Dirtha'vhen'an

by Hannehier

Summary

I live forever, eternally alone,
Or leave my loved ones in life,
And find a filled eternity in death.
But in the end, this life will be cloaked in heartbreak,
Either mine or theirs.
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When Saeris dies in her own world, she starts anew in the next one. Thedas. She’s there, and knows about nothing but that she is changed for ever, and will be so forever. Waking up in the Blessed Age, she ventures through forests, cities, countries, dreams and time itself, all the
way up to the Dragon Age, to find out who she really is, and what curse holds onto her that
makes her wander for eternity. Can she change her fate? Can she come to love and let go?

Or will she destroy everything.

Notes

So, this is my first fanfiction. I played all the Dragon Age games multiple times on different
consoles, read almost all fanfiction there is to read. And yes, I'm totally into that damned
Solavellan Hell!
Now, this is the first time I write and post a fiction like this. So please be kind, I'm learning.
English also isn't my first language, I have a beta (the best there is, nerdsaretotallyawesome),
but if you find any mistakes, please tell me :)

I'm not a one shot writer, I want to create something big, lasting. I want this story developing
over a long period of time, so many chapters will hopefully ensue.

Quick disclaimer: I don't own anything Dragon Age related, this is just a fanfiction. All the
characters belong to Bioware, just not the main character I created myself.
Blessed

Do you believe in fate? That everything happens for a certain reason? Do you think that there’s a road already created for you to walk on? Is there a greater being that decides things? And if so, are the choices you make really choices then? Do we have a choice, a voice, in our own lives? Maybe that would be better, since there are no good or bad choices, because they are already made for you? You are not responsible. But what if everything’s a coincidence? A compilation of random situations that result in something good or bad? What if there isn’t a road, and you have to make it yourself and all the good or bad choices are your own responsibility?

If I think about it, I really don’t want there to be an upper being. What being would do this to me? And for what random reason? Because it felt like it? Was it bored and wanted it to see what would happen? Was it fate or coincidence that my father met my mother in an old café in Belgium? Was it fate or coincidence that they met again one week later in the supermarket at the corner? Was it fate or coincidence that they got married, and made love and that all the possible mutations would create me? Was it fate or coincidence that they travelled around the world with me on their back? Was it fate or coincidence that out of all diseases, I would get acute lymphoblastic leukaemia. Is it fate or coincidence that I’m in the 30% that dies of their diagnosis?

Describing how dying feels like, isn’t something I feel like doing. It doesn’t feel like drifting off into a deep slumber. It doesn’t feel like going into the beyond, where it’s warm and cosy. It feels cold. Quick. Silent. One moment, I was still in the hospital bed. My mum was sitting next to me, her eyes watery but strong. My father kept on whispering my name, as if it would keep me in this world. My older brother didn’t cry or say anything at all, he just held my hand, as by saying I wasn’t alone. But in the end, I was. Everyone is alone when they die. So when I took my last breath, I didn’t even realise it was the last one. It was like switching off the lights in your room, or blinking your eyes when you go to sleep at night and the next moment it’s morning. Now, if you want to know if there’s a heaven, a hell, a nirvana, a Valhalla, or whatever you’re into, I will tell you that I have no clue. I have no clue because I didn’t get the chance to see it. Once death had found me, it immediately gave me a next destination.

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I woke up in a field. The damp grass caressed my cheeks like my mother just did a moment ago. I looked around me and noticed the greenness of the grass, the brightness of the blue sky and I felt the glowing warmth of the sun, like I haven’t felt for a very long time. Everything around me was humming, whispering almost, saying lovely words I did not understand. Everything felt so, strangely, alive. I felt alive, but wasn’t I dead?

‘Is this the beyond?’, I whispered to myself.

I stood up and felt the strength that had returned to my once feeble legs. They were strong again, reliable, unlike the ones I had been living with for three years. I didn’t stumble over, but stood straight, the wind blowing through my hair. My hair? I had hair again? I touched the tips and looked down. My hair that had once waved over my frame, my hair that had fallen off due to the chemotherapy, had now returned, curling softly around my long pale fingers. Strange, I thought to myself, when did I bleach my hair? It used to be strawberry blonde, but now it’s almost… white?

I took a step forward, my bare feet tingling in the wet grass. I felt fast, faster than ever before, my body prickling with all the new senses of this strange new world. I took a step forward again, and another one, and another one and, wait, am I naked? I looked down again. Yes. Naked. Great. I needed a mirror, I looked skinny, but not to the bone. I had always been long and slender, but now it
looked like my body had changed a little. My strong curves where still there, but it looked different, almost surreal. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and started walking again. Before me, a deep forest began stretching on into what looked like the end of the world. But I started walking, thinking that maybe this is all just a weird dream, and that I would wake up. But after walking for some hours and after I stumbled over the trunk of a large tree, I realised that it’s not a dream. You can’t feel pain in a dream, right? Shit.

The sun was going down, the sky colouring a pastel blue and orange and red. I came onto a little cottage, where a small light was burning behind a blurry window and the chimney was spouting soft smoke into the soft evening sky.

A man, young, red hair, tall, was working the little field that surrounded his home. He looked… medieval? Was I sent back in time? Are they making a film or something? I wanted to step forward, but then realised I was still naked. What to do? I knelt behind a bush close to the end of the forest and peered at the strange man cutting his crops. Would he notice me sitting here? Maybe he’d think I’m a creep. Maybe I am a creep. Oh god. I wanted to turn around and leave when the man suddenly looked up and stared into my eyes, mesmerized. I stayed still, paralyzed and still very much naked. I yelped and fell back to the ground to cover myself.

The young man slowly came closer, still looking into my eyes, not looking down. Gentleman. He knelt beside me and gave me an understanding look. And since waking up, I did not feel alone. And then the world went black once more.

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A fire was crackling close to the end of the bed I was laying in. I felt the soft furs that tickled my nose as I turned around. I slowly opened my eyes, half expecting to be in the hospital again, fully hoping that my mum’s eyes would stare back at me. But it were not her eyes, it were his. The young man looked at me, questions blurring his soft green eyes.

‘You alright?’ his voice was filled with concern.

I jolted up, clutching the furs in front of my chest. My mouth felt dry, I couldn’t speak. Or truthfully, I didn’t know what to say.

‘What day is it?’ I mumbled.

‘Uhm, Friday?’

‘No, what DATE?’ I sounded panicked.

His brows curled into a frown.

‘8:10 Blessed Age, Bloomingtide, Friday the 15th ?’ He finally said.

‘Wait, what?’ This isn’t, what, huh? ‘Where am I?’

The young man almost laughed. ‘Well, in Thedas of course!’

‘What’s a Thedas?’ Did this man fall on his head? Is this a city I don’t know of? The guy looked even more confused now. He almost looked at me like I was the crazy person. Well, maybe I am the crazy person.

‘Thedas is the world, created and cared for by the Maker?’

Wait, a lightbulb figuratively sprung in my mind. I had heard this somewhere before. My brother was always talking about this Thedas thing, wasn’t it a game? What was the name again? Dragon Time?
No. Dragon World? Something with dragon. Dragon Age? But this guy just said Blessed Age?

‘When was the Dragon Age?’ I suddenly spoke again, the poor guy almost jolted of his chair.

‘There hasn’t been any Dragon Age yet?’

So, I’m in some strange way dead, went to a video game, and am now stuck in the Age the game is NOT about. Great. Just great.

I looked around his cottage. The wooden walls didn’t feel ancient, the stone fireplace didn’t feel prehistoric, this place looked so normal, yet not. He had close to no furniture, just a table, a chair, a small closet, some pots and some trinkets and the bed I was laying in. There were no additional walls in here, the house was just a small square place. On one of the walls, an old and badly painted painting hung from a nail, depicting the forest. Did he paint it himself? With what?

The house smelt moldy, like stale bread, and also a little bit of smoked ham. My stomach grumbled, but I didn’t feel hungry. I didn’t feel like anything, just confused and afraid.

The young man scraped his throat. ‘You want something to eat?’ He smiled softly.

I shook my head. I need to go back. Back to… what? I was dead. A tear rolled down my cheek. Dead. My mum, my father, my brother, I will never see them again. Do they miss me? Will they bury me?

‘What is an elf wandering around these forests? You don’t look Dalish? Did you ran from an alienage? You don’t look like a city elf either? Are you a slave? Did you run away from the Imperium? Don’t be scared, you’re safe here.’

An elf? What the actual fuck? Is this Lord of the Rings? No, Dragon Age had elves too. Wait. I am an elf?

My hands flew to the sides of my head and I yelped. My ears aren’t my ears. They are big, pointy. I shudder went I caress the tips. Nope. Nope, nope nope. This isn’t happening. I’m not Legolas, I’m not Legolas!

The young man crooked an eyebrow. Yes, I am definitely the crazy person in here.

This will be a long night.
So, this chapter is very much about setting the story, describing, forming a basis. I kept the explanation about everything quite simple. The more information Saeris'll get, the more confused she'll probably become. Let's not overwhelm her ;-)
No? No. No! I yelled now, screamed, my lungs emptied. The fire went out and the room got dark, too dark, like I had sucked all the light away. As I fell to my knees, the light of the moon slowly lit up the darkness in the house again. Daniel opened the door, his face horrified and sad.

‘You are a mage?’ he whispered, afraid almost.

But I didn’t hear him. I shook while I was still looking in the mirror. And a stranger looked right back at me.

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I ripped a piece of the stale bread Daniel had given to me, it was all he got. I nibbled on it, hoping it would taste better if it had softened a bit. Alas, still gross.

Daniel smiled at the expression on my face. I had been paralyzed for an hour, sobbing for almost two. Now the light of the morning sun was creeping through the blurred window again as I started to study Daniel. He looked around my age. Young, still in his prime. His red hair was cut short, not a bad look. Freckles darted over his nose and cheekbones with a pale skin underneath. His eyes were a soft green-grey, topped with full eyebrows. He looked strong for a poor farmer. Healthy. Happy with his life.

‘I presume you lost your memory?’ His voice came suddenly. I shook my head. First no, then yes, then no again. A maybe it is.

‘You didn’t know that you’re a mage?’ He asked again.

‘No’ I answered, my voice cracking.

Daniel rubbed the back of his neck. Was I a burden? Again?

‘This is something for those forest people’, he murmured and stood up from the table. ‘I’m going to ask someone to help you, alright? I’ll be right back.’

And so he left me. Alone. With the stale bread.

He came back one hour later, the sun now fully risen. He looked concerned when he opened the door. A strange small woman followed behind him. I would’ve thought she was a teenager, if I didn’t see the many wrinkles on her face. She had large brown eyes, braided black hair that was turning somewhat greyish, and a light green tattoo curling all over her face. Her ears were long and pointy, like mine, I guess. A frown appeared on her serious face.

‘Your name?’ Her voice was loud, it had authority.

‘Saeris’, I, on the other hand, sounded scared.

‘Doesn’t seem like she lost her memory.’ The elf concluded.

Then, the old elf lady looked into my eyes and stared. The frown on her head disappeared and changed into a clear and curious face.

‘Born with that?’

‘No, just got it.’

‘You sure?’

‘Totally.’
Like I was filling in a questionnaire. The elf walked around me, almost checking if I was real.

‘You indeed don’t look Dalish, or like a flat-ear.’

‘A what?’ Should I feel offended?

‘City elf. So you’re not a slave, you say. Don’t lie to me child.’

‘No, I’m not, didn’t know there were slaves in Thedas’, now I’m worried.

The woman tutted, like a schoolteacher would do to an ignorant child.
‘You’re a mage’, she stated, ‘but you didn’t know.’

‘I still don’t know’, I mumbled.

‘But I do, dear, I can sense it all over you.’ Is it an odour? Do I smell now?

The lady turned around and looked at Daniel.
‘It’s good you took me to her, Shemlen, my clan will help her.’

‘Clan?’ I looked panicked at Daniel. No, I don’t want to leave.
Daniel smiled back at me, reassuring. Don’t leave me, please?

‘Yes, our Clan, you know, I’m Dalish.’

‘Yes, and what’s that?’

The woman looked at me like I was growing dumber by the minute.
‘We are the descendants of the true elves. We honour our ancestors and traditions. We preserve the knowledge and treasures of Arlathan. We revere the elven gods, the true gods. You haven’t heard of us?’ She seemed truly curious now.

‘No, never heard of it.’ Sounds like a cult. I don’t want to go with them.

‘She’s confused, Elgadira, can you help her?’ Daniel looked from me to this Elgadira and back.

‘Maybe’, Elgadira said, ‘I have to observe her, maybe look in the Fade.’

‘The what?’ I asked again.

Elgadira sighed deeply, ‘Of course you don’t know.’

Well, excuse me for my ignorance. I didn’t say that out loud though, Elgadira looked scary.

‘Come child, let me help you.’

I looked back at Daniel. He nodded at me. ‘It’s alright’, he said, ‘I won’t be far, you can come back to visit me.’ He smiled, but it was somewhat sadly. Maybe he was as alone as I was.

Daniel took a step closer, sliding my hair behind my pointy ear. What if I never see him again? I don’t want that. I don’t know why. I feel like I need him. Maybe it’s because I don’t feel alone when I’m with him. I don’t feel dead. Daniel smiled at me, but his eyes stayed serious. I knew that I would meet him again. I will meet him again. This old lady won’t keep me. I will come back, and I will stay. Maybe. I think. Daniel peered for a last time in my eyes.

‘Until soon, Saeris’, he whispered while stepping away.
I followed Elgadira into the woods, back into the dark forest with no end. Elgadira was a cranky old lady. She was wearing a strange, lightly fitted armour that she wore with pride. The clothes were made of a strange material, it seemed very… earthly? Like she’d made them herself from stuff she found in the forest. Well, she probably did. She also had a walking stick. A very pretty stick, with a flashy stone on top of it. Why is the stick on her back? Doesn’t seem handy.

‘You can stop staring at me now, da’lan.’

‘Da- what?’

Sigh. ‘Da’lan, young one, child. It’s elvhen.’

‘Oh’, I murmured, ‘I’m not really a child.’

‘Yes you are, you’re ignorant like a child.’

I was just about to reply to that, when we entered an open meadow. The sun was shining and leaving small glistering beams all over the place. There were tents scattered everywhere, all made from the same material as Elgadira’s armour. Elves were running around the place, doing daily tasks as cooking, skinning animals, making clothes or armour, doing stuff. They all looked like Elgadira in some way. Short, braided hair, curly face-tattoos, pointed ears and pale-ish skin. It was a camp. A hippie camp for elves.

Elgadira looked back, nodding at me to follow her. The hippie elves all stared up at me when we walked by and all murmured ‘Keeper’ to the old lady. Is she the leader or something? The elves kind of looked nasty at me. I was an outsider not meant to enter the camp. I heard some whispering ‘flat-ear’ when they passed me. My ears were definitely pointy, so I didn’t understand. We finally came onto a somewhat bigger tent near the centre of the camp. Elgadira held the flap of the tent open and gestured me to enter. And so I did.

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So. This is Thedas. Now we’re in Ferelden, which is a country in Thedas. The neighbouring country is Orlais, which are nasty French people. There’s also the Tevinter Imperium, Nevarra, The Free Marches, Antiva, Rivain, the Anderfells and some islands I don’t recall. There are elves, I know that much. City and Dalish elves. And I’m neither of them.

‘And what’s up with the tattoos?’ I pointed at Elgadira’s face. She turned my hand away.

‘They are Vallaslin, they are sacred. It’s a mark of respect, of adulthood. We wear them as signs of patronage to our gods.’

Alrighty then. We were sitting on a wooden bench in the centre of the tent. ‘And you all live in this camp?’

‘For now, we are nomads. We travel. We like to keep away from the shemlens, humans, and keep to our own. If a place isn’t safe anymore, we move, that’s how it goes.’ Elgadira gave me a small smile.

‘What’s going to happen now?’ I presumed she would do a hocus-pocus trick on me, sending me back home, or to the beyond, wherever that was.

‘I will consult the Fade. The Fade is the other realm, separated from us by the Veil. It’s The Beyond, where spirits dwell and demons lurk. We go there in our sleep.’
‘We can enter the beyond?’ Does that mean I can go home?

‘No, you never truly enter it. You dream there, nothing more.’

‘How do you enter it? Truly then?’

‘You do not, da’lan, you can’t.’ Done. Period. She seemingly doesn’t want to talk about that. Weird.

