to stitch you up. We've got a long bit of surgery ahead of us."

When no one said anything she realized Cullen, Katya and Rosalie were also going into a kind of shock of their own.

"Come on, snap to it. We need to improvise a stretcher and get him back to your homestead before he loses more blood."

Only Geralt seemed unfazed by what Aida had just done. He pulled off his belt and handed it to her so she could use it as a tourniquet and tie it to Branson's upper thigh. Cullen, still holding his crossbow in one hand, rubbed his face with the other and then looked at his wife.

"Y-You... You just killed two demons with lightning and a magic sword and you're still in your nightgown."

Aida blinked at him and gave him a small, sweet, innocent grin. "Cullen, are you really surprised by all of this this?"

Cullen looked at Ro, who could only raise her eyebrows at him. Katya gave him a similar look of acceptance before turning to kiss Branson's hand, clutched tightly in hers.

"I guess I'm not."

* * * * *

As night fell, Aida was finishing stitching up the serious wound in Branson's thigh with Geralt's
assistance, with the patient sprawled out across his own rustic kitchen table. Aida had to do her best with fishing wire and a needle borrowed from crafty Rosalie, and some of Katya's diluted moonshine as the only antiseptic. Branson gulped down Cullen's last bottle of "city whiskey" as he called it, while he swore through the entire procedure. Aida and Geralt worked in silence, until surprisingly enough, the Witcher spoke up.

"I need you to know something, Aida - you are the most powerful mage I've ever known. You conjured lightning with no grimoire or staff, without saying spells or incantations. Every mage and witch I've ever known was unable to do that. So how'd you pull it off?"

"I have no idea. Something's...clearly happening to me. And happening to the planet. What was that crack in the sky?"

Geralt handed her a piece of clean gauze and shook his head. "Where am I from, we used to speak of something called the Conjunction of the Spheres - it was an astrological event that allowed magic and monsters into our world. Something similar is happening here - the barrier between this realm and whatever's on the other side, it's growing thin and tearing."

"And you can close those rifts, Aida."

Aida looked up at Cullen, leaning against the kitchen counter holding his own whiskey double. For once, she couldn't read his face or his eerily calm tone. It felt like he was looking at her in an entirely new way, and it made her nervous. She broke his gaze and turned back to the last few stitches she needed to make to close up the rest of Branson's injury, but couldn't use a hand to brush away the sweat beading on her brow from concentration. Katya let go of Branson's hand and dashed to the kitchen counter where she had filled a basin with clean well water for the operation. She wet down a washcloth and wrung it out, and to Aida's surprise, she wiped her brow for her. And then she stood there, arms hanging awkwardly at her side.

"Thank you, Aida. For saving my husband. And your husband. And all of us."

Aida had to blink a few times to keep the tears at bay. She was saying thank you, but there was an "I'm sorry" in Katya's voice she clearly found hard to express. But it was enough for Aida. It erased all the unpleasantness that had passed between them and set everyone at ease, despite the stress of the day. Aida put the last stitch into Branson's leg and then swabbed the entire wound once more to clean it up.

"I'm staying here tonight, I can sleep on the couch, and you must wake me up immediately if he has a fever."

Everyone began speaking at once, even the injured patient, who was cross-eyed drunk from the bottle of whiskey he had finished off. Of course she can stay, no, she's done enough, we need to get you upstairs, you need to keep that leg elevated -

Geralt's masculine rasp finally won out over the clamor. "I'm! Going home. Aida, if you need me, just send me a signal."

"And how would I do that?"

He gave her a wry, almost flirtatious half-smile. "Just snap your fingers."

Aida was about to blush back at him when Rosalie stepped between the two of them. "And if I snap my fingers, will you walk me back to my place before you head on to yours? Sorry I don't have any super interesting magic powers though."
Before Geralt could answer, Ro continued to stumble her way through her invitation. "Besides! I'm not hitting on you! Those things might be out there, and you're the one with the - very big sword."

Ro's clumsy double entendre made Branson lay back down on the kitchen table with a brotherly moan of disapproval and Cullen rub his neck as he glanced away. Katya ushered Ro and Geralt onto the front porch with a kerosene lantern before Ro could make anyone else squirm, and locked the door behind them. As soon as they were gone, Aida turned to Cullen, putting a hand on his cheek.

"Darling, you and Barkley should just go home and rest, we can't all fit on the sofa."

"No way, what if you sleepwalk again, plus Ro's right, we don't know if those demons will be back. And Geralt gave me - some stuff, that's why we were meeting up with him so far east of our hunting grounds. I can smite you again if I need to."

Branson made another sound of sibling disgust as Katya helped him sit up. "Man, I don't know what you guys are talking about, but it sounds like too much information."

Katya snorted, brushing some of Branson's hair off his face and giving him a kiss on the cheek. "And you don't have to sleep on the couch, we have a spare room. You can smite Aida all you want in there. Just keep the door closed."

* * * * *

Aida woke up in the middle night, wanting to turn over. It took her a few moments to recall they weren't under their little hole in the roof of their cabin, but in Katya and Branson's sturdy home.

And it was almost sunrise. She hadn't walked in her sleep.

Cullen was resting on the pillow next to hers, a protective arm thrown over her body and his warm palm resting on hip. She studied his face, glad he was getting some rest and that she hadn't troubled him, at least for this one night. She could tell by the little twitches of his lidded eyes that he was dreaming. She reached a hand out and brushed her fingertips down his stubble on his jaw, letting a few of her fingers touch his lips for a moment. She drew back when he stirred in his sleep, worried she had woken him - but he kept his eyes closed, pulled her closer, and murmured something strange into her ear.

"Inquisitor. To work?"

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for reading and be sure to follow me at thetemplarandtherogue.tumblr.com!

And Cullenfreaks, I have a question for you! I'm getting revved up to start another Cullen fic and I'm trying to choose between:

1) PIRATE / HIGH SEAS ADVENTURE AU on the dread pirate ship the Inquisition! Trevelyan is the captain of an infamous raiding crew, and Cullen is the naval officer in charge of capturing her.
   OR

2) ANCIENT ROME AU. Imagine Cullen as a high ranking Roman general - in love
with his servant girl (Lavellan!)

If you have an opinion, let me know here. I think I will wrap up Neighbors by this summer and I'm ready to write more Cullen feels and smut!
Many things changed in the days after Aida surprised her loved ones, and herself, by raising her left hand and sealing a crack in the sky.

Aida's belly began to bloom as she entered a new phase of her pregnancy, but this didn't stop her from going out with Cullen in the mornings to help him hunt. She swore to him she'd stay atop the hunting blind until their quarry had bled out or was trussed up and immobilized, and their daily bounty was more than enough to feed all the Rutherfords. She hunted with a magic bow she conjured in her hands, her aim made true by the simple power of her thoughts. It was gratifying to be so helpful - and using her mana up until it was empty at the end of the day was the most surefire way to keep her from sleepwalking to her death. It still worried Aida that someone was out there, calling to her, looking for her, wanting to destroy her, but their day to day survival needs outweighed this dark paranoia. She did not dream of the strange sultry witchy woman who had told her of her greater destiny and Geralt had come by Katya's for dinner again to report that he had not seen or heard any demons stalking their way through the forest around their homesteads. There was no denying that what Aida had done that day in the clearing had been supernatural and incomprehensible, but she simply forced herself to push it aside.

Katya's home also became Aida's second home. As the two women focused on Branson's recovery, they grew closer. They exchanged skill sets, Katya teaching her all the domestic hacks she was missing for their off the grid lifestyle, and in turn Aida taught her as much about natural healing as she knew, the two women chatting away as they picked their way through the forest, gathering wild elfroot and crystal grace to make an essential oil they could apply to Branson's leg. It was on one of these excursions that Aida confided in Katya that something had changed in her relationship with Cullen, and Cullen was being stubbornly opaque about it.

"Changed how?"

"He just looks at me differently, ever since that day in the forest with the demons. And when I call him on it, he insists he isn't - but it's there, in his eyes. In his posture. And..."

Aida paused, pointing out a rare patch of prophet's laurel. "Oh, this is good, you can make a lotion from it, or bind it up and dry it and burn it as an air purifier."

Katya huffed a frustrated noise at her, stopping her from stooping down to pick the wild herb. "Will you let me do it please? Go sit on that tree root over there, and keep going, you were about to tell me something."

Aida obeyed her, resting her back against the trunk of the oak tree behind her. She put a hand on her stomach and let the sun warm her face, giving her an opportunity to close her eyes as she continued with the rather personal part of her story.

"...Cullen and I haven't been intimate since that day with the demons. I know I'm hideous right now -"

Katya stood up quickly, giving her such a stern, censoring look that made Aida freeze. "Are you kidding me? You're glowing from every pore on your body. I know I might live out here in the middle of bumfuck nowhere but I know that some men often find their pregnant women very
alluring."

"Well, maybe he's not one of those men."

Aida sat for a while, absorbing the sentence she had just said. Katya methodically picked every piece of prophet's laurel before speaking again. "Sounds like something you should just sit down and talk about."

"I-I...how do I talk about it? I mean, I've tried, you know...hinting that I'd like to...oh, never mind, Katya. I'll just live, I guess. I'm sure there have been millions of couples before us who stopped doing that while the wife was pregnant. I'm being terribly spoiled. It's just that - that - has been a very - vibrant - part of our relationship. There were a few times where that brought us back together, reminded us of how much we care about each other. And now, now that it's gone, I can't help but feel like I did something wrong?"

Katya passed her the bundle of herbs, giving her hand a little squeeze at the same time. "Just him everything you just told me."

* * * * *

That night Aida cooked Cullen a big dinner, and as they ate in silence she gathered the courage to speak to him with candor, but as he took his last bites he sat there looking at her with the same look he had been giving her for weeks now. She sat there, absorbing it, until she stood up to collect their plates with a sigh. She took them to the counter where she kept a basin of water for washing to let them soak. Somehow, not having to meet that iron stare of his made it easier to speak up.

"Cullen, why are you mad at me?"

She heard his chair creak behind her.

"I'm not, who said that?"

Aida tidied up her small kitchen, nervous now. "You've - been looking at me funny for weeks now."

"Have I..."

"You have."

She realized her hands were trembling as she fidgeted and fussed.

"Well, are you going to tell me what's on your mind? I thought we were striving to always be honest with each other, after everything we've been through together."

Cullen cleared his throat and cracked his knuckles.

"You...you're right. I have been preoccupied, and it's not easy to tell you what I've been thinking."

She turned around now and put her hands on his shoulders - and was shocked, heartbroken, and shattered when he practically flinched under her touch. She drew her hands away immediately.

"Cullen, if you won't speak to me - or let me touch you - then maybe you should stay at your brother's for a while."

He stood up, his back still to her. "Maybe that'd be best."

As he gathered up a few of his things, Aida couldn't look at him. She just stared at the fireplace, a
blanket around her shoulders, holding herself. She heard him pause in the doorway.

"If you need me, you know where I'll be."

She let a sob go after the door closed behind him.

* * * * *

It rained for a few days straight after that night. Katya was looking out her kitchen window at the downpour while Rosalie, Cullen and Branson ate breakfast together, chatting merrily as they ate some freshly baked breakfast scones and sipped tea. Cullen and Branson were in the middle of guffawing over some long ago family memory when Katya had had enough. She turned and took Cullen's cup of tea away from him, and even snatched the half-eaten pastry right out of his hand.

"How can you sit here, laughing, while your pregnant wife is sitting by herself in her kitchen, wondering what she's done to deserve this - this - whatever the fuck you think you're doing to her."

Rosalie blanched and froze as Branson readjusted how he was seated, keeping his injured leg elevated as Aida had instructed him. Cullen put his hands down on the table in front of him like a chastised child, his jaw clenched.

"Kat, maybe it's none of our business," Branson ventured in a cautious voice.

"No, you can't say that. We live out here together, we are a family, we share, we help each other."

She sat down across from him, next to Branson, whose hand she took in hers. "Now tell us what's going on, and how we can help."

They waited for a long time, the sound of the rain pattering on the roof filling Cullen's silence.

"I've been having these strange dreams. When Aida was trapped in the Fade -"

He paused, noticing his siblings all looking at each other.

"I know. I know you think we're crazy. I know you've had zero confirmation about any of this. But, will you just pretend to believe me?"

Rosalie’s eyes grew wide. “Oh, I believe you, especially after what I saw in the meadow the day Branson was hurt.”

“There are things in this world none of us can explain,” Katya added while sliding Cullen’s cup of tea back toward him. Cullen nearly drained it before he continued.

“She had dreams there, of even another realm, another time, where we were together. She saw a castle high in the Frostbacks. I was a general - her general - and the world was being torn apart by rifts in the sky and rampaging demons, just like the one we all saw. Well, I’ve been having dreams of that strange place too, and frankly, it scares the shit out of me. There was so much of Aida’s experience when we were apart, that I didn’t get to see. I figured they were things only for HER to see, and now - I’m seeing them too."

Katya made a small noise of annoyance. “But that doesn’t explain why you’ve slept over here for three nights while your pregnant wife sleeps alone.”

Cullen clenched his jaw. “In those dreams, Aida was a fighter. She was supposed to be fighting. She
was the KEY to saving the world. And I’m scared. I’m scared this is true again, in our world. I can’t
tell her what I’ve been seeing at night, because maybe it’s her destiny - our destiny. And I thought
our destiny was to hide out here in the woods with you guys, living off the land and loving each
other and bringing this baby into the world.”

This time when Cullen looked up, he didn’t look at any of them. “But. Here’s the conflict. There’s a
part of me that knows that’s right. If these rifts are opening up in other places, Aida should be there
close them, even when she’s nine months pregnant. That’s the Templar in me. If people need her
help, then she should be helping people.”

Katya made a bigger sound of annoyance. “Will you get out of my damn kitchen and just go talk to
her? The two of you, who have been through so much together, still can’t sit down and have an
honest talk with each other.”

Cullen glanced at the bottom of his tea cup, at the leaves nested there - remembering his time with the
oneiromancer. He wished she was here right now, maybe the leaves were telling him even though
they had only been in the forest for a few months, it was already time to leave.

“You know what too, you guys - maybe I don’t want to leave. Maybe it’s been nice, being here with
you. Even without wifi.”

Branson chuckled, rubbing his wife’s shoulder as he gave her an affectionate look. “Well…maybe if
you guys have to leave, we could see fit - to come visit you sometime, after you’re done saving the
world.”

Katya made a squeak of surprise that made them all laugh. Cullen stood up with authority now, his
posture Templar-straight and authoritative.

“I’m going to speak to my wife.”

Cullen stepped out onto the porch, heading to his cabin. He heard Rosalie’s teasing voice calling
after him.

“I’m sure she doesn’t bite, unless you ask her to.”

*****

Cullen opened the door to the cabin, some of his previous courage melting away. “Aida?”

Barkley was sitting in the living room, and he gave him a little yip in greeting, before returning to
chewing on one of his old toys.

“Well, you’re no help. Where’s Aida, boy?”

The dog only ignored him, so he decided to try behind the cabin where Aida tended their small
vegetable garden. There was no sign of her there except some bare footprints in the dirt, so he
headed for the creek where they bathed. He stepped through the bushes and then froze on the spot.

Aida was naked in the water, her raven-black hair wet through and so long now that it reached the
small of her back. Cullen held his breath as he looked at his pregnant wife - he hadn’t seen her like
this in the bright daylight before, her belly swollen with his child - and it was his child, he knew it
and felt it now as he stared at her. Her breasts were heavy, her skin glowing. Water glistened all over
her as she dipped herself into the water and stood up again. Cullen felt all the blood in his body
rushing south. He needed her, badly now. All it took was looking at her. He cleared his throat,
drawing her attention. To his chagrin, she turned with a yelp, sinking into the water so she was
hidden to him.

“What are you doing here? You scared me.”

“I’m sorry. M-may I join you?”

She blushed, her arms crossed in front of her now. “I - don’t want you to see me like this.”

Cullen began taking off his clothes as he spoke. “See you like what? What are you talking about?”

“I’m…huge. And ugly.”

He was in the water and his mouth on hers in a heartbeat. He kissed her until they were both breathless.

“Shut up. I never want to hear you say that about yourself, ever again. Where’s that bar of soap?”

She pulled back from him, giving him a little shove. “No, you can’t just - jump into my bath time and ravage me after you let me sleep alone for three nights.”

“Babe…”

“No, you can’t ‘babe’ your way out of this.”

She stepped into the deeper end of the pool but he followed, determined to get her to forgive him so they could get on to their more important business.

“Babe…”

“Nope.”

She leaned away and gently backstroked away from him, but he followed. She swam toward the other end of the creek but he managed to get a hand around one of her kicking ankles.

“Stop, let me kiss you again.”

Aida tilted her head away from him so he had to make do with nuzzling her neck, which smelled like the sweet lavender soap she always used.

“Maker, I missed you. I’m a fool.”

“True, true. Keep talking.”

“Can’t we talk afterward?”

He took one of her hands and moved it to his stiff cock under the water, making her grip him. It made the stubborn look on her face soften and give him a little hope.

“Cullen, no, not this time. What has been on your mind?”

“It’s too much to say right now, and you’re - “

She was giving him a few leisurely strokes under the water, while she watched his face.

“I’ll stop, if you don’t continue.”

“You want to tell me what’s been bothering me, while you - “

Aida knew how to touch him, exactly which spots to hit, how to twist her wrist as she played with him, and she kept her eyes glued to his, drinking in how she affected him, how pleasure she gave
him made him curl his upper lip.

“Aida, you’re torturing me.”
“Good. You deserve it.”

She allowed him to pull her closer so they were almost kissing, her lips hovering near his.

“Tell me.”
“I…I think we have to leave.”


Cullen gasped back at her. “Oh, please don’t stop, come on - “

He tried to grab her hand to put it back on his aching manhood but she was too much in shock.

“Why do we need to leave? I’m happy here, I thought you were too.”

“Aida, please, I’ll be glad to elaborate, just let me…”

Cullen knew he was being relentlessly grabby, but he was so incredibly turned on by her mere presence. Everything about her was fertile and ripe, round and soft - “…sink into you first.”

He had no choice but to just scoop her up in his arms and walk them over to the far bank of the creek. He ignored her whimpered complaints as he laid her on the dirt and made her open her legs for him. He pressed his entire face into her cunt, delighting as she yelped and yielded to him with every swipe of his tongue. Soon she was flooding his mouth with her sweet juice, her body getting dirty and muddy as she writhed against the firm tip of his tongue.

“Fuck me, baby. I need it, I need it - “

“I thought you wanted to talk.”

“Fuck you! Fuck me…”

He got up on his knees and looked down at her, wondering for a beat how they should do this now that she was much bigger than she was even a few weeks ago.

“Hands and knees?”
“How about on my side?”
“First one, then the other?”

Aida grinned, spreading her arms wide as Cullen mentally added “fucking my pregnant wife on a muddy creek bank” to his list of favorite things. He watched her getting into position and without much more fanfare, he thrust deep into her, making them both hiss with ecstasy. He pummeled into her, holding on to her ass, and then he sat back on his heels to watch her bouncing against him, letting her work up her own rhythm. Then after she grew tired, he plunged into her from behind as she laid on her side. He watched her hand grabbing onto the mud beneath them as her cries became more pitched. Out here they could be as loud as they wanted, it would be something he surely would miss. He gathered up her silken locks and wrapped them around his fist a few times and then pulled her hair at the right moment, feeling the walls of her pussy flexing and pulsing around him.

"Maker, Cullen!"
"What," he grunted out as he continued grinding his hips against her, a bead of sweat rolling down the side of his face.
"Again, please!"
"Greedy little wife..."

He never stopped thrusting as he felt for her pearl, already so swollen and slick with her arousal. He pressed three fingers to her cunt and began vibrating them as fast as he could, making her howl and twitch uncontrollably. "Can you come again, so soon hmm? Slut, rutting in the mud, big with my child, still needs my cock, doesn't she? Say it, tell me you still need it, constantly...tell me, say it - "

She could only squeak and groan back at him as his fingers strummed at her hot pussy, and then she was pressing her head back against her shoulder with an emphatic yelp as he made her gush and get even wetter than she already was. "That's it, baby, more, I'm so close, so close, so -"

They exploded together, Cullen holding on to her shoulder so hard he was worried he might have bruised her, but she was only moaning with relief as another wave of sweet release washed over her. He emptied himself deep inside of her, and as he pulled out of her, he made a mental note - as soon as she has this child, he'd put another one in her. He wanted to spend the rest of his life seeding her, over and over again, as often as she wanted it, as often as he wanted it...

They laid next to the creek, breathing heavily, regaining their bearings. He kissed her shoulder and kept a protective hand on her belly, knowing that as soon as she could speak again she'd be back on topic. Tenacious woman, love of his life, he'd follow her wherever she went, he'd -

"Cullen, I don't want to leave. Why do you want to leave all of a sudden? I thought you were happy to be with your family, especially as we start ours."

He propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at her. "Did you ever think after what happened that day in the meadow, with the demons, and that crack in the sky - that it could be happening in other places too?"

Aida's face changed from curious to conflicted. "I didn't."

"Aida - I've been dreaming - of that other place, that castle in the mountains, me in the armor with the sword and cloak, everything. Do you remember?"

She was now troubled by what he was saying, as she wove her fingers between his. "I was your commander, I lead your armies. You were a mage warrior princess. You were my mage warrior princess. Tell me you remember?"

"I do, baby, but - my dream there was so short. How long have you been seeing that other world?"

"Since the day in the meadow. In that other world, Aida, you stood between the innocent and pure evil, maybe here, maybe you're -"

She tried to wipe some mud off his face but only added a little more which she kept brushing away. "Cullen, how can we know what's going on out here? Maybe that day with the demons was just a fluke, maybe it has something to do with my sleepwalking, or my Fade powers. How can we possibly know?"

"We can't, but -"

"I understand your point of view, I do. If I - can help, in any way, I should. I know it is the way of the Templars, and not something you easily put aside."

Cullen sat up and then helped her to her feet.

"Is that all, Cullen? That's what's been making you nervous, that's what you couldn't tell me?"
He cupped her face in his hands. "Yes, because - if my intuitions are correct, and these cracks in the
sky are happening in other places...and you're the only one who can stop them from happening - then
I'm scared to death. Scared of losing you. Scared the world will need you even as you're carrying my
baby. And yes. I don't want to leave the forest. But - duty compels me. The code I once lived by
compels me."

She put her hands on his wrists, gazing into his eyes. "I don't know how to be a hero, Cullen."

Cullen had to swallow, on the verge of tears. "Yes you do. You saved me, Aida. You've saved me
over and over again."

She shook her head at him. "No, you saved me. You - "

He made an exasperated sound that made her giggle. "Must you argue, every time?"

Cullen kissed her deeply again, the tension gone from his body, now that he had both unburdened
himself of what was bothering him, and also rutted his wife to both his and her satisfaction.

* * * * *

Despite the deep philosophical implications of what Cullen had brought up after that round of
passionate lovemaking, they returned to the gentle rhythms of their rustic lifestyles. The women got
ready for the rainy season, pickling and jarring up food to store in their cellars, Branson was well
enough to do a little duck hunting with his brother, and Rosalie was in the middle of weaving a
heavier blanket for Cullen and Aida to sleep under. Cullen had also cornered his brother into helping
him patch up the roof over their bed. Yes, it was romantic, and it was even possible to pull the bed
away from the rain that inevitably trickled in, but it still made the room freezing cold at night.

Branson and Cullen were on the roof one morning, nailing a few boards into place, when they saw
the two helicopters heading straight for their settlement.

"Is that weird?"
"It is definitely weird."
"Should we..."

Before Branson could answer, they watched the copters land in a field near where Cullen and Aida's
dead RV was currently moldering away.

"Get Aida and then take the canoe up to Geralt's - he can hide you, better than you or I ever could.
His property is dotted through with hiding places..."

Cullen didn't ask for more details, he was sliding down the ladder, hitting the ground running. He
had a moment of panic when he realized he didn't quite know where she was, she could be out
gathering herbs, or helping Katya break down a deer carcass. She could be meditating under a tree,
or -

He heard Rosalie calling out to him, from her little house which was south of Branson and Katya's.
"Cullen, there are - people here! Where's Aida!"

Everything happened too quickly. He was bursting into Katya's kitchen, where she had two hands
deep into a ball of bread dough - Rosalie was suddenly behind him, everyone was shouting, Branson
was looking for his shot gun, but Cullen could only think of one thing, where's Aida, where's Aida,
where's Aida -
"I'm right here, baby, what's going - "

Aida froze, dropping the jar of pickled green beans on the floor where it shattered.

Standing in the doorway was a brunette with smoldering eyes. She was flanked by eight armed Templars, who were not brandishing their guns, but rather seemed to serve as her bodyguards.

"Miss Aida Trevelyan?"

Cullen couldn't help himself. "That's Mrs. Rutherford now."

Katya and Rosalie moved to Aida's side, standing on either side of her for support.

"You can't take her away, she didn't murder anyone. And this is neutral land that belongs to us, we won't let you take her."

The woman spoke, her voice mysterious and smoky.

"I'm not here to take anyone away. If I'm lucky, Mrs. Rutherford will come with me willingly. We know you did something that not even you knew you could do. Do you deny this?"

Aida shook her head slowly, staring openly at the woman. "Have we met before?"

One of her guards pulled a kitchen chair away from the table so she could sit. She gestured to Aida to join her.

"You know that we have. Will you please sit? We have much to discuss."

Chapter End Notes

Follow me at thetemplarandtherogue.tumblr.com!

The first chapter of my Roman Thedas/Cullen as a Roman General/Lavellan as his slave girl AU is alllllmost finished so stay tuned! IT GONNA BE SMUTTY AS FUCK.
Blessed are the Peacekeepers

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in updating this behemoth and sorry it's so short, I had to get my Cullen X Lavellan Roman AU sex slave-y thing off the ground (it's called When in Denerim if you're interested)

[I'm getting this train back on the tracks because I really truly do know how it's going to end.]

Aida and Morrigan sat across from each other at Katya's kitchen table. The special forces mage stared at her as Aida watched a video she had cued up for her on a tablet. As it loaded, Aida glanced at the Templar troops on the deck, drinking Katya's apple cider and tearing into a loaf of her soda bread. She could feel Cullen's anxious energy coming from the living room, where he waited for her with the rest of the family. Whatever Morrigan wanted to show her was classified information, for Aida's eyes only - which made no sense to her at the moment.

Why was she special?

And what was she watching?

"This is a Fade rift that opened west of Lake Calenhad, not too far from Redcliffe. It thankfully did not appear in a very populated area, this is a patch of farmland just outside of the city. It's proximity to a major city did ensure we were able to respond to the situation immediately but - "

Aida gasped as she watched a demon lift up a Templar infantryman and toss him aside. His body hit a tree and slid to the ground, now lifeless. She laid the tablet down on the table in front of her with shaking hands.

"Wh-what's, were you able to..."

"No, the Rift is still there. We have the area contained and on lockdown, and somehow, the few inhabitants nearby have not asked too many questions. We've lucked out this time. One of these is bound to open closer to civilization and then we will have chaos on our hands."

The video began to replay itself and Aida watched the Templar infantryman die once again before she put the tablet down on the table and looked away, queasy now. Five words looped through her head, over and over again.

That could have been Cullen...

"Ms. Morrigan - why did you come out the way out here? To arrest me? Or show me disturbing videos?"

The intimidating mage leaned over to slide the tablet back toward herself. "We know you closed a Rift not too far from here, saving several members of your family. We know you did this with no spellcraft or weapon of any sort."

Aida opened her mouth but could not get the word How out fast enough.
"We've been monitoring your every move, ever since you returned from the Fade. We knew when you landed in that alpine lake, we knew when your beloved had found you and brought you home. And we've known you've been out here off the grid for months now. I suppose the only thing we don't know at this juncture is the gender of your child."

Morrigan stirred her tea with a spoon with a delicate hand as Aida answered her. "Or whether I can help you or not. I have no idea if I can do - that - again."

Aida looked over her shoulder toward the living room where Cullen paced back and forth. Morrigan stood up, glaring down at her.

"I'm afraid I've - misrepresented the situation. You have no choice at the moment, you are going to leave and fly with us to Redcliffe to attempt to close the Fade rift there."

At her chilling words the kitchen filled with Rutherfords, everyone speaking at once, causing Morrigan to take a half step back.

"She's pregnant, just look at her!"
"She's wanted for murder! One she did not commit!"
"You can't just make her go with you, she has rights, she -"  

Cullen put a heavy hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

"She's not going without me."

* * * * *

They didn't even have fatigues that would fit her.

Aida had to make do with dark sweatpants and a Templar flak jacket that was too long in the arms because it had to be big enough to fit over her belly. Goggles, helmet, body armor - how did anyone move in all this gear?

And yet there was Cullen, sitting across from her in the helicopter looking comfortable in a Templar uniform that fit him perfectly, holding an M27 with ease and leaning in to talk to the soldier next to him. She smiled as he made the nervous young man laugh for a moment and then made eye contact with her before speaking to her via their comm device, so his rich, swoonworthy voice was right in her ear.

"I don't care if everyone can hear me say this, but as long as I'm here Aida, nothing's going to happen to you."

She nodded at him even though she wanted to explain to this entire helicopter full of trained soldiers that she had stepped into the Fade and killed a demon with her bare hands, with no magic - and now that she had a staggering amount of mana pulsing through her entire being as though she were a walking, talking nuclear bomb it would be she who would make sure nobody was hurt today.

Her powers didn't keep her from fretting about the baby though, a child so strong his or her kicking sometimes kept her up at night. Aida looked out the window at the countryside flying by underneath her. She knew it was a girl but hadn't told her family yet. They already had plenty of reasons to find her strange and dangerous, they didn't need to add 'being psychically bonded to her own unborn child' to the list of her supernatural quirks. She brushed a hand over her belly as the copter swept toward their final destination, flying over the blockade that was keeping citizens from the Fade rift site. Morrigan's voice filled their comms now as she went over their plan - the Templars would keep
the demons distracted until they could clear a path for Aida, who would be protected by a shield wall whose defenses would be generated by Morrigan herself.

Aida barely heard the plan - that woozy, disconnected feeling she had experienced the last time she had come into contact with one of these Rifts was washing over her again.

She didn't feel like herself.

Aida shook off someone trying to hold her back as she stepped off the helicopter onto the field underneath the glowing, green crack in the sky. She even hummed a little song to herself as the enchanted sword appeared in the palm of her hand with just a flick of her wrist and she began walking toward two Templars circling a hissing demon. She heard Cullen and Morrigan yelling at her but it was muted and soft as she arced her blade across the demon's chest, landing the blow while turning away, protecting the child inside her. She walked in her trance toward each demon, surrounded by Morrigan's shield, which evaporated away perfectly each time she needed to strike, until she was circled only by the protective Templars and the last few demons at the edge of the field were panting from effort and bleeding out.

She sheathed her sword by closing her palm, raised her left hand to the sky and sealed up the rift in the sky with a blinding flash. The effort made her sink to her knees in a half faint, but Cullen was at her side as he promised, to catch her from falling.

Aida looked up at him and it felt like she was on the far end of a tunnel. She even heard herself responding to him, but - it wasn't her, it wasn't her voice.

"I am fine, please, do not make a fuss."

She held on to his shoulders, gazing into his honeyed, chestnut brown eyes.

"Cullen, where is your cloak? Did you misplace it again?"

Through her tunnel vision, she saw him yelling for help. "Check my room, darling. Perhaps you left it there - at the foot of my bed."

Her eyes fluttered shut.

* * * * *

Aida kept her eyes closed and listened to them discussing her. It made her remember the thousands of other times when she used to be on the other side of moments like this, the nurse checking the vitals of a patient just waking up. It made her miss a slew of other things from that part of her life too - a smoke break with Sera in the middle of a long shift in the ER, a carefree night out with Dorian, the view from her condo and what it felt like to stand on her balcony on a crisp mountain morning in just her pajamas. Maker, it almost brought her to tears just to realize how ordinary she used to be, and how badly she wanted to be ordinary again.

She opened her eyes and before she could get her bearings, Cullen was blocking her view of the room as he came into sight to kiss her on the forehead and grab her hand to squeeze it.

"Is the baby all right?"
"He is. She is. I knew it would be the first thing you would say when you woke up. You're just fine too, by the way."

Aida tried to pull herself up to sitting but then felt the sedation spell she was under. "They did that to you just to keep you calm."
She rolled her head toward him and knew something was very wrong right away. It had been a long
time since she had seen Cullen look that defeated and it reminded her of the night she stepped into
his life when he was low and lyrium-sick. Later, one night when she was lying in his arms in the
condo next to hers, he told her that the worst thing about his drug addiction was that realization that
something else was in charge, and it was something that was killing you.

"Cullen, what's wrong, tell me."
"They - I... Do we have to talk about it right away, can't we just sit here for a few minutes and talk
about baby names like a normal couple?"