‘Our gods rest in The Beyond, in the Eternal City, betrayed by The Dread Wolf, Fen’harel. He still roams the realm, maybe even our realm. So no, you don’t go there. Next to impossible, it’s also extremely dangerous. Don’t let him fool you da’lan, the Trickster is everywhere.’

The woman seemed very serious about this. But I don’t believe in such superstitions. Myths, just stories probably.

‘You are a mage. You tap into the Fade when you cast spells. I will teach you soon. First I need answers.’ And you’ll find them in your dreams. Okay.

Elgadira saw my doubting face and sighed, again, for what’s probably the millionth time.

‘I will consult memories, whispers of your present or existence. Maybe the spirits will provide us more information on you.’ Sure lady, go ask your spirits.

‘So… what now?’ You’re not going to keep me in this camp, right?

‘You will stay here for now’, shit, ‘as a sign of my kindness.’

‘Do I have to sleep in a tent then?’

Elgadira tutted again. ‘May the Dread Wolf never hear your steps.’

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it. You can always leave me a kudo or a comment, they make my day.
Cultured

Chapter Notes

Trying to include the Elven language in my fanfiction using the works of FenxShiral. I'm probably butchering everything... I apologize in advance!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Life doesn’t always turn out the way you want it to. Sometimes you just follow a different path than you first planned to. But do you have to accept that path? Learn to live with it? Or should you do anything in your power to get back onto the path you first planned on walking?

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I sat in my tent, my feet curled into a tailor’s seat. The tent I was given was small and near the border of the camp, probably to emphasize I was still an outsider. They gave me a small bedroll and a pelt from some kind of animal I didn’t want to imagine. I sat there, listening to the sounds of the Dalish; banter, chatter, children playing, a campfire crumbling in its own heat. I closed my eyes and imagined that I wasn’t in the camp, I was in the forest, listening to its whispering sounds. The chatter of the crowd fell into the background and the sounds of the woods crept into my tent. The wind was blowing through the trees, making the leaves rustle. Birds were chirping, and somewhere deeper into the forest, I could hear a stream rippling through the mud and a deer stomping its feet. Why can I hear that? I shouldn’t be able to? Don’t panic.

I slit the flap of my tent aside to look outside. The elves were gathering near the centre of the camp, where they were making a big campfire. Some were already sitting beside it with a bowl of food. I squinted my eyes and saw the hot steam coming from what looked like a broth with some vegetables. I took a step outside. Maybe I should go and sit with them? Maybe I’ll like them?

But boy, they didn’t like me. When I silently crept closer to the campfire, some elves stood up to stand somewhere else while muttering ‘flat-ear’. I scratched the back of my neck. Well, isn’t this awkward?

‘By the Dread Wolf’, someone muttered and pulled me back by my arm. A female elf now stood in front of me, brown hair pulled back into a ponytail and big brown eyes staring angrily into mine. She had a strange pattern of curly tattoos on her face, they were black.

‘Excuse me?’ I muttered while pulling my arm away.

‘You don’t come here, alin,’ she hissed, ‘you already make the others uncomfortable.’

‘Why?’ I don’t get it, it’s not like I’m bothering them?

‘We don’t allow outsiders here, certainly not in our camp. The Keeper is already being resented by her choice, don’t make it worse.’

‘But…’

‘I don’t care.’ She flipped her ponytail and walked off.
With my chin pressed to my chest, I trailed back to my tent, which seemed now further away than ever, certainly with all the angry eyes directed to me. I crawled back in and crept into the bedroll. It was too small, my feet peeped from beneath the furs and laid naked on the ground. Stupid small elves. Suddenly, I heard someone’s footsteps coming towards my tent. The person stopped and then walked very slowly to the back. I heard something rustling. They better not be peeing there. A small light appeared suddenly where the person was standing, but it disappeared as quickly as I’d noticed. Weird. This place is weird. The person moved again, slowly as to not bother me, and walked back to the camp.

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Pickles purred as I patted her head. She peered at me with half-closed eyes and laid her head on the cushion. I smiled softly. I jumped onto my bed and let myself fall into the fluffy blanket laying on top of it and stared at my ceiling. There was still sticking a ‘Team Jacob’ poster on the pink wall from back in the days when I was really into that garbage. This is good, I thought while I was laying there. The sun was shining outside and I could hear my father mowing the lawn. A sweet smell was also entering my room through the cracks of my door. Mum was baking banana bread, my favourite.

‘Goddammit Solas!’ My brother screamed next door while slamming his console into what probably was his bean bag. I snickered. He should stop living in his games, and maybe go outside or something.

This was good. Everything was fine.

Suddenly, someone knocked at my door. I sat up and stared at it.

‘Yes?’ I prodded. No answer. I could feel someone’s presence.

‘Hello?’ I asked again. Still no answer.
I walked to the door and grabbed the handle. But it didn’t matter how strong I pulled or how much I writhed, it would not open. The presence was still standing there though, silently asking to come in.

‘I’m sorry, but I think the door is stuck?!’ I yelled. Then I sank onto my knees and closed my right eye to peek through the keyhole. I had assumed it was my mum, but it wasn’t a she or a he or an anything. Something dark was standing there, the contours of its figure smoking. The creature bent its head and looked straight into my left eye.

I woke up, sweaty. I’m still… no. I’m still dead. I’m not home.

I plopped back onto my bedroll, though I didn’t sleep anymore that night, because every time I closed my eyes, two bright red ones stared back at me.

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Day one with the elves. Elgadira clicked with her tongue and looked me up and down. The clothes I was given, were so… elvish? I was given a long, forest green tunic with pointed tips going down and two slits at the sides, making my legs and hips slip through. I was also given thigh-high leather boots with footwraps attached to it. I kind of liked the feeling of my bare feet touching the damp ground. A leather belt also hung loosely around my hips, with a small pouch attached to it. It looked intricate, but also quite simple. I’d tied my hair up into a high ponytail.

Elgadira turned her back to me and yelled something. Was she cursing again?

‘Nenhara, this is Saeris’, oh Nenhara is her name, not a curse word, ‘you probably know that
Elgadira said to the female now standing next to me. She was a little bit taller than most elves in this camp. She had brown hair pulled back into a ponytail and big brown eyes and black tattoos and wait. She was that elf who snagged me away from the campfire!

‘Aneth ara, Keeper. And yes, I do.’ Nenhara said while looking me up and down, like she was looking at livestock.

Elgadira turned back to me now.
‘This is Nenhara, my First. She will help you around camp. If you have any questions, you go to her, understood?’ I quickly nodded my head. What’s a First? Not going to ask, I think they’re sick of my questions already. Nenhara huffed, turned on her heels and trotted back into camp.

‘She’s a little bit stubborn, but she’s a good one. Very talented.’ Elgadira explained. ‘She’s the one who set your wards last night.’

‘Wards?’
Elgadira tapped her foot on the grass. ‘Wards are spells, da’lan, they keep demons from entering your dreams when you’re in the Fade.’

‘Oh.’ I said that sounding like I understood completely, but I didn’t.
‘I’ll teach you soon.’
‘I kind of saw something yesterday, it was standing behind my door.’
‘Did you let it in?’
‘No’
‘Good. Never let it in.’ Elgadira now looked straight at me to make sure I understood. Quickly I nodded again.
‘Now, follow me.’

***
‘Control your breathing, Saeris, feel the magic. You should feel it deep from within.’ Elgadira sounded annoyed. We’d been sitting in the field for three hours by now, and nothing had happened yet. I thought things would be flying by now. Mages let things fly, right? I don’t really know what mages do.

‘I don’t feel anything!’ I sounded almost as annoyed as Elgadira. The old elf lady sighed.

‘Maybe, I should, like, get angry or something? That seemed to work last time?’

‘No. You don’t want to learn magic by becoming angry. Don’t bind it onto your feelings. You won’t be able to control the magic once you get stronger.’

That sounded quite logical actually. ‘So I should just keep sitting here?’

‘Unfortunately, yes.’ She huffed again and leaned against a tree while staring into the sky. Thinking, she was thinking how to solve this. Solve me.

I closed my eyes again, controlled my breathing. I could fall asleep right here. No, stay awake!
Focus, Saeris, focus! But after half an hour of nothing again, the focus was gone once more. I started thinking of home. Of my mother, baking the banana bread, of my brother, throwing consoles around in his room, of my cat, purring and sleeping all day long, and of my father, mowing the grass in the garden, carefully leaving the blue flowers mum loved alone. And then, it finally happened. A small flower sprouted near my right foot. And another one poked against my butt. Soon, a whole bouquet of flowers grew where I sat. I opened my eyes and looked at them. There were a dozen flowers, all pastel blue, curled up to my sides. They were small and looked like they didn’t fit the field where I was sitting in. They were too perfect. Did I really do this? I looked up and saw Elgadira’s eyes.

‘How?’ her mouth agape, she almost stuttered.

‘I, just, thought of flowers.’ I apologized.

‘You aren’t supposed to be able to do that? Creation magic is only for those who have mastered everything else, but you are elvar’las, untrained?’ Elgadira shook her head. ‘They were right…’

‘Who?’ I asked her, but Elgadira turned around back to camp. Seems like I won’t get any answers from her.

I stood up to follow her. As I looked down to my flowers, they already withered. I went back to the ground and touched one of the pastel perfections with my hand. The withered flower almost responded, lifting its petals once more until it finally gave in to its nature, and died.

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I dreamed that night that I was walking around camp. The sky was dark and stars were scattered everywhere. You don’t see this anymore in my world, there were too many lights in the streets. The camp was empty, silent, like nobody was actually there. I walked to where the campfire was yesterday. The burned wood still felt warm. Strange. I was about to turn around, when I saw a light coming from Elgadira’s tent. I moved closer.

‘Is she an era’harel, Keeper?’, it was Nenhara, her voice high and worried.

‘No, she’s not. She’s eralin, like you and me.’

‘Why are you keeping her here? We have enough mages.’

There was a silence. Then, I heard movement.

‘Ir abelas, I cannot say.’ Elgadira’s voice felt directed to me instead of to Nenhara, as if she knew where I was standing.

And then I woke up.

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Day seven.

Elgadira hasn’t spoken to me much. Now, Nenhara was helping me control my magic. Was Elgadira avoiding me? Because I grew some flowers? I didn’t get it. She told me ‘they were right’, but who are they? Did she talk to her spirits? Does she know something more? Why won’t she tell me then? Why can’t she tell me? Something feels wrong here.

Nenhara sighed. ‘Lost in your tiny mind again?’

I hissed at her, but then almost fell on my face. Nenhara looked coyly at me and burst into a laugh. It
was the first time I saw her laugh. She stopped laughing though when we entered the border of the forest. Strange, when they’d first taken me away from here, it seemed so much farther away.

‘Here you are, alin, go see your shemlen, I will wait here.’ She ordered.

But I didn’t mind what she said. I was back, back to where it had started. It had been a week. Daniel stood in the opening of the door, he smiled. Maybe I wasn’t back home, but it felt like I was back to a place very close to it. Daniel nodded at me, signing me to come in.

I smiled right back.

Chapter End Notes

So this was again a very descriptive chapter needed to set my story on its way.
But don't worry... shit will hit the fan soon ;-)
8:22 Blessed

I smiled as I caressed the crops in Daniel’s field and they grew bigger and greener by my touch. It’s as if the plants knew me, moved towards me, bathing in my light. I looked up and skimmed the field. Most of our seasons were good, as I would be able to grow the crops no matter the climate, but I saw how nature enjoyed the weather. This will be a good year.

I returned to the cottage, our cottage. Daniel was gone, selling a part of his crops in the nearby port town of Gwaren. I never went there, it was an isolated but big and important town and Daniel grew up there. But the people were narrow-minded and didn’t like to see me coming. I upset them, as I was quite tall for a ‘rabbit’, taller than some of the men even, and my eyes disturbed them, made the children cry.

When Daniel returned with a bag of coins, we celebrated by eating sweets. Sweets were expensive, but sometimes we managed to get enough coin to buy some. With my magic, we could grow all the crops we wanted, but we didn’t, as we were content with what we had and only grew what we truly needed. We did rebuild the cottage though, made it bigger, with more rooms.

‘Everything well in Gwaren?’

Daniel looked up from his tart. ‘Everything fine, like always.’
He smiled, small wrinkles were forming near his eyes. Daniel aged well, his hair was still bright red, though a little bit dulled. Some wrinkles were forming on his forehead. People aged so fast here. But not me, I hadn’t aged, or changed for that matter, at all. My white hair still slightly curled along my face, stopping near my lower back. My face was still full of youth, my eyes as bright as ever. First I thought it was an elven thing, but two years ago I started noticing that the rest of the clan aged as well. But I stayed still, frozen in time.

‘Am I interrupting?’ Nenhara knocked on the door while entering the cottage.
She smiled coyly as she saw the sweets. I shot her a side-eye and gave her one.

‘Ma serannas’, she mumbled while taking a bite. Nenhara looked radiant and was ready to become the Keeper, you could see it, the whole clan could. She had the authority of a Keeper, she was ready for it.

‘Good, you coming?’

I nodded. I went to the clan once every month for two days. I practised my magic there, learning more about the Elven culture and language, but also about this world. I had picked up magic quite quickly, but it wasn’t without failing first. I’d almost frozen an entire field once, but luckily, that didn’t happen twice. I never used that spell again. I had also picked up healing five years ago, it came naturally to me. My creation magic helped of course, as I was the only one in the clan who could do it, and it did come in handy once in a while. But when the clan offered me a spot in their midst, I refused. They wanted me to learn how to defend, to kill, and I would not. I grew, made things alive. And because I refused, I wasn’t allowed to live with them anymore, and so I left. Daniel gladly took me in, and I gladly lived there.

The clan had moved further away about four years ago, but I still visited them, even though I had to travel for three days. It was like visiting a family. They almost filled the void, the emptiness, still left
in me. Daniel had tried to fill it, but couldn’t, as no one could. I still felt like a stranger in this world, and I was never able to fully accommodate.

‘I’ll see you in a week.’ Daniel smiled softly, like he always does. I know he doesn’t want me to go. The roads had become more dangerous the last two years. Orlesians were often spotted sneaking around Ferelden, crossing the border more often than not. They were scouts, pillaging and stealing, searching for something, looking. They didn’t want anyone to know though, and often killed those who crossed them. Something was on the rise, we could all feel it. The Mad Emperor Reville of Orlais was planning something, and Ferelden would not survive.

***

The trip to the camp went smoothly. We all knew the Orlesians wanted to take a look at Gwaren, but the town could only be reached by boat or by travelling along the Brecilian Passage. But no Orlesian scout had made the passage yet, as the Brecilian Forest, where the clan was camped now, was too dense and too much of a maze for them to fully discover.

When we arrived, Elgadira was already waiting for me. I never forgave her for not telling me what she knew. I asked multiple times about what she learned in the Fade, but she always answered that I would know one day, that I would understand. Five years ago, I stopped trying and accepted that I would probably never know, only when I would greet death once more. The Keeper of the clan had grown old, too old. I didn’t understand how she did it. In a world without modern medicine, with bad hygiene, most people died quite young. But not this old crone, she kept on going.

I took out my staff, slightly remembering that I’d once called it a ‘pretty walking stick’. It was a long staff, accommodating according to my height, made of curled branches and a white stone on top. Elgadira had given it to me at the end of my training, when I left the clan for Daniel.

The clan members nodded at me, whispering ‘lethallin’ when I passed them. They grew on me, and I on them, eventually. They became my family. I saw the elders die and the younglings grow up, and some even cried for me when I left.

Nenhara smacked her hand on my back. ‘Let’s do some training!’
She almost hopped towards the training ground. Nenhara was a strange one, cranky, but still open-hearted and warm. She’d been my best friend for the last years, my sister almost, my kin. I walked towards her while supporting myself on the staff. Elgadira followed us with her all-seeing eyes. She smiled. But I ignored her, like I always did, out of resentment. I’d always thought Elgadira would’ve been the one guiding me, but she never did. She taught me a lot, that’s not what this is about. But she never held my hand and told me why everything had happened to me. I knew she knew where I came from, but she never told anyone. Never did I either, maybe because I didn’t want my past to be real, so I could fully live in the now, here, in Thedas. But somewhere deep within, I knew I would never belong here.

Our training lessons were the one thing that connected Elgadira and me. She would coach us, throw challenges at us, while we recited Elven poetry and history lessons. For Nenhara, this was her training to become a better Keeper. She had to be the one to keep the clan’s history and traditions in use when Elgadira would die. But I never quite understood why I had to learn their culture, their stories.

Nenhara sent me an arrow made of ice. I swished my staff and blocked it, and the ice evaporated into a dozen white butterflies. I smiled.

‘Always being special huh?’ Nenhara mocked me. But it would always go like this. Nenhara used destructive magic, and I created something with it, something alive.

After training I would go to the healer’s tent in the camp, where I helped the ‘ladarelan’, the doctor
so to say. I helped with minor injuries, or cured the ill. There were almost never severely wounded in
the clan. Sometimes a hunter would come back with an arrow in his foot, or a deep scratch from a
bear, but overall, the Dalish were a very careful people. I’d cured children with pneumonia, small
infections, etc. People hardly ever died here from injury, but sometimes it happened. I guided them
into death, because there were some injuries no one could heal. I always wished them a great new
adventure in their next life, and hoped they would go somewhere good.

In the evening, I joined everyone by the campfire. Today though, I oddly remembered my first night
here. I’d felt so alone, and today, I strangely had the same feeling, like this would be my last time
standing here with no worries in the world. I wished I’d been wrong.

I shared a tent with Nenhara. We would always stay up very late at night, telling each other scary
stories. Tonight, it was about a Witch of the Wilds.

‘Have you heard about the Beast of the Tellari Swamps?’ Nenhara snickered. ‘The story goes that
the Beast is a beautiful woman, a Witch of the Wilds. They say that Queen Madrigal of Antiva had
made a deal with her, but something happened that made Madrigal challenge the witch in the
woods’, she wiggled her eyebrows, ‘and later the queen was found impaled on four swords!’

Nenhara made a gurgling sound.

I stuck out my tongue. ‘Stop it, that’s horrible!’

Nenhara curled closer. ‘They named the Steel Age after this event, didn’t you know?’ She huffed. ‘I
bet that witch is still out there.’

I wanted to debate her on this, but then Elgadira opened the flap of the tent. Her face looked worried.

‘You have to leave, Saeris. Now.’

Nenhara immediately stood up, taking her staff tightly in her hands and looked Elgadira in the eyes.

‘You go with her Nenhara.’ The two elves locked eyes again and nodded.

Nenhara hurried outside to put her armour on. Elgadira turned to me, her wrinkly face as pale as
snow.

‘I’m sorry, Saeris’, she didn’t need to say for what, I already knew. ‘You will someday understand.
Now go.’

I nodded and stood up without saying anything. I heard her whisper ‘Dareth Shiral’ as I left the
camp.

This would be the last time I’d see Elgadira. She died one year later. The messenger who gave me
the news had said that she died gracefully. And that the spirits had guided her into death.

***

I never travelled so fast in my entire life, this or the last one. Nenhara and I ran through the woods,
our feet rustling through the dead leaves. I was fast, faster than Nenhara, who was the fastest of the
clan, so I had to hold in a little.

‘Why do I have to leave?’ I wheezed at her.

‘I don’t know’ She panted.

‘Is someone attacking the clan?’

‘I. Don’t. Know. Saeris.’
Nenhara was getting annoyed, she was worried as well, questions were troubling her eyes. If the clan was being attacked, why would Elgadira send away her two best mages? I started running harder, towards Daniel’s cottage, something in me started screaming. Maybe it wasn’t the camp that was under attack.

Suddenly, Nenhara pulled me back by my arm. I yelped as we both fell face first on the ground.

‘What the…’ I started, but Nenhara clasped her hand around my mouth.

‘Shhh, look!’ She cursed and pointed to a small hiking trail.

‘Orlesians?’ I breathed. How did they come here? Why?

Nenhara and I both shared a look. Would we attack? Five men were standing there, scouts, swords and arrows attached to their backs. They were strong men, ruthless. We would not survive if we’d attacked them. And I didn’t know many destructive spells, and I didn’t think butterflies would harm these soldiers. Nenhara thought the same thing and signalled me to sneak around them.

How I wished I would’ve killed them. I should’ve. The men did not see us, and trailed back towards the Breccilian Passage, as they had found what they needed.

Nenhara and I tiptoed back towards the direction we were running. After we stopped hearing the Orlesians’ rustling armour, we started sprinting again. My body was screaming by now. The Orlesians came from the direction we were running towards, Daniel’s cottage.

I stopped holding myself in for Nenhara by then, and ran faster than I’d ever ran before. I heard her cursing behind me, but I didn’t look back.

I stopped near the treeline. Our cottage was burning. I heaved as I froze for some seconds, the wheels in my head already turning. Daniel.

I ran towards the fire and smashed into the burning door. I cast a ward around me, and started looking around. Everything was gone. Daniel’s painting, his fiddle, the sweets he had left for me, all gone. I turned back outside. The field! In the corner of my eyes, I saw Nenhara arriving near the treeline. The field was burning. My plants, my flowers, the crops, everything. Gone. I could hear them scream. My children. I started wailing, covering my ears to block out their screams. And then I saw him, lying near the flowerbed I had created when I started living here.

‘DANIEL’ I screamed and ran towards him. I fell on my knees and turned Daniel around. He was still breathing, I could still heal him! His face was as pale as ever, covered in blood. I cradled him in my arms, why did he feel so light? A deep cut pierced through his stomach, the wound still bleeding heavily. He was stabbed. The Orlesians. I cursed under my breath as I laid my hands on his stomach, but then I felt it. My hands hurt, they pricked. I looked at them and saw the purple slime that was oozing from his wound. The sword must’ve had poison on it. Why did they do this? To an unarmed farmer?

I tried putting my hands on his wound again, biting my tongue to not feel the prickling pain of the poison on my hands. I felt my magic flow through him, trying to knit the wound back together. But the magic refused, the poison coiling, burning the magic away, like fire to water. What was this? I screamed now.

‘COME ON, HEAL!’ I pressed my hands on his chest again, giving him everything I got. I was too weak.

Daniel moaned, his face twisting in pain. ‘My flower’ he whispered, his bloodied hand caressing my cheek, leaving a red smudge on my teary face. He smiled.

‘Until soon, Saeris’, then his eyes dulled and his head fell backwards in my arms.

I yelled his name, over and over again. But my Daniel was gone. Off to his own next big adventure.
We buried Daniel in the field next to where the cottage once had been. Blue pastel flowers covered his grave. A simple stone adorned his resting place, no name, no date. A single flower grew on top of the tombstone, a soft green one this time, the colour of his eyes.

Nenhara put her hand on my shoulder. And silently cried with me. She panted, and then closed her eyes. I did the same.

Time was once a blessing but long journeys are made longer when alone within.
Take spirit from the long ago but do not dwell in lands no longer yours.

Be certain in need, and the path will emerge to a home tomorrow and time will again be the joy it once was.

Nenhara let go of my shoulder. ‘Ir abelas, lethallin. Mala suledin nadas.’

I nodded and stood up from where I was sitting. I smiled one more time at Daniel’s grave.

‘Dareth Shiral’

Chapter End Notes

So, this happened.
If you liked it, you can always leave a comment or a kudo!
It was already dark outside. I lit up a candle and looked into the little fire as it flickered. My ear twitched as I heard him come in. He threw his nugskin cape from his shoulders and sighed. He had worked hard today, going all the way to Gwaren to barter with the merchants. I wish I could help him. He was holding a basket filled with blue pastel flowers he always picked for me from the flowerbed I’d made, and put them on the table in a simple vase. I smiled as he carefully replaced the old ones with the new. His eyes were searching mine, as I saw them squeeze together as he tried to see my face in the dim-lit room.

With his big hands he combed through his red hair. How long it had become. His broad shoulders sagged a bit when he finally found my eyes.

‘My flower’ he smiled.

I stood up from behind the table and took his hand and kissed his knuckles that had grown rough by working in the field. He lowered his head and kissed my brow, taking up my smell. The ends of his lips curled into a grin.

‘Welcome home, Daniel.’

***

The rain splashed on the cobblestones on the beach. I tucked my fur cape further over my head, covering my face. My boots crunched as they screeched over the sandy path leading towards the ferryboat that was sailing the Waking Sea towards a new land. The Free Marches. I crossed my arms together to stop the piercing wind from clasping my chest, making the crumpled letter in my pocket fall out. I stretched my arm to take it back, but the wind claimed it and blew it into the sea.

‘Fenedhis’, I cursed as I stopped and stared at the flying piece of paper. It was Nenhara’s letter, pleading me to re-join the clan. But I couldn’t. It felt wrong just going on with my life, like nothing’d happened. They all reminded me of my time with him, of Daniel. After his funeral one year ago, Nenhara had guided me through the Brecilian Passage, continuously reminding me I would always be welcome. She gave me all the coin she had on her, and I gave her my staff, I didn’t want it anymore. When we arrived at the end of the never-ending forest, Nenhara just turned around and walked off. She never said goodbye to me, she refused to.

Now, I was almost at my next destination. With the coin Nenhara had given me, I bought the cape, leaving just enough coin for a one-way ticket to Kirkwall.

I walked towards the port and saw how people from all backgrounds walked the shore. A human woman with two children, both crying. An elven kid, probably not older than sixteen, was leaning against a lamppost scribbling a letter to the family he left behind. A dwarf with his hood up carried his wares on board of the ferry, in hopes to find a richer land. And then me, a young elven woman with nothing on her but a broken heart. All of us sailing to a better place, a better life. All hoping to, one day, forget the old life we’d left behind.

‘Yer’ ticket’, a brawny man said as I walked towards the ferry.

I showed him the ticket I’d bought earlier from his crew. He looked at it and clicked his tongue, and
then looked at my hidden face.

‘Another runaway, up ya go.’ He pointed towards the deck.

I only nodded at him and climbed up the runway. The ferry was filled with people, all clinging onto each other to stay warm in the stormy weather. No one looked up as I walked by, nobody cared, they all just looked forward towards the horizon, towards their new home.

I smiled as I found myself a place in the middle of the deck, near the sail post. I plopped down and snuggled myself against a heavy barrel. Next to me a dwarven girl was sitting, softly humming a song I didn’t recognize.

Kirkwall had been liberated from Orlais nearly 18 years ago. They were independent now and had started anew, as I would do soon too.

The wind pushed the boat forward and off we were. Some people were clapping, gasping as their journey finally began. Others started crying harder, as they now truly had left their past behind. I tucked my knees against my chest and closed my eyes, drifting off on the drum of the Waking Sea.

***

‘RAIDERS’

People started screaming. I jumped up and looked around me. Chaos. The passengers of the deck were crying, begging, some jumped off into the sea, rather dying than facing the Raiders. Confused I sat up from my spot and climbed from behind the barrel. Cowardly men were charging for the sea, taking innocent bystanders with them to their watery grave.

A little girl suddenly stood next to me, her eyes big and confused. She had short brown hair, her pointy ears sticking out to the sides, and big hazel eyes.

The little elf, I guessed her no older than five, held my hand as she cried ‘Mamae’, her big eyes worried. Where had her mother gone to?

Suddenly, I heard someone scream above the rest.

‘STAY CALM’, a woman stood near the end of the deck. The Raiders’ boat was anchored behind her, its sails black. The incredibly tall woman had bright red hair, one grey eye, the other one scratched out of her beautiful face. She wore a black leather armour with intricate designs patched all over it, big brown boots and golden jewellery that hung all over her arms.

The passengers got quiet, like nobody dared to move. Suddenly, someone screamed again, I looked over my shoulder and saw the brawny man who had checked my ticket furiously clearing his path towards the female Raider. As the ferryman threw a dagger towards the woman, one of her crewmembers jumped in front of her. The dagger struck the dark-skinned muscled pirate in his stomach and he moaned as he fell onto his knees. The female pirate looked at him, bending her body for a second as to help the man, but she almost immediately straightened her back again as she swiftly snatched her own dagger from its sheath and threw it fluently in the ferryman’s gut.

‘If you throw a knife, my dear, don’t miss’, she snickered, her wicked smile reflecting in the dying ferryman’s eyes.

While two men of the Raiders’ crew tried lifting the dark-skinned pirate up, the female Raider almost looked concerned. Then, she straightened her face again.

‘The Felicisima Armada is here to help you poor fools get rid of all those damned valuables’, she
almost sounded proud.

An older dwarven man with pitch-black hair collected their prize. Nobody refused, nobody dared to. As the dwarven man finally stopped by me, his eyes expecting, I glanced right back, making sure he saw my eyes. The man took a step back, giving me a suspicious look.

‘C’mon lady.’ He threatened.

I tucked the little elven girl behind me as I just stared at him and quietly said: ‘I don’t have anything, *ser*, like any of these people.’

The female Raider’s eyes now focused on me from across the deck. I shivered. Why do I have to play brave? I’m not brave. But the woman smiled.

‘Take the kid, Heril, she will make a fine Raider.’ The woman’s eyes grew more wicked.

As Heril tried to grab the young elven girl’s shoulder, I stood defensively before her.

‘Don’t you dare.’ I hissed and felt tiny sparks glittering around my fingertips.

Then, the pirate woman finally moved towards me, her walk graceful and confident. Heril stepped aside as the woman grabbed my chin from under my cape and yanked. I yelped when my hood fell down and stared into her one grey eye. She tutted.

‘A pretty elf, with pretty eyes’, she stated, ‘we’ll just take the both of you.’

When I wanted to step back, two strong arms grabbed my biceps, holding me tight. The little girl screamed as she was thrown over the shoulders of a very tall horned man. My mouth fell open, a Qunari? I was told about them, but I never imagined how… huge they were.

‘Do something! Help us!’ I cried at the passengers, but they all looked to the ground, cowering and trembling.

I kicked and bit and screamed as I was dragged onto the Raiders’ ship.

Finally, the sparks left my fingertips and bore into the skin of the Raider holding me. He roared and almost dropped me into the desolate sea. I smacked onto the wooden floor of the ship and started sprinting across it, trying to jump to the elven girl.

I was almost there when someone smacked the hilt of a sword against the back of my head.

***

‘Mi amor’, a soft voice whimpered.

A small moan answered. I heard yelling, asking for help.

‘This is beyond my skills, Cecilia.’

‘MIERDA’

I opened my eyes, view blurry. A man was lying on the floor, blood guttering from his stomach. A woman knelt next to him, the female Raider, and held his hand, throwing curse words at everyone standing near.

Where was I? Yes, Raiders! Wait, the girl. I found two scared big eyes boring into mine from across
where I was laying. She was bound onto a barrel, her little arms turning blue by the friction of the rope.

My head hurt. Where was the ferryboat?
I looked around and saw nothing but open sea. What did they do? The wounded man cried out again. He deserved it, I bit him. The woman looked up, guess her name is Cecilia.

‘The elf! Tie her up before she jumps!’ She yelled, but her eyes were already back on the man.

I can heal him.

No, I can’t. I couldn’t help Daniel.

But that was different. I healed so many wounds like this.

No, in the end, Daniel died. Besides, this man deserves it.

Does he? Since when do I not want to help people.

A dwarf stomped towards me, but I rolled to my right and jumped up. The dwarf, what was his name, Heril, cursed as he tried to grab my arm.

‘Dammit knife-ear!’

I sprinted towards the wounded man and fell on my knees next to him. Cecilia didn’t even look up, she just took out her dagger and hissed while pointing it at me. But I lifted my hands into the air and was finally able to look into her eye. She nodded then, as if she understood.

My hands lowered and found the wound on the hurt Raider. He roared again as my fingers pressed against the cut. But then, I felt how my magic found me again, curling in me, coiling. It almost felt like the magic was happy, whispering ‘finally’ as I called on it once more.

A warm feeling prickled through the tips of my fingers, searching, and then finding. The warmth spread across the man’s chest, colouring a whitish green. The man sighed, as if the pain had finally lifted. My magic started knitting his flesh, stopping the blood.

The man breathed evenly again, his face serene.

I healed him. I did it.

‘Aarón’, Cecilia huffed as she caressed his hair. The man smiled at her.

I did it.

Cecilia shared a look with me, nearly thankful. How could this woman be the same as the Raider who had caused such chaos?

Two arms grabbed me again. I yelped. Cecilia didn’t even look up anymore as I was dragged back to the barrel the little girl was bound to. I huffed as Heril took out another rope and wrapped it around me.