He wanted to be ordinary again too and it made Aida let go and let herself cry. As she sobbed, she
allowed herself a moment of childhood sincerity and made a wish. Andraste, send us back to Haven.
I want to have this baby in the city where I met this man. She raised his hand to her lips to kiss one of
his knuckles.

"It's a girl."
"It's a girl? Are you sure?"
"Absolutely."

She watched joy transform his face. "What do you want to name her?"

"Let's name her after your mother. I think your brother and sister would love that too."

"Lila Rutherford," Cullen said, testing it out. "Lila Rutherford, you finish eating your spinach or you
can't have dessert."

Aida laughed. "We have to feed her spinach?"

Cullen snorted with disbelief. "Yes, we have to feed her spinach. And other vegetables. I can see
already that I'm going to be the good parent and you're going to be - "

The door behind him opened and cut him off. Cullen sniffled and then stood at attention as Morrigan
and two Templar generals stepped into the room. Aida felt the sedation spell wearing off as Morrigan
turned it down for her using her own magic.

"Mrs. Rutherford. The country of Ferelden thanks you for the completion of the mission she tasked
you with."

Aida darted a glance at Cullen, hoping he'd give her some kind of hint as how to answer, but he kept
his eyes forward. In the presence of the two ranking officers, Cullen's old Templar protocols had
overridden his other usual instincts, even the ones regarding his love for her. It took her aback for a
moment.

"You're welcome, General Morrigan. I am feeling perfectly fine, I was wondering when..."

The mage pulled a chair closer to her bed to sit down, but Aida knew this wasn't because she was
planning on staying to have a chat about her health and well-being.

"Two more Fade rifts have opened."

Aida felt ice spreading through her veins. "Where."

"Eastern Orlais. The Hissing Wastes and the Western Approach, both desolate places, although your
father owns stakes in oil drilling and mining operations in both regions, in case I needed to make it
personal."
"You didn't." Thinking about her family was too painful at the moment because it felt like the walls were pushing in on her. "Let me guess. You are going to make me go close those two Fade rifts, now that you know I can do it."

"We are not going to make you do anything. But what we will do is - make you an offer."

Aida had been very careful during her pregnancy to always try to be upbeat and happy, believing this had some bearing on the life growing inside of her. Even during her sleepwalking crisis, she had strove to keep any dark thoughts at bay and had indulged any whim she could have indulged while living in the forest. But now as she lay here under light sedation and a set of frustrating, buzzing florescent lights, she had to force herself not to feel angry as she responded:

"What could you possibly offer me?"

Morrigan fixed her eyes on hers.

"We have definitive proof you did not kill Leliana. You can have your life back, and not the one where you were hiding away in the woods, the one you had before all of this. All you have to do is join us."

"Us?"

"A special joint forces unit, supported by Ferelden and Orlais, with contributions from the Free Marches, Nevarra and Antiva. Only Tevinter is abstaining for the moment, but if these Fade rifts begin to open anywhere near their cities we expect that to change."

She felt the other mage turn up her sedation spell, to keep her pulse from racing.

"So I have to save the fucking world, to clear my name? What if I say no? What if I don't care about the Hissing Wastes or anywhere else on this Maker-forsaken planet? Can my husband and I return to his family?"

Morrigan sat back in her chair and crossed her legs, her expression stony. "No."

"You're not going to let me leave here, aren't you?"

"No."

* * * * *

Aida spent a night full of despair in the high security triage unit of - wherever she was. The fact she didn't even know where she was at the moment sent her off on another bout of quiet sobbing. Cullen had taken the news a lot better than her. If they had to bargain for their happiness, so be it. And he was ready to reenlist in this "Inquisition" to be at her side - mostly because he had insisted if they were going to use her as a weapon he was going to be there to be her shield. The idea made her sick, the entire enterprise. She was in mourning, having lost more than one life to the pendulum swing of fate. There was no feeling good about this, there was too much at stake, the baby, her husband, her life.

If she died in service to this cause, would they even tell her family? She thought of little Lila's aunties - Emilia buying up an entire mall of toys for her, Rosalie and Katya sewing and knitting simple garments at their kitchen table, and started a new round of tears.

She looked over at Cullen, asleep on a cot they put right next to her bed. He had that crease in his brow that was the tell tale sign of his anxiety and irritation. She reached out and felt for his hand and
he gave it to her instinctively and without waking. His simple touch was so comforting, and Aida finally drifted into a dreamless but fitful slumber.

* * * * *

Cullen rolled over in the middle of the night and remembered where they were, and then realized the room they were in was lit up with the same eerie green light that had been the indicator of Aida's strange sleepwalking. She hadn't done it in a long time, but Cullen sat straight up, looking for her. She was lying in her hospital bed, mumbling in her sleep - and her hand was glowing, the hand that could lock up the sky and strike down demons. He got up and pressed a hand to her forehead.

"Aida? Are you all right, shall I call for - "

Her eyes snapped open, and they were glowing green as well.

Aida grabbed his hand, squeezing it hard, and the voice that came out of her mouth was hers - but not quite hers.

"Darling. You can't. You can't come with me. You have to stay here. You're too important, both to the Inquisition and to me."

"Aida? I'm going to get a nurse, just hold on - "

She held his hand tighter. "No, listen to me. You - hmmm, what's that you're wearing? It's rather different for you. Come closer."

He obeyed her and let her slide a hand up his arm, over the curve of his bicep. Her fingertips gave him goosebumps, and a little smile appeared on her face as she touched the light fabric of his t-shirt.

"Well, I like that I can see more of you for once."

Cullen watched her settle back against the pillow, straightening the sheets out around her with an imperious air. He could tell just by her gestures that she wasn't herself again, she was that other Aida from the other world, talking through his Aida - but he couldn't help but feel that they were of the same mind right now, and his decision to pick up a weapon to defend her was upsetting them both.

"You're not going to listen to me, are you? Stubborn man. You're lucky you're so handsome or I would have chucked you out quite some time ago."

Cullen tilted his head at her, unable to not enjoy this plummy new accent of hers. Aida would have never said 'chucked', or practically purred the words 'stubborn man' at him.

"Aida, there is no way in the Void that I am going to ever let you out my sight again - " He stopped her from interjecting, continuing without listening to her. "I'm going with you to these, um... battles."

"No, you're going back to Skyhold, back to your desk... You remember your desk, don't you?"

Cullen watched her face take on a nostalgic air as she gave him a look he could only define as saucy.

"Do you - remember - what we did on your desk?"

Cullen inhaled. In this world, he and Aida had once had a little fun on his desk at work too. It wasn't that hard to say back to her, "I do," even if he had to swallow before saying so.

"Kiss me? Please?"
Without a pause, he leaned over to press his lips to hers as he cupped her face with his hands. When he pulled back, Aida's eyes and hand were no longer glowing green, and the hospital room returned to its normal, clinical lighting. When she spoke again, Aida was herself.

"Well, that's a nice wake up call. Except it's the middle of the night. You're so fucking romantic, did you know that?"

He chuckled, sitting down on the cot and rubbing his face. "Aida, you are the one who woke me up to lecture me. It was the you, from that other time and place, and you thought I was the... you know, the guy in the armor with the sword and the cloak. You didn't want me to come with you, into the field, I guess. Everything that's happening to us has happened before. We're just caught up in it. And I'm not going anywhere, alright? You tell that other Aida in there and all the other million Aidas in the galaxy that I'm going to stop anyone from ever hurting you, or the baby. End of negotiations."

Aida pouted and made a sound of annoyance that really signaled to him she was his woman again. "Fine. You always get your way. When's the last time I got my way anyhow?"

Cullen thought about it. Ever since she had come back from the Fade, everything had been tumult, they were just swept along in what life was dealing to them. Out of nowhere, he remembered the last time they ate at a nice restaurant together so long ago, and how he had even let her pick what he was going to eat, a simple and elegant bowl of 'cacio e pepe'. He took one of her hands in both of his.

"Make a wish, Aida, and let me see if I can fulfill it, right now."

"I want mint chip ice cream. And french fries. Do you think they'd let you out of wherever we are to get those things, or maybe they'd get them for us?"

He kissed the palm of her hand, the one that was going to save the world.

"I'll find out."

She yawned and settled back onto the bed. "When you get back, we can talk about how the woman who has done nothing but strive to keep us apart is still alive too."

Cullen ignored the shiver that went down his spine as he turned and headed for the door. He heard Aida's voice calling after him.

"Don't forget the ketchup!"
Tour of Duty

Chapter Notes

I think there's about a whole 12 of you still reading this, so guess what: I LOVES YA. I LOVES EVER ONE OF YA.

Sorry for the long delay on this short-ish update, I won't be so slackery on the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Aida had always wanted to see more of Thedas, she just never thought she’d do so while nine months pregnant.

The Hissing Wastes was barren but beautiful, the Western Approach full of echoes of the past. During her trips to the coastline along the Waking Sea it never stopped raining, but she loved the scenery regardless. They dragged her around like a piece of equipment, unloading her in the middle of chaos caused by rift after rift. She fought back more than they wanted her to, but she couldn't explain it to anyone, her enchanted sword seemed to leap into her palm without her summoning it and being near these strange rifts filled her with an energy she had never felt in her life. There had been a few times when she had tried to speak to Morrigan about how she had appeared to her in a dream before she had come to collect her in the forest. Morrigan insisted she had not purposely done any such thing, but the words of that dream still haunted Aida - that she was born to do these things, they were her destiny.

"Darling, I wish you would follow orders, just a little bit. We have strictly asked you not to engage with any demons, just close the rifts. Part of military life is - "

Aida reached out to hold Cullen's hand. They were sleeping on two cots pushed together in an encampment somewhere in the Orlesian countryside. The last time Aida had been in this area she had been vacationing at the summer mansion of one of her posh college friends and now they were returning to the area to close a rift and clear out a pack of Corypheus's rampaging red lyrium-addled revolutionaries.

"Cullen, I never signed up for this, I'm not military personnel, I'm - "
"I know. And I'm not a Templar anymore, I'm just -"
"I know."

It was a conversation they had had more than a few times. They were just enduring all of this, together.

Cullen rolled onto his side to look at her. "Are you comfortable?"
"Fuck no."

Aida smiled and drank in his rich laughter. She knew she sounded like a greeting card or a cheap sentiment pasted over a picture of a sunset on a social media post, but it was true, as long as they were together, nothing else mattered. They could throw them into the deepest, darkest hole on this planet and if she could still make him laugh, she'd be content to never see the sun again. Cullen caressed her fingers and his voice grew more conspiratorial. "Tell me again. You think Leliana is
alive? Are you certain?"

Aida dropped her voice to a whisper too, unsure of who could be listening. "I just have this -
feeling. And I know 'feelings aren't enough to clear you of committing a major crime, but it's possible
the Inquisition has more proof that could clear my name."

"I know you were nowhere near that murder scene."
"Yes darling, but you're just too handsome, nobody would ever believe you."

He kissed her fingers now and gave one of her knuckles a little nibble. "Mmmm, whenever you
flatter me, it makes me want to tear your clothes off with my teeth."

Aida groaned as she pulled her hand out of his to cover her eyes. "I look like a sea monster right
now. Don't say things like that to me right now."

He drew her hand back toward him to kiss her palm and press it to the side of his face. "I will. I will
say what I wish in regards to your body, especially when you are emanating beauty and strength
from every pore on your body. Haven't you seen how the soldiers treat you?"

She had, it was hard to not notice. Even though she felt as important as a missile launcher - the final
weapon to be unleashed on the enemy and nothing more - the soldiery didn't treat her so. These
brave men and women from all over Thedas were eager just to get a look at her or shake her hand as
she passed, the nurses keen to surround her in the canteen, trading both stories from the emergency
ward and tales of impending motherhood. She moved through their ranks with the quiet realization
that she was their leader, even if the orders were plotted by others, sometimes by her own husband. It
was a heady thought, to be responsible for lives, to push back against whatever was on the other side
of the Veil, and also soon be somebody's mother. The baby inside her gave her a kick, rousing her
from the brief reverie she had fallen into.

"Maybe I should enter politics after this. I've shaken enough hands to know how to begin, all I need
are the fancy speeches and I'm set."

Cullen tried to edge closer to her, as much as he could on a separate cot. "You could do that, or we
could go back to the forest when all of this is through. Do you know what I still think about? When I
fucked you on that muddy creek bank."

Aida covered her eyes in again as they laughed together. "Must you bring that up every day?"

* * * * *

Aida and Cullen slept three hours and then were roused by the sound of the encampment roiling with
turmoil around them. Aida heard shouting soldiers and then that was drowned out by an ear-piercing
alarm. Aida sat up, her hands over her ears.

"What does that mean? We haven't heard that one before?"
"Get up, Aida, we have to move. Let me help you."

It felt like the baby was doing somersaults inside of her but she followed Cullen's orders, hearing an
urgent note in his voice she had grown to recognize during this strange tour of duty. With a hand on
her lower back he helped her walk a little quicker as they headed toward the Inquisition command
post. Aida pushed open the door and saw panic on every face.

"A rift has opened - right over downtown Haven."
Aida felt Cullen's arm cradle her more and squeeze her tight. Her family, her friends, the one place she had always thought of as home...

Lace Harding, a high-ranking Inquisition officer, turned from the monitor that was replaying drone footage they had picked up from the metropolis. "Aida - this is it. We won't be able to keep you a secret any longer. The world is going to see everything you do. Even if we cleared out every news copter, there's still millions of cell phones out in the world."

She was barely aware of someone scrambling to bring a chair over to her so she could sit. She lowered herself onto it, woozy and tired.

"I'm wanted for murder by the Haven PD. What happens when they see me on Youtube sewing up a Rift in the sky?"

Morrigan emptied the room with a terse dismissal, but as soon as she was alone with Cullen and Aida, her demeanor changed - to one of helplessness.

"I don't know. I don't know what happens."

Aida gripped Cullen's hand harder. "You tell them - I didn't do it. You give them the proof you told us you had!"

Morrigan’s voice grew small, she was almost down to a whisper. "I couldn't force a pregnant woman to get on a helicopter. I had to find a way to get you on it willingly. Don't you get it, Aida? You're the only one who can save the world at the moment? I couldn't do anything about how you were in the middle of your own personal soap opera. And I still can't."

"So you're saying you have nothing that can clear Aida’s name? If we return home, the Haven PD is going to arrest her?"

"Considering she will be in the middle of an international task force, they won't be able to do it right away."

Cullen stood up and knocked everything off the table in front of them with one sweep of his arm, startling both women. He then paused, his eyes closed, until Aida spoke up.

"We should go, Cullen. The mission comes first. We will worry about the rest of it later."

* * * * *

Aida didn’t know how to tell anyone her contractions started on the helicopter ride, or how good it was to be home, even in these strange circumstances, the streets empty of citizens, cars clogging the highways out of town. They flew over the park where she and Cullen used to sit on a blanket and drink wine and make passing pedestrians uncomfortable with their kissing and landed right in front of City Hall. She looked over at Cullen and gave him a smile, and she heard his voice through the comm device in her ear. "Home sweet home."

Aida stepped out of the helicopter, flanked by soldiers on every side. She looked up at the sky and saw several news copters hovering a few blocks away, desperate for a glimpse of what was happening. There had been a part of Aida that didn't want people to know she was some sort of strange conduit of unexplainable magic energy, but today, things were different. Today she wanted them to see her at work. She was not a murderer, she was a caregiver and a nurturer, a nurse and an artist, and she was going to save the city she loved.

Her team pushed forward with their enchanted weaponry, they were now used to handling the
swooping, circling demons, but there was a moment of sheer terror as two enormous pride demons stepped out of the breach. Aida had handled one of these behemoths on her own, but two was overwhelming, especially in her condition. She was vaguely aware of Cullen speaking to her, prompting her to Fade-step around them, *do you remember, you can do this? You've done it before, Aida, can you hear me?*

Each time she pushed herself to leap around the giants, she heard shouts of alarm from her unit, commands to stand down, to wait for the other mages on the team to strike with their lightning, but she disregarded all of it. They were good soldiers, but they could not hit as hard as she could.

"I think my water broke!"
"Aida, stand down, let us handle this!"

Aida Fade-stepped three more times around one of the pride demons, tying up its feet with a magic lasso, a trick she had learned to conjure on her own. It collapsed in front of her, just in time for her to brace for a crippling contraction.

"This baby is on the way!"
"Aida, please stop engaging the enemy, we will handle it, we -"
"You can't close the Rift without me!"

She was hit with a wave of pain so sharp it made her see white, as she emitted a howl that made the second pride demon turn away from the handful of Templars it had been toying with. Aida realized she was no longer standing, but rather slowly sinking to her knees as the demon stomped its way toward her. Her mana was almost depleted, she had wasted too much of it on the first wave of attacks.

"Cullen, don't - "

She was vaguely aware of him fighting his way toward her but was it him? Aida had seen so many versions of him, which one was this? Aida felt tears rolling down her face as she thought of the Cullen who had died in her arms, the one who had sacrificed himself for her, the one who had put the baby inside of her. He was the Cullen at her side now, holding her hand a little too hard.

"Babe - "
"Oh, I always liked it when you called me that. Don't know why. Oh sweetie, there's a demon behind you..."

Cullen helped her lie down even though the look on his face told her he really wished she'd not give birth right here in the middle of the battlefield. "I know, don't worry about it, I think they have it under control."

"They don't. Give me one of those mana potions - "
"Aida, please, can't you just lie here and, have the baby as quickly as possible?"
"No, because we're all going to die."

The pride demon had stopped on its way toward Aida to contemplate a small compact car parked at the sidewalk. The soldiers shouted at it to get its attention but now it seemed fascinated with the shiny red surface of the car. Like a child choosing a toy, it picked it up with two hands as though testing its weight. Aida gulped down the mana potion and closed her eyes, feeling it sliding through her veins and soothing away some of her pain.

"Cullen, could you - "
"What, what do you need?"
"Duck."

He crouched out of her way as she pushed herself up onto an elbow and raised a hand at the demon. With every fiber of her magic force, she pulled the car out of its grip and let it hover ten feet above it. She shrieked as another contraction tore through her but she stayed focused as she raised it a few feet higher.

"Cullen..."
"Yes, sweetheart?"

Aida clenched her fist and dropped the car on the demon’s head. It crumpled to the ground like a cartoon character being hit with an anvil. As the troops cheered, she raised her other hand and sealed up the rift above them.

"I'd really like to go to the fucking hospital now..."

* * * * *

Too much drama.

It was the only thing she could focus on as she laid on her back in her hospital bed, waiting out the terrible pauses between the contractions. The journey to the hospital itself had already been an adventure as the Inquisition caravan had to push its way through a media blitzkrieg just to get to the doors of the ER. Once inside, it had been complete chaos, with the Haven PD already waiting for her, along with her father and her siblings - and a fleet of very capable Trevelyan lawyers. Cullen was all tangled up in that mess as he tried to find out if the police really intended to arrest a woman in the middle of giving birth, leaving Aida alone for a moment to stare at the ceiling and contemplate what a complete shitshow the Maker had made of her life. Who was in charge of all of this? Who put her in the middle of this unbelievable plot? She laughed to herself, and at herself, because there was always the chance it could get crazier.

Just as she was wondering if everyone had actually forgotten about her, three hospital staffers tried to walk through the door at the same time - her old friends and coworkers, Vivienne, Sera and Dorian. Before she could make a wisecrack about the quality of service at this establishment, she was enveloped in hugs, everyone fighting for a handle on her. Dorian stepped back with an overdramatic gasp.

"You're as big as the Titanic. What's in there?"
"A baby, Dorian! And it's almost here!"

Vivienne brushed the sweaty hair off her forehead for her. "Where have you even been, darling?"

"In the forest, with Cullen's family."

Sera snorted and then realized she was telling the truth. "What? Seriously? Are they Dalish? Funny, he doesn't look Dalish."

"I don't have time to get into it right now, she's almost here."

Sera's face went back to disbelief. "She? How do you know? Did you have time for obstetrician visits while you were on the lam?"

Aida squeezed her hand. "No, I just know."

Dorian looked at a few of the machines monitoring Aida's vitas. "Hmph, I knew the second I walked
in the room."
Vivienne gave her a wink. "I did too."

Sera let go of Aida's hand to cross her arms and pout at the three mages. "You guys are creepy, that's what you are."

Aida held her hand back out to her, feeling another contraction creeping up on her. "Please don't leave, you guys. Stay here and help me..."

She looked out of the window of her room into the hall, where Cullen was debating and arguing with a Haven PD police detective with her father at his side. "...Especially since the father of the baby is possibly under arrest for aiding and abetting a fugitive."

"But, darling, I'm not an obstetrician, and it isn't exactly Sera's speciality either."

Dorian smoothed down his mustache which Aida knew was a cue that he was about to say something self-important. "Yes, but I - happen to be a doula."

Everyone burst out laughing but Aida stopped when she remembered it was true. "That's right, you did it to impress that guy who worked in the maternity ward. How did that go, I forgot?"

"Not good! He's married to someone else now. A fireman too, can you believe it? No! No more laughing. Let's get down to business, shall we? No, don't push yet, you stubborn woman."

* * * * *

Hours crept by as Aida struggled and swore her way through childbirth, pining for Cullen to return, quietly petrified that something was wrong with the baby she had conceived in the Fade. They let her pace around her room instead of lie flat on her back, but Aida was too scared she'd be arrested the second she stepped into the hallway to find out what had happened to Cullen. A wave of heartbreak hit her when she wondered if the drive over to the hospital had been her last moments with her husband before they were separated for a long time. Tears rushed to her eyes as she pulled Sera closer to the bed.

"Listen to me, if something happens to me, and Cullen can't help - "
"Don't talk like that, breathe, c'mon..."
"No, listen. You have to make sure Cullen's family knows about the baby, they deserve to know her. Find his sister in South Reach and make sure the rest of them off the grid find out. And I want her to live with Emilia. Let her grow up in the house I grew up in."

Vivienne put a hand on her forehead and pushed a little calming, cooling magic throughout her limbs. "Darling, stop. Just concentrate on what's at hand."

Aida yelped as a sharp contraction hit her, harder than the others had. "Aida, it's happening, your daughter has stopped vacillating and decided she'd like to come out now. I love how she's just like you already: a total stubborn pain in the ass."

She wanted to tell him to shut up but it was impossible to unclench her jaw as she grunted and pushed. She was almost here, Lila Rutherford, a child of pure miracle magic, a baby who shouldn't even exist.

"Dorian! How much longer!"
"Soon if you stop talking and push!"

After that, it was like climbing a mountain, pulling herself up inch by inch. Sweat rolled down her
face, she shouted Cullen's name even though he wasn't there. Calling for him made her think about the other Cullen again - the knife in the museum, the night they had conceived her. He wasn't here either, and it broke her heart all over again.

But then a tiny wail filled the room, accompanied by Sera and Vivienne's sniffles. Dorian cradled the tiny new life in his arms and held her up so Aida could see her. A big, 8 pound baby girl, who one by one, unfolded her arms and then properly shrieked at the top of her new lungs.

"It's a big, healthy, perfect baby girl."

Everyone grew silent as they realized Cullen was standing in the doorway, staring at his wife and his brand new child.

"Cullen! Look, it's -"

Aida stopped when she saw the look on his face. He was pale, his eyes wide.

"What's wrong, Cullen? Say something!"
"He's just overcome. Step over here and cut the cord, man. Come say hello to your little girl."

He shook off his shock and stepped forward to help, and a few moments later after Lila was cleaned up and weighed she was lying in Aida's arms, nursing right away. Aida watched in wonder as Cullen's fingers brushed over her soft head, so gentle. In that little moment what was two became three, and they were now their own little army. She looked into Cullen's eyes.

"Aida, I have some news. Leliana is still alive. There was no body, no autopsy report, it was all faked. Your father and sister have been doing their own digging while Haven PD covers up their incompetence. Or the possibility that a dead woman walked out of the morgue two days after we left the city."

His face changed from stress and exhaustion to one of utter happiness as Lila held one of his fingers tight, but he looked up at Aida once he noticed she had fallen into a stunned silence. A chill had run up and down her spine that had made her mouth run dry at the mere mention of that woman's name.

Aida had to swallow a few times before she could properly speak.

"That - is not what I thought you were going to say."

Chapter End Notes

Please follow me at thetemplarandtherogue.tumblr.com. I love to RT Dragon Age, Witcher and other fantasy art and lots of images that spur on my fan fiction writing. Let's inspire each other!

[Also! Stay tuned for my new Cullen/Trevelyan AU fic - PIRATES style - and before certain fandom critics can ask, yes, I am staying away from ALL the problematic storylines that featured in my now deleted piece, When in Denerim, so calm thy breasts in advance and have a wonderful Thorsday.]
Chapter Notes

If you're still tuned in, this fan fiction behemoth still has plenty o' story to get through!

And I hadn't written any Aida and Cullen smut in a bit so enjoy...because it might be a while before you get a little more, she added in an ominous tone...

For two weeks, Cullen and Aida kept pretending.

They had two weeks of familial bliss with little Lila, who like all newborns had a lot of demands. The pair was exhausted but elated, under one roof together, and deeply in love. "Auntie Sera" had even figured out how to get Barkley home, having met up with Rosalie in Gwaren where she would sometimes buy things the off-the-grid Rutherfords couldn't make with their own two hands. Everyone was reunited in Skyhold, and now Barkley's favorite place to nap was next to Lila's crib.

In the mornings during those two weeks, sometimes Cullen stood in the shower and was overcome by the fact that he was so happy. He hadn't known it back when he was a drug addict and living in a rut of loneliness and sorrow, that this is what he had been dreaming about, reaching toward. Since his relapse, Cullen had not given lyrium a second thought, but maybe he had been so busy and it hadn't been discipline that kept his mind from his old addiction but rather a lack of quiet time. But now, he knew he was cured for good, he'd never need it again. He felt high when he walked into their shared bedroom in Skyhold and found Aida breastfeeding the baby, sitting in a rocking chair. He could close his eyes and conjure this image in his mind, her bare feet on the carpet, Aida still clad in the convent nightgown she had brought all the way down from the Anderfels, one hand on the back of his child's head, her hair loose and resting on her bare shoulders. He only needed his family. They were all he wanted.

Everything was perfect - except he couldn't sleep.

He kept having the same dream.

Gone were the torture scenes from Kirkwall whose scenes used to loop before his eyes during his addiction and withdrawal days. Now he was being haunted by this new nightmare. The details would sometimes be different, but the dread was always the same. He would be walking with Aida and Lila on a country road, a lot like Honnleath, and at a fork in the road he would realize Aida and the baby had taken a left while he had walked in the opposite direction. But he could never follow them, he just watched them walk farther and farther away until he couldn't see them anymore. He couldn't yell, he couldn't move. They just drifted away from him until they disappeared over the horizon and it had felt like someone had carved his heart out of his body.

Sometimes he dreamed Aida was at a sidewalk cafe, eating dinner with another man, Lila's carriage pulled up to the table. And again, he could not move, he stood on the opposite corner watching Aida treat this man exactly as she would treat him, offering him a ravioli from her plate, refilling his glass of wine. It wasn't him. It should be him. That was his kiss that man was receiving, that was his life over there, on the other side of traffic. He would look down at his own feet and try to will them to move and every time, he was glued to the sidewalk. He hated this version of the dream, it was too
detailed, it felt specific and horrific and each time he woke from it he would look over at Aida and touch her, just to make sure he could and that she was still there.

On some nights he was back in his condo in the high rise, but his life hadn't changed. His black suit jacket from his job as Leliana's bodyguard was on the sofa next to him, Barkley at his feet, a glass of whiskey in his hand. And Aida was on TV, in battle gear, leading a strike team into a battle with three swooping demons under a green crack in the sky. Even though his pulse was racing, he sat there like it was any other television show, watching as the soldiers at Aida's side fell one by one, until it was just her and her enchanted sword. Right before the pride demon could raise a claw to slam down on her, Cullen would sit up and change the channel. This dream used to make him want to get rid of every TV in Aida's father's home. He wanted to do it too, and wondered if people would think he'd gone crazy if he did so.

He would even dream during his naps - simple things, but still nightmares. In these dreams he was just going on with his life, but there would be no wedding ring on his finger, no mention of Aida. He went to work, he walked his dog, and nobody was waiting for him at home.

He didn't tell Aida about these dreams, he didn't want her to worry and he was good at acting like everything was fine. He also knew since coming back from the Fade Aida had developed a taste for thinking everything was a sign, down to the way the yolks landed in the bowl when she had made scrambled eggs that morning. Dorian claimed this character trait was nothing new, that Aida used to be superstitious about how many olives were in her martinis, but after that conversation with him he firmly decided to tell no one about his anxious night terrors. He'd keep it from everybody. Let it be his burden, he thought. Let everyone enjoy these days together, because he knew they had to come to an end. The Inquisition had been relying on some Fade-based devices that could keep demons under a Fade rift in one area, but they wouldn't hold forever and there were only so many of them, made by the scientist mages of Tevinter and on loan from their government. Aida would have to don her flak jacket again. She was the mother of his child but she was also the savior of the world.

He had just wanted more than two weeks. It was too short. The happiest days of his life shouldn't feel like he had been on a summer vacation, they should have stretched out before him for decades. He knew it was bound to happen, that he'd come back to Skyhold and find Inquisition representatives talking to Aida in the library, two soldiers posted at the door barring his access.

Emilia paced back and forth in the hallway, holding Lila and cooing to her. Barkley was moping on the landing of the stairs and Aida's father sitting nearby, holding his leash as though he had been ready to take him for a walk right as all of this had happened.

"What's going on?"
"What do you think. They've come to take her away," Aida's father responded, sounding broken already.

Cullen wanted to grab Aida, the baby and his dog and get into a car and drive straight to his brother's homestead. The rest of the world could go fuck itself. His former Templar sense of honor could go fuck itself. Everyone standing between him and his family could go to the Void and stay there. He took two steps toward the door but the soldiers stationed there only stood up straighter, their posture telling him there would be no passage.

"Can't we do something about this? Call someone, make them - "

Emilia cut him off. "Daddy called Alistair Theirin himself ten minutes ago. He claims he cannot help - and would not even if he could do so. He reminded us Aida is the only person keeping demons from tearing through our planet."
Cullen took the baby from her and didn't bother disguising the tears in his eyes. Emilia squeezed his arm, crying too. "We'll get through this somehow."

"How?"
"I don't know."

The doors opened and an Inquisition officer gestured at Cullen. "Please come in, Commander Rutherford."

Cullen ignored his own shock at being called his old title from his Templar days and also ignored Emilia holding her arms out to take the baby from him. He went in, carrying his child. If they were going to ruin his happiness, let them look at little Lila and see what was at stake.

Aida, Morrigan and some other staffers whose names he had completely forgotten stood around a map they had unrolled on a big mahogany table in the library. Aida looked tired and determined at the same time, but she perked up and smiled when he came in with the baby.

"Cullen, we've got two Rifts on opposite sides of Thedas to deal with. One in the Fallow Mire and another in the Hissing Wastes. The second one threatens oil pipelines and natural gas plants, but looks a little less intense than the one in the Fallow Mire. We will leave at -"

Aida faced him squarely and interrupted Morrigan. "Not 'we'. You will stay here with the baby."

A crisp silence filled the air. Everyone in the room had seen Cullen in combat with her, always at her back, her safety his only mission point. He felt light-headed with anger.

"No, I won't be separated from you. You know what you're asking for is impossible, Aida."

Morrigan gestured at the other squirming officers and they vacated the room quickly as soon as Cullen had raised his voice.

"Cullen, we can't argue about this, and you know that it's the right thing to do. We can't bring Lila into a war zone, think about it for just a moment. Don't think about me. I'm not important."

"Baby, please. Just sit down for a second. I've got some stuff to tell you."

Cullen chose a comfy arm chair nearby and Aida pulled up the ottoman that went with it to sit down near his knees. Aida took a deep breath and confessed to something he didn't expect.

"I am pretty sure I know where Corypheus is. And I am pretty sure these rifts are his doing."

Cullen stammered "pretty sure?" to himself in an incredulous tone a few times as he let this information sink in. "Why would you know anything about him?"

"Because I knew him, on the other side of the Veil. I was trapped there by this demon, running a simulation of my own life through my mind to torture me. But I mastered the game she was playing, I outsmarted her - by doing things there I would have never done here. Of course, I don't have his GPS coordinates, but I know in that world they had a small network of elluvians they were using to move agents around. He's somewhere deep in the Arbor Wilds, hidden well by sympathetic local villagers. And I know he was experimenting with using Fade tech to tear our world to pieces."

The baby cooed in Cullen's arms and opened her eyes to look up at him. Aida leaned forward to give Lila a finger to squeeze, and to look right at him too.
"I find him. I kill him. I come home."

Her steely tone made his stomach drop. "But Aida, you once said... You said you were no soldier. You don't have to go looking for him, just close those Rifts, let the Inquisition forces handle the rest of it."

"I am a soldier now, Cullen. It's too late to deny it anymore."
"What about Lila? She's not even a month old, she still needs you, she's not bottled trained, I - I'm not ready to be Super Dad yet."

"You are ready, Cullen." Aida drew closer now. "Everything you need is right here," she said as she pressed a hand to his heart. Cullen didn't hide his tears. He wanted to believe this was the beginning of the end of all of this, but too many terrible things were careening through his head, including standing in front of her flag-covered casket.

* * * * *

Cullen tried to enjoy his waning days with Aida, but it felt like his insides were packed with cotton. He buried himself in reading the parenting books he should been consuming while Aida was pregnant. If he woke up in the middle of the night after a nightmare, he rolled onto his side to watch her sleep. He barely heard Emilia as she explained in great detail how she had devised a complicated scheme to airlift Aida's breastmilk to him using Trevelyan Enterprise resources. It seemed like an awful lot of money when it could all be solved by forcing her to stay home or letting him and Lila go with her.

They were finally down to one last night together. Aida's family gave them plenty of space to savor these last hours. Dinner was served in their room and the plates taken away for them. Aida put the baby down for the night in the adjacent nursery and took a long, luxurious candlelit bath. Cullen was waiting for her in bed, knowing she'd want a lot of sleep on soft cotton sheets before returning to nights of restless tossing and turning on uncomfortable military cots - but he was mistaken.

Aida came back into their bedroom, fresh from the bath with a white towel wrapped around her and a very particular glint in her eye.

"Wh-what's up?" Cullen stammered, feeling a little nervous about how she was looking at him.

"So, we will be apart for a while. Hopefully not months and months."
"Please don't remind me. Just come to bed, Aida. You should sleep."

Cullen pulled back the edge of the comforter on her side of the bed but she shook her head at him, a blush on her cheeks.

"Would you help me with a little project, Cullen? I would like to take something with me when I go tomorrow."

He sat up straighter against the headboard. "Of course, Aida, whatever you want, whatever you need."

She revealed she had her phone in one hand. "Something wrong with your phone?"

"Cullen, I - just want to make a little video of you."

Cullen pointed at himself. "Me? What, like, me talking to you?"
She snorted, holding on to her towel so it wouldn't slip. "No, not - talking."

Cullen sputtered again. "Not talking, just - "

Aida nodded slowly as it began to sink in with Cullen about what she wanted. "Just me? Not you and me?"

"Just you. I gave birth two weeks ago, Cullen. I'm not ready quite yet to put it all out there on camera. But you... You look great, better than ever. Fatherhood suits you, did you know that? I'll be hard-pressed not to worry about you when I'm away, pushing our baby in her carriage in the park. Every woman in Haven is going to want to bite into you..."

She sat on the edge of the bed next to him and leaned in for a kiss, deep and sweet. "...like a cupcake." Cullen tried to pull her in, get her to drop the towel and get into bed with him and forget this video project, but she resisted, smiling against his lips.

"I know what you're trying to do and you can't get out of this, Cullen. Come on, give me this one little thing, before I go. Think of it as incentive for me to come home in one piece."

Cullen sighed, a hand on her cheek. "Aida..."

"Would it also motivate you if I told you that you and I have already done this once before, on the other side? Granted, I participated more then..."

Cullen felt a prick of lust and jealousy travel up and down his spine. "We have?"

Her face changed. "I'm sorry, I... I know I shouldn't talk about that other time, the other y-"

Cullen clenched his jaw. Anything he can do - I can do better."

He kissed her, feeling the flame building between them, a fire that he knew could not be extinguished. He whispered against her neck as he kissed a trail up and down her skin, still damp from her bath. "Tell me what to do, Aida, tell me what you want to see."

She readied her phone with a little excited shake in her hands. "Take your boxers off for me."

He stood up and discarded his boxers, keeping his eyes on her and not so much that intrusive camera. "Like back down. Spread out, let me see all that ex-Templar muscle. Mmm, that's nice. Roll over for a moment."

He obeyed, cushioning his face against a pillow. He felt the fingertips of her free hand travel down his back, down his spine, until she caressed his ass, her fingers digging in and massaging his flesh.

"Push up on your knees, show me that tight, hot ass of yours." The blood was rushing south now with every command she gave to him.

"Roll onto your back again please. Fuck, baby, you're so hot."

"What do you want, Aida? You want me to touch myself for you?"

"Yes, please."

He liked the way she said please, he always liked it when she begged him in the bedroom - or the backseat of a car, or in an elevator, or wherever their lust lead both of them. He'd make her earn this though. Even if she wasn't going to participate, he could still tease her a little. He put one arm behind his head, posing for her, while the other hand swept across his chest, brushing across both nipples,
before sweeping down his stomach. He gripped himself, and gave himself a few leisurely strokes.

"More..."

He gave his balls a little attention as he got into the spirit of Aida's artistic demands. He looked up at her, looking at him through her phone. She licked her lips. "What are you thinking about?"

"About how you should put that phone down, take that towel off, and let me fuck you good and hard before you go. Or at least, come here and sit on my face, let me lick you until you scream."

She laughed as she edged a little closer to him on the bed. Aida put her hand on top of his as he pleased himself, guiding him along, but he let go of his cock to tug at her towel quickly, freeing her breasts to his gaze. Maker, it made him harder, made him want her even more because there was more of her and even the scent of her bare skin was always like a beacon to him. One selfish thought went pulsing through his blood, how he longed to fill her up with his seed.

He saw her raise an eyebrow. Reading his thoughts again?

"I - "

"I know what you want, Cullen. And I wasn't reading your mind, you practically pushed those thoughts at me. Do you want my pussy?"

"Aida, please..." His hand moved faster but she slowed him down with her hand again.

"You want to see it dripping out of me, don't you?"

"Aida, please..."

"Do you want to lick my cunt then, taste both of us at the same time?"

"Yes, I want that..." Cullen pushed his head into the pillow behind him as he kept stroking himself for her gratification.

This was torture and bliss all at once, and all he wanted was her. He wanted to cover her with his flesh and hold her down in place so he could pump into her as hard as he could until he saw her eyes roll back in her head. As on cue, she surprised him back into the moment by making him remove his hand from his cock to observe it pointing skyward with great constancy.

"Look. Look how hard you are. You're so stiff, and hot - " Aida danced her fingers up and down his shaft, her eyes glowing. He wove a hand into her hair at the nape of her neck and pulled, every so slightly.

"Come on, put it in your mouth."

Aida exhaled, almost panting for him. She handed the phone to him with a determined look on her face. "Looks like you're the director now."

After that, it was only the sweetness of her mouth wrapped around him. She slurped and sucked and licked him all over and he made sure to pull her hair back from her face so every flick of her tongue was captured on video. He roughly pushed her down farther until she pulled back and gagged, drooling all over him even more. She buried her face against his balls and sucked each one of them until he had to pull her off and make her concentrate on his cock again. He chuckled a little as he aimed the camera at her.

"You're very, very, very good at this. In fact, I think I know how you can earn a little extra money when you come home."

She paused, letting him pop out of her mouth for a moment so she could respond. "Shut up, you're
ruining it."
"Then get back to work, Inquisitor."

Aida rolled her eyes at him. "No special ops code names in bed, Curly."

Before he could make her take that back, she had dipped her head and sucked him back into her mouth. Cullen made sure the camera was aimed right at Aida as he felt himself inching toward the edge of release. It was always oblivion being with her, lost in the intense pleasure she gave him every time, and his mind was empty of any other worry and any other words besides, don't stop, Aida. Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop.

With magical timing, she freed his cock from her mouth and wrapped a hand around him, stroking him until he was spurting uncontrollably, all over himself and her hand, some of it landing on her full breasts. With awe, he watched her wipe a little of his stickiness off of her, and then make eye contact with him as she put her fingers in her mouth. That nearly made him faint.

"Y-you better send me this video too. I'd like to rewatch it a few thousand times."

She smiled at him as he hit the stop button and let the phone fall onto the bed next to him with a satisfied huff. Aida cleaned them both off with her bath towel and got into bed with him, wrapping his arms around her.

"I'll be home before you even realize it. I won't let Corypheus keep me from filming a sequel with you as soon as possible."

* * * * *

The next morning Aida had to rejoin her special forces unit came too soon. Cullen watched as she said her goodbyes to her entire family. It reminded him too much of the day she stepped into that lab on the Tevinter Tech campus and disappeared, down to how Emilia and Bann Trevelyan clutched her tight, promising to take care of everything she was leaving behind. He knew they were assuring her about him too. He knew they pitied him and he accepted it. Their pity was an acknowledgement he was suffering.

Aida sobbed over the baby before passing her to Emilia, and then she took her time kissing Cullen goodbye, not caring who was watching or waiting. He felt her tears on his cheek as they stayed pressed together so nobody could hear what they were saying.

"If I go more than 72 hours without hearing about your status, I'm coming to get you. Nobody can stop me."
"I know."

Her lips were on his again, hungrier this time. "When I return, we'll hit the road, and get back to that cabin."
Cullen felt his heart squeeze just thinking of what she used to look like in the silver moonlight, under that hole in the roof. "I would like that very much."

Aida touched her forehead to his, her tone a little less emotional now. "Cullen. Please don't be stubborn while I'm away. Please let my family and our friends help you. Don't give me another thing to worry about."

"I will, I promise. You better go now, Morrigan's getting that 'let's get this Maker-damned helicopter in the air' look."

Cullen had to be make do with only three more sloppy, passionate kisses from her before he watched her fly away and right into unfathomable danger. He couldn't help it, he just felt his legs go out from underneath him and then he was sitting on the tarmac in dazed heartbeat. He sat there for a while, his head in his hands, listening to her helicopter growing fainter and fainter. And then he felt a hand pulling on his sleeve, keeping him from tumbling into a nervous breakdown right there on the spot. Cullen looked up and was amazed to find Varric standing before him, in Inquisition gear.

"Hey, you can't sit here buddy, this is a busy military base. Get up."

He let Varric help him up and then he looked around. Mingling among Aida's family were some familiar faces - his old coworkers Iron Bull, Cassandra and Blackwall, joined by Aida's colleagues from the hospital, her cousin Dorian and best friend Sera, and even two of Aida's superiors, Dr. Solas and Dr. Vivienne. He had to blink a few times when he realized Aida's former caretaker Cole was taking a moment to pet Barkley while everyone else chatted and donned more combat gear. Varric lead Cullen over to everyone, Cullen shocked to see all of them.

"You'll pardon my Orlesian, but what the fuck is going on here?"

Cassandra stepped forward to speak for the group. "Cullen, we know you can't go with her, and - we can't let her go on her own."

Cullen shook his head, focusing on Blackwall. "What about Josie, what about your little boy?" Blackwall just shook his head back at him. "Don't worry, Cullen. I have no intention of dying. That woman would never let me hear the end of it, even from beyond the grave."

Cullen clapped a hand on his shoulder and looked over at Iron Bull, who shrugged at him. "Like I'd let Dorian go without me." Cullen looked at Cass next, who blushed and coughed a little, tilting her head toward Varric ever so slightly. He looked down at his friend who had a victorious grin on his face. "She wouldn't let me go alone either."

Cullen grinned at Varric. He wanted to ask him how he had gotten the grumpiest woman at work to finally love him back, but he felt Sera tugging on his other sleeve. "Won't let anything happen to her, right? Me and creepy ghosty guy over there, and the two snooty mages, and of course, Mr. Mustache too."

The mages approached him, Solas speaking first. "Dr. Vivienne convinced me it would be good for my Fade research to accompany her. I've been looking for a way to prove that Elven -" Vivienne interrupted him with an aristocratic hand in the air. "Cullen doesn't need to know all of that, and even if he was interested, we wouldn't have the time. What matters darling, is that each of us cares about you, and Aida, and doing something about these cracks in the sky."

Cullen stared at all of them, tears building up in his eyes again. "How can I ever repay all of you for this?"

Everyone answered at once but the din of another helicopter landing in front of them drowned them out. Cullen hugged each one of them tight, these friends and a few almost-strangers had given him some new hope. His old coworkers were highly trained, the mages formidable and wielding super-powered battle staffs, and Sera was just crazy enough to shoot anything that would even come near Aida. Maybe Aida was right, maybe she'd be home sooner than he thought, the memory of this taxing day wiped out by her triumphant return.

Cullen felt his phone buzz in his pocket. He pulled it out of his pocket and glanced at the screen.
Oh, good.

Aida had remembered to send him *that video* from last night.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, for reading! I appreciate the kudos and the comments.

Follow me at thetemplarandtherogue.tumblr.com for Dragon Age, Witcher, Game of Thrones, and other fantasy realms/RPG/video game content. I like to post images that spur on my writing so join me and let's be inspired together!

Also if I sprout another pair of arms, I might have another modern Geralt/Ciri fic in me. And head over to read my friend @purpledragondix's Thranduil piece she just uploaded too!
The Hostage Crisis

Chapter Notes

Warning: you're going to kill me.

That Herald of Andraste stuff wouldn't go away.

The press wouldn't let it drop, the people in the cities and towns that she had 'liberated' kept her myth and her legacy burning bright, and in a few remote places they kept shrines to her. It all made her uneasy, she wanted to tell them all that she was a regular soldier like everyone else in the Inquisition, far away from their families, eating mess hall food and dreaming of a home-cooked meal. Despite her feelings, the crowds kept pushing in on her as she rolled into a new territory. They wanted to see her, touch her sleeve. The citizens of Thedas wanted too much and all Aida wanted was for them to know she was just like them.

Vivienne scoffed at this once, as they rode in a bumpy jeep through the desolation of the Hissing Wastes. "You have never been that regular, darling. You grew up fabulously wealthy, and then you turned your back on all of it for good, honest work. You're like a character in a fairy tale, being called forth into adventure for a greater purpose."

At this, Sera and Cassandra snorted from the back seat. Aida smiled, even though everyone was focusing on her again, the very thing she kept trying to avoid. "She's not much of a fairy tale. I've seen her throw up in her fair share of alleys behind bars. I once saw her throw up into her own purse in the back of a cab!"

More laughter. Aida drank it in. It was easier than thinking about her baby and her man, so far away. Every time she thought of them, it was hard to speak. She could only worry, even though Cullen sent her constant updates - photos, texts, emails, gifts, and even a few hand-written letters. He had such good handwriting, and he was a better writer than he realized, his letters full of sparkling details. Aida sunk into a little reverie thinking about how he had begun that last letter. "Do you think you will be home by Satinalia? I know it is months away, but I cannot wait to spend the holidays with you."

Cassandra's snort of disgust pulled her back to the conversation. "That should certainly disqualify you from fairy tale status. That, and the way you used to wipe your feet on Cullen before you were officially dating. Some princess!"

Aida turned all the way around in her seat to stare at Cass with her mouth open. "Oh come on, don't play so innocent. He was mooning around for months, just dying to give you his heart, and you were, what?"

Sera continued the story, "Dating a total tool. I hated him."
"We all hated him." Vivienne added with a purr.

Aida rested her chin on the seat in front of her, still facing her friends. "I know. I wasted so much time. If I could go back, I'd do so many things differently." Sera reached out to hold her hand for a moment. "Yeah, but if you did, maybe we wouldn't be here right now. You wouldn't be saving the world."
"I'm not saving the world."

They responded in unison, exactly like she expected they would: "Yes you are."

It might have been right if they only stuck to the saving the world stuff, but there was so much more to it, as their efforts grew and became more intense. Inquisition mage-scientists studied her like she was the last of her species. They drew blood, they scanned her hand before and after every battle, stared into her eyes and down her throat. Aida worried they were trying to weaponize the magic in her hand, use it to fight future wars - but against each other. They were bound together now in one cause, but after they got rid of Corypheus, would the peace hold? It was too big of a concept to worry about, but one evening, she used their constant prodding of her body as leverage in getting something she wanted for once.

"I need a knife."

Morrigan didn't look up from the drone footage they were watching in their mobile command unit, deep within a hidden crevasse in the Hissing Wastes.

"We can get you a knife."
"No, this is a very specific knife. It's under two inches of protective glass in the Natural History museum in downtown Haven."

Morrigan and two sergeant majors flanking her paused in their work. "But whatever for, Inquisitor Rutherford?"

That title always made her freeze. It didn't feel right to be called that, but it was indeed her title - and a last name she was still getting used to. "I need it. It's for the mission, the big one."

"You know that we have two more Fade rifts to close before we can head to the Arbor Wilds, and our drone footage from the area turns up no encampment like the one you've described."

"That's because I keep telling you, you need an elluvian to get there."

She saw one of the sergeants pinching the bridge of his nose. It made her smile, it was too much like Cullen's response to her when he thought she was being unreasonable.

"Aida, there are no more working elluvians on this planet. They only exist as pictures in textbooks now, exhibits in museums."

She watched the Inquisition leadership return to their screens and briefs and war plans.

"Why won't you believe me? Why won't you believe what I saw on the other side?"

Morrigan gave her staff a look that they read immediately, and they vacated the room for a moment. As soon as the last sergeant was through the door, she turned to Aida with an earnest and sincere look. "You know that I believe you, it's a matter of - I can't base military strategy on what you saw in the Fade. People will think we've gone mad."

Aida was not the kind of woman who cried whenever the impulse to do so struck her, but perhaps it was being away from her life for so long now that left her feeling so raw and sensitive. Tears popped into her eyes as she sat down in a nearby chair. "What happened to me there, was very real. I sat at Corypheus's feet as he preached his insanity, I patched up his wounded, I know what kind of cigarettes Calpernia smokes - I even know where in that encampment she likes to enjoy that cigarette. Give me a chance to prove it to you. Just one chance."
Morrigan paced and glanced at a few of the monitors nearby. "We really need to get back to Emprise de Lion. We were going to leave at daybreak."

Aida put her head in her hands for a moment and then sat up to look at this woman who dropped in out of nowhere and changed the path of her life. "I know you know how to activate an elluvian. I know you are a more powerful mage than you let on, and because the world no longer thinks arcane magic is of any deep importance, you've tucked it all away inside of you."

Morrigan had come to a stop and was staring at her now as Aida put the finishing touches on her statement. "I know who your mother was, and how you grew up. You know elluvians are real and that magic is the most powerful weapon on this planet."

"H-how..."
"I can read minds and you get pretty bored during all these helicopter trips. Psionic powers was just one of the after effects of spending three fucking months trapped in the the Fade. I also came back with a baby and a glowing green hand."

Morrigan seemed winded by the mere mention of her mother. Aida stood up and cracked her knuckles. "We'll close the next Fade rift but before we go to the second one, I want the mirror, I want the knife -"

The mage looked up at Aida as she paused. " - and I want to know where Leliana is. You promised me you'd try to help find her and your thoughts on this matter are always scrambled."

Morrigan gave her a weak smile, helpless and defeated. "She's in Haven. That's all I know. And she's closer to your husband than you think."

Aida stood up and stormed out of the room, pulling the phone from her pocket. It was after dinner, the baby should be down and he should still be awake. She walked all the way out of the building and into the heat of the Hissing Wastes. As the phone rang she looked up at the desert night sky and wondered how many of these stars Cullen could see from Skyhold as another part of her mind chanted pick up, pick up, pick up. She closed her eyes and imagined him walking around Skyhold, she tried willing his feet to walk toward the end table in their room where he left his phone, why didn't he have it on him, where was he. The panic attack spread out across her limbs and she felt a powerful longing for a cigarette, every time the phone rang she wanted another one, and another one and -

"Aida! What's up, what's wrong?" She heard the fear in his voice. He was as worried about her as she was about him.
"Nothing, well, not nothing, but - "
"Take a deep breath. Remember how you once showed me? In through your nose and out through your mouth."

Aida spotted a boulder nearby and forced herself to stumble over to it and sit down. She was lightly sweating now and her mouth felt like it was full of sand.

"Babe. What's going on? Do you need me? Need me to come to you?" He clearly wanted her to say yes but she needed him to be stay in Haven with their child.

"Have you seen Leliana?"
"Is that what this is about? You know that I haven't, that no one has."
"Morrigan said she's there, in the city - closer to you than you think."

He said nothing for a while and Aida realized her hand holding the phone was shaking. She
breathed deeply, trying to calm down.

"I can tell you what I do every day. When the baby wakes up, I feed her. I make sure your father and your sister see her before they go to work. I take her and Barkley for a walk - "

"Where, tell me where -"

"In the neighborhood, sometimes in the park near City Hall, sometimes we go to the farmer's market - "

She imagined someone watching them, Cullen pushing the stroller with Barkley jogging at his side, all his attention on Lila, not noticing anything around them.

"Sometimes we run an errand or two. Buy diapers, formula, tiny adorable socks."

She smiled through her tears. "What color?"
"Every color. I bought her 20 pairs of socks the other day because they were in so many different shades and I thought you'd love them."

Aida wiped her nose on her sleeve with a sigh. She should be there, they should be together, cooing over Lila's tiny fingers and toes together. "Hey, I'm sorry, I interrupted you when I asked about the socks. What else do you do?"

He paused, giving Aida another opportunity to begin to panic. "Once a week I take her back to Skyhold and Emilia is waiting for me. She watches Lila for about an hour or two while I go to therapy."

Aida blinked a few times in surprise. "Therapy?"

Cullen cleared his throat. "You know, while you were - away, the other time - I found it very helpful. And I find it helpful now."

They sat in silence for a while. A pair of soldiers saluted her as they passed and she returned the gesture, as uncomfortable as it made her.

"Does it bother you? I feel like I can say anything there, it's just a support group for people whose spouses are away on active duty."

Aida felt something burning inside of her and she realized it was irrational jealousy. "Is Sierra Amell there? Didn't you meet her at something like this?"
"Aida, I haven't seen or heard from her in a long, long time. She has not attempted to contact me nor I her."

It was the answer she wanted to hear but it still made her want a drink.

"I'm sorry. Please go to the group. I'm just tired. And I want to come home so bad."
"I know."

He let her keep talking. She wanted to bury him in pointless details so maybe he'd forget her moment of jealousy and selfishness. She only got off the phone with him when it seemed like he was falling asleep in the middle of one of her stories.

But she couldn't forget it. She kept imagining him sitting in a circle of chairs and the women studying him. How many of them were hoping she wouldn't come home? How many of them were admiring him every time they saw him, his rich, seductive voice, the way he held himself, his gestures, his sad smiles?
Then she wondered what Leliana was capable of. She had money - or at least once she did? Can someone dead on paper still have money? Money can buy you magic.

A lot of money can buy you blood magic.

Aida didn't sleep that night.

* * * * *

Two days later they reached the rift in a distant corner of the Hissing Wastes with no trouble. Aida was getting used to the routine so much so that they were beginning to banter with each other even as demons swept around them. The demons weren't thinking things, they never got smarter, even if they came in bigger sizes with sharper fangs. Aida hoped the end was near, and she could go back to the ER, back to her family, be a working mother, be a good wife, and fulfill her real destiny, and stop intervening in fantastical things she had never wished to see during her lifetime.

A few hours before they were set to deploy to Emprise de Lion, Aida was sitting in the mess hall thinking about her life back in Haven, just waiting for her there, when she heard a commotion on the other side of the room. It was Morrigan, but instead of being flanked by her usual coterie of officers, she had Dorian and Sera at her side, and everyone had the same look on their face - pure panic. Morrigan was grabbing soldiers and asking them something, and Aida had the distinct feeling they were looking for her. She stood up and called out to her.

"Morrigan?"
"Aida! Inquisitor. I - "

Aida became slowly aware that everyone in the mess haul was looking at them and conversations had dropped away. Dorian's face was grim, and it was an expression she had seen many times before, when Aida or Vivienne was unable to save a patient in the ER despite all of their best efforts. For a slim second or two before he spoke, Aida heard the wind pick up outside, blowing dust against the windows.

"It's Cullen."

Her heart pounded. She was only a little aware of Cassandra standing up next to her to put a supportive hand on her back, and Varric's response to Dorian's statement sounded muffled. She wasn't there, she was back in her nun's habit, in the tiny mountaintop town where she had arrived after her time in the Fade. She was handing out fruit to children in the street. She was looking up. And there was Cullen, saying her name, a hand held out to her. He had hiked up a mountain to find her and had let nothing stand in his way and she could still remember how golden he looked, the sunlight hitting his unkempt hair, and how his eyes had glowed at her with a desperate, primal longing. The euphoria of that moment, their reunion, was where Aida chose to send herself. She didn't hear the rest of Dorian's sentence, that after he had dropped Lila off with Emilia, he had been kidnapped in Haven and had never made it to his group therapy session that morning.

She fainted but she didn't know where or when she had fainted. She blinked her eyes a few times and she saw the stone street of Loftet under her cheek, she saw the floor of the mess hall a second later.

Aida thought she tasted blood in her mouth and wondered if she had bit her own tongue or knocked a tooth loose when she fell but a second or two later she realized the taste was in her imagination.

"Aida, look at me please - "
Dorian was shining a light in her eyes as Sera checked her vitals. Aida reached out and held her friend's hand, feeling a beatific smile spreading across her face. Sera frowned at her. "Aida, why -"

"I'm going to kill them all. I'm going to kill every single person who had anything to do with this. And I'm going to get my man back."

She looked up at Morrigan, who was already giving her a look that said this was impossible. Aida brushed away everyone's hands that were trying to help and stood up on her own.

"No. I know what you're going to say and the answer is no. I'm not getting on a heli to Emprise at 13:00. I'm going. To find. My husband."

"But Aida, we have no idea where he is, the Haven PD -"
"Fuck the Haven PD. They're either incompetent or corrupt or both."

Morrigan looked around at the hall of Inquisition soldiers, listening to this entire exchange. "Could we please discuss this somewhere -"

"No. These people fight with me, they fight for me, let them know what you're advising me to do - to just forget that my husband is missing and go to Emprise and clear out a rift near some dead, rich asshole's chateau?"

Cassandra tried to speak but Aida shut her down too. "What are you guys going to do now, huh? What can you do without me? Are you going to saw my hand off and see if the mark works without me? You've got a fifty fifty chance. But I can see it in your face that you think that's not going to work -"

Aida turned away from them all with a sigh, making pointed eye contact with several Inquisition soldiers nearby. "I'm the Herald of Andraste. I've lived on both sides of the Veil. You need me more than I need you - and I need him more than I need anyone on this Maker-forsaken continent."

She heard Morrigan's defeated tone and knew she had won this round.

"Then what do you want to do, Herald?"

"I'm going back to Haven. You're going to get me the elluvian and the knife."

* * * * *

By the time Aida landed in Haven, her father had received Cullen's ransom note, in the form of a video on a USB drive that had been delivered to Trevelyan Tower by a courier who had never removed his motorcycle helmet when he left the package at the receptionist's desk. It was a lapse in security Cullen would have never allowed had he been at work, a dark irony that was not lost on Aida or her father.

"What do they want?"
"Sweetheart, I don't know, I admit I - panicked a bit once I realized what it was. I didn't watch it, I called Homeland Security."

She watched her father pacing outside of his own office which had been quickly commandeered by both the Haven PD and federal agents. Emilia was on her way with Lila, and Aida was queasy with anticipation. She wanted to hold her child again, and find out what she had to do to get Cullen back. She would swear to little Lila that she would get her daddy back, she would lay an army of dead men at her feet, she would -
The door to his office swung open and without waiting for an invitation, Aida stepped in and closed it behind her. She knew everyone in her life, even the most loving and well-meaning of them all, would try to stop her from directly intervening in this matter. She stood passively as the room of important agents and officers introduced themselves to her, and the last one went on a little too long about her stellar service with the Inquisition. She waited until they all had nothing to say before she spoke, standing before them in a fashion she hoped was even just a little bit like Cullen's military stance.

"Where is he."
"Kirkwall."

Ice spread through her veins. "Then the Inquisition goes to Kirkwall with me."

She was going to turn on her heel and simply walk out of their makeshift situation room but one of them stopped her with another pointless detail. "Corypheus wants one of two things - the Inquisition to disband, or..."

"Or?"

"Your head, on a platter."

Aida had a bitter comeback on the tip of her tongue but one of the agents cut her off - and also barred her exit from her father's office. "Mrs. Rutherford, we wanted to question you about some additional remarks Corypheus made in this video that were rather troubling. He claimed you owed him a head that you never delivered. Would you please sit down for a moment?"

She didn't need to be asked, her legs were almost giving out on her right as one of the men lead her to an armchair.

Two opposing voices in her head started talking at the same time.

It wasn't possible.

How could the Corypheus of this existence know what the Corypheus in her Fade trap had known? That world had been a demon's creation, it was a story that had been concocted to torture her, it wasn't real -

But it was possible.

She had come back from that world with red lyrium marks up and down her arms - and a healthy, beautiful baby girl. It hadn't been just a dream. Aida knew she had lived two lives and she was the only one who could verify this fact.

Aida slumped into the armchair under her but her voice was all steel and rage.

"I'll tell you everything, but I'm warning you ahead of time, you won't believe me. And in exchange, I'll need federal support on this mission from both Ferelden and the Free Marches. If you can't provide that, I'd like for you to get out of my father's office so he can do so."

* * * * *

It would be unfair to call Kirkwall a warzone. There were parts of the city that were peaceful and lovely, and their helicopters swept over the port where Aida could see lines of luxury boats and yachts bobbing in the water. Her father had a boat down there, somewhere, and to calm her mind Aida tried to remember the last time she might have stepped foot on it, or even if she ever had. She
didn't have much time to focus on this, the character of the city abruptly changed beneath them as they flew into the more chaotic, disputed parts of the city where the angry, disenfranchise populace longed for rebellion and the Tevene rule of old. There were parts of Kirkwall still reliving those old battles, even though just a few streets away the modern world was ticking away and had moved on.

She felt Cassandra squeezing her hand and Aida pulled herself away from her thoughts. Cass's face was grim. She knew Cullen had been here before and what it meant for him to be here again. "Aida, perhaps you should - "

"No, I'm going. I'm leading. I'm going to save him."

She let go of Cass's hand and felt up and down her flak jacket. She had enough potions strapped to her to rain lightning down on the entire city of Kirkwall, law abiding or not, and leave it a smoldering crater and her mana was pulsing inside of her. She felt like a volcano about to erupt and she wasn't scared at all. She was ready.

They landed and began to move quickly and in practiced formation, her battalion flanking her, providing her with backup, and scouting drones flying overhead. As they passed through the empty streets, the Inquisition took and returned fire, the crackle of both guns and magic filled the air. She slipped through it all, protected by Solas's shield and supported by her team, and it wasn't long before they were ramming down the doors of the abandoned factory where they suspected Venatori forces were holding him.

"Maker's fucking breath -"

Aida heard Cass muttering to herself as they stepped into the huge building to find a veritable legion of raging Venatori mages waiting for them - and Calpernia standing at the railing a floor above them, looking right at Aida.

"Miss Trevelyan! You look well! You never came back from your mission, we wondered what had happened to you!"

Aida choked back the shock and bile rising inside of her and instead concentrated on what she saw behind Corypheus's right hand - through a window behind her, Aida could see a pair of mages guarding someone, and she knew it was Cullen. She reached her energy out to him and felt the faint pulse of his heartbeat.

"How is this possible, Cal! How could you know the me from the other side?"

Her troops, and Cal's, began to square off, ready to let loose at the tiniest sign from either leader. Cal laughed as she gave her staff a theatrical spin.

"In Corypheus, all things are possible. You are not the only person to have travelled through realms and cheated death, although I grant you are singular in your ability to wield magic with no staff, no grimoire, and no training. You - just a nurse, a run of the mill rich girl, with your little, insignificant friends who would do anything for you."

She slammed the end of her staff against the floor. "You will all die here today."

Aida laughed. She couldn't help it. It bubbled out of her, nonsensical giggling. Cass took inched closer to her to touch her arm but Aida batted her away as her snickering turned into a full belly laugh as she heard the subtle sound of guns being aimed right at her.

Her laughter ended as quickly as it began and Aida raised both her palms toward the sky and screamed, summoning a bolt of lighting that seared out of the sky, through the concrete of the
building to land right on Calpernia, practically sawing her in half. Cal's troops made a sound of alarm and then they began to attack, wildly and without any strategy, thrown into chaos by the abrupt ending of their leader.

"Well, that's not exactly how I thought that would happen!" Varric yelled amongst the melee.

"Aida! Stop! You can't - "

She ignored the sound of Morrigan over her comm device and pushed forward on her own, sawing down mages with mere flicks of her wrist that turned into columns of fire, shards of ice, bolts of electricity. All of her rage gave her a panoply of weapons - she could clench her fist and stop a man's heart in his chest, she could bare her teeth and rip the artery out of the neck of another.

It wasn't long until she was in that room, slamming the two guards together with such a magical force their skulls cracked together and they dropped lifeless to the floor. In the middle of the room, Cullen was tied to a chair under him, his head slumped forward and eyes closed.

"Cullen, baby, I'm here - I'm here, I came for you - "

Morrigan was yelling in her comm again so Aida yanked it out of her ear and let it drop to the ground so she could concentrate on untying him. She heard the fighting quieting down in the rest of the factory and boots heading her way. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Varric and Cass entering the room first, with more Inquisition soldiers at their back.

"He's alive! He's injured, we'll have to - "

Aida's knife slipped under the last restraint and she placed a tender hand on his cheek to raise his face to look at her.