‘Shit, we gotta mage on our hands now’, he cursed.

The little girl sobbed again, her red eyes desperately searching mine.

‘Mamae?’ she sniffed.

I shook my head. Had she been alone on the ferry?
Cecilia finally stood up. Her full lips formed into a grimace.

‘What is an apostate doing on a ferry to the Free Marches?’ she hummed.

I bit my lips.

‘You could’ve just killed us all’, Cecilia looked confused. ‘You don’t know how to defend yourself, darling?’ at the last word she almost laughed.

Cecilia took a step closer, squatting to get on my eye height, and took out one of her daggers. She dragged it across my face, slowly, taunting, from my cheek to my cheekbone to my green eye.

‘You want me to teach you?’ There was a challenge in her eye.

I spat at her, and she snickered. ‘Good, finally an answer’, she huffed and stood up, wiping my spit from her face.

‘Guess what, elf, you got lucky’, she grinned at me. ‘A life for a life.’

I stared at her, mouth open.

Cecilia smiled again and bared her teeth.

It now occurred to me how different I looked. My hair glossy, no scars, white teeth. The Dalish had looked somewhat savage, but not like these people. Even Daniel, a poor farmer, looked like gold in comparison. These Raiders looked like how people in a medieval world would look. Dry sun-bleached hair, no skin left untouched by a sword or arrow, and brownish teeth. But Cecilia, the only woman on board, was different. Maybe it was by the way she held her posture, the way she walked, her head held up high.

Cecilia cocked her head again as she looked from me to the little scared elf.

‘So, which life do you want me to spare?’

‘What?’

‘One life for the other, darling. One.’

I glanced at the little girl, scared, alone, still so young.

So, I made my choice very quickly. And Cecilia had seen it too, because she shook her head and stood up.

‘How brave’

Shit.

‘Set course to Kirkwall, guys’ she yelled, breaking our eye contact. The men did not question her, they got to work immediately. However, one man didn’t jump on it at once. The man who I had healed stared at me, his eyes a strange mixture of gratitude and suspicion. But he nodded at me and then turned around and disappeared with Cecilia into the Captain’s cabin.

The little elf huffed again.

‘Don’t worry, you’ll be fine’, I hushed. ‘What is your name?’

The girl looked up. ‘Sybil’, her voice trembled.
‘Hey Sybil, you’re from Ferelden?’

Sybil nodded.

‘I’m from Ferelden too!’ I comforted her, and she gave me a faint smile.

‘Have you seen my mamae?’

‘Oh’, should I lie? ‘Uhm, she might be still on the ferry! We’ll look for her when we arrive in Kirkwall!’

‘You’ll stay?’

‘Of course!’

Sybil smiled again. Poor thing.

***

I talked with Sybil for some hours, made her smile. I conjured some butterflies from my hands, made them tickle her, grew flowers near her feet, whatever made her not think of what was to come. Now, the sky was colouring a soft orange, the sea mirroring its light. Some men assembled on the deck, stuffing some bread in their mouths, opening a casket of wine, slowly ending a successful day of raiding.

Cecilia came out of the cabin, the man, Aarón, following her. She roared as she held another bottle of wine in the air, making the men cheer. I didn’t want to know why.

And then, Aarón took out his fiddle and played beautifully, like I hadn’t heard since… Daniel. I smiled sadly as I closed my eyes. Daniel had played the fiddle every now and then, especially when I was sad and lonely.

What would they do with me? I was certainly too dangerous to keep alive. Would they kill me? After we leave Sybil on shore? Will they do it at night?

Aarón started playing a lighter tune, some men started singing.

_I've been a wild rover for many a year_
_And I spent all my money on whiskey and beer,_
_But now I'm returning with gold in great store_
_And I never will play the wild rover no more._

If I die now, will I just come back again?

_And it's no, nay, never,_
_No nay never no more,_
_Will I play the wild rover_
_No never no more._

Would there be a beyond? Will Daniel be there?

_I went in to an ale-house I used to frequent_
_And I told the landlady my money was spent._
_I asked her for credit, she answered me “nay_ _Such a custom as yours I can have every day.”_
Why was I sent here, if I’m dying now?

*I, then, took from my pocket ten sovereigns bright*
And the landlady's eyes opened wide with delight.
She said "I have whiskey and wines of the best
And the words that you told me were only in jest."

What if I die, will I be going back to earth?

*I'll go home to my parents, confess what I've done*
And I'll ask them to pardon their prodigal son.
And when they've correct me as oftentimes before
*I never will play the wild rover no more.*

Or will it be just the end this time? Dark, silent and cold forever?

*And it's no, nay, never,*
*No nay never no more,*
*Will I play the wild rover *

Will I ever go back again?

*No never no more.*

Chapter End Notes

Hey, here we are. If you liked it, leave a kudo or a comment, it makes my day!
I’ve always been intrigued by immortality. What would happen if no one would die? Would we be happier? Or would we just get bored with life? Isn’t the reason we get up each day, more or less because every day could always be our last?

***

‘Get up, knife-ear’

Am I still alive?

‘GET UP!’, someone shoved me up, my eyes adjusting to the light of a new day.

The sea was still stretching out before me, the sun’s warmth softly prickling my skin. They haven’t killed me? I looked up, the dwarf Heril was standing there, his face contorted in a mean grimace.

SYBIL!

My head turned to my right. She was still there, her eyes red from crying. We have been sleeping here this night, outside on the deck of the ship, the light breeze reminding us of our fate. Her fate being alone, my fate being alone again.

Sybil sniffed as she woke up, her eyes immediately searching mine. I winked at her. I’m still here. At least someone’s happy about that. Heril unbound us, muttering curse words that should insult me, but really didn’t.

‘Why are you untying me?’, I questioned while never keeping Sybil out of my sight.

Heril huffed again, ‘Captain’s orders.’

Cecilia.

‘What’re you going to do with Sybil?’

Heril looked up, ‘that little rat? Gonna put her below in the cell. Don’t want you jumping off takin’ her with ‘ye.’

Do they really think I would do that?

‘Alek’, Heril yelled, ‘take the little rabbit below.’

The giant Qunari man, who was securing ropes, grumbled as he threw Sybil over his shoulder again.

‘Saeris!’ She screamed.

‘Don’t worry, kiddo, I’ll join you later! They’re just giving you a room to stay in!’ I tried to reassure her, but her eyes told me she would be crying all day.

‘Up!’ Heril pushed me towards the cabin. And I entered.
Red velvet tapestries were covering a small, round room. It would look luxurious, if the bottles of booze would not be laying around. Cecilia stood in the centre of the room, looking at a big round table with a map on it.

She cursed and smacked the table, ‘We are really going out of course for that little rabbit of yours, mage.’ Someone moaned, I looked at Cecilia’s bed and there was movement.

It was Aarón. God he is naked. Seems like I’d healed him quite well. No, don’t look.

He snickered as he saw the horror on my face when he stood up. ‘Cecilia, you have a guest, I’ll be out of your way then.’

Cecilia smiled back, ‘oh please do come back later!’

I couldn’t help being a little jealous. Not because of Aarón, but because of what they had.

‘Good, your name?’, Cecilia ordered.

‘Saeris’

‘Typical elven name’, she stated.

Is my name elven? Why did no one in the clan ever tell me this?

‘We are leaving you two in Kirkwall.’

‘Us two?’ What?

‘Yes, the two of you.’

‘But I thought…’

‘No, you asked us to spare one life, the little girl’s life, but how can she survive in the City of Chains alone?’ Cecilia’s eye sparkled, ‘Seems like you made the best choice after all. Besides, I don’t want an elven apostate on my boat, brings bad luck.’

‘Why don’t you just kill me?’ Get it over with.

Cecilia looked up from her map. ‘I don’t know.’

We both stood there for some seconds, just staring at each other. But then Heril scraped his throat. Oh, he’s still there.

‘Heril, take miss Saeris below.’ Cecilia looked confused for a moment. Why?

Heril nodded and grabbed my arm to pull me back outside. Cecilia waved as she laughed, ‘You’re welcome!’

I was thrown in the cell next to Sybil, who seemed relieved I was there with her, even if it wasn’t in the same cell. How could such a young thing be so brave?

I nodded at her and she smiled back. Below the deck was actually a storage place with some hammocks on the other side of the room. Does the whole crew sleep here? There was no light in here, only some oil lamps burning on their last strength.

‘Are we there yet?’ Sybil’s voice broke the silence.
'I don’t know.’

‘What if we don’t find my mamae?’

‘I will take care of you until we do, Sybil’, I winked at her.

‘Why is your eye so strange?’ So many questions.

‘Magic gave it to me’, I don’t even know if I’m lying, and wiggled my fingers. Soft green sparkles danced around the tips, creating some more light for Sybil and I. She smiled at that, creeping a little bit closer to where I sat.

The hatch that lead to the deck creaked open, making the sparks around my fingers fade away.

‘Go stand over there, Sybil, out of sight.’ I don’t trust these Raiders.

Sybil nodded and shuffled away as quick and silent as she could. I was silent too, listening to the steps coming closer.

‘Who are you?’ It was Aarón, clothed this time. He took a step closer to my cell, but not too close, keeping a safe distance. Not that I could hurt him if I wanted to. Maybe I should’ve taken up the clan’s offer to teach me how to defend myself, I had been so foolish.

‘Saeris’

‘I know that’, he hissed, ‘why are you here?’

What is this guy talking about? ‘I just want to go to Kirkwall.’

‘Why did you heal me?’

‘Because I could.’ I stated.

This made Aarón more confused. He looked like he was going to say something, but just turned on his heel and left.

Some hours later, I could hear the sound of Aarón’s fiddle again. Does this mean it’s evening? Why isn’t there a window here? Sybil was laying on the floor in the cell next to me. I had given her my cape through the bars of the cell, she had been shivering. She sighed in her sleep. What would she be dreaming about? Is she in the Fade too?

After some time, the music and singing stopped and the hatch opened again. Men were coming down, clearly drunk.

‘Hey, pretty bunny’, someone lisped, ‘care for some of this?’

I don’t know who it was, just some unknown Raider with his friends. He came closer to my cell door and put his face against the bars. I could smell his foul breath.

‘I can take care of you real good’, he winked.

Sparks danced around my fingers again. I took a step closer, the Raider’s face lighting up from my response.

‘No thank you’, I grinned as I touched the bars with my hand. The Raider winced as he fell on the ground, electricity prodding through his body like a thousand needles. Had I done that? I
immediately regretted it.

The Raider’s friends swore as they tried helping him up. ‘You’, someone pointed his dagger at me, ready to throw.

‘Don’t you touch the apostate, my dear.’ Cecilia coiled from behind the hatch, stepping down gracefully. Her eye went to the drunk Raider who was still squirming on the ground. ‘Damn, Saeris’, she grinned and then looked back to her crew, ‘Out!’.

The drunk men seemed to sober up immediately. What did she do to gain such respect? The men straightened up and dragged the squirming Raider back on his feet.

‘Yes, Captain.’ And gone they were.

Cecilia looked back at me again. And then left the room without saying anything. Nobody bothered me again ever since.

***

I don’t know how long Sybil and I stayed in the cells. We could sometimes see some light when Heril brought us food, or when some Raiders went to sleep below deck. I only knew the time of the day when I heard Aarón’s music. I’d tried counting the times I heard his fiddle to keep track, but after a while, it all overlapped with each other. So in the end, we didn’t have a clue how long we were down there. Days? Weeks?

But one day, the hatch opened up again, light entering the room once more. It was Heril, his sturdy face a little bit happier than normal. He took out two keys.

‘Are we there?’ Sybil’s soft voice sounded hopeful. Her skin had gone paler, she really needed some sun.

Heril grinned as he opened our cells. Sybil and I jumped out, hurrying upstairs to the main deck. Cecilia was waiting for us there, Aarón at her side. But I looked beyond her, seeing that the Waking Sea had finally come to an end and a strange new land was peering on the horizon.

‘We have arrived’, Cecilia nodded, ‘this is where we part ways.’

Sybil yelped, she was happy, how long had it been since she was happy? I looked at Cecilia, grateful, and to Aarón, his face relieved.

‘Thank you.’

Cecilia threw her red hair over her shoulder and smiled. ‘If you ever feel like going back to Ferelden, elf, don’t travel by sea, I don’t want to catch you again.’

Heril stepped from behind me, eager to let us go.

Cecilia sighed, ‘Take this pinnace. We can’t get any closer to shore, the city guards don’t really like us, but they’ll take you in.’

I nodded.

‘And don’t go around conjuring flowers, the Templars will take you.’

I heard from Nenhara what they do to free mages. But I nodded nevertheless. Cecilia then threw me an eyepatch.
‘What do I need that for?’ I mumbled.

‘Don’t show your strange eye, it disturbs people, the Templars will notice’, she said, ‘You stand out as it is.’
I held the black eyepatch in my hands and smiled a little. A tall elf with an eyepatch, no I won’t draw any attention whatsoever.

‘Thank you, Cecilia, again.’ I grinned at her.

Cecilia nodded and directed me to the little rowing boat. I crawled in with Sybil in my arms. She was so excited to just be outside. How could I ever tell her she would probably never see her mother again?

Before we were loaded into the ocean, Aarón stepped up to the pinnace.
‘Here,’ he held out his fiddle, ‘for saving my life.’

I stared at him, speechless. ‘But I don’t play.’

He smiled, ‘you’ll learn.’

And then we were dropped into the ocean.

***

As I rowed closer and closer to the shore, two huge statues of tortured slaves greeted me, chained and crying, their hands covering their faces. A warm welcome to the City of Chains. We passed them, Sybil creeping closer to me, while navigating the pinnace through rocks and high waves, getting wet in the meantime.

We weren’t the only ones here, ferries and boats from all across Thedas sailed the same passageway. I swallowed as we anchored to the harbour, becoming just numbers between the hundreds of refugees. Humans, dwarves and elves sauntered towards the huge queue that had formed. People were walking around this place, throwing curses at the immigrants.

‘We have enough! We don’t need you here! Go back!’

I took Sybil by her hand, whispering, ‘Say I’m your sister, okay?’

She nodded, scared.

I had draped the eyepatch around my face, letting it cover my left eye. And it felt extremely strange, uncomfortable. But I was happy I had it. The city guards were pushing people in directions, humans and dwarfs to the left, elves to the right. Some people were dragged from the queue for looking suspicious, the Templars taking them to a place I don’t want to know. This was the first time for me seeing Templars though. They were huge men and women, eyeing everyone nervously. Strong, steel armours were padded onto their bodies, a big black sword with flames on its sides was carved on their chest plates and shields, a red sash bound around their waists, and a steel helmet was covering their faces, making them look like knights. But they didn’t seem like knights who would save a poor lady in need.

As we waited in line, one Templar passed us and stopped, looking at me. Sybil clamped my hand, softly shivering. The Templar squatted and looked at Sybil and then to me. Then he straightened again and moved on to the next in line.

‘Ferelden?’ a city guard asked us when it was our turn. The man eyed us disapprovingly.
‘Yes, ser’

He nodded and scribbled something down.

‘To your right, elves’

Sybil immediately dragged at my hand, wanting to go. I shushed her and followed the other elves. Most of their faces resembled Sybil’s, scared and hungry. But I knew if I gave in, I would make Sybil even more uncomfortable, and laughed at her.

‘Don’t worry, Sybil, we are going to find us a new home and then look for your mamae, okay?’ Sybil smiled at me, reassured again.

‘You know where we’re going right?’ the elf before me whispered to me, his big eyes confused. How could he be so skinny and still be breathing?

‘No?’, I answered.

We walked through a poor part of the city, the streets smelled, the houses crooked. People and merchants were walking on and about, clearly avoiding us as we slumped towards a big iron gate.

‘Enter!’ a city guard yelled at us as we all stopped to stare for a moment.

‘The Alienage’, the skinny elf cried.

What?

And I had thought the last part of the city looked poor. This place looked even more dilapidated. This was, a ghetto? Hundreds of little apartments were packed onto each other, and thousands of elves were roaming around. They all looked horrible. Underfed, sick, their faces scarred, they all looked at us, almost sad. Were they sad for us? Or sad for themselves? Maybe both.

In the middle of this Alienage, a large tree was planted, its leaves hanging proudly over the square, lights embedded all over its branches.