"Cullen - sweetheart?"

His eyes fluttered open.

Gold and whiskey. Her man. He had climbed a mountain to find her.

She smiled at him, waiting for him to smile back.

And then the view of the bombed out ceiling above them came slamming into view -

*Why was she on her back, what was on top of her - it's him, it's CULLEN, what's he -*

Aida's hands grasped his wrists. He was on top of her, holding her down against the filthy ground with all his weight, his strong hands wrapped around her neck. He said terrible things to her, angry, unrepeatable things that made him froth at the mouth as he squeezed her windpipe so hard she feared he would snap her neck. Aida could hear Varric and Cass shouting at him, there were soldiers at his back pawing at him, trying to pull him off of her, but still, she did not scratch or kick him or fight back, she was too shocked by what was happening.

He was trying to kill her.

They had programmed him to kill her. In his eyes she saw no love, only the rage they put inside of him.

Two soldiers hit him with tasers at the same time and she watched in horror as the veins stood out on his temples and then he went slack on top of her. Still Aida savored the familiar smell of his sweat
before they pulled him off of her.

Aida sat up in a daze, trying to regain her breath, and then dropped back onto the floor, too weary to stay upright. There was too much going on around her for her to concentrate on anyone's orders or questions, or what they were even doing to him now that he was incapacitated right next to her. She reached out for his hand and grasped it even as they implored her not to.

Dorian touched her neck with just his fingertips as he searched through her body for signs of permanent damage, and his gentleness brought tears to her eyes.

"Please tell me we can fix him. Please."

"Darling, I -"

She passed out, still holding Cullen's hand.
Cullen woke up strapped down to his hospital bed. His head felt like it was full of concrete, he was sweaty, disoriented, tired, hungry, and then the last thing struck him the hardest - he was lonely.

"Hello? Is anyone... Hello?"

He had the hospital room to himself, there were no other beds next to his, but then he noticed the big mirror taking up one wall. He knew there were people on the other side, watching him.

"I'm, a little thirsty, could I get some water? And find out where I am?"

The room behind the mirror wasn't soundproof, he heard muffled voices and a door open and close. He pulled on his restraints a little but found them tight. A new thought came rampaging into his head - Lila, where was Lila.

"My daughter - is she all right? Please, you can't just leave me in here, I've done nothing wrong..."

In the silence that followed his last statement a sense of dread began percolating inside him. Had he? Done something wrong? He turned his wrist in its restraint and saw the usual information, but also that he was currently in Kirkwall General Hospital - in the psych ward. He swore to himself but relaxed on the pillows behind him. There had to be an explanation - the last thing he remembered was walking through downtown Haven on his way to group therapy and then -

His memories began to slip and crackle with dark magic. Did they grab him and shove him into a van, did he walk willingly into the group and they ambushed him there. He struggled to remember a boat night at midnight, his captors avoiding the search lights of the coast guard. He remembered the food they fed him, Tevene cuisine, homemade. It was good, and spicy stuff. But Cullen knew instinctively the things he wanted to remember they had buried deep inside him. What had they done to him? What had he done?

The door to his room finally opened and the serene face of Dr. Solas, Aida's mage neurologist from her bout with amnesia, swept into the room. Cullen noted with some disappointment he had no water with him, and his expression, as usual, revealed nothing.

"Hello Cullen."
"Solas."

He checked his vitals with an almost annoying amount of serenity and then rolled a stool up to his bedside. He took a deep breath and looked over his shoulder at the mirror on the wall before beginning.

"You are in Kirkwall General. Do you have any idea how you got here?"
"No clue whatsoever. But, please, can you tell me, is my baby all right? I just want to know -"

Solas clicked his pen a few times and Cullen felt his magic swirling around in his head for a brief
moment. "Your child is with your sister in law, and they are in the building. She is safe."

He wanted to feel the weight of her in his arms, it wasn't enough to be told this information. "Can I see her?"

Cullen could tell the implacable elf was weighing his words, as though he were afraid of angering him.

"Soon."

Solas had failed, that one word definitely made him angry.

"Tell me what I did, and stop fucking with me."

The elf left his professional impartiality slip with a resigned sigh. "Better to show you."

An Inquisition technician entered with a tablet in her hands, and gave Cullen a steely look of disapproval before disappearing again. Solas swiped around on the device for a moment and then rolled his chair closer to Cullen, by only an inch or two. He held it for him as the video on the screen started.

It was footage from a soldier's bodycam, blurry action and yelled commands, but Cullen was still confused, he didn't see or hear anyone he recognized. Then he heard shouts from offscreen, and the soldier wearing the cam started running, it was just heavy breathing while the soldier pushed his way down long hallways, following the back of the soldier in front of him. The unit pushed into a room and then panic began to spread through the troops, he only heard swears and the once-familiar sounds of a mission going sideways.

*It's the Inquisitor! DO SOMETHING -*

Cullen watched as the troops parted for just a moment, and he saw himself - pressing his own wife to the ground, his hands wrapped around her neck.

*Aida.*

Nausea. He had to stop himself from coughing up the bile that was rising up inside of him. He watched as two soldiers hit him with tasers at the same time and they pulled him off of her. Tears filled his eyes as she cried to crawl toward him, one hand to her throat. The footage ended abruptly when she reached a hand out toward his.

"Cullen, I need to ask you something: did you finish your mission that day?"

He was unable to control his answer, it came out of his mouth unbidden by him: "No."

"What is your mission, Cullen Rutherford?"

He pulled on his restraints as Aida burst into the room even as her friends and the hospital staff tried to hold her back. Cullen saw her face and it felt like someone had pressed something searing hot to his heart, and again, the words came out of him even though he was trying to say he loved her, to let her go, let them be together -

"To kill Aida Lyanna Trevelyan, and put an end to the Inquisition."

Aida tore her arms out of Sera and Dorian's grips and made it to his bed side. She pressed her hands to the sides of his face and looked into his eyes. He involuntarily thrashed away from her touch as
she sobbed, "You don't mean it, tell me you don't mean it, you know you love me, Cullen, you love me, please remember - "

She was hysterical, trying to crawl up onto his bed next to him even as nurses tried to get her under control. Cullen's arms strained against his restraints and he felt something new and strange inside of him, near the back of his throat, as though his true feelings were a knot inside of him he wanted to loosen. He tried to open his mouth to speak to her but the words would not come out, and he didn't want to twitch away from her touch, he wanted to embrace her, hold her hand and run out of here together.

Solas and two of the nurses hit him with a sedation spell and he fell back against the bed, limp. Only then could he whisper to her, sobbing against his chest:

"Aida, get away from me, please. I don't want to hurt you."

* * * * *

It took a few days to come to an agreement about what to do with him. Cullen laid in bed while they debated how to care for him, or whether to put him a detention center. He let them pump him full of sedation spells and he wiled away the hours watching TV through bleary eyes. Emilia came once a day with the baby and it was the only joy he ever felt, even though he saw the disappointment and heartbreak all over Emilia's face as she placed Lila in his arms. The Trevelyan tribe was tight, and he knew even though he wasn't at fault for what he did, there was a part of Emilia that may never trust him again. They had all urged him to stay close to Skyhold and he had blithely ignored their anxieties. Cullen swung back and forth between feeling helpless and feeling guilty. Inquisition intelligence was taking a lot of the blame, they should have predicted they'd come after the one person who Aida would defend with every atom in her body, but it was too late for any of that talk.

He desperately wanted to see Aida, but he didn't know what was inside of him and what he was capable of. They had run tests - the sound of her voice, the mere hint of her profile, the smell of her perfume - all of it overwhelmed his memories and senses and triggered their magic inside of him, their dark wishes became his and he was unable to hold on to the love he had for her. He could think of a thousand metaphors, but the one that kept occurring to him was that was trapped behind a wall they had built inside of him. He could shout that he loved her over the wall but when the words landed on the other side, they were about her death.

Worst yet, Solas was worried there was no counterspell. He wanted to send him to Tevinter Tech for more study - but the Ferelden government was five seconds away from putting him on a no-fly list and into an orange jumpsuit. What he had done was an act of terrorism on behalf of the enemy and he was still capable of murdering the Inquisition's golden bullet. His wife. His only love. They put a bomb inside of him and it could go off if she was in his arms.

Aida was still fighting for him though, he was heartened by her pure loyalty. She was forcing them to prove that he was a threat only to her, and there would be no reason for them to keep him locked up in the psych ward while she was off fighting. She wanted him to have his life back, to be with their daughter and be free. If she was a thousand miles from him, surrounded by Inquisition forces, she would be safe until she came home.

"And then what?"

They had sent Dorian in to tell him everything Aida had said and he was glad of it because the man was not much of a liar or the type to sweeten bad situations.
"I don't know, Cullen. As far as I can see you've got two choices: you can live separately, but - "
"No, that's not an option."

Dorian sighed and sat back in his chair and reached into his jacket to pull a flask from a pocket. 
"You're more stubborn than Aida and that is saying something."

Cullen was glad Aida advocated to let him out of his restraints when other visitors were around, because it meant he could reach a hand out and gesture to Dorian to let him have a little. Dorian shrugged and handed it over, and used the opportunity to scoot his chair closer to Cullen's bed.

"Listen, they won't come right out and say this - "
"They?"
"The Inquisition. They need Aida and want to keep you locked up in here, so they're telling everyone your case is hopeless, the spell is permanent and unbreakable. But I don't think so. These guys were good but they weren't that good."

Cullen shivered as Dorian sent his magic through him. In the last week mages had had his way with him left and right and in retaliation, he drained Dorian's flask for him.

"Hey! I needed that - "
"Well, what was that unauthorized scan for?"

Dorian took the flask back from him and gave it a disappointed shake before slipping it back into his jacket. "Every spell has a counter spell and I have read of cases of surprising resistance to even the strongest spell craft. A man stricken by a necrotic spell, able to stop the rot at the shoulder, so he only lost an arm."

"But how, Dorian?"

Dorian grabbed a device that laid on Cullen's bed next to him. "Is this the button for the nurse? Do you think she'd bring us more whiskey?"

"Dorian, concentrate."

The mage sighed, fiddling with the pager. "The man was still a Templar, he still had lyrium in his veins."

Cullen kept his next thought to himself while scratching at his beard, which he had only grown because they wouldn't let him near a razor.

"Well, that'd be bad news - if I didn't know a man who is capable of making an non-addictive lyrium-like substance."

He had to get out of this hospital, and he needed Aida to get him out.

* * * * *

That night, she came to him in a dream.

It wasn't quite her of course, and after everything they'd been through together, it didn't phase him anymore when an Aida from a different time and different realm appeared in his hospital room after hours. She might have been clad in period piece linen and leathers, but she smelled like his Aida, and she felt like her. And he could touch this Aida and not be sent into a rage, he held her hand and
kissed the back of it and believed every moment of it when she even crawled onto his hospital bed to curl herself into his arms.

"Darling. Why are you locked up in here?", she asked in her posh, other-worldly accent.

He kissed her forehead and squeezed her tight. "I tried to hurt you, but it wasn't my fault."

The other-Aida hummed to herself as she nuzzled him back. "I don't believe you, you'd never hurt me."

Cullen wove his fingers between hers and looked at the strange rings she was wearing. "Aida, can you - help me talk to the...you, that lives in this world with me?"

She was now kissing his neck, working her way up to his ear. He grinned to himself that even this other version of herself couldn't restrain herself. "We are all one in the same. This world is not that different from mine. And you are - "

Aida turned his head toward her so she could kiss him, and he moaned at the lightest touch of her lips. - "Definitely mine." She straddled him with a giggle and was about to kiss him again when he stopped her. "Wait, babe, listen - I need you to get me out of here. I can get better if I can only get out of here and back to my brother's place in the forest."

He watched Aida of the Fade puzzle over his words. She gave him a thoughtful head tilt he was used to, even if this Aida wore a dagger strapped to her belt.

"All right, I'll do everything I can."

He drew her close to him again, taking a selfish moment to brush his hands over the curves of her ass in her tight leather pants before wrapping his arms around her again.

"Can I ask you something? Do we have a child together, in your world?"

She laughed to herself, low and sultry, and it made him squirm underneath her. "Not yet, but trust me, we are trying. At every chance we get. We've tried on your desk, with your soldiers on patrol right outside the door..."

She kissed him and smiled against his lips. "We've tried in the armory. We've tried in that dusty storeroom in the north tower. We've tried in the stables when Blackwall wasn't around. We've tried in my quarters, in your quarters, on the war table, under the war table."

They laughed together but then Cullen grew serious for a moment. "Aida, all of you - you must know, I'd do anything for you. I'm going to fix myself, even if I must spend the rest of my life doing so."

"Why would any of us ever doubt you?"

Aida of the Fade leaned down and pressed her forehead to his, while threading her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck.

"But darling, please listen. People will seek to keep us apart, for their own selfish reasons. We mustn't let them."

It was then that Cullen noticed what was around her neck - an old coin, attached to a simple velvet cord.
"Where did you get this?"
"You gave it to me. On a little dock, on a quiet lake in Honnleath. We had to sneak away to go there and I treasured every moment of that time together."

Cullen touched it and rubbed his thumb over it. It was exactly like the coin his brother once gave to him, and he knew where his was, tucked away in the same box where he kept his cuff links.

"Incredible. I have the same coin."
"And you haven't given it to me yet? Shame. I truly believe it has kept me safe in battle and returned me safely to you each time."

He reached up to tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear and then brushed his fingers down her jawline. This could be the last time in a long time he got to touch her, or any version of her. "I will make sure you get it then. Because we will be together again. I know this."

She gave him a breathtaking, unforgettable kiss that made him reach up and cup her face in his hands. When she pulled back, she raised an eyebrow at him.

"One more thing before I go: shave that beard, please!"

Before he could burst out laughing, he woke up.

* * * * *

The next day, Aida got the hospital, the Inquisition, and the government of Ferelden to back off and let him out of the psych ward. He tuned out Emilia's protestations that he was moving too quickly, he needed time to rest after what had happened to him, and he ignored her as he dug through his belongings, looking for his lucky coin. He shrugged her off all the way to the front door of Skyhold, Barkley's leash in one hand, Lila strapped to his chest in her sling, and his hiking pack on his back.

"Cullen, you can't be serious about this. Look at you, you look like a crazy drifter. With a baby. Who is my tiny niece! Please, just stay with us for two weeks."

"I can't. You promised Aida you would let me leave so I can look for the cure for this - thing - inside of me."

The baby gurgled for a moment and reached a chubby fist out. Emilia was on the verge of tears now. "But you don't know, that this, guy, your brother knows can help you. You don't know for certain."

He gave his sister-in-law a reassuring shoulder squeeze. "Trust me, he's not just 'a guy'. And I will come back if he can't help me, I swear."

Emilia sniffled and had no choice but to wipe her nose on her sleeve. "You're killing my father right now, he's lying down and staring at the ceiling."

"How about this, I will call you both from my sat phone when I get there. Things will be different this time, you'll be able to get in touch with me. And it's just a two day drive to the forest. I have to go, she's going to deploy in an hour. I have to give her something. Emilia, please - "

He had to pull his arm out of her grasp and walk away. It hurt a lot more than he thought it would.

* * * * *
Cullen raced in Aida's old truck toward the army base outside of Haven. The Inquisition was set to whisk her away to another Fade rift and he knew from Aida's texts and emails that she was pushing them harder toward the goal of getting rid of Corypheus once and for all. He kept calling various Inquisition numbers, Cass, Blackwall, Iron Bull, anyone and everyone who was around Aida, in the hope of catching her before she took off but nobody was answering. He was surprised when Varric picked up and spoke before he could.

"Give me a second, will you?"

Cullen pulled the truck over as he listened to Varric walking somewhere at a brisk place, until it was quieter around him.

"You know they've instructed us not to speak to you. They think any contact with you is - compromised - because of the Venatori stuff inside you."

Aida of the Fade had been right, there were lots of people trying to keep them apart. He clenched his jaw but forced himself to calm down, because this was way more important.

"You've got to help me, Varric. I just want to give Aida something before we deploy. Please. I will - do anything."

He heard Varric chuckle to himself and it made him laugh too, because he knew he shouldn't have said that. Varric was going to come up with something impossible, something ridiculous, something -

"Will you proof read the first draft of my novel?"
"You - wrote a novel?"
"Yeah, why not? It just came pouring out of me. I want you to read it first. Well, second. Cass already read it and it made her angry!"

Cullen remembered a time when he, Cass and Varric worked together every day, and things were so much simpler. But there was no Aida in his life yet. She was still just the woman next door, painting on her balcony.

"Why'd it make her angry?"
"Because it ended! Ha! That's how good it is, buddy. Will you read it and give me some notes?"

A small feat, compared to the very important thing he needed Varric to do. "Yes, of course. Just meet me at the gates of the base. I bet they're not going to like this, so you have to help me."

* * * *

Cullen stomach churned as they let him onto the base but treated him utterly differently than they used to. Gone was the deference and respect, and in its place, distrust and distaste, and he had to leave little Lila and Barkley with Sera. Two Inquisition lackeys put him in a room whose protective magic weighed too heavy on him and made it impossible for him to do anything but sit in the only chair in the room and look at what was obviously another a one-way mirror on the wall. Before they had escorted him away, Varric had been able to tell him that they were scanning his simple old Ferelden coin in the other room, over and over again, trying to detect even an atom of bad magic. Cullen felt his hope ebbing away, Aida would go off into battle without his coin in her pocket, and he knew he was crazy to think this, but it made him worry not just for his Aida, but the one who had appeared to him in his dreams, and why not - all the other Aidas that could possibly exist.
Another deeper philosophical question started to haunt him too: if there were an infinite number of Cullens and Aida fighting to be together, doesn't that mean in a few instances, their love would be defeated?

And what if that meant he could be the one Cullen who would fail?

"Hey Cullen -"

It was Varric, speaking to him from the other room, through a speaker on the wall. "These idiots are done being paranoid about your gift, and Aida's here. She knows she can't speak to you, but, she's here, and you can speak to her. Just give me a moment to clear out of here."

Cullen waited, and it was the longest minute of his life, but he waited until he sensed she was alone. He stood up and took four heavy steps to the mirror.

He reached out and put his palm flat on the mirror.

"Aida. That's my coin, my lucky coin. I should have given it to you a long time ago. But - the you, from that other place we've both seen, she came to me the other night -"

Cullen shuddered and he knew Aida had stepped up to the mirror and pressed her palm to his. He felt hot and cold at the same time, he wanted her and wanted to run from her - but he forced himself to stay there, touching her through less than an inch of protective glass.

"Will you promise me you will keep it with you, always?"

He gasped when he heard her whisper back to him, but not inside of this room - in his head. Her voice was wobbly and very far away, as though played on a cassette tape, and into a phone, three rooms away from him. "Yes, I will, I promise - but I'm so sorry, I have go to now, Cullen. We were about to deploy, but I made them delay it so I could see you one last time."

"You can see me?"
"Yes. Happy Satinalia, Cullen."

He leaned his head against the mirror. With everything that had been happening, the holidays didn't register with him, or seem important. But this moment with her was. The next time he was with her, he hoped there would be no barrier between them.

"I love you. I'm going to fix myself. I can fix this."

Her voice was sadder this time. "I wish you wouldn't say it like that. You're not broken. It's just..."

He felt her doubt but she didn't give him time to say anything about it. "Never mind. Please send my love to your family, and give Lila a kiss for me. Tell her every night that mommy loves her. And, I love you so much that it hurts to be away from you. I -"

She couldn't finish her sentence, and their magical connection snapped. Cullen felt panicked, he yelled her name, and wondered if they had dragged her out of the room. He wanted to punch the mirror until his knuckles bled but Sera stepped into the room with his daughter and he took a deep breath.

"Sorry, Cul. They took her away, shoved her on a helicopter. She'll be mad for days about it and who will have to hear about it? Me. Here's little Lila. I think she needs a new diaper, whewph."
The road unfurled before him, the same highway he took with Aida as they fled from Haven. Cullen remembered driving that RV and feeling darkness chasing them, an evil in the world that seemed to hunger for them, but now he realized it wasn't ever after him, it had always been after Aida. She was the linchpin in some eternal battle against evil, not just in this plane of existence, but in all of them - and she was the hero of every story. Cullen bopped along with the radio and glanced at Lila in the rear view mirror. He felt a strange sense of elation because if Aida was the knight in shining armor of this story, it meant he was her protector, her vanguard. It was his job to be dependable, and he would rather die than let her down.

Two days later he was standing on Branson's porch. He didn't have to knock, the door was always open. He startled Katya, who was enjoying a cup of tea and reading a book in her kitchen nook.

"Cullen! What are you - Maker, you've brought a baby with you! Rosalie! ROSALIE!"

He listened to the familiar sound of his youngest sister's steps as she ran across the second floor of the house and came tearing down the stairs. He was quickly enveloped in hugs and sisterly concern and then Lila was being cooed over and Barkley was running in excited circles in the living room. Branson stepped into the kitchen next, his crossbow at his back and two ducks in hand.

"Brother!"

Katya brought Lila to him, her face glowing with an aunt's pride. "Look! Our niece is here, look how perfect she is!"

Branson glanced at the baby but then looked squarely at Cullen. "Where's Aida?"

Everyone paused. "She..."

Rosalie stepped up to him, a hand on his forearm. "Cullen, what happened?"

"Can I tell you all over dinner? Because I need Rosalie to take me out to that guy's house. The guy with the eyes. And the sword."

Rosalie was the only one who knew how to get to Geralt's shack which was upstream from the Rutherford homestead. She steered her little canoe in silence, even though Cullen knew the questions inside of her were just stacking up, higher and higher. They reached the Witcher's little cabin and found it empty.

"That's - weird. Where would he go? Where could he go?"

Cullen peered in through the little window near the front door and spotted a loaf of bread sitting on the kitchen counter, next to a serrated knife and an open jar of jam.

"It looks like he was in the middle of something, perhaps he's coming back soon. I will wait for him."

"Cullen, it's almost dark. You can't just sit on his porch, waiting for -"

"I can. I'm not hungry. Go back to the house. Make sure Lila and Barkley are all right."
Rosalie shook her head in the exact same way she did when she was a petulant two year old. "No, if I go back there without you, I'll never hear the end of it. Katya and Branson are just going to make me paddle everyone out here and I can't fit three adults, a baby, and a dog in this canoe."

"Please, Rosalie, just - I have to wait for him. I think he could help me with this - thing - that's inside of me."

Rosalie folded her arms against the chill, but he could also see some fear in her eyes. "What's inside of you, Cullen? Is this why Aida's not with you?"

Cullen was ready to tell her the truth.

"Yes."

* * * * *

Every day that Geralt didn't return to his homestead was another notch of defeat for Cullen. Dorian's words continued to echo in his head: a Templar had been able to fight off the darkest of spells, the lyrium helped him do it. Solas had suggested he go to Tevinter and simply surrender himself to a magical research facility. Both solutions didn't feel right to him. He wanted to forge his own cure, but perhaps it was folly to include someone else in his plans, someone who had stopped in the middle of making a sandwich to disappear.

Rosalie kept him company from time to time as he waited on Geralt's porch. They played chess and gin rummy, talked about the different bird calls around them, played guessing games and also just sat in silence. Cullen had told Rosalie the entire story of everything that had happened to them since he left and didn't leave anything out, from Kirkwall to the other-Aida visiting him in a dream.

"What are you going to do if Geralt never comes back?"
"I don't know, I didn't think that far ahead."

Rosalie watched a bluebird dive past them, squawking in protest at something. When the forest was silent again, she added, "What if Aida never comes back?"

"Then we're all dead. She's the only thing standing between us and whatever's on the other side."

Rosalie giggled for a moment. "What? What's so funny?"

"Never thought you'd end up with a woman like Aida. A mage. A rich girl. And a conduit to another world."

He smiled at his sister. "And who did you think I'd end up with?"

"Well, Katya, honestly. But don't let her hear that. Or Branson. That's ancient history. That's - "

Before she could finish, a blinding light erupted inside of Geralt's cabin, causing them both to take three steps back. Cullen instinctively reached for Rosalie and pulled her behind him as the Witcher's front door creaked open.

"There's people on my porch. That's not what I was expecting." A deep sense of relief flooded Cullen's system as the tall, strange man stepped under the doorway to approach him.

"Geralt, I need your help. I hope you can help me."
The Witcher peered at him. "I can tell. You're cursed, my friend. It's all over you, inside and out."

Rosalie stepped around Cullen, her arms crossed and chin jutted out in an annoyed gesture. "Who's she!? Your girlfriend?"

Geralt moved aside and Cullen finally saw who Rosalie was so upset about - a lithe, silver-haired young woman, with striking green eyes, and decked out in light leather armor.

"No, my - daughter. This is Ciri. And if I can't help you, she certainly can."

The strange woman made eye contact with Cullen and he felt her intense, other-worldly magic reach out and wrap around the curse inside of him, giving it a squeeze as though she had his heart in her fist.

He responded by promptly passing out.
Cullen's days were made up of exactly three things - exercise, meditation, and staring at the child who so strongly resembled the woman he could not be with. The third thing was easy enough, and Lily was an amiable baby despite the drama of her birth, but Ciri and Geralt did not make the first two things easy, not at all. Those two indefatigable supernatural humans made him run through the forest in their wake, and he struggled to keep up with them as they jumped over logs and wove through trees. They worked him until he was on the verge of collapse, and then when he was drenched in sweat, they find a quiet forest clearing and make him sit straight up on a cushion and meditate for a straight hour, with the intention of him learning how to do it for longer than that. Ciri's voice guided him for the first few minutes and the ritual was always the same, clear your mind, push all words away, and concentrate until there was nothing but darkness...

"Geralt and I are from another place - "

Cullen was about to open his mouth and give her a sarcastic response about how there was no possible way they couldn't be, but she shushed him.

"We have a unique set of skills..."

Cullen bit back another remark about the cat eyes that could see deer hundreds of feet away and, of course, the time travelling - and kept listening.

"Meditation is our reset button. A Witcher can meditate for hours and open her eyes and be refreshed, strong, and healthy again."

He had to interrupt this time but he kept his eyes closed, knowing if he opened them to look at them, they'd make him run five more miles. "I've meditated before, it was part of my Templar training, so will this really help? What about the story I told you about using lyrium? Geralt, couldn't you just make me up a batch of that stuff you gave me before?"

He knew Geralt would never answer. He thought Dorian's story was a fluke, misreported or embellished for the sake of getting a medical study published. Instead, Cullen heard Ciri sigh - not a cynical, mean sigh, but just a resigned one.

"You bring that up every time we sit down to do this."
"I know. I keep hoping you will give me another answer."

Cullen shifted on his knees and but grew still when Geralt spoke up. "I've got a different one today. The mage who did this to you is the only one that can reverse it. My guess is he got put down when you were rescued though, am I correct?"

His memories of that day were terribly scrambled. One minute he was in Haven walking to his therapy group and the next he was... He stopped himself from recalling what he had done to Aida, but he did remember the gunfire, and later, the voice of a soldier on his walkie talkie confirming there were bodies to deal with.

"Yes, Inquisition forces made short work of him and his friends that day. So there's no hope I could rid myself of this magic?"

He opened his eyes now. Ciri and Geralt were looking at each other, as though they were measuring their response together, but he let Ciri answer this time. "There are so many ways to think about it. The magic is like a net, tightly woven, binding up all your good memories and feelings about your
wife. Or you can think of it like - a box of Christmas lights, hopelessly tangled up, and you have to sit down and unknot the strands one by one. Yes, Geralt, I know what Christmas lights are."

"Or, you're like Sisyphus, pushing a rock up that hill," Geralt added, in his rasp.

Cullen cracked one of his knuckles. "I don't like that last one. He never got away from that rock."

He felt Ciri's hands touching his now, opening them up and relaxing them, but then turning them down so they rested on his thighs, in the same fashion the two of them took when they meditated.

"What I'm trying to tell you is, yes, you may never rid yourself of this curse, but you can manage it. You can push back at it and train your mind to override it. You can be with her again, yes - but you will have to master yourself. Your own thoughts. Your memories. Your past and your present. You will have to counter their magic with every atom in your being."

Cullen stilled his mind and tried to think of Aida, but all he could conjure up was that terrible day when he pressed her down with all his strength, his hands around her throat. He tried to remember Aida's laugh, the color of her eyes, but instead the bad memory would take hold and push her aside. It felt like he was turning on a TV that only had one show on, on every channel. He took a deep breath and tried again, and again, and again. He imagined changing the channel and it landing on a moment from his relationship with her that was nothing but sweetness or pleasure.

"Breathe, Cullen. Don't let them win..."

He thought of a multitude of metaphors. He was turning pages in a book, he was looking for her face in a crowd, swiping through profiles looking for hers, pushing his way through a crowded bar looking for her table. And then, he tried something new - he walked away from that day in Kirkwall in reverse a thousand times. He got stuck countless times, the magic fought back against him, but he kept visualizing letting go of Aida's neck, standing up, and backing away from that moment. He rewound the tape a thousand times, until just once, he was able to rewind it all the way back, as far back as he could go. Then he was back in his condo in Haven, standing on his balcony.

"Aida. Aida. Aida. Her name became his mantra.

"Keep searching, Cullen. That's it. Find the loose thread - and pull on it."

He looked to his right and there was her balcony, and her easel, with a watercolor painting of the mountains behind their building. A cigarette was burning in the ashtray next to the easel, as though she was about to come back to finish it off. Wind chimes. Morning sunshine.

He heard her patio door slide open. He held his breath, waiting for her, until he felt Ciri shake him out of his vision.

"Cullen. We should go, it's dark now. You've been meditating for five straight hours."

His eyes snapped open. The forest was dark around them but in the dim moonlight he could see Geralt's strange eyes glowing at him, the Witcher giving him a look of actual approval.

* * * *

Out in the middle of the forest, with no electricity or television or internet, one stopped caring what day it could be. The Rutherfords had no bills to pay, they only had to feed themselves and maintain their shelter. Cullen found himself becoming as attuned to nature as his siblings. They rose at dawn
to do chores and hunt, they ate breakfast together, busied themselves with more chores or found some time to read or take a nap until it was time for dinner. In the afternoons before he put the baby down for a nap, Cullen strapped her to his back and took her and Barkley for long walks in the forest, and each time he imagined Aida was with them, even if she was only a fuzzy ideal at the moment. As much as he meditated on her and dreamed of seeing her again, there was one place he never went - their old cabin. The mere sight of the building made him take a step back, the dark magic inside of him knew it was a place of great power, and he always turned on his heel and headed back to the house.

One afternoon when his ramblings took him near the cabin and he was about to double back and walk the other way, Ciri was in his path.

"Hey!"

Cullen gasped, eyes open wide while Barkley yapped at her a few times in alarm. "Maker, you startled the void out of me, and my dog. Wh-what's going on? Figured you'd be popping in and out of time and space around this time of day."

"Oh no, I can do that whenever I please. Doesn't mean I do it for fun. Or only in the afternoon. Where were you going?"

She reached a finger out to the baby who grasped it and gurgled. "Oh, was just going to get back to the big house, maybe have some tea."

Ciri's green eyes blinked at him in disbelief. "I don't believe you. I think you walk this direction for a reason every day and turn around for a reason every day."

"I don't."
"You do."
"Are you watching me?"

The baby whined a little when Ciri pulled her finger out of her grasp. "Nothing else to watch out here."

Cullen studied her for a moment. She was like no other human he had ever met, but there always a tinge of sadness to everything she did and said, as though she were weary from long travels that had brought her little joy.

"Why are the two of you here out of all the places you could be?"

Ciri shrugged and looked off toward the horizon. "Geralt likes it here, so he stays here. And there's no telling him what to do. And there's no fooling me with a quick subject change. We're going to work on getting you into that cabin. That will be a good first step."

Cullen glanced at the little building, its front door ajar an inch or two. He wanted to go and shut it but he was glued to the spot. "I thought I had made some good progress lately?"

"There's no way to know how well you've been doing until you are tested."

He touched his forehead, realizing he had broken out in a light sweat just thinking about touching the knob of the front door. After dinner that night, after he had put Lily into her crib, Cullen knelt in the middle of their shared room in Branson and Katya's home in Ciri and Geralt's style, and meditated past midnight. Lately he had found his own internal metaphor for fighting back against the magic inside him - he had begun imagining that the spellcraft inside of him was like a huge tapestry, and he was going to undo it stitch by stitch until none of it remained, and he could see Aida standing on the
other side. He knew there'd be no speeding up this process, it might take a long time, but lately he
could think of her and not feel a sudden plume of rage blooming inside of him.

He had to be ready. He knew Ciri and Geralt were going to test him sooner than later.

* * * * *

"I can't do anything about it. They're going to make me."

* * * * *

"Three days after his conversation with Ciri, the Witchers wanted him to approach that cabin. "But
you couldn't be ready, not this soon!" Katya exclaimed while pacing back and forth with Lily in her
arms. Cullen was stunned by the Witchers' aggressiveness which bordered on callousness, at least in
Katya's book, and then her skepticism spread to Brandon and then Rosalie was no longer supportive
of Geralt's ideas anymore.