‘What is that?’ I mumbled

‘That is the Vhenadahl, the Tree of the People.’ The elf behind me muttered, ‘Didn’t you have one in your Alienage?’

I shook my head. Will this be our new home?

We were separated into little groups and led towards the smallest apartments in the back of the Alienage. I opened the door to our new place, Sybil and I had to share it with 12 other elves. The room wasn’t bigger than Daniel’s cottage had once been before we’d rebuilt it. How could we all live here?

‘How can they do this to us? Where are all the humans and dwarves at?’ I asked the elf standing nearest to me.

She looked at me like I was crazy, ‘They are in Lowtown, we don’t get to live with them.’

‘It’s better than Darktown’, someone else muttered.

‘Darktown?’ My face must’ve looked panicked, as the elf next to me patted my shoulder.

‘It’s for criminals and outcasts’, someone assured me.
Sybil grabbed my trousers, my cape draped over her tiny head. ‘Are we going to look for maman?’

The other elves in the house looked pitifully at the little girl, as if they all knew her mother was long gone. But I winked at Sybil, ‘Of course! Let’s just settle here for a bit!’ Sybil smiled at that.

I found us a little free spot in a dusty corner of the apartment. There wasn’t any furniture, except for three blankets and a chamber pot. One for all fourteen of us.

We divided the blankets between an elder woman, a sick man and Sybil. No one here argued or was selfish, because they all knew we had to take care of one another to survive. Sybil snuggled next to me, my cape draped over our shoulders for extra warmth. This will be our new home. I glanced at the fiddle that laid next to me. And that will be my new job.

The next morning, we got up at the rise of the sun, cleaning the apartment with some water from the well downstairs, and opened up a window for fresh air to come in. After that, I took Sybil by her hand and went outside to the big tree, whatever it was called. Maybe we could find us some food there.

Hundreds of elves were all busy and about when we entered the square. They all looked up at us when we passed by, softly smiling and whispering ‘good day’. How strange that everyone accepted everyone here so quickly, like we all knew we were in the same pile of shit. Some elves avoided me though, giving instead their attention to Sybil. It must be because I look so different. I don’t look starved or sick, hurt or scarred. Or maybe it was just the eyepatch. They adored Sybil though, her big bright eyes stopping people from across the square. There weren’t many children around, though I saw some running near the tree playing tag, and I think I heard a baby crying in the apartment below us, but I’m not sure. Sybil vaguely smiled at the sprinting children. She would make friends soon, or at least I hoped she would.

‘I’m hungry’, Sybil mumbled as her stomach groaned.

What do I do? I don’t have any coin to buy something. Desperately I looked around me and saw a merchant standing near the tree. He had some goods on display, but mostly some weird-looking bread and strange leaves. I walked towards the elf, eyeing his goods.

‘I don’t give free stuff’, he spewed and I took a step back.

‘Can’t we just…’

‘No.’

Sybil softly whined while clasping her stomach. ‘Please, just for the little one’, I begged. Why won’t he help me?

‘Damnit Sid, why are you so crude’, a female elf cursed as she walked by and stopped near his table. She took a coin out of her small moneybag. ‘Here’, she winked, ‘for the little one.’

I gratefully accepted her coin and bought some bread from the annoying merchant, who huffed as he almost threw the food at Sybil. But she didn’t mind and munched gladly on the small loaf.

‘Thank you, truly’, I smiled at the woman.

‘No, it’s nothing! We have to stick up for each other!’ the woman nodded back, ‘even if our own kind betrays us.’ She almost spitted at the merchant.

We walked away from the man, the female guiding us towards the tree.

‘You just arrived?’ She asked.
'Yes, yesterday.'

'And the little one, is she yours?'

'She’s my sister!' Sybil yelled. I smiled. Good girl.

'Oh how cute!', the female shushed, 'My name is Lelya, by the way!'

'Nice to meet you! I’m Saeris, and this is Sybil.’

Lelya nodded, ‘Did you also ran from the Orlesians?’

‘What?’

Lelya looked confused, ‘You don’t know what happened?’

‘No?’ Oh no.

Lelya scratched her head, her ears twitching. ‘There has been a battle at Lothering. King Vanedrin Theirin has been killed!’

I stared at her, mouth open wide.

‘Orlais is invading Ferelden, it’s been a bloodbath!’ she almost yelled at that, ‘You’re lucky you left on time.’

So lucky. I just hoped Nenhara and her clan were fine, though I knew they would be travelling to the Dales by now. But still.

‘But don’t worry, Orlais won’t come near Kirkwall again. Not since the rebellion!’, Lelya stated, her curly hair shaking against her pointy face.

I looked at Sybil. I can’t go back to Ferelden now, I need to take care of this one.

‘Do you have a job?’ Lelya asked again. She won’t shut up, clearly.

‘Uhm, no.’

‘You should though, you won’t be able to take care of little Sybil here if you don’t.’ She patted my shoulder. She looked at the fiddle strapped on my back, I didn’t dare to leave it in the apartment, scared it would get stolen. ‘Do you play?’

‘A little’ I smiled.

‘You know, in the Hanged Man, they’re still looking for a minstrel. You should apply!’

‘The Hanged Man?’ Is it a prison?

‘Yes, the tavern in Lowtown! Don’t wait too long, lots of people want that job!’

Crap, how could I compete? I can’t play yet! I can sing a little, but will that be enough? Lelya clicked her tongue as Sybil tripped over a stone. I smiled at the clumsy elf. I should at least try, for her.

‘How do I get in Lowtown?’ I asked Lelya.

‘Through the iron gate over there. Just come back before nightfall, they close it and will punish you
if they find you without a working permit.’

‘A working permit?’

‘Yes, we can only leave the Alienage if it’s for work. Taverns, brothels, the docks, they don’t want us, but they still need us.’

***

I had left Sybil in the apartment with the elder lady and asked the woman to take care of her for a while. The nice lady had nodded and grinned as Sybil had given her some of her bread.

Anxiously I sauntered towards the gates. Two guards were standing there, eyeing me as I came closer.

‘Where are you going, knife-ear?’ one of them said.

‘I want to go to the Hanged Man, to work.’ I answered nervously.

‘You have a working permit?’ the other man questioned.

‘Not yet, I still have to apply’, won’t they let me go now?

The guards stared at my face, and then to the fiddle on my back. ‘Just this once, elf, if you don’t come back with a working permit, you won’t go out anymore.’

I nodded and walked past them, feeling how their eyes never left my figure.

Up the stairs, to my left, walk through this street, up the stairs again, to your right, this place was a maze! The streets were walled by big beige ramparts, and loose stones and wooden beams were scattered throughout the streets. But how nice it was in comparison to the Alienage! All kinds of people were walking these streets, they may be dressed in rags, but they looked almost happy. Merchants could almost be found on every corner, but when I came closer to look at their wares, they hissed at me, saying they didn’t sell to ‘knife-ears’.

I was happy when I finally arrived at the Hanged man. It was quite central, and looked like a normal stone house, had it not been for the big statue hanging down from the building. It was a hanged man, how original.

The door was open, humans and dwarves entering and leaving. I also heard music, seems like the job interviews had already begun. When I entered, I heard multiple people swear. I didn’t see any elves, and it seemed like the other contestants weren’t happy I was applying, like I was insulting them to even be there.

The Hanged Man was quite a big tavern, with brown walls and sheets hanging on the ceiling, tables scattered all over the place, all occupied by drunkards. There were some old tapestries and paintings on the walls, nothing special, and a small fireplace was burning even though it was midday. Big iron lanterns were also hanging from the ceiling, giving the whole tavern a warm glow. I walked towards the bar near the back of the room. A man was standing behind it, his tanned face scarred and wrinkled. He squinted his eyes as I came closer.

‘What are you doing here, rabbit’, he sounded suspicious.

‘To apply… for minstrel’, I muttered softly. Someone behind me whispered something and others started laughing.

‘Can you play and sing?’, the barman lifted up his eyebrow.
'Yes… a little.'

‘Why would I want an elf who can’t even play? Twenty good minstrels are here today for that job.’ He wanted to turn around as he muttered, ‘we don’t just need a pretty face.’

‘Please, wait!’, shit, ‘if you would just let me try?’ Clumsily I took the fiddle from my back, holding it uncomfortably in my dirty hands. The barman stopped ignoring me then, his eyes big while looking at the fiddle.

‘Where did you get that!’ he swore as he stormed from behind the bar.

‘I… It was given to me?’ Did I do something wrong?

‘You lie! Did you steal it!!’ the man spat.

‘No, I swear, it was given to me in return for something I did!’ I swore.

The barman huffed, ‘Who gave it to you!’

‘A Raider!’

‘Which Raider, dimwit!’, the drunken customers had all gone quiet by now, gaping at the scene.

‘A… Aarón, ser.’ Did I pronounce that correctly?

The barman shook his head. ‘You are hired, elf.’

‘What? You haven’t heard me play yet!’, I questioned, hearing the other minstrels swear and storm out of the tavern.

‘If Aarón gave that to you, rabbit, he must’ve had a big reason’, the barman scratched his balding head, ‘I trust in his opinion.’

I stared at him, ‘just like that?’

The barman grimaced, ‘Tell me, elf, what did you do to get it from him?’

I sighed, ‘I… I just saved him, I guess.’

The barman looked me in the eye, ‘Why did you save him?’

‘Because… because I could, ser’, I answered

The barman tutted, ‘Yeah, just like that’, and went back behind the bar to take something. ‘Your name’, he sighed.

‘Saeris’

‘Alright’, the barman scribbled something down, ‘here’s your permit, don’t ever lose it. Come back at noon tomorrow.’

I nodded as I took the little piece of paper. The barman mumbled something of a goodbye and pointed me towards the entrance. When I walked away, I heard him mutter ‘Fucking bastard Raider’ as I closed the tavern’s door behind me.

When I returned to the Alienage, I immediately showed the guards my new permit. They nodded
disapprovingly and let me through. I ran back to our rundown apartment. I entered and heard Sybil jumping up from where she and the elder elf were still sitting.

I smiled as I waved the permit in the air, ‘I have a job, kiddo!’

Sybil smiled, ‘Did you find mamae?’

Crap. ‘No, kid, but I got work, so from now on I can go out and look for her!’

Sybil smiled, a little sadly though, at that.

The next day, I went back to the Hanged Man a little before noon, the fiddle proudly in my hands. As I opened the door, the grumpy barman looked up and sighed.

‘You’re here, good.’ Though he didn’t sound relieved. ‘Go over there, start playing something, you’ll learn by doing it.’

I nodded.

‘You’ll play from noon until sunrise, understood’, he grumbled, ‘you can take a very small break every two hours.’

I nodded again. Hard work, but I could earn money, that’s what counted. Then, I took out my fiddle, proudly eyeing every customer in the tavern. There were five, all drunk, but still, a crowd is a crowd. I smiled as I played a simple note on the fiddle, sounding just a little out of tune, and started singing.

*I've been a wild rover for many a year ......'*

Chapter End Notes

If you liked it, you can always leave a comment or a kudo, they make my insides smile :D

& Just a quick, but big, shout-out to the best beta ever, nerdsaretotallyawesome !!!
‘Saeris, darling! One more time!’ the customer yelled while holding his tankard in the air.

The old fiddle cracked in my hands as I played the notes again, happily singing the drunkard’s favourite song. The tunes now swiftly flowed from my long fingers, my voice carrying the lyrics with no thought, like a second nature. The guests smiled at me as I sang over and over again the songs they requested. It was quite crowded again this night, like most nights.

‘Ah, my pretty one-eyed elfy darling’, a drunk man lisped while standing next to me.

‘Yes, Rodd, she’s good, we know, now let Saeris play’, Garrick yelled from behind the bar, laughing as the drunkard stumbled back to his seat.

I smiled back at Garrick, the bartender who had given me this job twenty years ago. He was like family to me now, grumpy and all.

‘Hey, Saeris, where is our little Sybil?’ another customer yelled as I took my break.

‘Where she’s always at!’ The customers laughed at that, as everyone knew where the playful elf would be, if not in the tavern with her strange, “pretty one-eyed sister”, or that’s how they called me. Sybil could always be found near the city guards of Kirkwall, secretly learning archery from them. The guards liked Sybil, and if she had not been an elf, she would’ve been one of them. She was brave, big-mouthed, but good-hearted. And talented, so talented! Her arrows never missed. The guards even let her stroll through Lowtown from time to time, and she was allowed to come with me to the tavern. She practically grew up there.

‘Who is the youngest again?’ Some dwarf joked, I laughed, but not truly. I knew people were starting to notice I wasn’t aging. I should be in my forties in their minds, but I looked not older than 20 or so. I stopped counting the years, but I should be around my mid-fifties by now. People around me grew older, even Sybil looked older than me now, but I was still frozen, and I didn’t know why. Deep within I saw it as some kind of punishment for something I had done in my previous life. Like cancer wasn’t punishment enough. Would Nenhara still be alive? She must look like Elgadira by now.

‘Argh!’, someone cursed with a thick Fereldan tongue, ‘those blasted Orlesians.’

I looked up, almost choking on the water I was downing. The man who had cursed, was holding a small piece of paper, his hands shaking.

‘Dudley, lad, what’s wrong?’ Garrick said, his eyes also worried.

‘Brandel Theirin… he’s dead’, he choked, other customers clasping, ‘Orlais, they have put a king of their own on the throne’
‘Who?’ someone yelled.

‘A bastard called Meghren’, Dudley answered, other people started swearing. ‘After Denerim fell, I thought Brandel would still….’ The man shook.

‘It’s not my country anymore! An Orlesian king! My father is turning in his grave!’ someone cried.

‘The bastards’

‘I’m going back’, someone said and left the tavern. Others started ordering more drinks, to drown the news. But I just stood there. Orlais had won and I hadn’t done anything to stop it. The murderers, I had let them do their thing, I had just looked the other way. Ferelden isn’t my fatherland, but it was my home once. Our home. How could I have left it like that?

‘We’re closing, everyone out!’ Garrick looked as pale as a sheet, his eyes watery. His family back in Ferelden had been openly supporting Brandel, they would not… The customers stood up, some cursing, but not arguing as they all knew what was wrong.

‘Saeris, go home’, he mumbled as he hastily searched for some paper to write his cousin.

I ran back home, the morning sun just barely shining its light through the streets of Kirkwall. The guards at the iron gate eyed me, whispering something as I passed them, but I didn’t hear. Did Sybil hear the news? She was standing there, in the middle of our rundown apartment, the little belongings she had packed into a small bag. The apartment was ours now, as most of the other inhabitants had died or left for another place.

‘Sybil?’ I asked. She looked up, her big hazel eyes determined. She nodded at me as I walked in, completely out of breath. Her short brown hair stuck to her tanned face, her droopy ears peeking out at the sides. She was of a small stature, but she stood straight, a wooden bow attached on her back, arrows close-by.

‘You’ve heard’, she stated. I nodded.

‘I want to go, Saeris’, Sybil sighed, her sharp face pulled into a grimace.

‘What? Now? Sybil no!’

‘But…’

‘Do you know how dangerous it is there? What do you want to do, throw rocks at the new king?’

‘There’s a resistance, led by the Rebel Queen Moira, she’s Brandel’s daughter. And I’m going there to help.’

‘How do you know? What if it’s just another lie the refugees are throwing around?’

‘I just know, dammit! And if it’s not true, I’ll help in any other way I can.’

‘Sybil, please, just don’t. It’ll pass!’ I begged her.

‘It’s not because you like to hide and cower in this shithole, that I have to do that too!’ She threw her hands in the air.

Ow. That hurt. Especially because she was right. ‘Why? Why now?’

‘Because now is the time! I’m ready, I’ve trained, I want to help my homeland!’
‘But you don’t even remember it there! You don’t even know if you came from Ferelden!’

‘You might’ve stopped looking for my mother, Saeris, but I haven’t. She’s there. I’m sure of it.’

‘Sybil…’

‘No, I don’t want to hear it’

‘I…’

‘Stop it, Saeris! Don’t you care? I know you’re a mage! You can help! Like you did with that Raider, remember? Because I do! What are you so scared of? That you’ll die?’ she spat at me.

‘No’, I whispered, ‘I’m scared that you will.’ I will not let them take someone else from me, not again.

‘Then come with me!’

‘But, the Hanged Man, our life is here now.’

‘How long do you think you can stay here? They are noticing already Saeris, they’ll kill both of us if they find out you don’t age.’