"We don't know what will happen to you. We don't know what it will do to you - and you are a
father now, don't forget."

Branson looked out of his kitchen window in the direction of Cullen and Aida's former cabin. "There
are too many unknowns. What if going in there is like stepping on a landmine? What if it unlocks
something worse inside of you?"

"What if it kills you."

Rosalie's response made everyone sink into a doomed silence.

What if it killed him.
What would happen to Lily.
What if Lily grew up with no father.
What if Aida died hunting Corypheus.
What if something happened to both of them.
What would the Trevelyans do. What would the Rutherfords do.

What if she came back but they could never be together again.

Cullen knew out of the thousands of nightmare scenarios, this last one haunted him the most. It
would kill him to also have to live without her, potentially move on with her life, fall in love with
someone else, all while he stood by and watched her thrive and prosper and learn to be happy again
without him.

He had to go in there. He knew it. The Witchers knew it. Today was the day.

He crossed the room to stand next to his brother, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I will eat an early dinner with you all tonight. The baby and Barkley will stay here. And we will see
what the morning brings."

* * * * *

Cullen approached the cabin with Geralt and Ciri flanking him. It was dusk, the birds who hunted at
night were just beginning to chirp in the trees and the sky was aglow with what was left of the
sunset. The door of the cabin was still ajar and he wanted to shut it so badly, just to set things right, but once again, he came to a stop twenty feet from the little building.

"I can't. I just - I can't move my feet."

Ciri took a few steps forward past him and looked around, as though she were looking for an actual wall that might have been blocking him. While Cullen watched her, Geralt put a strong hand on his back and shoved him forward.

Cullen took a deep breath and gasped, and then fell forward onto his knees. A deafening roar filled his ears, as though he were in the center of a hurricane and the sky was glowing in an eerie shade of green, a color he had seen before coming from the cracks in the sky that only Aida could seal. He turned to look toward Ciri and Geralt but they were gone, the rest of the world was a blur and the only thing he could see clearly was the cabin in front of him.

A swirl of voices echoed around him and he couldn't concentrate on anything they were saying, it felt like he couldn't breathe. And then as though she were yelling in his ear, he heard Ciri's voice cut through the confusion.

"Cullen! Remember what we - "

Remember what - he couldn't hear the end of her sentence, all he could hear now was strange chanting in Tevene, the spell was turning him into a helpless mess, he could feel the dirt under his palms and then against his cheek. Someone was walking toward him now, he heard their footsteps - then there was a sizzle around him, and then all was quiet, he could hear birdsong once again.

He blinked open his eyes. Geralt was down on one knee next to him where he cowered in the dirt path that lead to the front door of the cabin.

"I helped you out a little. Just a little. The ring of glyphs will keep you safe until the doorway, but after that you're on your own."

Outside the protective circle, Cullen heard Ciri's petulant voice ring out. "He never let me cheat, consider yourself lucky!"

Geralt helped him to his feet and Cullen felt a pang of embarrassment in front of the strange man. "Why are you helping me? Why bother, I'm a mess."

"I've dealt with this kind of magic before." The Witcher shrugged in his nonchalant way. "Can't let the bad guys win."

Cullen looked at the little symbols that glowed around him. The edge of the ring intersected with the front door. He'd be able to get into the cabin but he had no clue as to what waited for him on the other side - nor did he have any time to stand around wondering.

He took three steps forward, put his hand on the knob and pushed the door open. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him, all while his heart pounded. Instead of the homey interior of the cabin, he was standing in a stone structure. There was a ladder to his right that lead to a second floor and a crack in the roof was letting in both cold air and bright sunshine. But it was dark outside, how -

Cullen stared at the desk in front of him. There were two neat piles of letters held down with paperweights, one of which was a gigantic tooth of some beast he did not ever wish to encounter. An inkwell and a quill. He stepped closer to one of the stacks of correspondence and studied it -
"My dearest Commander -"

His eyes moved down the sheet of paper and landed on a big signature on the bottom. *Aida Lyanna Trevelyan.*

He had to touch it, he wanted to read it. He put a hand out and gripped the edge of the parchment and was about to pull when a voice stopped him. His own voice.

"I would rather you not disturb my paperwork. Bloody things. They never stop coming."

Cullen spun around and came face to face with himself. The same height, the same eyes, the same brow line - except this other-him was in full metal armor with a fur surcoat at his shoulders, and he looked tired, as though too many things kept him up at night.

"Wh-where am I?"

"A better question would be - *why are you here?*"

The man in the armor hadn't asked that. Both of them looked toward a bookcase in the corner, where *yet another* version of him was standing. This Cullen was in suit he used to wear when he was in Leliana's security force. This Cullen was bleeding from a wound in his side, but it wasn't affecting him, and he stood there with great calm, although the furrow in his brow seemed to be one of frustration.

"I - I'm not here. And neither are you. We're in his world. This guy. Mr. Knight in Shining Armor."

The vision was so clear Cullen could see the dust motes hanging in the air. "Is this good magic or bad magic?"

Nobody had an answer, but it felt like every time he spoke, the Cullen with the knife wound got more and more agitated. When Cullen spoke again, he practically whispered. "What's the point of this. I'm supposed to be getting better for -"

The other-him in the suit and tie was at his side in the blink of an eye, hissing into his face. "Don't say her name. I can't bear it. She left me to return to you. I begged her to stay."

Cullen shook his head, maintaining his composure. "You're not real. You were something a demon created to torture her with."

*"You have my child. My baby girl."

Now it was Cullen's turn to be outraged as he spit back at the mirror image of himself. "What's the point of this, who is doing this to me?"

The-Cullen-in-Armor answered first. "I came to tell you that you are simply out of sync in your world. You need to step back into line, regain your balance - take your life back, take your Aida back."

Cullen could still feel the version of himself in the suit seething at his side. He turned to confront him. "And what do you want to tell me?"

"Nothing. I came to kill you."

Cullen spun around - the room around them had disappeared and now the two of them stood in the middle of a courtyard, in a hexagon lined with a wooden fence. Rowdy soldiers were cheering
from every corner, leaning on the railing and egging them on. Cullen looked down and found a sword and shield in his hands - and the Cullen in the suit and tie also had a matching pair. A few of them parted and the Cullen in armor appeared, watching them intently.

"Well, go on. Let's see you spar."

Cullen of the Fade dropped the period piece props on the ground and cracked his knuckles. "I'd rather kill you with my bare hands."

Cullen disposed of his sword and shield and then had to duck and swerve away from the punch that came flying this way, but he wasn't fast enough to dodge his followup punch, which hit him firmly in his rib cage. The pain he felt was REAL, he dropped to a knee with the wind knocked out of him and it was time enough for the other-Cullen to throw himself at him and knock him flat on his back.

The already-bleeding, angry, vengeful version of himself began to pummel him relentlessly and it was hard to block his punches or push him off of him, he was fueled by pure rage...

But a thought seeped into his mind even as he absorbed the bone-crushing blows.

*He isn't real. He was never real.*

This isn't real. Take what is yours. Take back your Aida.

Cullen blocked one of the punches, he grabbed onto the other-Cullen's fist in his own and squeezed as hard as he could with an angry roar. He pushed the man off of him and the two scrambled back to their feet.

Cullen touched a corner of his mouth and spat blood into the dirt. He looked up at himself.

"I'll fight you and I'll win. And she'll return to me - again."

* * * * *

Outside of the cabin, Ciri and Geralt had built a little fire in a clearing nearby where they could keep an eye on the front door. They waited for hours, sometimes falling into long silences, sometimes talking about the past, but Ciri couldn't keep Geralt talking about those days. He had left them far behind, to live a simpler life out here in the woods - in a different plane of existence. Now he was all caught up in someone else's drama again, but Ciri knew it was because he would always find himself lingering around magic, especially bad magic. The stubborn man had always been compelled to either fall into bed with a sorceress or pick a fight with a wizard. Ciri studied him over the fire, biting back her own grin. Cullen's sister had also told her that once Geralt had stared at Aida over the dinner table, so who knew what was in this old Witcher's heart. She had a feeling perhaps Aida had reminded him of Y-

Before she could finish her own thought, Geralt and Ciri both heard something and stood up at the same time. It was Rosalie, running toward the cabin from the big house, and Ciri could tell by the patter of her footsteps that she was frantic about something. The woman ran right up to Ciri, something in her hand.

"It's ringing."

She held the object out so the Witchers could see it. It was Cullen's satellite phone.
Geralt took a step back in distaste while Ciri just gawked at it.

"Well, answer it then."

Rosalie fretted even more. "I shouldn't. It's *his* phone. He told us it was for emergencies only, to talk to Aida's family. I can't answer it. I also - don't use phones, don't you get it?" Rosalie gestured to everything around her, including her homemade clothing. The phone went silent for a while and all three of them relaxed - until it started up again, it's cheery little tune looping around over and over again.

"Please. I need to tell him it's ringing. I know you guys are doing your little experiment in there - "

Geralt stopped her, his voice stony and authoritative. "It's not an experiment. Cullen is deep in a meditative state, looking for the weaknesses in the spellcraft. He has to, or - "

Rosalie squinted at him and tilted her jaw at him in stubborn defiance. And then she ran, as fast as she could, weaving around Ciri and then right past Geralt.

The two Witchers looked at each other, stunned.

"I - didn't expect her to do that."

Ciri threw her head back and laughed, ending on an undignified snort - and then they both followed Rosalie down the path toward the cabin.

Rosalie pushed open the door to the cabin and gasped when she found Cullen curled up into the fetal position on the kitchen floor, muttering to himself and sweating through his clothes. Rosalie tried to loosen his limbs, shaking him, yelling his name in his face, but he stayed stiff and unresponsive. Geralt looked down at him. "It's *their* magic, he's stuck - it's like he walked right into a spider web."

Rosalie pressed her palm to her brother's forehead. "He's burning up, this is making him sick! Please make it stop!"

Ciri and Geralt exchanged a look and then Geralt knelt to the ground, summoning his glyphs - but to their surprise, Cullen stayed deep inside his trance and continued grinding his teeth and mumbling to himself.

"Damn. Thought that would work."

"Geralt! How can you be so calm?!" Rosalie was on the verge of hysteria when Geralt raised a hand toward her, hitting her with another bit of his countermagic. She stopped speaking, and in a daze, sat on the floor next to Cullen, the phone lying in her lap. Ciri made a face at Geralt as she lowered herself to Rosalie's side. "You should have warned her you were going to do that. She might be madder than ever afterward."

Geralt raised an eyebrow at Ciri. "No she won't. Curls over there likes me. Will you please answer that thing? It's driving me crazy."

Ciri picked up the phone and made a face at Geralt. "I'm scared."

They laughed for a moment together, father and daughter, but then his face grew stern when the phone refused to stop ringing. Ciri pressed a green button on the phone and held it up to her ear, murmuring a soft and tentative hello into the phone.

"*Cullen?*"
Ciri didn’t say anything, she only shook her head at Geralt, unsure how to proceed. "Cullen, are you there? It's me, it's Emilia...

Ciri held the phone toward Cullen, hoping he could hear the person on the other end.

"Cullen! Are you all right? Can you hear me? I have crazy news! Corypheus is dead, and Aida's coming home!"

Rosalie shook off the last effects of Geralt's spell and grabbed the phone from Ciri. "Hello? This is Cullen's sister, Rosalie! Will you say what you said again, but louder? I don't think he heard you..."

Rosalie shook Cullen hard and put the phone right up to his ear. "Cullen! Aida is coming home! You have to come home too!"

Cullen blinked open his eyes and sat up so fast he nearly knocked out his own sister with his skull. He grabbed the phone with a gasp. "Emilia! I'm here. I'm back. I'll come back. I'll come back right away."

He ended the call and let the phone fall back into his lap. Rosalie hugged him tight but Geralt wouldn't let this family moment last too long.

"What did you see Cullen? What happened?"

Cullen rubbed his face and put an arm around his little sister. "The demon that once imprisoned Aida is after me now. It destroyed her happiness and now it wants to destroy mine."

Rosalie put a hand on his cheek and made him look at her. "That sounds ridiculous, do you hear yourself? There is no way that could be true."

Cullen looked up at the two people from another time and place who were standing over them. "Those Venitori assholes were trying to rig up one spell inside of me, and somehow - they made something even worse."

The Witchers exchanged another one of their inscrutable looks and when Geralt spoke, he spoke with decades of authority in his voice. "It's not your run of the mill dark magic, it's something else."

Cullen's curled his lip in distaste. "It's blood magic. They fucked with me with blood magic. And I already know - the only way to undo it is even more of that stuff. And I already know - Aida is going to let that happen."

* * * * *

There was no time for tearful goodbyes. Geralt and Ciri simply shook hands with Cullen and faded back into the forest toward his little shack, Geralt mumbling something at Rosalie about seeing her later, but who knows when. Cullen packed up his things and Lila's baby supplies and started dumping all of it into Aida's old truck while his family watched and worried.

"Cullen, we know you won't take a deep breath and wait until morning but for the record, that's what I think you should do. There's a storm on its way, and when it rains down here, it really rains."

Branson put an arm around Katya, who kept a concerned eye on the baby strapped to Cullen's back while he loaded up the truck.

"I'll be fine. I have the sat phone. And you don't know what the Trevelyans can do."
"They weren't able to keep you safe, how about that?" Rosalie was the most bitter about Cullen's departure and was wishing she had ignored the bleating of his phone earlier.

"Guys, when I get back to Haven, I'll - "

They all stared at him. They all knew there was no way to immediately contact them.

"No, don't look at me that way. I'll figure something out, I promise."

He closed the passenger door of the truck and then turned to them.

"I will come back as soon as I can. And Aida will be with me. We will eat at your dinner table again, as a family."

He looked at Branson. "And maybe Aida will be pregnant again. We'll see."

This made the two men smile at each other, and then the brothers hugged each other hard, clapping each other on the back.

* * * * *

Branson had been right, Cullen got caught in a downpour and then the roads became muddy obstacle courses that slowed him down. He got stuck a few times and almost panicked, but there was a part of him that didn't want to call Aida's family. He wanted to come back to her on his own terms, even if he showed up at their front door dead on his feet.

He had one thing keeping his confidence up as he journeyed home - that trance he had endured in the cabin made it possible for him to think about her and not immediately remember trying to kill her with his bare hands. Now when he conjured the idea of her in his mind, he got neutral static - it wasn't ideal, but it was better than the rage that never belonged to him. He wanted to test his progress though. He wanted to look at her and see how it felt. He could make do with just looking at her. If he could get to that stage, then he could get to the next ones, the more important ones - holding her, kissing her, waking up next to her in bed in the mornings.

It took him three days of trekking through the backroads in the forest to get back to paved highways, and then he pressed the gas pedal and spent the rest of the drive talking to Lila in the backseat. We're going home, baby girl, home to momma. She squealed in response, high pitched and loud enough to sometimes make Cullen wince and laugh out loud. You are a loud one, aren't you. Loud like your momma. You always get your way too.

They only stopped for gas and food. It had been months since he had been in proper civilization and he felt like everyone was looking at him. They were racing back to Haven because Emilia had told him she would be home by Friday, and they were going to throw her an over the top dinner with her closest friends and family, but he also didn't want to show up on the Bann's plush carpets covered in mud and smelling of three days on the road, plus he wanted to gussy up little Lila. This required a stop into a children's store, where people moved away from him in the aisles as he looked for something tiny and light lavender for her to wear. They then stopped at his old condo so he could feed her, bathe her, and then take the quickest shower and shave off his off the grid beard. His hands shook as he looked at himself in the mirror. He was worried, worried about everything that could happen. Worried he'd try to hurt her again with her entire family watching. Worried they'd put him down for it, if anyone could find a way to make someone disappear it could be her oligarch father.
Cullen dug through his suits and cursed at himself. They were late for dinner now for sure, and here he was fretting over his clothing. He knew the Trevelyans sometimes ate in formal attire for special occasions but Emilia hadn't said anything about black tie and he didn't want to call her and look like he was nitpicking over something not serious. Then he saw it toward the back of his closet - the sleek black suit he used to wear when he was just a bodyguard, the job he had when he met Aida, and - exactly what the other-him had been wearing in his meditative state.

It seemed strangely appropriate to wear it.

* * * *

On the steps of Bann Trevelyan's sprawling home, Cullen, Lila, and Barkley were greeted by two people he didn't expect to see right away, Varric and Iron Bull, wearing earpieces and packing heat and looking very official. They hugged him heartily, but then Cullen saw the look on Varric's face.

"I'm sorry, buddy. They hired us to look after Aida."
"Because of you. Jeeze, she's super cute. I mean, I expected any kid of Aida's to be adorable, but not yours."

Bull was leaning down over Lila's stroller and making her smile. Cullen ran a hand through his hair and straightened his suit. "I'm glad you're here to protect her, so can we go inside now?"

The anxious look on Varric's face hadn't disappeared. "Cullen, I'm sorry, but I have to..."

He was holding a set of handcuffs. Cullen held his wrists out, wanting to be as meek as possible. "Go on, it doesn't offend me. Bull, will you - "

Bull already had Lila in his arms and she was trying to reach for one of his horns. "Let's go. You missed all of dinner, but maybe if you're nice, someone will make you a cocktail."

Nice. The word made Cullen stand up straighter. It occurred to him he was entering hostile territory, he was a fallen combatant, a war criminal. They stepped through the huge mahogany doors of Skyhold, Cullen following Bull, who pushed Lila's stroller and cooed nonsense at her, and Varric and Barkley following him closely from behind. Inside, little had changed from the morning he and Aida had slipped away almost a year ago, and the place was mostly silent.

Varric put on a posh voice. "I think most of them are on the terrace. You know how the other half lives."
"On a terrace." Bull added.

The three stopped walking for a moment. "Cullen, do you want to go out there, or..."

In the awkward pause, Lila emitted a few fussy sounds. He knew she wanted to be picked up, but he had his wrists handcuffed at the moment.

"We know this can't be easy for you. What do you want to do, Curly?"

Hearing his old nickname from their professional past made Cullen smile. "How about this, just take me to the Bann's library and let me think for a moment. But tell Aida I'm here, and Lila's here. And then make sure you're always close at hand. Do what you need to do, okay?"

Bull dropped his usual wry tone. "Cullen, we'd never hurt you."

"Yeah, although Bull was joking earlier that if he had to, he'd just sit down on you."
Cullen adjusted his tie. "That - would definitely hurt. Let's go, it's this way, down this hallway."

As they drew closer to the library, Cullen could hear the light tinkling of piano keys. He remembered there was a grand piano in the corner of the library, but neither he nor Aida ever went near it whenever they had been there together. The door was slightly ajar when they approached it and Bull was about to push it open, but Cullen gave him one of their old verbal signals to stop and stay still, just a slight *tsk* under his breath.

Through the four inches of open door Cullen could see Aida sitting next to a man, the two of them on the piano bench. She had her back to him and the first thing he noticed was that she had cut her hair, her midnight black hair he could push his face into so he could breathe in her scent, so long he could wrap it around his fist. Now it was nearly shoulder length, with twists and waves in it. He took in the rest of her, her dress dipped low in the back, and she looked a little underweight due to all her weeks stalking down a terrorist. This woman didn't seem like the girl who once lived next door to him, who was a bubbly nurse who sometimes talked too loud on her cell phone and chain smoked on her balcony. Too much had happened, too much had changed them both.

He was aware that Bull and Varric had backed away, letting him gawk at her and study what he longed for. The spell inside of him had weakened, perhaps just a little - he could look at the back of her, that was good to know, although she hadn't said anything yet or turned to look his way. He felt somewhat reassured, over time, he could undo the magic inside of him using what Ciri and Geralt had taught him.

That feeling of brief reassurance disappeared very quickly.

The man at Aida's side had finished up his sad, sweet song and then he looked over at her. Cullen could barely make out what they were saying across the room but he strained his ears.

"You're crying."
"I'm sorry, I'm just - overwhelmed. I'm home but everything's different now. And I can't fix it."

She began to cry harder and Cullen wanted to take a step into the room but he couldn't, and it wasn't the magic stopping him, it was a perverse part of him that wanted to see what was going to happen next.

The man put an arm around her waist and drew her close. Aida relaxed in his arms and sobbed and Cullen felt woozy when the man planted a kiss on her forehead.

"It's all right, I'm here now. Look at me. You can depend on me. I'll stay in Haven for as long as you need me."

Aida cried more and Cullen wanted to drop to his knees. He felt so weak because he wasn't the one comforting her, in fact, he was the reason she was so upset.

This man, this *stranger*, he cupped Aida's chin and tilted her face toward his. Cullen vaguely recognized him from somewhere but it didn't matter at the moment, he was too fixated on the level of intimacy he had in his voice as he spoke to his wife. "It was sheer luck I ran into your father the other day. I'm glad I did now."

"Sebastian, I - "

Cullen put a hand on the door in front of him and it creaked, louder than he thought it would, and then Barkley simply walked in, trotting up to her. Aida looked at the dog with both tenderness and confusion and then she pulled away from the man at her side, realizing *he* must be here. Her eyes
went wide with shock as she looked at the doorway and found him standing there.

It all came back, like a slap across the face.

He felt that dark impulse inside of him telling him to -

*Charge into the room, don't stop, don't pause, go right up to her and put your hands around her neck and squeeze. Squeeze until she's not breathing.*

Aida stood up and tried to approach him but her friend grabbed her arm and stopped her in her tracks, "Aida, no, we don't know - "

She pulled back against him, tears suspended in her eyes, with her other arm reaching toward him. "Baby! I'm home, you're home, let go of me, please. Cullen!"

He heard her words as though they were far, far away and he did exactly what he didn't want to do.

*He took a step away from her and pushed the door shut."

"I've got to get out of here."

Cullen picked up Lila and kissed her a few times, making the little girl squirm and grab at his curls.

"Varric, please, um... Just tell Emilia I'll be in contact with her tomorrow."

Aida was still struggling and arguing with Sebastian on the other side of the door, but Iron Bull had a foot placed squarely against it, keeping her pinned inside.

"We can talk about visitation and how we'll handle all of this."

Aida pounded on the door and once again, Cullen could barely hear her words, it felt like his ears were stuffed with something anytime she spoke. "Don't leave, please. Stay here tonight. Lila needs you, I need you."

Cullen put the baby in Bull's arms. "Please take care of both of them for me."

He fled.

He went all the way back to his condo where everything was in the same place as the day he left it to run away with Aida. He sat down on the couch and loosened his tie, Barkley at his feet. He couldn't tell if it was his imagination or his intuition but Barkley seemed as down as he was and it was because neither the baby or Aida was with them. In fact, when he looked around right now, it felt like someone had hit the reset button on his life. He was drinking the same old whiskey, his loyal dog at his side, with no particular plans for the night. He was basically a bachelor again and he did not like it, not with that guy hanging around his wife and playing the piano for her (pretentious bastard), and his baby sleeping under another roof.

There was only one thing he could do. Cullen dropped to his knees and sat back on his heels. He closed his eyes and thought about the knot inside of him. He looked for the loose string and began to work it free.

* * * * *
The next morning Cullen woke up in his bed, still in his suit. He didn't remember walking into his bedroom and passing out, he must have meditated past his own body's threshold. He felt a few things all at once, proud of his accomplishment, but also sad he didn't have anyone to report it to. He thought of his family and knew they were worrying about him, he'd have to figure out a way to communicate with them that he was safe, and everything was fine. Everyone was alive and well, just not together. Okay, everything was terrible.

Cullen rolled onto his side and noticed Barkley was seated nearby, wagging his tail in a nervous but excited way - and he was facing the wall.

"Barks, what are you doing?"

He was listening - something was going on next door. In Aida's apartment. Cullen sat up with alarm as he heard furniture moving around and footsteps. It was a few people, and their tones were businesslike and efficient. The walls in their overpriced condo building were notoriously thin, and he had a keen flashback to lying on this bed listening to Aida walking around next door.

It was Aida walking around next door. He heard her muffled voice and even Lila's little squeaks.

"Aida, is that you?"

On the other side of the wall, he heard her footsteps coming closer to the wall, and then the creak of her bed springs. His sat phone lit up on the bed stand nearby and he grabbed it. An unidentified number had texted him.

- It's me
- i'm moving in next door it will be just like how we first met
- this way too Lila has both her parents nearby
- we will learn how to make it work
- what do u think of my idea??

Cullen had to take a deep breath before texting. He realized he was smiling and that maybe he hadn't smiled like this in months.

- I think it's the best idea i've heard in a long time

He waited for her response, one hand on Barkley's head.

- I love you

He typed out what he knew she wanted to hear:

- I love you more than life itself
Following, Volume 1

Chapter Summary

I'm back, baby! Let's finish this one up by the end of the year.

Or something. Writing goals are futile, aren't they.

ENJOY THE FEELS AND THE SMUT

It was hell, living next door to him.

Aida could hear Cullen moving about his condo next to hers, much as she used to before they had fallen in love. She could remember those days, the daily annoyance of his footsteps and his coming and goings - but it was annoyance quietly fueled by her attraction to him. It had been impossible to not crush on him, think about him - and then also worry about him when she could hear his nightmares right through the walls.

All of that past was still tied up in the present. She still worried about him, she still longed for him, but instead of just walls now an unbreakable, deep, dark piece of magic separated them, magic that had taken the domestic bliss of their lives and turned it into something unreal. When she texted him about the baby and when she could leave him with her, she knew her messages appeared in his phone with no contact information attached, so even the sight of her name would not trigger him. Even their shared custody of Lily was stilted and strange - she would leave her in her stroller in his living room and see herself out while Cullen waited for her to leave, locked away in the farthest corner of his condo. As soon as he heard the front door shut behind her, he would emerge so Lily was only alone for twenty seconds at the most. All of it was unnatural. It was no way to live, divided in half.

Aida hated to admit it, but she did sometimes feel normal. She always had dinner at her father's mansion every Friday night and after all the meals in mess halls during the Corypheus campaign, she finally relaxed into the wealth she had grown up in, and also the sense of security she felt within its un-breachable perimeter. Her father had been doing something that irked her though - he had been inviting one of her old boyfriends around, Sebastian Vael. The Starkhavens and the Trevelyans were also investment partners, so every time she tried to ask him what he was up to he claimed it was business and business alone. Aida tried setting him straight one day when she swung by his office after lunch with her sister.

"Are you inviting Sebastian to dinner on Friday - again?"

"Aida, it's not a big deal, it's just business. He's in town, and he's now managing some of his father's portfolios. I think it's about time we get into wind power, it - "

"Don't forget, I dated him for three months when I was 22 and you didn't approve of it then."

Bann Trevelyan leaned back into his big executive chair and gave his youngest daughter a semi-sheepish grin.

"Yes, I remember. Sebastian was different then, he - "
"- didn't have the paparazzi chasing him around yet, that was before all the celebrity girlfriends. You know I don't like cameras or being followed, after everything I've been through. I definitely don't like how they're waiting for them at the gates when he comes to Skyhold."

Her father sighed deeply, and she knew he had just glanced at the calendar on his laptop screen, growing impatient with her now.

"Listen, you know I support your husband. I'm not trying to break up your marriage. But I think it'd be good for you to get out of that condo when you can. Cullen's focusing on himself, going to therapy, doing the work of getting better - and you don't need to just... sit there waiting for him. You do realize that's what you've been doing? What happened to nursing, or your drawing, and the other eighteen things you used to do?"

It was a good question. She thought about who she used to be, before the Maker took the neat and tidy life she had once had and shaken it up, hard - so hard she had been thrust into another corner of the multiverse.

That Friday at dinner at Skyhold, Sebastian was waiting at her chair, holding it out from the table for her.

"Hey."
"Hey. You're looking beautiful tonight."
"You don't have to lay it on so thick, Sebastian. I'm not one of your twenty-six year old starry-eyed ingenues who thrives on compliments."

Sebastian sat down next to her with a chuckle and a huff. "And you don't have to be so tough. Just take a compliment, jeeze."

They snorted together and Aida forced herself to relax as he handed her the bread basket.

"Why are you in town again anyhow, Seb?"

She waited for him to slather on too much butter onto his roll. "I know you've just been off fighting big bad villains and doing crazy stuff like falling out of the sky, but there's a tennis tournament going on in town, the Haven Open? I've got tickets to all the good matches."

Her father was in the middle of a conversation with her sister Emilia but he gave her a quick, pointed look.

"Really. Uh, tennis, huh? I haven't played since high school."

Sebastian filled her wine glass for her. "Would you - want to come with me to a match? Or, maybe, play a quick round together? See if you still remember how to swing a racket?"

Everyone looked at her. Her father, her sister, and one of her brothers and two of his kids who had come to dinner that night. Even their chef, who had come out of the kitchen with a heaping bowl of pasta and sauce paused to see how she'd respond. Aida surrendered. She didn't have very much going on, it was true. Spending another evening listening to the sounds coming from Cullen's condo while she drank red wine and did some mindless online shopping was - probably not good for her.

"Sure. I guess it wouldn't kill me."

* * * * *
Aida ended up having a better time than she expected sitting next to Sebastian at the Haven Open, even though she had to endure the public's continued fascination with the intensely private "Herald of Andraste" -

Who was out and about with a man who wasn't her ex-Templar husband...

She wanted to tell everyone that Sebastian wasn't even flirting with her that much, he legitimately seemed to be acting as a friend, taking her out to dinner a few times a week and playing tennis with her, either at her father's country club or on the courts at Skyhold, but she always felt a pinprick of guilt if the photographers caught them leaving a romantic trattoria. For some reason, her anxieties were fixated on Cullen's oldest sister Mia, the one who wasn't living off the grid in the forest, the one who might see that cover of that gossip rag and wonder what kind of woman she was.

One night at a sushi restaurant, Aida watched in quiet awe as Sebastian did all the ordering for the two of them, in perfect Japanese. Strange how this one interaction sent her into a whirlwind of emotion. She had caught herself wanting Sebastian in that moment, and it felt right, and natural, to feel compelled by this suave, charismatic man, and yet also, at the same time - so terribly wrong. It should be Cullen across the table from her right now, not speaking Japanese one bit, but describing the dishes he liked to the patient water, maybe not as articulately as he wanted, in that endearing, slightly bumbling way of his. You know, I like the one you put the sauce on. The lemon-y soy sauce. Yeah, the halibut. Bring us that, and a lot of yellowtail, that's the other one I like, isn't it, Aida? This place doesn't have rolls, does it...

Aida missed him so much in that moment, but another part of her needed a distraction, badly. She didn't dare tell anyone in her life that a new voice had begun chiming in inside of her head - that maybe Cullen would never get better, and they would be apart like this for a long, long time. If not forever.

She asked Sebastian to come up to her condo for a drink one night after dinner.

Just to show him the view.

"It's a killer view, Aida - although I'm surprised your father let you move into a high rise he didn't own."

She brushed off the lounge sofa she had on her balcony and motioned for him to sit down.

"Things used to be so different and not even that long ago. I was a lot more independent then, before - just about everything that could possibly happen to me, happened to me."

Sebastian leaned forward. "Is it true - all of it? You know - "

"Everything I said in the one interview I granted to the New Denerim Times? Yes. But there's stuff I conveniently left out of that. Stuff that makes me sound even crazier."

Sebastian brushed his hand against hers, giving it a little squeeze. "Tell me, I want to hear the crazy things."

"We need wine. And a lot of it. I'll be right back."

Aida realized her hands were shaking as she opened the bottle of red. What are you doing, your husband is next door with your daughter, what are you doing, what are you doing...

She returned to her balcony and found Sebastian standing at the railing, staring out at the mountains. He turned to her with a very serious look as he took the glass of wine she offered him.
"Ah... He saw me. Next door."

Aida froze.

"I just looked over my shoulder and he was standing in the patio door over there, glaring at me."

She had been as discreet as possible when it came to her friendship with Sebastian. This had been the very first time he had come up to her condo after dinner.

"You didn't tell me he's a big guy."
"He is."

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. "He looked like he wanted to kill me."

"He probably does. Do you want to go sit in the living room?"

He held up his glass to hers for a toast. "Yes, please. I don't want to get thrown off this balcony."

* * * * *

And so they carried on their friendship, longer than Aida expected. She assumed Sebastian would be back to his famous girlfriends and his red carpet events and his billion-dollar hedge fund, but he was hanging around Haven, hanging around her.

The truth was the Herald of Andraste was really enjoying her rounds of tennis with Sebastian, about three times a week now. She was getting plenty of fresh air and exercise and the heavy malaise that had fallen on her after killing Corypheus with her bare hands lifted off her shoulders in those afternoons perfecting her swing. She also stopped fretting about what Sebastian was "up to". She had a friend, and one that was removed from all the surreal drama she had endured. He hadn't been there when an explosion robbed her of her memories, he wasn't there when she got sucked into another corner of the multiverse, he hadn't known her panic as she fled into the forest.

One afternoon before meeting Sebastian for some tennis at Skyhold, she looked at herself in the mirror and took inventory of what she saw: she was a woman in her mid to late thirties, a nurse, an artist, a mother, a veteran.