I had told her two years ago, she had accepted me, but now I wished I had never told her. ‘Don’t! Keep it down!’ I frantically looked around me, almost paranoid.

‘Saeris, please, I need to leave this place and go. If I don’t, I won’t be able to live with myself!’

I shook my head.

‘Saeris please!’ She stormed towards me, clamping my face so I’d look in her teary eyes. ‘I don’t know what happened to make you feel so afraid, but we’ll stay together, and we will make things right again!’

‘But…’

‘If you won’t go, I will go alone.’

And how could I just let her go? I sighed, I didn’t want to run away from another home again, from the songs I’d still have to sing in the Hanged Man, from the elves in the Alienage I’d still have to say goodbye to, Garrick I still have to tell him. ‘I… need to take care of some things first.’

Sybil looked up, hopefully, and smiled, ‘then, you’re going with me?’

I nodded.

‘Oh, Saeris’ Sybil sighed happily, ‘We have some savings, I’ll go and buy tickets for the ferry!’

‘No,’ I interrupted her, ‘not by sea. We travel by land.’

***

Garrick nodded sadly, ‘Stupid rabbit, I’m too old to look for a new minstrel.’

‘I’m going to miss you too’, I smiled.

‘If you see my cousin, Kirby, tell ‘em I have a place for him to stay at!’ he grumbled while mopping
the tavern floor.

‘Will do, boss!’ I waved as I walked towards the door. When I closed it behind me, I saw how Garrick lifted his head towards me, a sad gaze troubling his view. Another goodbye I had to say.

As I strolled back towards the Alienage, I looked one last time at the streets of Lowtown, Kirkwall, and smiled. This place had become a home for me, almost letting me forget the other homes I’d lost. Now, I had to leave it again. But I had to, I knew that. I couldn’t stay here, the people would notice, the Templars would, and I wasn’t planning on becoming the Circle’s experiment. What would they do to me if they knew I wasn’t aging? And Sybil, I can’t just let her go on her own. She was like a true sister to me, how could I live with myself if I just let her go like that? I must do this. Home is wherever I am.

I looked up at the Vhenadahl as I entered the Alienage. Though the elves had it hard in here, they were still happy. They were there for each other, content with living among their own kind. There were worse places to live. Though, I didn’t have much attachment to most people here, as I kept to myself, I still knew many of them. Elves arrived and departed every day, only a few remained here for a long time. Those people weren’t exactly my friends, but I respected them for living every day as if it was their last.

Sybil stood at the door of our little room, her bow and arrows neatly strapped to her back, travel gear on and prepared.

‘You done with everything?’ She looked up at me.

‘Yes, are you?’

‘Yes, I’m ready.’

‘Good’, I said as I put my cape back on, covering my face.

‘Are you finally going to lose that eyepatch of yours?’

‘No, not yet.’ I smiled.

I strapped the fiddle to my back. Sybil shook her head, ‘You’re going to sing when they attack you?’

I laughed at that, and closed the door of our rundown apartment behind us.

***

It took us a couple of months to travel from Kirkwall to Ferelden. We had to travel through Orlais, and I hated every part of it. We travelled from tavern to tavern, not straying too far from the main roads. But almost nobody looked at us, what could two elves do? And when thieves tried to attack us, Sybil swiftly took care of them. She really had trained quite well.

Using my magic felt foreign to me, I hadn’t used it much during the twenty years in Kirkwall. I only healed Sybil a couple of times, like when she had a cold, and I sat my normal wards every night, but that was about it. Now, I used it just to shield us, but Sybil was really good at killing others so we didn’t need a lot of shields. She actually protected me, instead of me protecting her. I was a little ashamed of it, to be honest. After being here for so long, I never truly learnt how to defend myself. I was stupid to decline when Elgadira tried to teach me how to use my magic to harm. I wanted to heal, to make alive, to make whole. I had been foolish. And I knew just how foolish I had been when we were overrun near the border of Ferelden.

It had happened so quickly, like they had been waiting for us, or for something. I don’t know with
how many men they were, I only know that there were many. We were walking down a path leading up to a tavern on the border of Ferelden. We wanted to spend the night there, and maybe I could earn some coin by playing some songs.

Sybil cursed as three men jumped from behind the trees onto our path. Their smirking faces were lit up by their shining swords.

‘Look what we got!’, one soldier grimaced with a thick French accent. ‘Elles sont faits comme les rats!’

Sybil hissed, swiftly unhooking the bow from her back. ‘For Ferelden, bastards’, she cursed and shot an arrow towards the front Orlesian soldier, who dodged it with his shield and laughed sharply. The men encircled us, stalking us like predators.

‘Qu’allons nous faire d’eux?’ one said to the other, grinning.

‘Vous allez voir qu’on va bien s’amuser’, another answered, looking me up and down.

‘Enough!’ Sybil screamed as she launched another arrow, this time hitting her target in the shoulder. The Orlesian man roared as the arrow struck him.

‘Shouldn’t have done that’, he smiled and charged towards her.

Now was my time. With one hand I smoothly covered Sybil with a ward, while I lifted my other hand to the charging soldier’s feet, and two roots sprung from the ground, clinging themselves onto the soldier’s legs. The men cursed as the soldier fell to the ground and Sybil shot an arrow through his head.

‘Une mage!’ someone yelled as multiple men now started ambushing us from all around.

Sybil screamed, firing her arrows as fast as she could, but the men kept coming. One grabbed my arm, trying to gut me with a dagger. I turned on his arm, making it bend the other way and let butterflies sprout from my fingertips. The man started waving with his arms to get them out of his face, letting me go in the process. I smiled as I let prickly plants curl up from the ground, trapping the soldier in thorns.

‘Yes, Saeris!’ Sybil yelled proudly. I looked at my hands. ‘DUCK!’ Sybil cried. I fell to the ground and heard a sword swish above my head, almost cutting off the tips of my ears. Small sparks curled around my fingers. I grabbed the Orlesian soldier’s shin and let the sparks glide through his skin, making him squirm like the drunken pirate twenty years ago.

I smiled proudly, and turned around to watch Sybil. But she was down, two soldiers grappling her to the ground. I screamed as I charged at them, the ground shaking as I ran. Someone tackled me, and I fell face first onto the hard ground. I turned on my back, roots and sparks circling around my hands. The giant soldier held his sword to my throat, making a small cut just by caressing me.

‘NOW!’ someone yelled, and another group stormed from behind the bushes. I smiled at the giant who was holding me down. The man cursed as arrows started shooting down on them.

‘La resistance!’ someone yelled as I saw the Fereldan soldiers cutting the Orlesian ones down. Sybil was up again, sprinting from across the path towards me. But the giant had seen her, and then I felt it. Air. Air gliding through my body, through a place I never felt before. I moaned as my hand tried to find the whole in my body. My stomach. The pain started then, first like something was pinching me, all over my body. Heal, I must heal myself! But my magic wasn’t coming out. The pain grew, and it spread. I could feel it now, my blood, and how warm it was in contrast to how cold I felt. I knew this
feeling all too well. My view went blurry as the giant Orlesian soldier pulled his sword out of me, and Sybil crashed into him, disarming him on her way.

‘Saeris’

It became dark again.

‘Saeris, come on!’

And so cold,

‘Please, sister!’

Death is close now, it’ll be over soon,

‘PLEASE’

Soon.

***

Pickles purred, rolling on her belly as I scratched her fuzzy head. I smiled, here I am again, home. This room was the place the Fade always took me, I’ve never been anywhere else, and I never wanted to. This is fine. Mum was baking banana bread, I could smell it, father was mowing the lawn, again, and my brother, I could hear him cursing names from his games again.

‘Slightly disapproves? WHY THIS TIME?’, I heard him yell against his screen.

I smiled as I mimed Pickles, rolling onto my back like her, purring in the soft, clean sheets on my bed. But, wait, something is different today. I sat up again. Where is the presence behind my door? It was always there, waiting, prodding. Where is it now?

‘Oh dear, you look hungry! You want some?’

I yelped. Was that… mum? She was standing right there, in the corner of my room, her blonde hair neatly put in a bun, wearing her blue stained jeans and yellow camisole. How did she get here? She never came in?

‘Saeris, honey?’, she tilted her head as she presented me a piece of bread, ‘Take some’

How did she come in? The door is always locked? The wards… did I forget to…?

Suddenly, it wasn’t my mum standing there anymore, it was my father holding a blue pastel flower.

‘Hey Saeris, can you put this in a vase for me? I accidently pulled this one out’, he winked at me, ‘please Saeris, before it withers?’

I glanced at the door. It was open, just a little bit, but open. How did it open? I could never open it before?

‘My flower’, that was… I looked back to my father, but it wasn’t my father anymore, it was Daniel. He held the flower in his hand, looking at it lovingly.

‘I’ve missed you’, he sighed as he held out his hand to me, ‘come, let’s go home.’

I blinked my eyes, how was he here? Suddenly, as I blinked, Daniel’s vision became blurred, distorted almost, like the outlines of his figure were smoking and curling.
'Who are you?' I took a step back, blinking rapidly.

'I'm here, Saeris please, I've missed you so', his hand was still stretched towards me, 'come home to me!'

I blinked again, why is he so distorted? Is there something wrong with my sight? I rubbed my eyes, but that made my right eye only sting a little bit more. As I closed it, winking, it finally became clear.

'You are not Daniel', I almost cried at the smoking presence before me, its red eyes staring at me confused.

'You can see me, mage?' its voice coiled, high pitched and screeching.

I opened my right eye again, and Daniel was back again. Then I closed it, and the presence was there once more. Does my left eye... see through its disguise?

'Don't you want me, want this man? I can give him back to you, just take my hand.' It screeched.

'No, Daniel is dead!' I screamed as my left eye twisted and turned, breaking the grasp the demon had on me, seeing what it truly was.

'Don't you want answers, Saeris? Don’t you want to know who “they” are?' it hissed, ‘I can give it all to you, just take my hand, give me that pretty eye of yours, that’s all.’

'NO! Get out!'

'I know you want it! But you don’t need that eye! I can make more use of it! Think of what I can give you, my flower!'

'GET. OUT.'

***

'She’s healing incredibly fast. I’ve never seen this before.'

'She should be dead.'

'Is she an abomination?'

'No'

'Saeris? Saeris?'

'Calm down, elf, let her rest.'

***


'Maker', someone muttered and ran out as I opened my eyes, ‘she’s up!’.

I was in a tent, a small one, and it smelled like dried blood in here. Like me. The cold wind screeched through the holes in the raggedy tent. I looked down my body, and saw the cloths bound around me, they were turning a dark red. Old blood. A fluffy pelt was covering my body as I laid on a wooden bed.
'Saeris?', it was Sybil, her big eyes filled with tears as she entered the tent and raced over to my bed. 'I'm so happy', she sobbed, 'that you're alive!' 

I smiled and tried to turn around on my side for her, but a stabbing pain soared through my body and held me in place. 'Shit!'

'Don’t move, please, your body isn’t fully healed yet!' Sybil shushed. 

With a lot of effort, I lifted my hand to my stomach and peeled the bandages from my wound. 

'You healed unbelievably fast, Saeris,' Sybil stated while watching me, 'you’ve been down for just a day, and the wound is already closing!'

'Not enough', I sighed at the red bloody scar near my midriff. My hands found the wound then, and I pressed hard, holding my screams as my magic flowed through my fingertips. 

'A healer, that'll come in handy’, a woman said as she came into the tent. I lifted up my face towards her as my wound knitted together, not even leaving a scar. 'And a very good one indeed!’ the woman eyed me. She was a giant, a warrior, that I could see immediately. You could describe her as a mixture of Brienne of Tarth and Éowyn of Lord of the Rings. She was really tall, muscled, wearing heavy armour plated on top of her feminine shoulders. Long waving blond hair framed her beautiful but stern face. 

Sybil immediately stepped aside. Why? I’ve never seen her so quiet before. 

'My Queen’, Sybil mumbled as she took a short bow. A Queen? 

The woman nodded while stepping closer. ‘You’ve been wounded very badly, Saeris’, her voice had a melodic tune, ‘but you healed like it was nothing.’

I nodded. What can I say, this old lady has a strong bod. 

'You are an apostate’, the woman stated. 

'Obviously’, I grinned. No point in hiding when she saw me heal myself. 

'Alright. Good.’ The woman grinned back. Good? ‘Sybil, you are both welcome to join.’

Sybil jumped up, her damp eyes clearing. 

'To join what?’ I looked from Sybil to the woman and back. 

The woman frowned, ‘The resistance, of course!’

Sybil almost jumped again as she stepped closer to me and whispered, ‘Told you it was true!’

I looked back to the tall woman. 

‘You are Moira Theirin, the Rebel Queen.’

Chapter End Notes

*Jumps on a table* VIVA LA RESISTANCE!
Rebelled

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Picture yourself in a medieval wonderland, an earth were everything still feels so untouched. That was Ferelden, a land full of lush green meadows and forests. The grass was greener here, the air purer, the water clearer. Ferelden always had a serenity you couldn’t find anywhere else. But the wind was whispering of a storm, and we were right in it. Living it. Feeling it. Tasting the blood. Power. Death. Victory. The storm would be claiming more and more and more until it would be satisfied. But will it ever truly be?

Where there is war, where there is injustice, there will be rebellion. But what is this rebellion claiming? Peace? Justice? Freedom? Or is it just more power? More war? These people wanted their country back, but was it ever theirs to begin with? How do you solve violence with more violence? And who was I to say.

Moira stood before me, her shining armour reflecting the autumn sun. The few guards she had encircled her like a ring of fire. Nobody would touch her, nobody would go in, or out. And although Sybil felt like she had returned home, I felt like I was imprisoned again in a strange place I couldn’t recognize anymore. Where there was once serenity, there was now chaos. Like Pandora had opened her box right here and now. People were slumping, like there was a heavy burden weighting them down. This wasn’t my home anymore. And Sybil had said we would take it back, but at what cost? I wanted to join this resistance, this rebellion. Not for Ferelden, but for her. I wanted to give Sybil a place she would gladly call home again, a place where she would be safe, where I wouldn’t be fighting all day to keep her alive. A place where she wouldn’t be killed, like Daniel. A place to love once more.

‘We are not enlisting an apostate’, a dark-skinned man said. His face stern and worried.

‘We are enlisting a healer, General.’ Moira answered, her voice like honey.

‘We cannot trust her. She should be sent to the Circle, let the Templars take care of her.’ The General pushed.

‘When I asked her if she was a mage, she didn’t lie. She knew I could’ve just killed her, turned her over, but she didn’t lie. That is someone I can trust.’ Moira held her chin up high. ‘She’s as Fereldan as you are. You want to survive this war? You better accept a healer when she comes.’

‘I… uhm… I also sing.’ I smiled, dangling the fiddle in my hands.

‘Yes. A singing apostate will surely help our cause’, the General snapped at me, ‘Maker’.

‘You will not regret this, my Queen!’ Sybil smiled as she grabbed my shoulder, almost having to jump to reach it. ‘I can shoot anything you want, and if I miss and shoot the wrong target, my sister here will heal it, or his or her, for you!’

‘Good way to put it, Sybil’ I grinned.

‘Great!’ Moira laughed as she turned to us, ‘So you’re sisters, huh?’

Sybil and I both nodded.
'Who’s the oldest?', Moira smiled.

'I am.' Sybil answered and looked at me, winking. Ah yes, I don’t age, let them think I’m really young so I could stay for a while. Smart.

‘Yup’, I nodded again.

‘What’s with the eyepatch?’ another man asked, standing to Moira’s left.

‘Subtle’, Moira tutted, ‘This is Erik, my Spymaster. He makes sure this rebellion gets the right information.’ Erik winked at us, and I saw Sybil turning bright red. The Spymaster was a tall but slim young man, maybe just around his mid-twenties, just like Sybil. He had long black hair, which he had bound into a tight ponytail. He wasn’t wearing armour like Moira or her General, but a woollen shirt with travelling pants and boots. I poked Sybil in her side and wiggled my eyebrows at her, but she ignored me. Or tried to.

‘What were two pretty sisters like you doing here?’ Erik questioned. This man surely asks a lot of questions. Well, maybe that’s just his job.

‘Searching for you!’ Sybil spouted, ‘to join the resistance, I mean.’

Moira snickered. ‘Good, you found us. Or, we found you.’

‘All of this doesn’t matter’, the General interrupted, ‘my Queen, we’ve been here too long. We need to restart our journey.’

‘Yes’, Moira nodded, ‘that’s right.’

I cocked my head. ‘Journey?’

‘Indeed’, Erik stated.

‘What were you doing here then?’ Sybil asked, her big eyes never leaving Erik.

‘The Orlesians had something we wanted.’ Moira answered, resting her body on the trunk of a tree in the middle of the camp.

‘What then?’ Sybil prowled still looking at Erik.

‘We will tell you, but now we need to move on.’ Erik smiled.

The resistance’s small party moved fast, silent and efficient. Sybil and I shared a horse with each other. The horse tapped its hoof as we clumsily tried to get on top of her. Sybil had never been on a horse before, and I sat on an elk a couple of times with Nenhara, but that wasn’t really the same.

‘We have been hiding since Denerim’s fall’, Erik said as he rode past us. ‘trying to get some Fereldan nobles to join our cause, to boycott Orlais in any way whatsoever.’

‘And how’s that going?’ I asked.

Erik shook his head. ‘We’re retreating, we need a base, this war won’t be won so easily.’

‘And where are we going exactly?’ Sybil turned her head towards the road.

‘Greenthorn’ The General rode past us through Erik’s side, keeping a trustful eye on him, and Erik looked back, giving the General an encouraging smile.
Greenthorn was a small, rural Fereldan village, between Orzammar and the Storm Coast, close to Lake Calenhad. It wasn’t that far from where I had taken the ferry to Kirkwall years ago. The village was composed of some houses and farms, and one large, fortified tower. You could see it once had been a very proud fortress, but time and nature was already starting to reclaim it.

As we rode towards it, the villagers started opening their shutters and doors to look at the strange newcomers. Moira had her hood up, covering her face. The guards reformed from a tight circle to a loose formation and started acting like normal mercenaries, not paying any attention to her, or so it seemed. They were pretending to be just some random group of hirelings, incognito. Sybil and I arched our backs to not stand out. I slightly touched my eyepatch with my cold fingers. Still on there, safe and sound.

‘Good, you’re here.’, a somewhat older man said, standing in front of the fortress, and nudge us to come forward.

As we entered through the tower’s gate, Moira sighed, took her hood off her head and dismounted. The General, I actually still don’t know his name, and Erik followed suit. The guards straightened their backs again, respectfully encircling their queen, General and Spymaster.

‘Victor!’, Moira smiled, ‘My friend, how long it has been!’

The man, Victor, grinned. ‘My Queen, I bid you welcome.’

Sybil and I dismounted as well, never letting go of each other’s hands.

Moira turned her head towards us again, telling us to come and stand closer. ‘This are Sybil and Saeris, our newest recruits.’ Erik pointed towards us, and I could hear the General grunt silently.

Victor nodded at us, ‘I am Ser Victor Greenthorn, Commander of this fortress.’

Sybil and I both dipped our heads respectfully.

The tower was strong, safe. A true haven for a beginning rebellion. Moira had chosen this place with good thought, as nobody would expect the Rebel Queen to hide in such a rural farmers’ village. And even though the tower had looked somewhat shabby from the outside, the inside was warm and felt comfortable.

While the guards led the horses to the stables in the back, Moira, Erik, the General and Victor turned towards a big chamber near the centre of the tower. And they stayed there for three hours before calling us in.

‘Where have you been living before?’ it was Erik asking the questions again.

‘Kirkwall, ser’ I inclined.

‘You said you were Fereldan.’ The General grunted.

‘Yes, we were born here.’ Sybil smiled. Well, one of us was.

‘Where?’

Sybil looked at me, as I answered, ‘Gwaren.’

Moira’s eyebrows raised a little. ‘Could you recognize this then?’

She showed me a strange-looking dark green leaf, symmetrical thorns sticking on its sides.
‘Doesn’t this grow in the Brecilian forest?’ I crooked my head as I remembered how the Dalish would avoid it.

‘Yes’, Erik inclined, ‘could you tell us what it is?’

He offered the plant to me, but I shook my head. ‘No, I don’t want to touch it.’ If the clan avoided it, I would do so as well.

‘Why not?’ It was the General again, stepping a little closer.

‘I don’t know, but the cl…. Dalish avoided it like the plague.’

‘I knew it!’ Victor cried. ‘This must be it then!’

‘What?’ Sybil whispered.

Erik looked us in the eyes and took a dagger from under his vest to cut the plant open. As he pinched the strange leaf, a thick purple slime oozed out of it. My breath got stuck in the back of my throat as I stared at the sap.

‘Saeris?’ Sybil put her hand on my arm as the blood drained from my face.

‘This is what we wanted from those bastards’, Moira added while looking at the plant, ‘they use it as…’

‘Poison’, my voice cracked as the whole room now looked at me. I remembered how this had crept from Daniel’s wound, pricking my hands as I had touched it, how it had coiled around my magic and prevented me from healing him. This had killed him.

‘Do you know this, Saeris?’ the General dipped his head.

‘It… I tried healing someone who was stabbed with this’, I swallowed, ‘my magic couldn’t even reach the wound.’

Moira nodded, ‘You’ve been lucky the sword you were stabbed with didn’t have this dirt on it. Meghren has been using it to torture and kill “traitors”, and is testing it on citizens as we speak.’

‘We need to find an antidote, and quick, or this rebellion won’t stand any chance. One wound with this poison in it, and you’re done.’ The General cursed.

‘I want you to look into this, Saeris. You’re a healer.’ Moira looked only at me now, her eyes pleading.

‘I’ll… try.’ For Daniel.

***

Sybil and I were given a room higher up in the tower. The small round bedroom had one bed in it, so we had to share, and a table and a chair. Sybil plopped into the bed.

‘I feel like I’m finally doing what I’m meant to do!’ She sighed.

‘This won’t end well’, I said while watching her sternly.

‘What you mean by that?’
‘The poison, Sybil, it’s incredibly lethal. I lost someone very dear to me because of it.’

‘Is that why you left this place?’

‘Yes’

‘But now we can help! We can get rid of it, so no one will die from it again!’

‘I know, but still’ What if Sybil gets hurt?

‘I’ll be fine!’ She smiled. But I wasn’t so sure. ‘Tomorrow you can start research this stupid plant, and you’ll fix this in no time!’

‘So much confidence in me’, I snickered.

‘You are the most talented person I know, so yes.’ God, I love this little elf.

‘My dear, Sybil’, I smiled as I crawled into the bed next to her and stroked the top of her spikey hair. The sun had slowly gone behind the horizon, while the moon was gladly replacing it. I grinned and quickly cast a ward over her and myself in case we would fall asleep.

‘Can you sing it again?’ Sybil whispered as sleep was overtaking her.

I nodded while I slowly hummed the lullaby I sang to her in Kirkwall on days she would miss her mother, or when she was sick, or when she couldn’t sleep. My arm rested on her shoulder as I looked how Sybil slowly entered her dreams.

Elgara vallas, da'len               Sun sets, little one,
Melava somniar                     Time to dream
Mala taren aravas                  Your mind journeys,
Ara ma'desen melar                 But I will hold you here.

Iras ma ghilas, da'len               Where will you go, little one
Ara ma'nedan ashir                  Lost to me in sleep?
Dirthara lothlenan'as              Seek truth in a forgotten land
Bal emma mala dir                   Deep within your heart.

Tel'enfenim, da'len                 Never fear, little one,
Irassal ma ghilas                   Wherever you shall go.
Ma garas mir renan                  Follow my voice
Ara ma'athlan vhenas                I will call you home.
Ara ma'athlan vhenas                I will call you home.

***

That night I dreamt once more that I was in my old bedroom. The room filled itself with the familiar noises. Pickles’ purr, my brother’s voice, my father’s lawnmower, my mother’s baking. The door was closed again, and wouldn’t open anymore.

I stood up from my bed and crept closer to the door and squatted to look through the keyhole with my left eye. No red eyes stared back at me. No one whispering deadly promises. The never-ending corridor behind my door was empty, silent. Nothing was standing there anymore. I was alone.

***
Sybil shot her target every time. Her arrows following each other faster and faster. Moira’s guards clapped their hands as they placed each target further and further away.

‘Some practise and you’ll be one of us’, a guard joked as Sybil reloaded her arrows. I saw how her eyes lit up, her smile widening with hope. This is what she had always wanted. I arched my back against the stone wall of the barracks. I had been watching her all morning, seeing how easily she kept up with the guards’ training. She truly was one of them, or would be soon. Some guards slyly looked at me from time to time, giving me sometimes a welcoming grunt or a shy smile.

‘You’re distracting my men’, Moira snickered as she leant against the wall next to me.

The guards noticed her and all slightly straightened their backs while training, Sybil following suit.

‘It’s the eyepatch’, I smiled.

‘No, it’s your beauty’, Moira winked and nudged me to follow her. ‘They’re all enchanted by the strange healer, the beautiful tall fair elf, with the compelling blue eye.’

Moira looked at me. They should see my other eye.

‘You’re not the youngest, are you?’, Moira’s question startled me. How did she know?
As if she saw the question in my eye, she answered, ‘The look in your eye, the way you behave, you’ve seen more than you lead on to. The way you speak, the way you hold yourself, it speaks of a past. But Sybil, she’s still innocent.’

‘I…’

‘You aren’t your past, Saeris, I don’t care what happened. I can feel like I can trust you, you’re good. That is all I need right now.’ Moira sighed.

We entered a small room on the second floor of the fortress. A table stood in the middle, littered with testing tubes full of strange liquids, flasks and books.

‘This room will be your study’, Moira pointed out, ‘where you can research the poison. Erik will help you with studying the substance, and will give you any requisition you’ll ask for. Victor has already prepared a sample for you and some research material on poisonous plants.’

I nodded. ‘Handy’, I said while slowly walking towards the table. ‘Are there gloves?’ I asked while looking at the plant that lay on the desk on a piece of cloth.

‘Right here’, Erik said as he entered the room, and threw me some leather ones.

‘Good’, I nodded and put them on, ‘let’s get started.’

The plant was like any other plant you could find here in Thedas or on earth. There didn’t seem to be anything special about it. It had the texture of a cactus, its prickly thorns protruding from the sides to protect it from certain bugs. But it was its sap, the purple slime, that bothered me. I tested my magic on it, and it burned it away, like I was trying to put out a big fire with a glass of water. It burned away magic, elfroot, and even lyrium. And when I boiled it, it would only become thicker. When mixed with blood, the slime really showed its power. It ate it, absorbed it like a snack. I worked on it for days, testing, looking for something that would dissolve the substance, but nothing did. Erik kept bringing me more and more herbs, explaining what each herb was, because I really didn’t have a clue. I tried casting all kinds of spells on it. I cast other plants to absorb the poison, but the slime burned them, I cast electrifying sparks onto the plant, but the slime reflected them, I cast wards to try to wall around the plant, but the slime ate through it. Nothing would help. Days became weeks and
weeks became months, but I couldn’t find anything. And while I was struggling to even find a small clue, the people of Ferelden were suffering.

Sybil joined up with Moira’s guards and went out for different quests. They would burn supplies, free prisoners, find information, everything to enrage Orlais. Nobles were taking notice of the rebellion’s efforts, and some started to join Moira’s cause. They sent their own herbalists over, but no one could find a solution to the burning poison.

‘Nothing yet?’ Moira asked as she entered the study. Erik looked up, tossing another useless experiment in the garbage.

‘What do you think?’ he grunted. I looked up from behind a pile of books, dark circles underneath my eyes.

‘No breakthrough, I’m sorry Moira’, I huffed and stood up, stretching my body. I swear I could hear some of my bones pop.

‘We need to take this further! How can we…’

The door flew open and Victor Greenthorn raced towards Moira, his eyes weary, his face pale.

‘Victor, what is…’

They found us!, he cried.

Erik raced back to him. ‘What? How haven’t I heard of this?’ he cussed.

‘I don’t know, but I need to get you out of here.’ The General said as he entered the room, immediately going straight to Moira.

‘Henri LaPointe, he has a whole force marching towards us as we speak’, Victor, still out of breath, looked up to the General and the Spymaster.

Moira shook her head. ‘I have a plan.

Then, she looked at me, ‘Saeris, go get Sybil, pack all of your research. You two will go with me.’ I nodded and ran outside as Moira told the rest of them of her plan.

Victor Greenthorn would cover our escape by ambushing LaPointe’s forces with his soldiers and our guards. The General would accompany him. During that time, Moira, Erik, Sybil and I would run for the woods, where some horses would be waiting for us. After Victor’s ambush, he would lure the Orlesians to assault his tower, making them believe the Rebel Queen was still there. But we would be far gone by then, on our way towards another noble’s fortress. There we would hide and rebuild. The fortress was close to Highever, in the Coastlands. The reigning noble had been secretly supporting us, and had offered one of his abandoned strongholds. We would cross Lake Calenhad and the River Dane and stay close to the coastline. The fortress should be located in the mountains of West Hill.

‘NO! I will fight with them! I am a guard, I will join them!’ Sybil cried as I tried dragging her back to the tower.

‘SYBIL! SHUT UP AND COME WITH ME’, I yelled, my voice had never sounded so powerful before, and Sybil took notice. She would not die today, not here, not this way.

‘But…’
Sybil. You are still a guard. You will be protecting the Queen on her next journey. She needs you.’

One of the guards stood up, looking Sybil in the eyes. ‘Go.’

Sybil cried then, her hazel eyes sad and desperate, like she had been on the ferryboat years ago. But she nodded at her friends, who were preparing themselves for their last battle.

Sybil followed me back to the tower, where Moira was awaiting us. Moira stood strong, no hint of fear in her eyes. She had bound her blonde hair up with two crossing braids, an iron band around her head. She wore a simple leather armour with steel enforcements, but nothing that would be too heavy or noticeable. Her sword hung around her waist, the hilt depicting a golden lion. She was ready. When she looked at Sybil, who was still crying, her eyes faltered a little.

‘Prepare yourselves, we will be leaving soon’, her voice echoed sternly through the room.

Victor, his men and our guards assembled in front of the fortress. They all looked confident, no fear or remorse, nothing weighing them down. They knew what they would die for, and they would do it gladly. For their homeland, for their families, but especially for what they truly believed in. Freedom. The General, wearing a brilliant steel armour, walked up towards his men, his black horse waiting for him, tapping its hooves nervously with the thought of battle. Erik walked towards the General and put a hand on his serious face.

‘I will protect her, Corran’, Erik smiled up to the General, who, for the first time ever, warmly smiled back at him.

‘I know’, he whispered and bent his head to kiss the Spymaster on his lips. It was ever so softly, ever so quick, but I saw the world flash before their eyes, knowing they would never see each other again. Sybil stared at the ground, and I saw a heartbroken tear escape her big eyes. But then she looked up again, assured, confident. She thought the same thing I did, all of us were thinking. Their deaths would not be in vain.

‘For Ferelden!’ Moira yelled as she lifted her sword in the air. The men roared, and rode towards the forest, where an Orlesian force would await them. But they didn’t look back, they rode towards their destiny, with no fear, no regrets.

Erik’s shoulders didn’t slump as he watched his lover ride off into the fray. He turned on his heels, towards Moira, and they both shared a look.

We then ran towards the other side of the tower, to the western part of the forest. As we rode, our horses huffing and heaving, we could hear how the Orlesian army screamed as they found an empty fortress. The escape had been a success. That’s what I should have been thinking. But I knew what we lost that day, and it would take years to rebuild the resistance again. But word would spread of this battle, of how the Rebel Queen fooled Orlais and rode off with her party towards the sunlit horizon, towards victory.

Chapter End Notes

*Southern voice* Run, Saeris, Run !

If you liked this chapter, you can always leave me a kudo or a comment. They are hugs. Virtual hugs. And I like hugs.
8:54 Blessed

‘Be still, little one, don’t cry. It’ll all be over soon. Don’t cry.’

The little girl twisted and turned, my magic slowly trying to slip through the cut. The girl winced.

‘Shhh’, I hushed, ‘almost there.’ And I pushed some more. Done. The girl huffed, a tear falling from her red cheeks.

‘Ma serannas’, her mother smiled, her face relieved and thankful.

I smiled at her, how long has it been since someone had spoken Elven to me?

‘Next please!’ I yelled as the mother dragged the girl away, and the next person came to the healer’s hut.