Aida made herself to add something she had been in denial about: and, estranged from her husband.

She practiced the lines the past months had forced her to write.

*It's a long story.*

*No, we didn't fall out of love, no, nobody cheated on anyone.*

We just can't live together anymore.

She teared up for a moment and then took a deep breath. She was going to be late.

Two hour laters on the other side of town Sebastian was helping her finesse her swing and they were getting giggly, probably due to the mimosas they had been drinking. After a few botched returns, Sebastian crossed to her side of the court to help correct her. He came up behind her, close, putting one hand on her hip and the other on her wrist.

"Your stance is wrong, I want you to keep your shoulders like this, pull back like this. It's easy when you're standing still, a little harder to remember when you're moving, but..."
She was aware of Sebastian's cologne in that moment, mixed with his sweat. It had been so long since a man touched her, held her, and he was practically embracing her from behind right now. She felt the breeze against her bare legs, rustling her tennis skirt, and all she did was turn her head a little to the left and now Sebastian was nuzzling his nose into her hair.

Aida closed her eyes as he dipped his head lower and kissed her neck and against the logic of her own heart, she sighed.

And then she panicked, no no, what were they doing, what was -

She hadn't even finished her thought when the sound of footsteps falling hard across the clay top of the tennis courts made her eyes snap open and then her heart began pounding in her chest.

It was CULLEN, stomping toward them.

"Get your FUCKING hands off my wife!"

Sebastian pushed her away and dodged the first punch Cullen levied at him. "Aida, run, I'll - " He was a little less lucky with Cullen's second punch, which forced him to lose his footing and he fell backwards onto the court.

She didn't turn to see their scuffle unfold, she was now in survivor mode. This had nothing to do with romance, the only thing pulsing through her mind in that moment was how hard he had choked her when he had had that first chance, how he could certainly kill her despite the months of meditation and therapy and mages scanning him from head to toe -

She ran across her father's vast property, sprinting toward the only structure before her, the pool house. She could lock herself in the bathroom in there until someone helped her. More frenzied thoughts popped into her head, where was Lily, how'd he know she would be here, how'd he even get past the gates, why'd he have to show up at that very moment and see her like that...

Was someone going to stop him?

Aida ran toward the small bathroom in the corner and turned the knob and gasped when the door wouldn't open. Fuck, what was that about? She turned around, scanning the room around her, realizing nobody had used the pool house in a long time, a lot of the furniture was covered, and she had forgotten there was no back door to the pool house. She was trapped, and now Cullen's looming silhouette was filling the doorway in front of her.

She didn't say anything, knowing the sound of her voice could make it worse. Aida pressed her back against the wall and watched him stalking toward her. Even though she was scared, it was so good to look at him. He had lost weight, he looked like he wasn't sleeping much. Guilt flooded her veins. She had a tan from all her time outdoors and it probably looked like she had been on vacation for the past few months. It didn't matter how she looked. She knew the thing inside of him wanted to kill her.

Cullen stepped closer, slowing down now, his eyes drilling into her. Two tears rolled down Aida's cheeks. She wanted to say she was sorry, Sebastian was just a friend, what he had seen was the first and only moment he had gotten physical with her, she had been lonely, people had encouraged her to get out of the house, it was their fault, not hers. It had just happened, it didn't mean anything. Please. But she knew this had nothing to do with that. This was simply what the Venatori had put inside of him, when he was their hostage.

I love you, and only you.
She felt his fingers around her throat. Aida couldn't help it, she remembered how he used to dominate her in bed with that single hand. Now she had the courage to look into his eyes and she exhaled, jagged and full of emotion. He was going to kill her but she still wanted him, badly.

Cullen squeezed her windpipe, but not as hard as she expected. She reached up and put her hand over his, touching him for the first time in months upon months. He squeezed a little harder and she tried to shake her head at him. Aida concentrated her energy and pushed a thought toward him with her mana.

_You don't have to do this._
_I know you don't want to._

He leaned down and she wanted to touch him more, run a hand through his hair, but she was still pinned to the wall and he was beginning to squeeze a little harder now.

_Baby, please. Don't make *me* hurt you. You realize that I could, right?_

His eyes swept over her face as though he were looking for something.

_I miss you so much. I want you so badly._

He snarled his upper lip at her and had to moisten his lips before speaking. "I saw you. You don't miss me."

She was crying in earnest now.

"Are you sleeping with him him?"

Aida didn't bother with magic, she answered him with her voice, as hard as that was at the moment. "No, I swear, baby. I would never, ever - "

"Do you want to?"
"NO, I promise, I swear to you - "

He was now choking her, lifting her slightly off the ground so she was perched there on her toes. This was it. She had survived passing through the Veil, a childbirth that had started on the battlefield, and facing down Thedas's most wanted terrorist, but she was going to die here, at the hands of the person she loved the most in this world.

Or she could push him away. She could send him careening through the glass doors behind him. Aida couldn't do it though. He was going to kill her but she didn't want to ever hurt him.

Aida opened her eyes when he loosened his grip and put her back down on her feet, but he still had his hand wrapped around her neck. She noticed he was sweating, and the dark look in his eyes seemed to be filtering away, like a cloud passing in front of the sun.

Cullen was leaning forward now. Aida froze again, listening to the sound of his breathing.

He drew closer and closer. Aida felt goosebumps prickling all over her arms. He was trying to kiss her?

She tilted her head up, giving him access to her lips. This was really happening. He was better, he was going to get better, he -

He was inches away from her face now, fighting with every atom in his being to lean down and give
her the simplest of kisses, and then something interrupted this tiny oasis of a moment: three of her father's security guards who worked at the front gates of Skyhold appeared in the doorway of the pool house and before she could tell them to stop, Cullen was crumpled in a heap in front of her feet. They had tazed him.

Sebastian arrived next, blood dripping down his face. Cullen had broken his nose.

Aida was still standing with her back against the wall, shaking, when she told Sebastian, "I don't think we should see each other anymore."

*A * * *

Aida sat at the dinner table, mute and apathetic as her father raged about what had happened earlier that day.

"I pay these guys, and for what? They sit in the gate house watching Judge Judy all day. How'd he get past them? How'd he get in if none of them let him in?"

She slathered more butter on her dinner roll. "I told you, don't worry about it. And don't fire anyone over this. Nobody got hurt. Well, except Sebastian. And he'll be fine. And none of it will ever happen again."

Aida didn't want to talk about the details, she wanted to sit and think about how close they had been standing for just a moment and how she had felt Cullen fighting what was inside of him with every atom of his being just to kiss her. She wanted to imagine what would have happened had they been alone, how glorious it would have been if the entire thing had unfolded like a fairy tale, that one kiss would have been powerful enough to break the darkness inside him. And then, spell broken, maybe Cullen would have fucked her into oblivion on one of those old pieces of furniture in the pool house.

Aida made quick eye contact with her sister, who was bouncing Lily on her lap and giving her a look she recognized from their younger years. "What are you thinking about? You look like you're thinking crazy thoughts."

She was crazy, even though as a healthcare professional, she loathed that word. But she did feel irrational and unhinged by what had happened that afternoon. And she wanted to do something about it.

Aida met up with Dorian the very next day, taking him to dinner. She let him ramble on about his wedding, the one he kept planning that had no actual date, and then when he moved on to what kind of napkins they should have at the tables, she cut him off.

"Dorian, nobody remembers the napkins at weddings. Just pick a color and get on with it. People are starting to think you just don't want to get married. Poor Bull, just sitting around, waiting for you to make up your mind."

"Oh, like he cares. He'd rather just go down to City Hall and - "
"What's wrong with that? You do the civil ceremony and then straight to dinner and champagne!"

Dorian scoffed as he ordered them another bottle of the aforementioned bubbly. "Please. That's where he works! What's romantic about that? We might as well have the reception in the ER then!"

"Dorian, stop talking about your wedding for four seconds, I need to ask you something. Do you know a - good blood mage?"

Dorian nearly spit out the spoonful of risotto he had in his mouth, but he swallowed, wiped the
corners of his lips, composed himself and looked right at her.

"Why. Are you asking me about this."

Aida put a hand on his arm, pleading with him now. "Dorian, just a few days ago Cullen was able to fight back against what was inside of him, even if it was just for a moment. He's making progress but - not enough for my taste."

Dorian put his hand on top of hers. "Darling, you can't rush these things, and blood magic isn't some easy guarantee. And it's dangerous, you risk -"

"- demonic possession, yadda yadda yadda. Yes, I know. But -"

Dorian waved down the waiter and ordered himself a scotch, which Aida always felt was a sign he was only going to be able to deal with her if he was a little drunker.

"You had Merrill helping you with your grand experiment, which may I remind you, went totally sideways, even within the confines of a university testing facility."

Aida took the glass of scotch from the waiter before he could grab it and had a sip before passing it to him.

"I know it's so, high school, in a certain way. But all I want is a little spell, a little love spell, to draw him closer to me. I want him to try again. Dorian, please."

He rolled his eyes and took a bigger gulp of scotch. "Why do you think I'd know a good blood mage? Just look on Yelp, for Maker's sake."

* * * * *

Twenty minutes after dinner, Aida fired up her laptop and found there were plenty of blood mages operating their thriving businesses all over town, and some of them had thousands of positive reviews from customers claiming a little blood magic was all they needed to jumpstart their career, lose weight, find love, speak to the spirit of a dead pet, locate missing wedding rings - all kinds of wild statements that made Aida think of Dorian's skepticism with this project. Everyone seemed so sad and desperate...

And then Aida remembered she was sad and desperate too. She could hear Cullen walking back and forth next door, probably with Lily in his arms, cooing to her. She wanted to be in the room with him, she wanted to raise their daughter together, so she was willing to do anything - including driving to the hipster neighborhood, spending nearly thirty minutes looking for parking, and getting in line to see Anaïs, a blood mage with quite the following. Her practice was in the back of a bustling shop, where people were doing things like buying smoothies and teas, looking at crystals, dreamcatchers, spell tomes - and a slew of other things that were simply fashionable, linen dresses, silk scarves. She was selling everything, and for a moment, Aida considered leaving, but it it was hard to ignore how everyone looked blissful, glowing, positive, happy. She wanted to be at least one of those things by the end of the day.

After nearly 90 minutes of slouching around this trendy Haven neighborhood, Anaïs welcomed Aida into her office, which to her relief, looked like any doctor's office, complete with the paper-covered examining table.

Aida shook her hand and took a seat. "As a registered nurse, I'm glad it looks like this in here, because out there - "
Anaïs sat down across from her and waved off what was going on in the rest of the premises. "My business partner thought we should do that stuff, it's a little less scary than blood magic, and it certainly pays the rent around here. How can I help you today?"

Aida licked her lips and chose to study the grout between the tile on the floor, rather than make eye contact with the seemingly ageless woman in front of her.

"So, you don't... Recognize me at all?"

Aida glanced at her and the woman was simply writing notes in her new customer file.

"You're a patient, like my other patients. If I did recognize you, I wouldn't blurt something out. I only want to help."

She didn't believe her, but it made things easier. "I'm fine with that, because it makes the story so much easier to tell. My husband is under the influence of some dark magic, possibly a twisted form of blood magic, engineered by Venitori separatists, and, every time he looks at me, the magic forces him to - try to kill me."

The blood mage had stopped writing notes, she was just staring at her in shock.

"I know. We're both former veterans, it happened on a recent campaign."

Anaïs shook her head at her. "I cannot help you with anything like that. You said you were a nurse earlier, so I'll be honest with you - the spells I craft with the blood of a willing donor, they're almost always spells to give the user some self confidence. Everything people come in here hoping for, wishing for, are simple things. More money, more beauty, more love... All people really need is to feel reassured, and then they go out there and get those things for themselves and, then - "

Aida began to despair as she trailed off, the mage seemed to be admitting her magic was - well, magic. It was an illusion. But she had already wasted half the day down here on this side of town that reminded her of the kind of men she used to date before Cullen, so might as well get something out of it.

Aida rolled up her sleeve and offered her arm to her. "I'll take whatever you've got. But let's say it's a love spell. Let's say it will bring him back to me."

She gave her 350 ml of plasma. She watched as her own blood was poured into a copper chalice, combined with other alchemic elements, and then handed back to her.

She drank all of it while chanting the spell, her tongue struggling with the strange words and the taste of her own mortality.

She went home and waited. A week went by, and then ten days, and everything stayed the same.

On the fourteenth day after the blood magic ritual, Aida found herself pushing Lily in her stroller in the direction of the Chantry in downtown Haven, sifting through her memories, remembering two versions of these streets. She rolled her sleeping daughter into the cavernous building, picked a pew, and sat down to do two things she rarely did. She prayed, and let herself cry.

Aida was surprised when both things made her feel better, and on her walk back home, she noticed the moon was full, silvery, and bright.

* * * * *
In the middle of the night, many hours after she read Lily her bedtime book, Aida thought she heard someone in her kitchen. She lay very still, wondering if it was just Cullen next door, pacing through a bout of insomnia as he often did during these long days of separation, but when she heard the footsteps moving into the living room, she became more alarmed. She slipped out of bed as quietly as she could and headed for her closet, slipping a hand into the bottom of a truck of winter sweaters until her fingers brushed against the case of her Sig Sauer. She loaded it with calm hands, took a deep breath and headed down the hallway, slow and quiet, the way she stalked Corypheus's minions not that long ago.

Her heart began beating harder when she realized the door to Lily's room, her old art studio, was wide open. She did not want to have to fire a gun in her daughter's room, but if she had to, she would...

Aida peered around the corner and froze. It was Cullen, one hand on the railing of her crib, leaning down to touch her cheek with a tender finger as she slept.

He turned around and Aida raised her gun, pointing it right at his heart. He blinked at her a few times, and then Aida realized the soft green light filling the room wasn't from Lily's frog-shaped nightlight nearby. It was coming from him.

It was coming from his eyes.

"Babe?"

It was his voice, but it wasn't his voice.

He raised his arms in a surrendering gesture. "What's with the gun, Aida? I'm not going to hurt you - or my baby girl."

Aida felt her mouth run dry. No, there was no way, that other Cullen - how could he be here?

"She's beautiful, Aida. She looks just like you, but she got my hair, didn't she."

Aida lowered her gun, just a little.

"I don't understand, you... You died. You died in my arms."

He took two steps toward her and put a hand on the barrel of her gun, pushing it down for her.

"Yes, I remember. You and that knife. And then you were gone. I sent you back here, so you could be happy, so you could live. You didn't want to stay with me. That hurt more than the knife did."

With his free hand, Cullen lifted his white t-shirt, just a bit.

"Go on, feel the scar. You know it's me. You remember, right?"

Aida reached out and felt for where the knife had slipped into his side.

There was no scar there.

This was certainly her Cullen, the one next door, the one she hadn't been able to touch for months now. But he was speaking with the voice of the other Cullen, the one she had left behind.

Aida remembered how her own blood had tasted in her mouth - and how she had begged Andraste to send him back to her. She also remembered how Cullen had consulted a oenieromancer and seen right into that other world where she had been trapped, the strange self-destructive sleep-walking she
had once done while she was pregnant with Lily, and all the other inexplicable plot twists that had happened to her, including how she could conjure a magical sword with the flick of her wrist.

Who knows what kind of spellcraft this was, but he was back. And he was holding his hand on top of hers, her fingers still pressed to his side. This Cullen could touch her. He was both of them tonight.

"You didn't answer me earlier. Why were you pointing a 9mm at me?"
"The you, in this world - he's been cursed with something. He's been programmed to kill me."
"And yet, you're still living next door to him?"

He laughed and Aida couldn't help it, she laughed too. "You're obsessed with me, Trevelyan, it's pretty obvious."

Aida lead him by the hand down the hallway to her bedroom. She put the gun down on her bedside table, barrel pointed away from them, but she was still worried enough to want it nearby if she needed it.

She turned back to face him.

"Tell me something you remember. Something about you and me."

This-Cullen, whoever he was, pulled an adorable *let me think about it* sort of look, while Aida waited patiently.

"You tricked me into taking my clothes off so you could draw me, or something like that."

Aida smiled, beginning to relax around him now. "I did that with you here, in this world too, though."

She watched him thinking harder, feeling goosebumps tingle across her skin when he took a step closer to her, his fingers now moving up and down her bare arm.

"We went to the museum together. You drew pictures in your notebook. You told me I reminded you of a lion."

Only *he* would remember that. It was definitely him, the man she had loved in that other world. Aida felt a tear rolling down her cheek.

"How are you here, baby? You shouldn't be here, it doesn't make any sense."

He shrugged while tracing a finger up her shoulder now, making her shiver.

"This guy? This me... He's broken. He's missing stuff. I'm just - stepping into those blanks somehow. I can't explain it, but I felt something pulling me here. And it doesn't matter. What matters is I'm here now. Why are you crying, Aida?"

She was crying because she had always been the type to thinking about how the moment passing by might never happen again. She had seen patients die in the ER after a mighty effort to keep them alive. She had stood over some properly evil men, Corypheus's foot soldiers, sobbing for their mothers, moaning with regret as they bled out at her feet. She could remember happy Sunday mornings with Cullen before any of this had happened, and how she hadn't savored it as much as she should have. This could be it, her only chance to be with him, whichever Cullen it was.

And then she took a deep breath and focused on him, now cupping her face with the same hand he
had recently wrapped around her throat.

"Kiss me."

He gave her a smile that made her feel warm all over. "I was going to."

The second his lips landed on hers, she stopped thinking. It didn't matter that this could be a glitch, an anomaly. The kiss grew deeper and she let everything go, the possibility that he could snap to and still kill her, the possibility that it could never happen again, that this would be the last time he'd ever touch her again. He broke the kiss to grin at her, looking down at his ancient college t-shirt she slept in, a souvenir from the early days of their courtship.

"You still have this old thing."
"I'll never get rid of it."
"Well, you will, right now."

He pulled it off over her head and made a low noise of approval when she proved to be wearing nothing under the shirt. She helped him get his t-shirt off and he stepped out of his sweats, and they stood naked in front of each other, for the first time in a very long time. She felt his eyes moving up and down her body, lighting her up from the inside with his desire for her. Aida realized she wet already when he paused in his looking at her to say something.

"I love you."
"So show me."

They landed on the bed, tussling for dominance, Aida wanting to be on top until he rolled her to the mattress and pinned her there as he dipped his head to draw one of her nipples into his mouth, and then the other, going back and forth until she was groaning loud enough to make her worry she'd wake up the baby her room. They were moving quickly, panting between kisses, swearing as lips landed exactly where they should land. A single swipe of her palm against his cock made her want to take all of him into her mouth, and very quickly she found herself straddling his face and choking on the length of him, growing more and more excited by the tip of his tongue and the sounds his was making deep into her pussy. She orgasmed on his face, giving him a bite on his thigh she hoped would leave a mark. Aida rolled off of him onto her back, giggling a little as he crawled over her.

"You are always so, so good at that."

Cullen wiped a hand across his face and then messily swiped it across hers. "Look at how wet you are, and you're so hot and sweet."

She couldn't respond, he was kissing her hard now, tasting herself on his lips while he pushed his cock into her without any fanfare or warm up or sweet words. He slid himself deep into her until she squeaked and wrapped her legs around him. He got up onto his knees so he could hold on to the bed frame behind her and give her hard, aggressive little thrusts and watch her face as he did so. She kept her eyes locked onto his and in begging, desperate tone, told him everything she had been wanting to tell him. She loved him, she loved his cock, she loved how hard he was, how deep he was, she wanted to come, she wanted him to come, she wanted to be full of his come, she wanted it in her mouth too, on her tits, she wanted him again and again. She wanted another one of his babies. She wanted to carry more of his children.

These words lit a fire in his eyes and his thrusts became more insistent, Cullen curled that sexy lip of his at her and grinned at her, playful lust dancing over his face.
"That's what you want? You want me to put a baby inside you?"

Aida grinned back at him. "Yes, but not before you make me -"

He knew what she was going to say, and he stopped, got up on his knees, pushed his cock deep inside her once again and touched three fingers to her swollen clit.

"Make you what?"

He rubbed her pearl in a slow, torturous circle. Aida arched her back and cried out, grabbing on to the sheets below her. Cullen slowed his thrusts, gliding in and out of her as he stimulated her until she was aching. And he was watching every moment of it, staring at his cock entering her pussy, their sex as pornographic as ever, making Aida disengage from all her anxious thoughts and nagging troubles with every touch of his fingertips. Then with a mighty groan, he laid down over her again, pressing his muscle all over her, kissing her messily. She scratched his back, bit his shoulder, grabbed his hair and pulled. She wanted the Cullen in this world to wake up and feel her, remember her, she would leave her marks all over him. She wanted this Cullen to last for hours but they were too excited, and after she hooked her ankles behind his neck, his thrusts grew rougher and more emphatic. She dug her nails into his forearms as he threw his head back and howled and Aida squeezed him tight from within, the two of them climaxing together in one desperate crescendo.

They were so loud they woke the baby, who began whining in her crib, which made Barkley start barking in concern in the condo next door. Cullen's head turned, the light in his eyes dimming just a little.

"He's going to wake up. I better go."

Aida swept her hands over his sweaty chest, up his neck, through his hair, just savoring the ability to do so. "Do you think you can - come back? Come back to see me again, please. Please don't leave me."

He dropped his head to kiss her a few more times but then scrambled off her to pull his sweatpants back on.

Cullen paused in the doorway of her bedroom to look back at her.

"You'll see me again, sooner than you think."

She listened to his footsteps leaving her condo and entering his. She listened to him going all the way back to his bedroom and lying down in his bed, right on the other side of the wall from hers. Lily began to cry a little louder and Aida got up, looked for Cullen's old college shirt and pulled it on, noticing how wobbly she felt just walking down the hallway.

Did that all really just happen? How was she supposed to go on with the rest of her Wednesday?
Cullen woke up and laid in bed for a while, remembering that he didn't have Lily today. He listened to Aida moving around next door and then rolled over and looked at Barkley, who was studying him intently with his shiny, sympathetic eyes in an almost worried way.

"What's up, Barks? You want to go walkies? Can you wait a bit, you know what we do on Wednesdays, remember?"

The mabari kept the rather anxious look on his face as he followed his master around as he went about his business, making himself a pot of coffee, and then Cullen caught a glimpse of himself in the shiny glass door of the cabinet where he kept the mugs. His hair was out of control, and this was beyond the usual bed head and it was odd enough to make him stop and look at his reflection. He ran a hand through his hair and realized a few things all at once. He felt tired, despite sleeping a good eight hours. He also felt - sore - as though he had done a lot of running or walking the day before. And, he had gone to sleep with a t shirt on and woken up in just his sweatpants. Weird, but not too weird.

He didn't have too much time to ponder it, he had to stay on schedule. Cullen hopped in the shower and ran down how the day would unfold. Aida would be taking Lily to their baby music class, where toddlers banged on bongos with two sticky hands while their benevolent parents told themselves this would help them with math later in life. After class, she'd likely walk back home through the park, passing through in the farmer's market where Lily would be remarked upon by all the vendors Aida always visited. Sometimes she stopped and laid out a blanket so she could read a book while Lily played in the sunshine, then they'd stop at the grocery store for things the baby needed. After that, it'd be home for a nap. Skyhold for dinner. He felt both relieved and guilty Aida had stopped playing tennis, it had proved harder to follow her to the country club for her lessons, and harder to get past the guards at her father's estate. She had clearly been enjoying herself, but Cullen had been queasy once he realized that guy was enjoying himself too. He had been queasy, and angry - too angry.

Cullen shook off the unpleasant memory of attacking Aida in that dusty, dark pool house behind Skyhold and turned around in the shower to let the water hit him on the back, but then he stepped out of the spray when he winced in pain. He touched a hand to his shoulder and felt three ridges there. It puzzled him enough to get out and try to look at his back in the bathroom mirror. He had three swipes across his back, fingernail marks, right near the scars of old ones, ones Aida had given him at the peak of her pleasure. The memories of those simpler, lust-driven times made him shudder, and he stepped back into the shower and rested his head against the tile while the hot water washed over him. He touched his fingers to those fresh marks on his shoulder and closed his eyes - and then heard Aida groaning right in his ear. He got a flash of her underneath him, her eyes closed in ecstasy.

She opened her eyes and looked right at him and said, "Baby..."

It was enough to make him feel his cock pulse in response.

He hadn't felt like being sexual ever since the kidnapping. He had told himself if he couldn't be with Aida, then he didn't need that part of himself either. Perhaps that had been an impossible belief, because he was now stroking himself, quickly liberated by the realization he could grab onto these flashes of lust and not trigger the magic inside him. Details came flooding into his senses, her groans...
and her moans right in his ear, rubbing his face against her hot, wet femininity, holding her down as he made her shriek and writhe when he pushed his entire manhood into her. She begged, she pleaded, he heard a list of things she wanted punctuated by a demand so primal it made him gasp as he came onto the bathroom tile in front of him. *She wanted him to come inside her, she wanted another one of his babies.*

Cullen’s eyes blinked open as he let himself go. He then felt the scratches again on his back. Everything he had just felt, felt real, like it had just happened. He took inventory of his body - there had been his messy hair this morning, the scratches on his back. His hands slid down to his upper thigh and he noticed two light red half rings there: teeth marks?

He now stepped out of the shower and rubbed some of the steam off the mirror. Instinctually, he tilted his head at his reflection. He had telltale marks on his neck too.

Cullen blinked at himself a few times, feeling exactly like he used to after a night of too much red lyrium.

Where had he been, what had he done - who had he been with?

He heard Barkley whine and then run down the hallway to the front door, making him realize Aida and Lily had left to start their day. Fuck, all this daydreaming in the shower cost him some time, and now he’d be late.

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Cullen and Barkley waited for them outside of the music studio. There was a park next to the building that was the kind of place where nearby office workers would congregate to eat their solo lunches while looking at their phones, and it had always been easy to sit down on a bench under a tree in the corner and wait for the two of them to emerge in a bustling cluster of parents and toddlers. There was the requisite chatting with the other moms and dads, and then he’d follow her to the farmer’s market.

He’d been following them everywhere for weeks.

The thing inside of him might keep him from walking right at Aida’s side but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t follow her everywhere she went with their daughter, from a safe distance, at least twenty feet away. He would be vigilant until Aida told him to stop, and so far, she seemed unaware of him keeping a close eye on them. He had just slipped up the one time, when Sebastian had the balls to put his hands all over her, and that memory made Cullen close his eyes and do his breathing exercises just to keep himself from getting up and punching the tree behind him.

He centered himself and concentrated. He had come to think of the spell inside of him as a brick wall that was always sliding toward him. All he had to do was put two hands on it and lean his weight against it to push it back. He had pushed hard enough that day in the pool house to lean down and almost kiss Aida. *Maker, remember how she tilted her head up at you, you bastard? You were so close. Will she ever let you try that again?*

Barkley nudged his knee with his head, making Cullen open his eyes. The music group was out of the building now, but Aida and Lily were nowhere to be seen. Cullen combed the crowd a second time and began to panic when he didn't see them, but Barkley was ahead of him, pulling him out of the park and toward the parking lot on the other side of the music school. They were too late though, he saw Aida's new car making a right out of the lot and toward downtown.

Cullen stood there for a while as parents and kids filtered past him, wondering where they could
possibly be going that was different from their standard Tuesday, until someone interrupted his worrying.

"Hey dude, what's up? What're you doing here? It's not your usual day with the kid..."

Cullen looked at the man speaking with him so casually and then realized he knew him, his name was Mike or Mark or Chris, and he was in the art class he took Lily to on Fridays. He had to catch up to the moment, trying to recall if Mike or Mark or Chris remembered the circumstances of his family, that they couldn't be together, and this wasn't a divorce thing, they just -

"They're headed to the natural history museum if you're looking to catch up with them, Aida said something about - "
"Thanks, I'll see you Friday."

Cullen walked away from him as fast as he could, he needed to hail a cab.

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later Cullen sat on a step outside of the museum wondering what Aida and Lily were doing inside. He couldn't enter, not with Barkley, nor was he one of those people to tie his dog to a railing and forget about him. He sat down on a step outside of the museum, petting the mabari.

"What's this about, huh boy? Can't go in without you and I'm not going to leave you out here. If this becomes a regular thing, I might have to leave you at home."

The dog turned his head with an excited sniff, cueing Cullen to Aida and Lily's imminent arrival. Cullen got up as fast as he could and walked Barkley into a pack of tourists taking photos and selfies for cover. From between two Dalish retirees, he saw Aida emerge from the museum, carrying Lily in her arms. It was hard to see the details of her face from where he was, which meant she'd be safe, but also meant he had no clues about what she was doing, thinking, feeling. He watched them disappear into the parking lot and then realized the tourists had moved on and he was standing there with Barkley, who had sat down to pout and pant at his feet.

"I don't know what's going on today, Barks. Sorry. Let's just go do our own thing, I guess."

Doing their own thing made Cullen nervous. He wasn't supposed to be sauntering around the city like a carefree bachelor, he was supposed to be with his family. Aida had always been a creature of habit, he remembered how he could time her comings and goings when she was just the woman on the other side of his bedroom wall. Now the thing that divided them also had turned her into a mystery, something he hated as much as not being with her. He wanted to know her. He wanted to be with her.

That night, after he knew Aida had put Lily to sleep, he texted her.

- **everything fine over there?**

He watched the three blinking dots with helpless anxiety. He could remember when waiting for her to text back used to tie his heart into knots, and here he was again, in the exact same place.

- **yes**

He got the dots again.

- **how do you feel?**
He stared at the question. She had to know how he felt, on "medical leave" at work, unable to put his
daughter to bed every night, waking up alone every morning. He felt like shit. She knew this, right?
What was this question all about?

- tired. lonely. i miss u.

He quickly thought about the mystery of what she was doing in the Haven Natural History
Museum.

- what did u do today?

She typed. For longer than she should have. And then the message that appeared on screen made
Cullen feel helpless.

- the usual
- music class, stopped to play in the park, farmer's market, dinner at skyhold

- how about you?

Cullen flopped back on the bed, letting the phone drop at his side.

She was lying to him.

He knew people in relationships were capable of lying to each other, he knew people often had to,
there were plenty of reasons people did that, but - to catch Aida keeping a secret from him hurt more
than he expected it to. He laid in bed and did not respond back to her. He was too blown away by
how much darker his world felt after one little text.

* * * * *

Life continued, even in the wake of Aida's strange behavior. He kept following her, keeping
meticulous notes about how long she stayed in certain locations, when she arrived there. She had
started adding in a few different locations, all of which did not tie together. After the Natural History
Museum, she sometimes went to a gastropub in downtown Haven, the kind of place with a medieval
theme that was relatively quiet during the day but was rowdier after 6 PM. From his lookout post
across the street, he could barely make out Aida sitting in a back booth with Lily across from her.
She handed her bits of food the little girl could handle and spoke to her throughout their lunch, but he
didn't know why she liked this fish and chips and pints place. They now went to the Natural History
Museum once or twice a week, and then Cullen was even more confused when Aida rolled his baby
into Haven's Chantry and stayed in there for nearly half an hour. They had never talked about getting
Lily baptized, but they hadn't really had the time when she was born.

Cullen was driving four cars behind Aida one day, thinking about how he missed the forest, and the
other Rutherfords. He wanted things to be normal, so they could get into an RV and visit Mia, and
then Branson and Rosalie. He wanted to rock his little girl in a cradle he made with his own hands,
with a lot of help from Branson of course. He wanted to wake up at dawn in that little cozy home
next to the creek and -

He had to make a quick right. Aida and Lily were turning into a drugstore. He didn't think anything
of it as he waited ten minutes or so before going into the store. It was large enough that he could still
maintain his distance from her, and lately she had been unpredictable enough for him to want to
follow her even on these small errands.

Cullen went to the aisle with the diapers and didn't find her and then felt foolish for thinking she'd
only need baby stuff. He carefully swept the store and then came to a halt, feeling adrenaline surging through his veins when he realized he was standing only ten feet away from Aida - but he couldn't back up and move away. He felt his hands shaking as he watched her leaning down to look at something on the bottom shelf while Lila sat in the shopping cart, drooling all over a sealed box of baby wipes.

Aida stood up, a pregnancy test in her hands, and a look of hopeful anticipation on her lovely face.

Cullen turned and walked out of the drugstore.

* * * * *

He had drinks with Varric that night, before Varric went off on an Inquisitr date.

"Hey, if you could meet the love of your life on this thing, I should be able to meet the love of the next two weeks of my life, at least."

Cullen peered into his whiskey double, ignoring the looks a pair of women were giving him from the other side of the bar. "I didn't meet her on the app, if you remember. It just helped us, and you had to swipe on her for me. Plus - what happened with you and Cass, that seemed to be going well."

"That woman runs hot and cold. I have to time my entrances properly so I get her when she's running warm at least. Besides, I know she's on this app. I've swiped on her before!"

They laughed together at the idea of Varric trying to hook up with his own on again, off again girlfriend and former coworker, but then the heavy matter at hand fell on Cullen's shoulders.

"Varric, Aida's cheating on me."
"What? No. Don't be stupid. You're being stupid. I thought the therapy was supposed to be helping you with that, with the - stupidity."

Cullen downed the rest of his glass and signaled the bartender for another.

"I'm not being stupid. I've been following her - "

Varric's eyes widened but Cullen put a hand up. "At a distance. The right distance. For weeks and weeks."

His dwarf friend looked a little sad, but Cullen pushed through his pity regardless. "I don't have anything else to do, I want to go back to work but - "

"Your father in law doesn't want you around."

"Yeah, well, he hasn't come out and said it to my face but it's obvious. I do a little consulting from home, but the rest of the day... I just want to know what they're doing, where they're going, who they're talking to. And when I was following her the other day, she was buying a pregnancy test."

The two sat in silence for a while. Varric had seen him go through a lot, but Cullen hoped he realized this was serious. He couldn't lose Aida to another man, not while he was still alive.

"Cullen, I'm sorry. What can I do?"

He put a hand on Varric's sleeve, looking into his eyes.

"I need you to tail her on the days I can't. That's all." Before Varric could open his mouth to express his dismay, Cullen continued. "I'll pay you. I know you're freelancing now, you got tired of
following Mayor Cousland around."

"Yeah. The job hasn't been the same without you. But - this isn't cool, do you realize? You don't trust her."

The bartender brought him his second drink. "No, I don't. Will you help me or not?"

The two men looked at each other via the mirror behind the bar.

"I'll do it, Cul, only because you seem so damn heartbroken. But we have to do it on my terms."

"Whatever you want."

It was Varric's turn to down his drink. "You can't be mad at me when I find out the truth. I'm going to put that in the contract."

* * * * *

Varric set stern terms. He would follow Aida for two weeks - a fortnight, he had said with a whimsical glint in his eyes - and Cullen couldn't ask him anything while he was on the job. He had to wait until Varric had collected enough evidence, and he couldn't question how he obtained that evidence. Cullen had to continue with his life, and all of its pointless spare time. On the days he had Lily, he stayed busy, chauffeuring his toddler around like she was the mayor of Haven. On the days Aida had her, he stopped tracking them, knowing Varric was on the job. He had nothing else to do but meditate, work on breaking down the spell inside of him, and go to the bevy of doctors and mages he was consulting about his condition.

Two weeks went by, as torturous as the first two weeks of sobriety. And then Varric called him to meet up at their usual bar. Cullen waited for him in a booth where he could see the front door, because he wanted to see what his face looked like when he came in. He hoped Varric would push open the door with his usual carefree insouciance, but when he arrived, the dwarf looked troubled.

Cullen already had a pint waiting for him so Varric slid into the booth with a sigh and they clinked glasses together.

"Hey."

"Wow, that doesn't sound good."

"I haven't even said anything yet!"

"No, but I can tell by your tone - and your face - that the news isn't good."

Varric took another big sip of beer and waved at the waitress to bring him a menu. "It's not that it's not good. It's that it's... weird? I have weird news. It's weird. I don't know how to explain it. But I want you to know right now, I didn't watch all of it, okay?"

Cullen felt sweaty all of a sudden. And achey. He had been waking up exhausted for what felt like months now. "Watch what?"

Varric put a USB drive down on the table and slid it toward him. "I promise I stopped when uh... You'll see."

Cullen grabbed the drive and stood up but Varric tsk-tsked him and motioned him to sit back down. "Nope, you can't just rush home and watch that. You promised me dinner upon delivery. Check your contract. You signed it!"

He sighed and sat back down, putting the USB drive away, where it felt like it was burning a hole in
his pocket.

Cullen walked fast - from the restaurant to his car, from his car to the elevator, from the elevator to his condo. He grabbed his laptop and then realized his newer computer didn't even have a USB port and had to stop himself from throwing the thing against the wall. He calmed himself for a moment and then went in search of his last laptop, buried deep in his closet. Then he had to find its charger, which took digging in the hallway closet. He was wrecking his tidy home just to watch this thing. What was on it?

He finally got the older laptop powered up and inserted the drive. The drive contained just four videos, and Varric had helpfully labelled them with the date they were taken. He picked the oldest one and double clicked it. Cullen felt a surge of adrenaline surge through his body when he recognized Aida's bedroom, even as the camera jiggled into position. It moved down a bit for a moment and there was Varric, a guilty look on his face.

"Look buddy, I knew if I asked for your permission you would have said no to this, but I followed Aida like you had, and she never met up with any other guy for that first week. I figured she was meeting with him the one place I couldn't go - her place. So, forgive me, okay? But this is what you wanted."

Varric put the camera back into position and then left, and then Cullen had to fast forward for a while, as Aida hadn't come home yet, and then when she did, she was just doing things like folding laundry and looking at her phone. Cullen could feel the angry spell churning inside of him as he watched her on his laptop screen, but he could control it at this level, especially since they weren't in a room together, she was just a flat image, a few inches tall. He paused it at one point when she was facing the camera, brushing her hair, so he could touch a fingertip to her cheek. 

Babe, I miss you so much.

He fast forwarded and was disappointed when she simply went to bed and the camera switched to a night vision mode. Why would Varric want him to see this? He watched the time flying by via the digital alarm clock next to Aida's bed, and then as soon as it hit midnight, she sat straight up in bed, as though she had heard something else in another part of her condo. She got out of bed, mussed her hair and smoothed down the silky nightgown she had worn to bed and looked at her own door in anticipation.

Cullen stopped breathing when he watched himself enter her bedroom.

She ran into his arms, and he watched in a fog as Aida pulled him down to her level for a passionate kiss. She then lavished at least eight more all over his cheeks before the Cullen on screen stopped her by cupping her face. She said something, and then Cullen realized there was sound too. He backed up the video and turned the sound on.

"I'm always afraid you'll never come back."
"I'll always come back."

Cullen paused the video again, rubbing his face, trying to get his bearings. So he had been sleep-walking into Aida's condo? He didn't look like he was sleep-walking, he looked and sounded perfectly lucid. Cullen grabbed his cell phone and called Varric.

"Knew you'd call me right away."
"Varric, what the FUCK."
"Have you ever slept-walk before? Maybe it's some sort of side effect from the spell?"
Cullen stared at the image, frozen on the screen, of himself, touching his wife, something he could not do at the moment.

"It doesn't make any sense. Also, was something wrong with the camera? Why is it - why does it look like I'm glowing?"

He could hear Varric cracking open a beer, accompanied to the sound of a rerun of Seinfeld playing in the background too. He sighed and Cullen felt a little bad, he had clearly interrupted his friend's mostly relaxing night with frantic, unanswerable questions.

"I don't know. Camera worked fine all the other times, except for when you'd show up. It is you, right? You don't have a twin somewhere?"

After that, Cullen got off the phone with him, apologizing for calling him so late. He did have a twin, from another time and place. And then he himself had seen yet another world, where he was a knight with a sword at his side. There were plenty of Cullens out there in the multiverse - but that had to be him on the video. It was him, in his usual sweatpants. Cullen pressed play and watched Aida guide him to the sit on the edge of the bed while she curled into his arms. He unmuted the sound and leaned closer to the computer. They were talking quieter now, and Varric's microphone wasn't picking up their dialogue clearly, but then Aida turned her head so it was resting on his shoulder and then he could hear everything she was saying now.

"I went to the museum again today. I know it's stupid."
"It isn't stupid."
"I just like to remember our day there together. I think the staff is starting to think I'm weird."
"Do you need me to go down there and tell them you're not weird, you just miss me?"

Cullen watched himself brushing the hair off her face, feeling a few things at once. He had never been to the Natural History Museum with Aida while they were dating, nor did that ever even come up as a possibility. Jealousy washed over him, followed by anger - and then more jealousy.

It wasn't really him. It was him with the other guy inside of him.

It made total sense. It made no sense.

It wasn't fair though, that much was certain.

And then he quickly learned why Varric had blushed and told him he hadn't watched all of the videos on the USB drive. Cullen was now lying flat on the bed while Aida straddled him and pulled off her silky black nightgown. Cullen wanted to remember all of this, he had been there, hadn't he, it was his lips and his tongue enjoying the feel and taste of her nipples in his mouth as she dipped them into his mouth. He had been there as she crawled down his body so she could lick a broad path across his stiffening cock, rubbing her palm against him, gripping him with her fingers. He was the one who propped himself up on his elbows so he could watch her pleasing him, murmuring encouragement as she noisily enjoyed the taste of him. Then minutes later, it was his face between her legs, his tongue driving her wild, his hair she was grabbing handfuls of as he made her climax with two of his fingers inside of her. He had been there, Cullen kept telling himself, it was him, he was the one to position her over a few pillows so he could knead the the two round globes of her ass and then open her wide to lick her exactly where it would make Aida gasp and her eyes open wide in surprise. Cullen watched as he slid into pussy from behind and for one brief moment, he remembered how wet she had been, how she had clenched him tight right away to make him groan.

Cullen made a decision. He took himself out of his sweatpants and began stroking himself. Was this weird, fuck it, It's too late to worry about it. And it was hot, Aida had clearly been on fire for him, he
watched her yelp as he slammed into her, grabbing handfuls of the sheets beneath her. He impatiently skipped ahead ten minutes and now he had her on her back as he held her legs wide open so he could watch Aida's fingers stimulating herself as he pumped himself into her. It was too good, it was exactly how it had always been between the two of them, nothing but passion and six or seven different sexual positions. He clicked forward again and then let the video play, watching Aida ride him hard as he held on to her tits. They had flipped around on the bed so Cullen could clearly see her orgasming for what seemed like the fifth time in the hour long video, and then he looked down and watched himself spurt into his own fist, coupled with the sound of her groaning.

He sat there for a moment, catching his breath and also coming back down to earth as the video kept going and the other-him kissed her goodnight and walked out almost automatically, leaving Aida to fall asleep on her own. How long had this been going on? Long enough for her to hope she was pregnant again. Now that the lust had ebbed away, he was angry again. It occurred to him that he felt cheated on, even though it was him in the videos. Was she still in love with that other version of himself?

When Cullen woke up the next morning, he made a decision. He picked up his phone and called Aida. They had not spoken to each other for months, not since the spellcraft. She answered on the first ring and said nothing, knowing the sound of her voice could make him feel sick.

"Aida. I know what's been going. I know you've been with - him. The me, from that other world. I don't know how it's possible. But I do know this. You can't see him anymore. You're cheating on me. It hurts me. You have to stop."

He listened to her jagged inhale, full of emotion, but when she spoke, she used her magic, transmitting it right through the wall that separated them. "I can't stop. I love you. He's you. You're him."

"How is he getting into your condo?"

She was crying now and it made his heart twist. "Don't know. Front door."

"You will change your locks immediately. Or I'm moving out and I won't tell you where I am."

Aida sobbed now. "No, you can't, what about Lily? What about me?"

Before he could answer, more of her words came careening toward him. "Please, I need you, I can't live without you and your visits. Can't you see, this could be the only way we could be together?"

"It isn't right, Aida. It upsets me. It's also dangerous. What if I 'woke up' while I was over there? What if I killed you? What would happen to our daughter then? They would lock me up forever and she would grow up without either of us."

He listened to her crying on the phone, and then realized he was crying too.

"I'm sorry, Aida, it's over. It hurts me, and I also will spend the rest of my life making sure you are safe. Which means maybe we can't ever be together again."

She hung up on him and he now he could hear her anguished, heartbroken wailing right through the wall.

Cullen walked over to his laptop and deleted all the videos off the USB drive.
Yes, I'm putting you through the ringer so you can EARN THAT HAPPY ENDING I HAVE IN MY HEAD
Sorry this took so long! I haven't abandoned this story, my stupid actual real life keeps interrupting my writing time. I will finish it, this I swear to you, the last 8 people who are still here.

Dorian and Bull were finally getting married.

Aida was paradoxically both ecstatic but numb when Dorian told her the news at one of their old bar haunts. She wanted to be legitimately happy for him but she had felt nothing since Cullen put an end to his nightly visits, terminating the only contact she could have with him. She had stopped doing everything she had been engaged in, only emerging from her condo to do activities with the baby and see her family, and outside of those two things, Aida lived like a ghost. And here was her best friend and cousin-of-sorts outlining the thousands of things she'd have to do as they prepped for his big day.

"Don't make that face. I won't have you be gloomy. I've waited a long time for this."
"You have not. You were the one who kept putting it off."

Dorian poured more wine into her glass, almost to the rim.

"Yes, because things kept HAPPENING to you. Crazy things. Why can't you be normal?"

She laughed as he slid the glass toward her so that none of the wine would spill. She laughed even though she too wondered why she couldn't be normal.

"So, since I could tell you weren't paying attention, you are going to be a bridesmaid."
"Yes. I heard that part. And the baby will participate too."
"She'll look divine as she drops white rose petals down the aisle, providing she start walking soon, right, mummy? Think we can get her to walk in the next few months?"

Aida shrugged off his pushiness but also sent a few prayers to Andraste for her little girl. She should be in her crib in Cullen's condo, while her father did - Maker knows what. She didn't know him anymore.

"And - Cullen is going to be in Bull's party. One of his four groomsmen."

Aida took a big gulp of wine and then put her glass down. "What."

"It'll be fine, he'll literally be surrounded by the rest of the ex-mayor's security detail. And Cullen told me himself he'd be able to stand on opposite sides of the altar from you."

Aida knew this was true. In the weeks after their "breakup" Varric had come clean about everything he had done, and told her that Cullen had been following her around the city from a safe distance. Since then though, every time she was out, she would turn around to look for him but he was nowhere to be seen.

The truth was she longed for him, but she was also frustrated with him. She wanted those nightly
visits, she needed them. Didn't he understand that she wanted every version of him, throughout the universe?

"You're so obviously not listening to me, but I'm okay with it, because you're going to come with me to the tux shop tomorrow, right?"

Aida snapped to, thinking ahead to how it was very possible Dorian would try on every suit in the place. "Yes, but we will have you on a timer, okay? We still have lives to maintain."

Dorian mumbled something to himself while adjusting the napkin in his lap. Aida squinted at him.

"What'd you say?"

"Some people have a life. I wager this is your first time out of the condo that had nothing to do with the baby or your family. Aida, think about it. Have you considered going back to work?"

Aida shook her head. "I can't, Dorian. The bombing - the thing that ruined my life - it happened at work. I can't go back to Haven General Hospital."

"There are other hospitals. And you don't have to work in the ER, you know that."

"I can't do it."

Dorian put a hand on her wrist now, giving it a squeeze. "You used to help people, remember? Try to remember who you were before any of this happened."

An impossible task. Aida felt like she was miscast in the drama of her own life. When was the last time she felt like herself?

She got her answer, almost two hours later, as she was standing at her kitchen sink, washing out baby bottles.

The last time she felt good was in the forest with Cullen's family.

They had had a rocky beginning there and some supernatural interruptions (okay, plenty), but she could also remember the feel of wet dirt under her bare feet as she headed down the path to Branson and Katya's house, a basket of blackberries under one arm, and one hand on her pregnant belly.

There was no going back to that place and time. Aida got into bed and took one small consolation in life, that Cullen was asleep next to her, on the other side of the wall behind her.

* * * * *

The baby started walking just before the wedding. She toddled across Cullen's living room and he got it all on his phone, but Aida hadn't been there, she was across town being blindsided by her father in a conference room in Trevelyan Tower.

"I wish you'd just hear us out."

Aida gestured at the three men and two women sitting at the table flanking her father.

"I don't know who THEY are, but - "

One of the women broke into rehearsed patter about their political consultancy firm which Aida listened to only because she was trapped here.

"Are you really advocating I run for office? You think I could be the mayor of Haven? Why stop there, I could be Grand Cleric, or the Divine herself. She's old, right? About to kick over at any
"moment?"

Her father sputtered into his coffee. "Aida, don't be blasphemous -"

One of the other suits piped up with enthusiasm. "Actually, our research has shown that Miss Trevelyan's - "

"Mrs. Rutherford."

He ignored her and kept plowing through his thought. " - her rebellious spirit is one of her most appealing characteristics for voters. They see her as an outsider - "

"Because I am an outsider, I've never been involved in politics."
"Have you ever voted?"
"Yes, of course!"
"Well, that counts. You were also a nurse. Hospitals are full of politics. You're an artist too. Art is political, is it not?"

Aida turned away from the people with the power hungry eyes and looked at her father. "Daddy, really?"

"I just want you to consider it. You're a war hero now. You're a nurse. You're a mother. You know how to make decisions, and that's all elected office is really, making decisions. You're a natural leader, even if you reject the label."

"If I tell you I'll think about it, can this be over so I can go to lunch with my sister? Does she approve of this plan?"

Her father sat back in his chair and Aida was reminded of the thousands of time this stern man had imposed his ways on his family. "No, of course not. That's why she's not here."

Aida had told herself a long time ago to keep the mind-reading to a bare minimum, that nobody liked it, some people could feel she was doing it, and she felt it was an unfair advantage in a world that still tended to be biased against mages, but in this moment she instinctively knew everyone in the room was keeping something under the table.

"What aren't you saying to me? There's something you want to talk to me about but you're a little cowed, so out with it."

The men wouldn't look at her, but one of the two women was brave enough to speak up. "It's your husband. He's the only thing in your profile that doesn't fit. He couldn't campaign with you, stand by your side as you give speeches. We've been told he can't even say your name."

The second woman stepped right over the line without thinking about her words. "Have you considered divorcing him? We could work with a divorcee - but an estranged husband with mental health issues? Not quite the same thing."

Aida stood up and walked out of the room.

* * * * *

The weeks of wedding prep filled up a lot of her time after that day, but she found herself thinking about what those people had talked to her about in that board room. They were right, she did have natural leadership abilities, she could make decisions quickly and soundly, and Haven had a lot of problems that needed to be fixed and the political process wasn't helping, it was hindering it. She
thought about this while walking Barkley through the park in the middle of the city where a homeless encampment had settled down along the southern edge of the public space. It was a lot bigger than it had been before she and Cullen had to flee Haven, when the ex-mayor had a blood vendetta for her.

Aida pulled up the collar on her jacket thinking about that Satinalia's eve. It had been both romantic to marry Cullen a few minutes after he had proposed, but then they had to vanish in the night because of Leliana.

It would be a strange twist of fate to have that woman's job after everything she had done to her.

A woman pushing a baby carriage gave her a warm smile as she passed. Aida's celebrity had faded just a bit, but women always seemed to remember her wherever she went. Maybe they didn't call her the Herald of Andraste as much as they used to, but they did seem to take some inspiration from her. What if there was a way to join public life and not lose Cullen forever? What if -

"Excuse me, but don't I know you?"

She turned around very slowly as Barkley emitted a low growl. He never growled or barked, unless it was serious.

Aida froze when Sierra Amell came into view, the woman Cullen had been seeing when he (and everyone else in her life) had believed she would never return from the other side of the Veil. She had seen it all from her parallel universe, while deep in the sweet, illicit high of the red lyrium the rebel mages had pumped into her veins. This woman didn't know that she knew her though - but Sierra knew her. Of course she would. Aida had returned to reclaim Cullen, against all odds. She had snatched the prize right out of this stranger's hands.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I know you." Aida made no attempt to step up closer to her. The woman had cold, grey eyes, even if she was lithe and pretty enough - and Aida wanted to slap her, knowing she had put hands on her man.

"Please don't walk away, I, I should explain myself. I knew your husband while you were - "
"I know you knew him. But that doesn't mean I need to know you."

Aida felt something beyond being generally flustered: she felt threatened. Sierra was now standing up and facing her, and Aida tried to reach out to read her mind with her mana, but was surprised when she could feel nothing. It was like placing a bare hand on an icy surface so cold you were afraid your skin would stick to it. She wheeled around on a heel to keep walking, but Sierra kept talking.

"You're a very lucky woman, Aida Trevelyan. I'd have him back in a heart beat if I could."

Aida gritted her teeth and picked up the pace, but she could still hear the last thing the woman said to her. "I'd take him back if I could."

Aida and Barkley got back to her condo without further interruption but her run in with her rival sent her straight for her bar cart. She poured herself a double whisky and downed it, experiencing a few feelings all at once - sad, because this was Cullen's favorite whisky, and once, a long time ago, it had been an important part of their early courtship... and, she also felt scared, as though she were once again on the precipice of losing everything in her life. And she longed for something - a change of scenery.

After one walk in the park, Haven felt haunted to her - or like the city was holding back a secret.
Dorian and Bull's wedding was a lavish affair. Who expected less, Aida mused as a heavy flower crown dripping with exotic orchids was placed on her head. She was covered in heavy purple silk from Tevinter, embroidered with twining gold thread, and Emilia had brought out some of the Trevelyan family jewelry to top it all off. Aida looked at her left hand where her mother's huge sapphire ring glittered almost obscenely next to her wedding ring. She couldn't help it, she felt a twinge of excitement knowing she'd see Cullen in a bit, even if it was from the other side of the altar. She would always be thrilled to be around him - even if she couldn't be with him.

Aida heard someone protesting near her, in the suite next to hers, where the hair and makeup ladies were working on Dorian's cousin now. Angelique was some kind of "social media influencer", a drop dead gorgeous girl who was spoiled down to the marrow in her bones. She would be the one walking down the aisle paired with Cullen and Aida had already panicked over the photos of her on her Instagram, spread out on the deck of a boat in the tiniest bikini she'd ever seen. At the moment, there was no time to worry about how much Angelique would flirt with her husband and for a moment, Aida felt foolish about that. This day wasn't about her, it was about Dorian and Bull. She smiled to herself as they lined up at the back of the venue. No, it wasn't even about Bull really. This was Dorian's day, and everyone was going to have an amazing time. Plus, she should really focus on her toddler at the front of the wedding party, a little wobbly in her shiny white mary jane shoes, already squishing handfuls of the rose petals between her chubby fingers. She walked up to the front of the procession gathered at the back of the venue to speak to another one of Dorian's cousins, Nathaniel, a boy of seven, who seemed as aware of the image he was projecting as vain Angelique.

"You have to help Lila get down the aisle, okay? She might sit down and just forget what she's supposed to be doing, she's still a baby!"

Little Nathaniel patted down his pomaded hair and Aida smiled. This kid was a tiny Dorian, and for a split second, Aida wondered if Dorian was capable of maybe fathering a kid somewhere and hiding the secret until today. "Don't worry Auntie Aida, I'll take care of things."

Before she could stand up, she felt him. Her magic told her he was about ten or twenty feet behind her, standing still.

All she wanted to do was turn around and look at him. She knew he'd be in the snappy black tuxedo Dorian had picked for all the groomsmen, but she wanted to see him in it. She wanted this to be their wedding day. She wanted to say yes to him every day of her life, but instead she had to stand up in her painfully high heels and find her place in the wedding procession.

Just get through this, get to the open bar later. Get them to give you a bottle of champagne and then hide in an alcove somewhere. Aida blinked back tears. She knew these were the thoughts of a depressed person, someone she didn't want to be, but it was too late. Life had dealt her a shitty hand, and now it was time to smile through it.

They lined up at the back of the venue and now Aida had a chance to look at the back of Cullen's head, standing next to pretty and young Angelique. The mere sight of his golden hair, coiffed into place, made her sigh - and slip up. She sent a thought to him, with her powers, disregarding that it could be the very thing that could send him into a rage and attack her.

"You look so handsome, baby."

Aida felt time stop as he turned his head to the right, oh so slightly, as though she had whispered at him. She saw him clench his jaw and then face forward but there was no time to think about what it meant that he could now stand ten feet away from her. It was too much to think about how he might
be getting better, she had to teeter down the aisle in these ridiculous shoes Dorian had chosen for her.

* * * * *

The wedding itself was a short, non-denominational affair since neither Bull or Dorian were religious. They read vows they had written to each other, and Bull's were hilarious, but during Dorian's surprisingly sincere and sweet words, Lila had finally had enough. She began squalling in Emilia's arms from the audience, wanting at least one of her parents. Aida didn't hesitate, she stepped down off the dais and strode toward her child, holding up the train of her dress with one hand, the other holding on to her flower crown.

"Give her to me, it's okay, I'll take her outside - "

Aida then realized Emilia had a strange look on her face. She looked up and saw Cullen standing right next to her, close enough to touch. He had his hands out too, ready to take Lila.

"It's okay, I'll go. Don't argue."

Aida stood there, feeling wobbly as she watched Cullen whisk Lila to the back of the venue where her crying couldn't be heard.

She felt frozen.

When was the last time he spoke to her without being overcome by that black magic inside of him, and not over a phone, but in person? And he was - him - the real him, the first version of him she had loved. Or was it a fluke, too short and too insignificant to mean anything?

Emilia touched her on the elbow, bringing her back to earth. Aida turned and looked at Dorian, his hands still in Bull's, and then noticed the entire audience was staring at her.

"I'm sorry, please continue."

* * * * *

The wedding recovered quickly after their interruption. Dorian and Bull kissed, there were many, many photos, there were toasts and toasts that turned into speeches, although Aida suspected Varric was now interested in stand-up comedy as his speech lasted exactly 10 minutes and had several punchlines throughout. When they put the microphone in her hands, Aida lifted her champagne glass and spoke straight from her heart, still feeling fluttery and light-headed over the less than ten words Cullen had spoken to her earlier.

"To love, no matter what. To a love that you hang on to, every day. To a love that inspires others. To a love that makes you a better person - every day."

She wanted to make eye contact with Cullen but instead she kept her gaze soft and distant - but apparently even this little, gentle performance made a few of Dorian's friends come to her afterward and ask was it true, did she want to be mayor? Or did she have her sights set even higher? They all claimed it was just something they had heard, so Aida made a note to look online and see if her father was meddling in her future.

Sometime after dessert, Aida took the bottle of champagne she had been thinking about all day and found a balcony where she could be left alone for a bit while everyone danced and caroused. Her sister had taken the baby long ago to get her home by bed time, and Aida knew her sister didn't like big parties outside of the Trevelyan mansion. It made her think. Her family was so insular, and
always had been after the death of her mother long ago. And now, here she was, her life shrinking away as well, until it became only a few things. She suspected Emilia and her father were on the verge of requesting she simply move home. Once, she had prided herself on not needing the Trevelyans but she could now feel them pulling her back in. Maybe she should let them. She didn't have much of a life anymore - the one she wanted was sealed off to her by terrorists, by time, by circumstance.

Aida downed her fourth glass of champagne and decided she would ghost her way out of this wedding. Not very appropriate, but people were in high spirits with the finally-married couple at the center of the dance floor. Nobody would fault her for -

"Aida."

She had been so deep in thought that the ping of his being did not register with her. Now that she had the chance, with her back still toward him, she gave Cullen the lightest scan with her mana. Something about him felt different, stronger - as though he were a Templar again, but there was no lyrium in his veins, at least she hoped so. Still, she didn't respond, she stayed still and wondered if this was it: he didn't have a chance to kill her when the magic was at its strongest, right after she rescued him, and he didn't do it in that day when he had broken Sebastian's nose. Now she stood on a balcony where nobody could see her, or hear her crying for help, Bull's promise that he'd be monitored by other strong, ex-mercenary types had been forgotten.

"No, I'm not going to hurt you - I don't want to hurt you. It tells me to hurt you but... I've been learning I don't always have to listen. I can ignore it, for a controlled period of time. And as I get better - "

Aida abandoned her fears for a moment and swung around to face him. "You're getting better?"

Cullen's face froze, his mouth open. "Maker, you look so beautiful."

Aida felt warm all over her body, high on the fact that they were having a conversation together. "I think I look like a spoiled Tevene empress."

His face changed again and Aida held her breath.

"If you were a Tevene empress, I would sack your city - and despoil you on your own throne."

Aida was trembling now, bewitched by the sound of his voice, its depth and total masculinity. Their time apart had only made him more like a demigod in her eyes. He seemed taller, stronger, more handsome - she wanted him so badly she could feel herself sweating under her ornate silk gown.

Aida was about to speak again but he put a hand up. "I have to go. Or you should go. Or..."

She blurted out what had been on her mind since she bumped into Sierra Amell in the park. "Cullen, let's leave Haven, back to the forest. We can make it work somehow. I'll stay in the cabin with the baby, you could - "

He looked pained, he clenched a fist at his side. "I'm walking away, but not because I want to..."

Cullen then stopped, framed by the Orlesian doors around him. He glanced at her over her shoulder, just as he had when they were lining up for the wedding procession.

"And yes - let's go. I want to go too."

Just like that, he turned and disappeared back into the party, leaving Aida on the verge of tears. He
was getting better, but they had only been speaking for all of five minutes, at the most.

It was better than nothing. It was a beginning. And he could finally say her name.

* * * * *

Cullen went back to the forest first, ten days before she was set to join him. He insisted he return before she got there and prepare the cabin for her arrival, get the other Rutherfords ready for their strange marital circumstances. It gave Aida a little anxiety - the last time she had seen Cullen's family she had been doing utterly surreal things like sealing up gaps in the sky. Now they were returning to them broken in two pieces. She didn't know how they were going to treat her, or even how they'd eat dinner all together. Would she have to take her meals in the cabin on her own?

She found out her answer when she arrived a few days later at sundown in her old truck, laden down with gifts and supplies for Cullen's off the grid family, and Lila strapped to her back in a hiking harness. After passing the baby around and letting everyone coo over her, she and the Rutherfords sat down to dinner. Aida accepted a basket of freshly baked bread from Katya with a smile, but before she could say anything, Cullen came in from the living room and sat down in the empty chair on the far side of the table from her. He was less than ten feet away, but with Branson and Katya seated between them so she could not directly look at him.

"Did you have a safe trip?"
"Yes."

A long silence unfolded as Aida listened to the clink of everyone's cutler against their enamelware plates. It was so quiet out here in the forest that she could hear Katya's chickens scratching around in their coop outside as they settled in for the night. Aida didn't have to read their minds to know they all felt their relationship was doomed. Yet another thing lost to her, right? Aida took a bite of her stew and decided inane small talk was the best way to get through this dinner, and perhaps the rest of them.

"Katya, why are your potatoes always so good? They're better than any city potato I've ever eaten, so creamy and golden."

Her sister-in-law beamed at her from across the table. "Oh, you know, they're just potatoes I grow out back. Look, Lila likes them too."

Rosalie was spooning a quarter of one into her mouth, but she had to stop to let her finish her yawn first. Aida took one look at her and knew in about ten minutes, she would get fussy, and then very cranky, all on the lead up to her passing out for the night.

"I should get her to bed soon, you're up way too late, aren't you, Peanut?"

Lila spit the potato back onto the spoon, took one look at her mother, and began her slow descent into her cranky pre-bedtime acting reel. Everyone awwwed as her little brow furrowed and her lower lip trembled, and then Cullen laughed. His family turned to look at him in surprise, although Aida had to keep her eyes trained on the baby.

"I've seen Aida make that exact same face before when she doesn't get her way."

She opened her mouth a little, taken aback at his sudden zinger. "Excuse me, you have not!"

"Granted, it's been a while since..." Cullen drifted off, not wanting to state the obvious, how except for those brief moments at Dorian and Bull's wedding, he hadn't really looked at her in months. It was getting close to a year.
Aida stood up, interrupting her own thought loop. "Shall I take her upstairs and put her down for the night?"

Cullen stood up too, the two of them still not facing each other. "No. She should stay with you. There's a surprise in the cabin. Branson and I had a little time to make something. For you. For Lila."

Rosalie handed Lila off to her, now twisting around in discomfort. Aida paused for a moment, looking at all the Rutherfords except the one standing at the far end of the table, half facing away from her, his head tilted down.

"Well. Um. Good night. Thank you for dinner, as always, Katya. Maybe I could help you out tomorrow night."

Aida saw Cullen clench his fist and saw his body stiffen and knew he was fighting the spell inside of him and that her voice and her being in the room was getting harder and harder. She made a quick retreat, walking down the dirt path from Katya's and Branson's, with only a little grey moonlight to illuminate the path.

* * * * *

In the cabin, she discovered Cullen's surprise - he and Branson had handcrafted a crib for Lila, with sliding railings, all of it made of wood the way it would have been hundreds of years ago. Cullen had even been thoughtful enough to bring her tiny mattress pad from the city, and her sheets and a set of warm blankets. An L was carved into its headboard and Aida ran her fingers over it as she let a tear or two slip down her cheek. Why was she always so worried? Even in this state, Cullen would be a good father. He was still present in Lila's life, that was the most important thing, even beyond her own feelings.

Aida watched Lila drift off to sleep and then rummaged in her things for her own nightgown. She slipped it on and then looked around at the bedroom of the cabin. The picturesque hole above the bed had been quickly patched over and Aida remembered Cullen and Branson had been working on fixing that before she got whisked away to search for Corypheus. They hadn't had time to do a very thorough job, so she could still feel a bit of a draft coming and see a few inches of sky too. Her eyes then landed on the bed and she felt heart sick all over again. They used to make love in this bed. They never would again.

She pulled back the coverlet on the bed and then saw something. There was an envelope sitting on her pillow. She sat down on the edge of the bed and grabbed it, bringing the candle on the nightstand a little closer. She pulled a letter, several pages long, out of the envelope and instantly recognized Cullen's handwriting, which was always better than she expected it to be.

Her hands shook for a moment. What did he need to say to her, what - state was he in when he wrote this?

"Aida -

Looks like I can write out your name and not want to strangle you to death. That's good to know. Was that too dark? Are you smiling right now?"

Aida inhaled, jagged, full of emotion, and then yes, smiled.

"There's so much I want to say to you, every day, and I can't. I miss the simplest things, like rolling over in bed and saying good morning to you. When was the last time we got to do that? It isn't fair that we didn't know that that morning would be the last morning I'd be able to do that. Everything
about this is terrible, and unfair. And I'm sorry. I know you'd tell me it isn't my fault, but - you should
know I feel like it is. I had to be out walking on my own the day they grabbed me. I just had to leave
the condo that day. It is my fault."

Aida murmured "baby" under her breath to herself. He was in so much pain over something he had
no control over. She wanted to hold him. He was just a five minute walk away, probably lying in
bed thinking about how she was reading his words. She slipped into bed too, wishing he was here
with her.

"There are just a few things I want to tell you. Every time you have Lila, I stay home and meditate
the way Geralt and Ciri taught me. I meditate for hours at a time, putting myself back together. I
once sat in the same position for five hours, and didn't move until I heard your door slam next door.
There's no way to prove that I'll one day be able to hold you again, but what matters is I can control
it, bit by bit. And that progress has made a few of the specialists I've met with a little hopeful. I don't
want to get your hopes up, and give you a time table when I can't do so - but maybe it is reversible.
It's a bit like being the only person on the planet with one specific disease. I am the sole test case.
And if nobody can help me, then I will find my own cure."

At this point in the letter the ink changed color. She imagined him writing this letter to her, knowing
what he wanted to say, and then being hamstrung by something so silly as a pen running out of ink.
He made no mention of it, he just kept writing.

"Aida I need to know, would you want me even if we could never touch each other ever again?
Could we still love each other without that? Would you still love me? I can tell you
unequivocally unequivocally that it wouldn't matter to me. We could find a way, right?"

Aida realized she was crying. It was something that happened a lot. She had stopped even being
conscious of her own sadness, she had grown too used to it. Could they live - like roommates?
Would that be something she'd be able to do? If she had to be honest, being with Cullen had
awakened a deeply sexual side of herself that she had never tapped into until she met him. All the
other men in her life had been standard business, they finished too fast, spent too little time on her
pleasure, they were punchlines by female comedians, and not even the modern ones. They were all
jokes from decades past, right down to the size of their manhoods and their disposable sorries. But
with Cullen, sex was something they focused on, it had defined their reconciliations, their reunions...
Aida had to shake her head out of her reverie to focus on the letter in her hands.

"Regardless of how we live now, and what those fuckers put inside of me, they couldn't control one
thing. I still have my memories of when we were together. They couldn't infect the past. I can sit
here, right now, and think about our first date, and what I did to you in the elevator. Do you
remember?"

Of course she remembered. She remembered every time she got into that elevator and saw the big
red button Cullen had hit with his fist to make it stop. She remembered watching him drop to his
knees to push his face between her thighs. At the time it was the most incredible thing that had ever
happened to her.

"Do you remember that one Sunday morning you got up to make pancakes, but I couldn't wait for
them to be finished?"

This memory made her grin. She had had the audacity to try to make those pancakes in an apron and
nothing else, and one burned in the pan while he took her roughly from behind, two hands braced
against the kitchen counter. The burning pancake then set off a fire alarm that woke up half their
neighbors.
"I think about it all, constantly. My mind can hop around through time and easily land on a memory that makes me want you. All I have to do is think about what we did at the Four Seasons that night on the campaign trail and I get rock hard."

Aida felt her cheeks burning now. When she thought about that night, it always gave her a frisson of excitement. They did so many things together that night that she hadn't really ever done before, the role playing, the spanking, the outfit, the sex toys.

"Even now, when I catch glimpses of you, I desire you. I wanted to tear that bridesmaid's dress off of you, when I spoke to you on the balcony, you were breathing heavy, and all I could notice was the rise and fall of your breasts. I could have easily ripped that sink in half, leaving you so exposed. I would have grabbed your bra cups with two hands and pulled your tits out so I could taste your nipples, lick them until you were squirming. Do you realize that?"

Aida swallowed. She was wet.

"I still have every nude you sent me, every picture I took of you. So much has happened since these photos, I wonder if you remember?"

She didn't remember every photo, because sometimes she felt shy when Cullen wanted to snap her picture. He was used to being her muse, sitting still for her drawings, lying across her bed spread out like the emperor that he was, but sometimes he wanted to take photos of her just to have in his phone and she'd only acquiesce to a few. How many were there?

"I'm looking at a picture of your tits, right now. Your hands are pushing them together for me. I've got a very rare, and very special photo of your pussy, dripping wet, your fingers are wet too, you were touching yourself for me. I also love this pic of you with my cum all over your body, and you have this sweet little smile on your face, you're blushing, Aida. How many times did I make you come that morning?"

Aida couldn't help herself now. Her hands slipped between her legs to touch the heat he had built there with just his words.

"The more time we spend apart, the more I want you, the more I crave you and the things you've done to me. Do you know what I want right now? I want your mouth around my cock, I want to feel you drool all over me. I want your hand wrapped around me while you lick my sack, I want to push your head lower so you're licking my asshole. You have no idea how much I want that, and then I want to do it to you too. I want you to sit on my face so I make you scream with my tongue, I love when you go wild and grab me by the hair and force my face deeper into you. I love your little gasp of surprise when you realize I want to lick your asshole too, and how your moans get a little softer as you lose yourself in the feeling. And then I'm going to flip you onto your back and watch my cock slide into you. Then I'm going to take it all the way out, and slide it back in again."

Aida's fingers moved faster. She always howled it when he did this, she had always savored being filled with every inch of him, over and over and over again.

"I love it when you clench around me as you look into my eyes. I love putting a finger in your mouth to suck as I pick up speed and begin fucking you hard and fast, the way you need it. I know you need it. I can hear you at night, did you know that? I can hear the creak of your bed as you reach for your vibrator in the night stand. I've listened to you, every time you've played with yourself next door. The walls are paper thin, Aida. You brazen slut, I know you watch porn sometimes. I wish I knew what you were watching in there, what desires I haven't begun to fulfill. Do you want me with another man, Aida? Do you want to be filled from both ends? I'm the most jealous man in the world when it comes to you, but if you wanted that, I'd let you have it. I would have joined you and your
insufferable old boyfriend in a heartbeat if I could have, because I know whatever I give you, you could take double of. We could take turns fucking you for hours and you'd still want more, I know how you are."

Aida gasped as she came, her orgasm surprised her, but there was just something in the way he wrote that last part, *I know how you are*, that made her explode. And he knew it, because there wasn't much more of the letter left to read.

"Will you please write back to me, Aida? I want to know what you're thinking, what you want. We can be together in this way. It's not ideal, but I need to be intimate with you, somehow.

*I love you. Write soon?*

*Cullen."

Aida folded the letter up carefully and slid it back into her envelope. Tomorrow Rosalie wanted to take the baby for a walk. She'd have plenty of time to write back then, and she'd start with what she watched on her phone at night when she couldn't have him, and end with what she'd let him do to her now, if only he could.
In Knots

Chapter Notes

I'm back. And I will finish this thing.

The letters. They exchanged them back and forth while they blew off the rest of the world and raised their daughter, in tandem, with the help of his family. If Cullen had to be honest, he was always a little disappointed her letters were not as long as his, or as detailed, but then again, Aida had always been a mystery to him. And if you had to push him, there had always been this part of him that would always worry that she simply did not love him as much as he adored her, but he knew it was just the way his mind worked, he had no proof. There was just so much of Aida that would never belong to him. She had been through incredible trials, she had danced with a demon.

She had loved another man that was not him.

He often spoke about this troubling fact with Branson while they were hunting, who took it in stride with his big brotherly aplomb. He watched Branson shaking his head as he rolled his standard morning joint atop his hunting blind.

"You bring this up all the time, and yet, she's never left you. Plus. Who knows what the fuck all of that was, on the other side of the Veil. Was it a dream? Another universe? Besides, it doesn't matter what Aida did with whom while she was away. I know that baby of yours is a Rutherford. She's not afraid of anything."

The two stopped talking for a stretch while they listened for deer in the underbrush until the forest grew silent again, and then Cullen watched as Branson took the first hit and then passed the joint to him.

"You know we've been writing these letters - "
"Yes, I interrupted you the other day and I've never seen you slam a notebook shut like that since you were in high school."
"Well, they can be - salacious at times."

Branson coughed as he took his second hit. "I don't need to know the details."
"I wasn't going to tell you!"

Another long pause unfurled. Cullen wasn't sure what he was trying to tell his brother, but over the last few days he had simply had something that felt like a knot in his stomach. He was going to lose Aida, the spell inside of him would keep them apart forever, there was no way a woman like her could keep loving someone like him, so broken.

Branson studied him while he fretted. "What's on your mind, spit it out."

"I'm not going to get better. I can be in a room with her for twenty minutes tops, and even then, I can't look right at her, I can barely speak to her. The letters... They can't keep us together forever. And we will have to go back to the city when Lila is ready for school. And when we go back, it'll - it'll be over. We'll live like a divorced couple, sharing custody. There's no point in denying the inevitable."
Cullen waited for him to say something comforting. He was a reasonable man.

"I'm sorry."

* * * * *

After that day, Cullen stopped leaving letters on Aida's pillow and threw himself into helping Branson around their property. The waters would be rising again in a few months during the rainy season and Branson wanted to reinforce the support beams of the big house, not to mention build Rosalie a new chicken coop, fix Katya's still (a priority, her homemade liqueurs and gin were top notch and very necessary), and fell some of the overgrowth in the forest nearby for wood that would last them through the many monsoons to come. In between all of these tasks, he fished, he hunted, and of course, spent time with his little girl who was now walking with great confidence and beginning to speak (her first words had been "more", and "again", proof that she was Aida's child for certain). He only saw Aida at dinner, although as usual, he never looked at her. He knew she was there, at the far end of the table, and that was all.

Then one night after dinner, Cullen retired to the guest room down the hall from Katya and Branson's room and found one of Aida's sketch pads sitting on his bed and the sight of it made his heart thump in his chest. He picked it up gently, knowing she had held it and opened it. He held his breath as he flipped through the pages. She had been sketching up a storm, and he suddenly saw their simple existence through her eyes. She had been drawing her cabin, the flora, the horizon line, the big house, Rosalie's little cabin, the streams and creeks that flowed through the forest, piles of Lila's toys, her cradle, the little messes she made on the tray of her high chair that Branson had made for her. It made his heart squeeze because all of it was so familiar and it was her hand that had brought it to life. He kept flipping until he was about a third of the way through the notebook and then he saw her handwriting.

"Why did you stop writing to me?"

The words made him close the sketchbook with a sharp inhale.

The next day, when he knew she was out foraging with Rosalie and Lila was being watched by her Auntie Katya, Cullen snuck into her cabin and put the sketch book on her kitchen table, her question left unanswered.

* * * * *

That night, he came downstairs for dinner and knew without looking that Aida was not in the room with him, simply because he could not feel the spell roiling inside of him. He looked down the table at her empty seat and the high chair next to it, and then at his sister and his sister-in-law, both of whom were giving him matching reproachful faces.

"Aida said she'd take care of their dinner tonight, they're staying in the cabin."

Cullen sat down and reached for the bread basket, but Katya slid it away from him exactly two inches so he'd have to look at her.

"I don't know what you are up to -"
"I'm not up to anything, wh-what does that mean?"
"Y'all better fix it. You don't need to hurt her for no reason. I remember the last time you were here, you pulled some shit like this, and -"

Branson cleared his throat and passed his brother the bread basket. "Don't meddle, Katya."
At this, Rosalie snorted. "There's usually no one else to meddle with, Branson. Give her a break. We just want them to be happy."

Cullen had to stop himself from sniffling, hoping they couldn't see how easily he was about to tear up.

"Can't you see? We don't know how to be happy anymore."

Katya put a hand on his wrist and squeezed, hard.

"You're being defeatist. Things have gotten better. You can eat dinner in the same room together. You didn't used to be able to do that."

Cullen shot a pained look around the table at each of them. "I can't touch her."

"You couldn't even look at her for a long time, but then you told me you were following her around the city, like a creep." Rosalie added the last bit with a playful smile.

Katya heaped some mashed potatoes onto his plate with an almost smug look on her face he recognized from being her boyfriend decades and decades ago. He knew she was about to say something she knew was right.

"I'm no scientist, or mage, or arcana scholar, or anything like that, but can't help but think that the more you defy that spell inside of you, the weaker it gets. You don't get anywhere by doing what it wants. Think about it! Do you want some green beans or not?"

That night in bed, Cullen thought about Katya's advice.

She was right. This thing inside of him had no right to control his destiny.

He wanted to counter it.

He wanted to break it.

* * * * *

Early the next morning, Cullen waited behind a clump of trees near the front door of Aida's cabin. He knew Rosalie took care of the baby this time of day so Aida could go for a quick walk in the woods followed by a swim in the creek. He heard her humming to herself as she came up the path. Cullen ducked behind the tree a little deeper but kept watching her. Her hair was dripping water down the back of her cotton robe, and for a moment, she put her clothes down on a boulder nearby so she could dry off her hair a little more. She leaned forward and shook her locks a bit, sending droplets of water here and there.

Cullen could watch her like this, from behind, like he did in the city, but he knew he had to push it further. He waited until she opened the door to the cabin and stepped inside before he followed her in.

Aida turned around with a start, her face a mask of shock. He felt his nerve endings burning, as the spell activated itself, but he forced himself to make eye contact with her.

He hadn't looked at her like this since that moment in her father's pool house. She took a step backward, toward the kitchen, and he knew she was thinking about the kitchen knives that sat in a drawer nearby. Cullen squinted his eyes shut, wrestling with the spell but determined to get what he wanted out of this moment.
"No, don't... Don't think you have to hurt me that way. If you have to defend yourself, use your magic. I want you to. Do you understand?"

When she responded, she used one of her skills she had earned when she passed through the veil, she spoke to him in his mind but at a whisper, like she had turned the volume way down on her voice. He could hear her this way, barely, but it was enough.

*Why did you stop writing to me?*

He felt a swell of emotions inside of him so intense that the dark magic ebbed away for a moment. Cullen opened his eyes and looked right at her.

"You never wrote as much as I did. I was worried you were faking it, going through the motions. Sometimes I realize I don't know you very well. We've been apart more than we've been together. I don't know what's in your heart. Will you leave me when we go back to the city? Will you have a choice? What's the point of me? What good am I to you, like this?"

The effort of saying this much to her left him winded and he crumpled to his knees in front of her. She gasped and took a step forward but stopped.

"All I want to do is touch you. Please. There has to be a way. Aida..."

She inhaled deeply. Behind her, outside, the sun broke through the clouds and filled the kitchen. She was nothing but a silhouette in his vision now, all he could see was light, and the outline of her body as she stepped closer to him.

She spoke to him via her mind again but louder this time, and with a telltale ache of longing he was so familiar with. "I love it when you say my name, Cullen. Every time, I love how it sounds."

Aida raised her hands and Cullen felt the room fill with different magic, hers, undeniably strong - the strongest he had ever felt in his life, as a Templar or after. He felt himself standing up and walking as her spellcraft guided him a few feet away, holding on to the spell inside of him like a fist squeezing his heart. She made him sit down at the kitchen table, facing her, and he felt pinned there. He could fight back a little but felt like she had wrapped him up in a rope, around and around his torso.

"Can you move?"

Cullen shook his head and then watched her in a sweet daze as she sat down on his knee. He could smell her now, fresh and clean from her bath. She traced her fingers over his face but then he saw the look in her eye. She was flooding all of her mana into this moment, and it couldn't last forever.

"Do you remember the first time we kissed?"

The magic inside of him was fighting back against hers now, but he breathed deeply and tensed himself all over to hold still.

"I remember what you were wearing, that's for sure. Do you still have that coat, Aida?"

She nodded at him, drawing even closer. He could feel her breath on his lips.

"I want to see you in that coat again. With nothing on under it."

Aida dove forward, kissing him deeply, her hands gripping his shoulders. A white hot pain shot through the core of him, but he used every atom of his mind to ignore it. Instead, he willed himself back to that moment in Haven when he first wrapped his arms around her on 7th street, their first
kiss. He remembered everything, how he had pulled her closer to him after she had stumbled forward a bit, unaccustomed to the high heels she was wearing, the crimson red of her lipstick, her little studded collar necklace, how he had knew she wanted him as much as he wanted her by the force of her tongue in his mouth and how she had hung on to the back of his neck as though she never wanted to the kiss to end. At that moment it was the happiest he had felt in a long, long time, he was confident and knew what he wanted, and it was her. He had wanted her more than he had ever wanted any woman.

The girl next door.

At the edge of his sweetest memories he was aware of the sun slipping behind the clouds outside and a breeze picking up. The slip in his concentration made the dark spell inside him surge back harder and he struggled to keep a grip on it. The last thing he saw clearly was Aida pulling back from the kiss, her eyes wide with alarm as Rosalie opened the door to the cabin, carrying Lila in the crook of her arm.

"Aida, I think Lila wants her -"

Rosalie made a little noise of surprise and then all at once, Aida's spell that kept him pinned in place gave out, and he felt that angry thing inside of him pulsing and throbbing and wanting what it wanted.

Everything after that was a frantic montage. That night as he paced back and forth in the guest room in Katya and Branson's house, all he could remember was standing up and knocking Aida onto the ground, his hands around her neck again, Lila's wailing, and then the electric surprise of the taser Rosalie shot him with.

He remembered lying on his back on the floor in the kitchen, groaning in pain as he listened to Aida's footsteps and Lila's crying grow softer as she ran away from the cabin. Rosalie sat down next to him and cried too, holding his hand.

"Where did you get that thing?"
"Aida gave one to me, and one to Katya... I suppose for just such an occasion. I'm sorry, I didn't know the two of you, um, I didn't think I'd ever -"
"It's okay. We shouldn't try such things, and we won't again I'm sure."

But he wasn't so sure. And he wanted to kiss her again, maybe the next time, get to touch her. But would she want to try again?

* * * * *

For a few days he had the feeling Aida was avoiding him. She didn't come to dinner three nights in a row and he had to stand on the porch of Katya and Branson's home and look toward the small square of light that was the cabin's kitchen window and be content with that. He also felt his family's support of all of this ebbing away. He wondered when Branson would advise him to go back to the city with his broken family, and make do with the situation he had no control over. But he didn't want to leave. Ever since they kissed, he only wanted more. It drove him mad, just remembering about how good Aida had smelled sitting on his knee for those moments they stole away from the dark spell. It wounded him deeply to think she didn't want that again.

It hurt worse when Geralt popped back into this corner of the the multiverse and Aida started spending a lot of time at his cabin up the river.

At least he could commiserate with his sister, who had always harbored a crush on the strange man
with the weary sigh. Rosalie had made it worse for him by suggesting he and Aida didn't even seem to need to talk, at least not the way other people had to. Rosalie swung by Geralt's one day with a basket of blackberries for Geralt only to find him and Aida standing on his porch, not saying anything, just staring deeply at each other. Cullen knew Aida could read the minds of people near her, and also speak to them with just her mind. What did they need to talk about with those other voices? What needed to be a secret? Why did they walk together into the deepest parts of the forest in the middle of the night? Cullen began to despair, his imagination spinning up details he had no right to imagine. They were having an affair by the light of the moon. She was doing blood magic with him. She was going to leave him for this freak from another time and place and worse yet, move away and live up the river from his own family. All right, maybe that last one was a little crazy, but not as crazy as Geralt kissing parts of Aida's body he hadn't seen in a long, long time. It was unfair, deeply unfair.

He dwelled on that unfairness until he couldn't take it anymore. Cullen walked up to Geralt's front door and banged on it with a fist until the Witcher appeared, irritation all over his face.

"You don't have to bang. I was home. What do you want, Rutherford?"

Cullen was momentarily cowed. Geralt was three inches taller than him and looked like he could easily carry his corpse to the nearest ravine to dispose of it, but then he remembered why he was there — that's right, the gnawing jealousy.

"Wh-what are you doing with my wife? All the time, huh? What's going on?"

The Witcher cracked the hint of a smile and leaned against the door frame, giving Cullen just the smallest glimpse of a table behind him. It covered in strange bottles, jars containing bits of odd business floating in cloudy liquids, mushrooms, and bundles of herbs.

"Oh, that's right, you're the paranoid jealous type. Well, you should be. Have you ever noticed how Aida smells good all the time?"

Cullen felt a wave of rage roll over him but he breathed through it instead of trying to punch this guy on his jaw.

"Don't worry. Everything we're working on has to do with you. And it should make you happy, unless, well... unless you're doing it wrong."

Geralt slammed the door in Cullen's face. Cullen laid in bed that night wondering what that meant. Doing what wrong?

* * * * *

A few nights later when Cullen was about to take Lila upstairs to put her to sleep, Rosalie took her out of his arms. The sleepy toddler raised no fuss, she put her head on her aunt's shoulder and sucked her thumb.

"What are you doing? I can take her up, you head on back to your place —"

"Aida would like to see you, in her cabin. In your cabin, that is."

Cullen froze. "What does she want?"

Rosalie gave the baby a little peck on her forehead when she made a noise of impatience. "To see you. And she told me not to worry, I could give the taser a rest tonight."
"But —"

"Cullen, she said to trust her. I'm worried too, but she said she has taken precautions, and that Geralt helped."

"But —"

"Cullen, if you don't leave right now, I... Well I don't know what I am going to do. Push you into the creek when you're not expecting it. That's all I've got, I'm sorry."

A few moments later Cullen walked down the path to the cabin, noticing the windows were softly glowing with candlelight. He was worried, he didn't know what she wanted, and dread filled him up inside. She was done with him, he was certain. He was no good to her, a broken man who could never be with her again. She'd go home in the morning and maybe he'd stay here.

His hands shook as he opened the door and stepped inside. He couldn't feel her, usually the spell inside of him told him exactly where she was and how he could kill her.

He nearly jumped out of his own boots when he heard her soft voice inside his head.

*Pick up the bottle on the kitchen table please. Do you see it?*

He did. It was a little hard to miss, since it was glowing iridescent and purple. He recognized Aida's handwriting on the paper label tied to it with a piece of twine. *Drink me.*

He spoke out loud to her. "What is it?"

*Don't worry, it won't hurt you.*

He took the cork out of it and gave it a sniff, which he quickly wished he hadn't done. It smelled strange, somewhere between paint thinner and dirty dish water.

*Please don't be so curious. We have limited window of time. The moon will be at its brightest soon enough...*

After she said that, every candle in the cabin blew out and Cullen looked toward the little loft above the kitchen. Someone had pried the boards off the hole in the roof he had nailed into place a long time ago, before Aida had to leave the forest to find and fight Corypheus. The cabin was now flooded with silvery moonlight, but still he couldn't see her or sense her. Why was he surprised? She was a mage of great talent even before she crossed through the Veil. She had so much magic in the tips of her fingers. He shuddered as he drank down the strange potion and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Now what?"

She stepped out of the shadows right in front of him, wearing her very familiar black silk kimono. Before he could even blink, she raised a hand in front of her and an upside down triangle flashed before his eyes. He felt very weak after that, like his brain was encased in cotton, but what was important was he didn't feel like murdering her. He tried to open his mouth to speak but he couldn't do it.

*Don't be scared, baby. Go upstairs. Up the ladder. Take your clothes off. Lie down on the bed.*

The sound of her voice in his head gave him goosebumps all over his body.
Don't think. Just obey me.

It was like a dream, lying down in the bed they once shared together, feeling the simple cotton sheets under his back. But he wanted to participate, he didn't want to be like this with her, in a haze. And yet he watched in abandon as she was suddenly standing next to him, letting the kimono slide from her shoulders. She studied him, the way she used to look at him when she would sketch him on a Sunday morning.

I miss you. I miss just looking at you. But we must hurry, we don't have a lot of time.

Cullen groaned against Aida's lips when he felt her kissing him, her hair brushing against his face. It was all so familiar and yet it had been too long. He wanted to kiss a little longer but Aida had an urgent look in her eyes. She moved down the bed and positioned herself between his legs to grasp his cock and slip it into her mouth. He was hard in an instant and mounted him very quickly. It made Cullen groan again, she was so wet too, she kept reaching down to feel where they were connected, to feel him fully inside of her. It was so ecstatic that he wanted to close his eyes and just enjoy it but he had to keep looking at her. How long would this magic last?

Aida answered him out loud, forgetting to use her interior voice. "Geralt said we'd have twenty minutes, tops."

She rolled her hips in a circle on him and smiled. This time, Cullen spoke back to her with just his thoughts.

Could you not talk about another man while you're riding me?

Aida laughed and it felt exactly like a thousand other moments in their rapturous lovemaking history. He lived to make her happy. He'd do anything to make her happy. He drank in the sound of her breathy moans and stared at her breasts bathed in the moonlight. She read his mind and leaned forward to dip one of them into his mouth. Cullen was worried for a moment that he couldn't even move his tongue, but he could, and it made him hungry for more. But something inside of him flipped, out of nowhere. He willed his hands off the bed where they had been simply resting at his sides and put them on her thighs. It startled her, Aida opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Cullen...?"

He'd never be able to explain it, nor Aida, who wouldn't get a chance to report back to Geralt how the magic he had taught her worked, but it also didn't, and the way that it didn't work was actually marvelous. Cullen felt that potion he drink seeping deeper into him, spreading out down all his limbs.

Aida, hit me with that spell one more time, whatever you did downstairs — do it again. And, tell me what you want me to do to you.

She heard him and stopped moving on top of him for a moment so she could concentrate, close her eyes, hold out her hand, and rear the air around them with her new powerful magic.

Aida opened her eyes and looked into his. "I want you to fuck me."

Before she could react, he had her on her back, and a surprised little gasp slipped out of her mouth that made him even harder. He pushed open her thighs wide, exposing her wet pussy in the silvery moonlight, making her squirm when he didn't push himself in right away. Cullen worked himself in his fist, just looking at her in this highly aroused state.

"What are you doing? All of this — it can't last all night. Don't make me beg..."
"Oh, I think you should beg. I think you'd like to beg."

"Cullen!" That little outraged look on her face almost made him dizzy with desire.

"Touch yourself for me. I haven't seen you like this in much too long. Make yourself come for me."

Her fingers moved fast even as she objected. "You're supposed to be obeying me, I don't understand!"

Cullen gave her a wicked smile. "Can't you see, I *am* obeying you, Aida, all of this is clearly what you wanted. So go on, like you said, we don't have much time."

He watched Aida for a while, writhing in the moonlight, pleasuring herself, until she looked at him, gasped and pressed her head into the tangle of sheets beneath her. He crawled over her now, limp and more than ready for him, and he licked the tip of her tongue as he sheathed himself deep inside of her. Aida wrapped her legs around him tight as he filled her up, over and over again. It felt too good to be with her again, he could feel that darkness inside of him locked away, struggling to get loose, but it was being contained for the moment, and he found if he simply didn't think about it, it wasn't there. It was just Aida, and how soft she was, and how her moans were the only things he could hear.

Cullen propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at Aida to find she was crying.

"Don't cry, baby..."

"You have no idea how much I miss you."

"I do, because I miss you too. I miss this. I think about this, when I'm sitting at the far end of the dinner table from you."

He began pumping his hips hard and fast now, watching her face as he lead her closer and closer to the edge of another climax.

"I think about fucking you, every morning and every night, when I'm supposed to be concentrating on other things."

Aida looked up at him through her tears, her gaze drilling into him as he rutted her so hard the old, sturdy bed frame beneath them began to creak.

"Don't cry, because this won't be the last time, I promise you."

She nodded at him, hanging on to his shoulders now, moaning louder and louder, her pussy squeezing him tight. He wanted to keep going, to fuck her senseless for a few hours so she'd sleep past sunrise. He wanted her to wake up sore, still feeling what he did to her.

Cullen bit her on the shoulder as they both climaxed together, wanting to leave a mark on her. Aida whimpered as he did so, gasping "baby" when he tasted a bit of her blood, while she threaded a hand through his hair. He rolled off of her, collapsing at her side.

Aida laid at his side and ran her fingertips down his chest, giving him goosebumps. "I should go, you can stay here tonight. The spell is going to fade, especially once the moon moves out of view."

"Then let's go outside and fuck in the forest. We can follow the moon all night."

Aida laughed and threaded her fingers through his, kissing each of his knuckles. Suddenly, everything simple thing she did was more magical than what she had just pulled off.
He watched with a heart full of melancholy as she got up and headed down the ladder, but she paused before she disappeared out of view, and he knew what she was going to say before she said it:

"I love you more than life itself."

* * * * *

Cullen woke up the next morning feeling better than he had in a long, long time. He smiled to himself as he replayed the night before in his head, six or seven times back to back. He could hang onto that night now for a while, until he'd be dying for her again. They'd figure out what to do. Aida was just that clever, wasn't she?

He went downstairs and located his jeans and his shirt and pulled everything back on. Katya would have breakfast going by now and Cullen wondered if his family would know what happened last night from the incredible smile he couldn't get off his face. It reminded him of when he first got together with Aida, how overjoyed she made him feel every morning, how she had chipped away all the loneliness in his life and replaced it with her kisses, her eyes, her touch.

Cullen headed up the path, practically striding. He was hungry, and already thinking about how he could brag to his brother about what had happened. And he wouldn't be bragging about the sex (although he wanted to, so badly), he'd be proud they had found a way to fight back against what was inside of him.

He paused when he saw what was happening at Katya and Branson's. His sister-in-law was pacing back and forth with a crying Lila in her arms, Rosalie was sitting on the steps, a gloomy expression on her face, and Branson was looking at him, holding two cups of coffee. Cullen approached them all, feeling something bad in the air.

Branson handed him a cup of coffee. "So, um, a drone? Was buzzing around the house this morning. Not one of them toys, a bigger one. I was going to shoot the thing out of the air when Rosalie noticed it said 'Trevelyan Enterprises' on the side of it. We realized someone was desperate to contact Aida."

Cullen got a few flashbacks to his job as a security executive for the Trevelyan family's massive conglomerate, the drones had been his idea.

"Aida's father is dying. I guess her family was waiting to tell her until it was really bad."

He felt a few things hit him in the stomach at once. The Bann had been nothing but kind to him during all the ups and downs of his relationship with Aida. He had hired him when he needed to get away from Leliana and let him become a part of the family when she was away. The sorrow he felt about him mixed with the realization Aida would have to leave the Rutherfords, and did that include him too?

"Where is she?"
"Living room."

Cullen stepped inside and paused. He waited for the bad junk inside of him to turn on being one room away from her, and he could feel it buzzing away in the back of his head, but it wasn't as loud as before. He stood in the door way of the living room and looked at Aida, clutching a tissue and lying on the couch, her eyes red and puffy.

She looked over at him and used her interior voice to tell him: *My father is dying.*
He gave her a small nod in return. He wanted to hold her so badly.

* * * * *

We have to go. We can come back after... After...

Her face crumpled and she began sobbing again, but Cullen took a step forward, making her stop and look at him.

"Then we should go. Unless — you want me to stay here. Do you? I'll do whatever you want."

Aida wiped away a tear and sat up. "Cullen, you're speaking to me, and looking at me, and not, hurting me..."

"I-I know, it's weird. Maybe it's just leftover business from your spell last night? We don't have time to wonder about it. Do you want me to pack up the RV for you, should I —"

"Of course you're coming with us. Cullen, I will always need you."

Cullen felt his heart pounding. It was all he needed to hear.

They packed up quick, agreed they should go back in the RV together, leave Aida's truck in the forest for now. She could ride in the back with the baby, armed with one of the tasers she gave her in-laws, but Cullen wanted to tell everyone not to worry, he just felt different today, there were too many bigger things to panic about. They said their goodbyes to his family, swore they'd come back as soon as they could, and navigated their way back to society.

Cullen stared at the highway, feeling a little guilty every time he thought about what they had done together the night before. Now was not the time for those hungry memories, there were more serious things at hand, but every time he thought about how it felt to be inside her again, it gave him hope.

What he didn't know was Aida was sitting in the back, thinking about that night too as she watched the baby pawing through one of her favorite books. She also had something in one of her hands she couldn't quite let go of — it was a tiny sample of Geralt's strange potion. Waves of grief kept buffeting her, but she hung onto that vial. She was going to keep it in her pocket until they could get back to the city.

She was going to fix everything, save her father, save her husband, put her family back together.

Aida laid down on her side, holding the baby in the crook of her arm. She was about to drift off for a nap when something in the first moments of her dreaming startled her wide awake.

She suddenly saw the cold, grey eyes of Sierra Amell, staring right back at her.

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