‘Busy, I see?’, Sybil smiled, a deep cut on her arm.

‘Dammit, Sybil!’ I cursed as I looked at it.

‘Not dammit! I just killed a handful of Orlesian bastards! You had to be there, they didn’t even see us coming!’ she boasted.

‘Uhu, bet you didn’t see that arrow coming too…’ I swore as I put my hands on her wound, and it slowly closed. ‘Fenedhis, Sybil, there could’ve been poison on there, then where would you be?’

Sybil looked at the ground by that. She was so careless.

‘If I hadn’t taken the arrow, one of my men would. I can’t allow that, can I?’ She grinned.

I sighed. Since Sybil became the captain of Moira’s new guards, she had developed a new sense of duty. She wanted to protect them all. When we arrived at the new fortress, she had become so quiet, so disappointed in herself. I knew she had wanted to go into battle at Greenthorn. Now, Sybil had grown, her spikey hair now caressing her small shoulders, her big eyes stronger than ever before. Her once skinny, bony figure had changed into a muscular body.

‘Other topic! How’s the healing going?’ Sybil smiled.

I looked up from her arm, now fully healed, and smiled tiredly. That should explain all. Aside from researching the poison, I had also taken up the job as the resistance’s main healer. I healed the men and their families. And I had taken a liking to it. Nobody asked questions. That was fine by me. The strange healer apostate with an eyepatch was good enough if she just kept doing her job well. And I did. More and more people joined our cause, supported us, even if it could mean their deaths.

Meghren, Ferelden’s occupying king, was a true monster. He took away the people’s rights, slaughtered who he wanted, took who he desired. But we would stop him! Or at least, Moira would. She truly was the Rebel Queen and many battled in her name. Though most battles were won by merely boycotting Orlais. But every little deed helped.

After some hours of healing in the morning, I would restart my research again in my study. After
years and years of looking, I hadn’t found anything at all. Nothing!

‘Have you tried putting this in it?’ Erik asked as he handed me another flask.

‘Yes.’ I sighed. Erik shook his head. The Spymaster slumped his shoulders and combed through his slick hair with his hand. The man had suffered from losing the General. Even though they had never openly discussed what they had, we all knew it must’ve been serious. But the General wasn’t really a talkative person. Erik had taken the blame for not seeing the attack coming, but he had been young and inexperienced. But he has grown so much, and has become the rebellion’s fearsome Spymaster. But somewhere deep, he was still very much broken. Nothing could make him forget his past lover, not even Sybil, who had tried but failed. I understood how Erik felt, because I was pretty much the same. A lot of men came onto my path, all asking for a bit of my time. But no one was able to fill the void Daniel had left, no one ever could.

Erik left the room, on his way to do his Spymaster stuff. Did that man ever sleep?

‘Maybe if I rub this balm on it… Nope’, I cursed as the slime thickened and coiled, burning the plant away. ‘Shit!’

‘Wow there, Saeris, don’t burn the whole place down.’ Moira grinned as she entered the study. Her golden eyes were shining like the armour she was wearing. How could she work day and night, fight with no end, and still look so refreshed?

‘You’re going out, my dear Saeris.’ She announced.

‘Alright, when?’

‘Tomorrow!’ she waved as she left again. ‘Take Erik and Sybil with you, will ‘ya!’

We did a lot of expeditions. We would go to other noble houses to ask for aid, to forests to find antidotes for the poison, and we sometimes even went out of the country to gather support from outside. But this last expedition was different.

‘Where’re we going?’ Sybil asked as her horse caught up with us.

‘We’ve received a tip’, Erik answered, ‘about the poison.’

My ears flinched. ‘What?’

Erik wiggled his eyebrows at me, ‘We got news from someone claiming to have an antidote. I’ve been looking into it for weeks now, and we’ve already sent scouts to see if it was a trap, but it isn’t. The tip is asking for you, so here we are.’

‘Why are you coming with us?’ Sybil looked at Erik, but I didn’t think she minded him being there.

‘How could I let you guys alone?’ he winked. But that wasn’t really an answer. Sybil thought it was enough though, and she grinned at Erik, her hazel eyes sparkling. But why was Erik here? Why would the Spymaster leave his tower?

We travelled for a week or two, staying off the paths and close to the forest, through The Bannorn and towards the Hinterlands. What would this person have that we hadn’t found already?

‘It should be here’, Erik said as we came across a scout of ours.

‘Landolf!’ Sybil smiled as she dismounted and raced towards him. She did know every recruit of the
rebellion.

‘You’re here, good’, Landolf smiled, his eyes avoiding mine. He had asked my hand in marriage once, but I had refused him. Seems like he still wasn’t over me.

‘The informant’s camp is to your right, behind the den. She’s a weird one, claiming to have gathered the information from a ‘most trustworthy person’ or something. Says she has been trying to contact us for months.’ The scout said to Erik, who nodded. He probably knows all of that already. ‘She keeps calling me a stupid shemlen. I don’t know what she’s saying by that.’

‘Thank you, Landolf.’ I smiled politely, and he bowed his head.

‘Let’s go.’ Sybil ordered and guided her horse towards the treeline.

Erik and I dismounted as well, carefully wading through the dense branches. It had been raining for months now, and the earth stuck to our knees, making it more difficult for the horses to walk on the sandy paths. We entered a small field and saw a little tent near the centre, an elk standing close to it, and a small campfire. We crept closer.

‘You are finally here.’ Someone sighed arrogantly, ‘took your time.’

An old elven woman came from inside the tent, long grey hair put into a high ponytail. She held herself up with a staff.

I squinted my eyes at the tiny wrinkly creature. ‘El gadira?’ I huffed, my eyes getting teary.

‘Awch, Saeris, do I look that old?’ the woman smiled. She looked up to me then, her black vallaslin gracefully curling on her face. A cocky smile formed on her tin lips.

‘N… Nenhara?’ Holy Mythal.

‘Finally! Where you lost in your tiny mind again?’ Nenhara grinned while shaking her head. I ran towards her, leaving Sybil and Erik confused behind me.

I cried as I sprung into her feeble arms, and hugged her. She hugged me back, as strong as she could.

‘I thought I’d never see you again!’ I cried, thick tears leaving my eyes, soaking my eyepatch.

‘Dirthara-ma, you know you won’t get rid of me that easily, alin!’ Nenhara smiled, slapping me on my back. ‘You haven’t changed a thing.’ She grinned knowingly.

‘Well… you did… a bit though’ I laughed.

‘Saeris?’ Sybil took a step forward. ‘Who’s this?’

‘What’s with the eyepatch?’ Nenhara asked, ignoring Sybil completely. Typical.

‘To hide’, I whispered so only she could hear.

‘Yes, because that won’t stand out at all!’ she grinned.

I turned around, letting Nenhara go. ‘This is… Nenhara.’ I looked back at her face, and she nodded. ‘My friend.’

Erik grunted, not really caring to know more. He wanted that antidote and get back to work, I bet. But Sybil’s big eyes only got bigger, questions troubling them. But I looked at her and shook my
head. Another time.

‘Come, sit!’ Nenhara smiled and pointed to the tree trunks that lay close to the campfire.

‘You know of an antidote?’ Erik asked to the point as we sat down.

Nenhara nodded slowly, her eyes not leaving mine. ‘I do.’

‘What is it?’ Sybil asked curiously.

Nenhara tutted loudly and took out a little pouch. ‘Here’, she said as she shoved it towards me.

‘How?’ I started, and Nenhara sighed.

‘She gave it to me, said you needed it.’ Nenhara stared at the little pouch. ‘She said to mix them with the poison. There’s a note in it that has all of the ingredients on it.’

‘Who’s she?’ Erik asked, bending his body somewhat closer to my friend.

Nenhara ignored him. ‘She’s here to help, she said you needed a little push.’

I squinted my eye. ‘Ehn, lethallin?’

Nenhara looked up to me. ‘Asha’bellanar’

That was a word I didn’t know. ‘Ir abelas, alin.’ Nenhara grimaced, as if she couldn’t say anything more. Like she physically couldn’t.

‘Translate please.’ Erik asked nervously. He really wanted to know. Is that why he came?

‘I can’t, Erik, I’m sorry.’ I looked back at him. He cursed loudly and stood up, walking towards the treeline. Sybil looked from me to Nenhara to Erik.

‘Nice to meet you, and thanks!’ She waved and ran towards Erik.

‘Like a puppy’ Nenhara huffed.

‘Where is the clan?’ I smiled at her.

Nenhara looked into the campfire, still somewhat smothering. ‘They are gone, falon.’

‘What?’ I yelped and stood up.

‘They were taken, all of them. The children, the elders, everyone.’


‘They are long gone, Saeris. It was inevitable.’

‘WHO?’ I cried

‘Meghren. He had wanted someone to test his poison on. It happened three years ago. They took everyone. But they left me. To suffer they said, for being blasphemous.’ Nenhara whispered, as if the king could hear her even now.

‘No!’ I screamed, the ground rumbling.
‘Saeris’, Nenhara hissed. ‘It is done.’

The ground kept rumbling beneath my feet, the grass shuddering.

‘Stop it, asa’ma’lin.’ She hushed. ‘Falon’Din has guided them all to the beyond. They are at peace now.’ She softly cried then. ‘Like Elgadira, they are safe, they don’t need to suffer in this world anymore.’

‘How can you…?’

‘I must. I will join them one day soon. That is what keeps me going. I was prepared to go. But she saved me, Saeris.’ Nenhara smiled sadly. ‘She has plans for you. She will protect you. Accept her when she comes.’

‘How do I know who she is?’ I asked confused.

‘You’ll know.’

I softly wept as I sat down again, wrapping my hands once more around her frail frame.

‘You have to go now, alin, you need to make this antidote, make sure no one suffers from the poison again.’ She patted my shoulder.

‘Come with me! The resistance has a fortress, we have an army now, we are growing! You’ll be safe there!’

‘No, falon, I won’t’, Nenhara smiled, ‘My journey ends here. I have fulfilled what they asked of me.’

The ‘they’ again. ‘Who?’

Nenhara grinned. ‘Her daughter will tell you.’

‘Dammit Nenhara! Stop being so cryptic and just tell me! I’m sick of living in doubt!’

‘You will learn soon.’ What is soon? Tomorrow? Next year? A decade? What is soon for an immortal! ‘Go now.’

‘No! I won’t leave you! Not again!’

‘You will, Saeris. I want you to.’ Nenhara nodded.

‘No!’

‘Saeris,’ she caressed my cheek, her fingers slightly pressing against the eyepatch.

‘Let me look at you again.’ She sighed and took it off. ‘You are a miracle, Saeris, you just don’t know it yet. You are our salvation.’ Nenhara looked into my left eye, as if it held all the answers of the universe.

‘What?’ Great, more questions.

Nenhara stood up from the tree trunk. ‘Come on, Saeris. Go.’

I stood up too, looking her once more in the eyes and then put my eyepatch back on.

‘I’ll write down where our fortress is. So you can find us when you want to.’ I sighed and took out a
little scrap of paper from my backpack.

Nenhara fondled the scrap in her wrinkled hands, smiling as she stared at it.

‘Dareth…’

‘No, Saeris, no goodbyes. We will see each other again.’ She smiled. ‘I will be waiting for you.’

‘I hope you will.’ I cried. ‘Until then.’

Nenhara nodded, straightened her back and powerfully lifted her staff into the air. ‘Until next time! You stupid alin!’ she grinned.

I smiled as I crossed the treeline, looking back to Nenhara once more.

‘Always being special, huh?’ I yelled back at her as she put her staff down.

***

‘Just like that’, Moira mumbled as I mixed the herbs together.

‘The note says to mix it with the poison itself’, I grinned, ‘The poison itself is the antidote. It will kill itself. It is the final ingredient!’ Why didn’t I find this before? I took an elfroot leaf and cut it open. Then, carefully, I let some of the purple slime creep into it. The slime coiled in the plant’s wound, sucking the life out of it.

‘Now’, Moira inclined. I threw the antidote over it. The poison hissed, cried almost, meeting its greatest enemy. Itself. The poison turned into damp, burning almost. Nothing was left of it. I put my hands over the elfroot leaf, my magic knitting the wound back together with ease.

‘Looks just like new.’ Erik mumbled wondrously.

‘We did it!’ I cried, turning to Moira with teary eyes.

‘You did it, my friend’, Moira smiled, her eyes squinting with relief. ‘You did it.’

‘Time to make more of this’, Erik nodded casually as he looked over the herbs on the crumpled list. ‘It’ll take some time to collect all of these in bulk. But I can do it.’ He smiled.

‘This is for all who have suffered. Our first true victory!’ Moira clasped her hands. ‘Now, we need to use it.’ She grimaced, her eyes fixed.

‘What?’ I looked up at her.

‘There’s a prisoner camp near Amaranthine’, Erik stated, ‘They are keeping political prisoners, men we can turn to our side.’

‘They are making the poison right there, crafting it, and then experimenting on the prisoners themselves. A huge pile of poison is standing there just for us to burn with this… stuff.’ Moira grinned.

‘No! It’s too dangerous. What if the antidote isn’t enough?’ I panicked.

‘It will be! We will show those bastards whose country this is!’ Moira’s eyes sparkled with confidence. ‘Let them know their poison is useless now. Stop the suffering. And why not doing it with a bang? All of their resources! Gone!’
Something in me started crying, alarm bells started going off. ‘No, Moira, please, listen to me, don’t. We don’t have the men!’ I begged.

‘We have enough.’ Erik answered. ‘We just need a small party to sneak in, burn the poison, free the prisoners, and get out again.’

‘It’ll be quick.’ Moira promised. ‘They just need to ride one day and one night, burn it, and sneak back again.’

‘Sybil won’t come with you.’ Something was telling me to keep her close, closer than ever.

‘You sure you can keep her away from going with her men?’ Erik whispered to me. I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop Sybil from joining her men, she was too headstrong. But I knew Moira could.

‘Promise me, Moira, that you will not order Sybil to go on this mission.’

Moira squinted her eyes, thinking. ‘She’s my best soldier, my best archer, my best rogue. The party will need her.’

‘No, they don’t. They trained enough. If you allow Sybil to go with them, you will have to look for another healer.’

‘You feel so strongly about this, Saeris?’ Erik blinked at me, not believing my words.

‘Promise me.’ I stared Moira in the eyes.

‘I promise, Saeris.’ Moira looked back at me, her eyes sad.

If only she had kept her word.

A week later a grand festival was held to celebrate our victory. The resistance would be known as those who had stopped the people’s suffering, who had beaten the corrupt invaders once more. They would gain more power. People would pray in our names.

Moira raised her cup, like Nenhara had raised her staff with confidence, and cried out, ‘Rejoice! Another step towards freedom!’

The men all cheered, raising their cups in turn, screaming Moira’s name, her title. ‘Rebel Queen! Rebel Queen!’ They drank and they cried. For the ones they had lost, the ones who were suffering, for the ones they would soon save. Sybil sat next to me, her cup raised in the air like the rest.

‘For Ferelden!’ She yelled while her men cheered for their captain. Sybil bared her teeth, smiling as she leaned against Erik’s back, who softly smiled back at her. ‘Sing for us, Saeris!’ Sybil lisped, the alcohol already spreading through her tiny body.

I smiled while looking at my full cup. I hated drinking.

‘Yes Saeris!’ a guard cried, pulling me back from my daydreaming.

I grinned at the room as I took my old fiddle that laid next to me. It creaked as my hands tuned. ‘One more time, old friend’, I whispered at the wooden fiddle.

\emph{As I bury my enemies deep in the sea}  
\emph{No, no loser’s grave is waiting for me}  
\emph{I will be winning the stolen crown}
As I watch the bastard king drown.

Rejoice, with victory, rejoice!
C’mon, rebellion make noise!
As we fooled them once more
We open the door
To victory, men, rejoice!

Put up your cups,
And scream for your Queen
Let her hear you roar
For she will lead us to victory
To free Ferelden once more.

Rejoice, with victory, rejoice!
C’mon, rebellion make noise!
As we fooled them once more
We open the door
To victory, men, rejoice!

***

Sybil leant against the barracks’ wall, watching as the new recruits trained. ‘You need to at least touch the target with the arrow, guys. Make sure you hit them hard enough. Tickling your opponent isn’t going to work.’

‘Aye’, the recruits said nervously while I walked towards them.

Sybil looked up to me and smiled.

‘How’s the hangover, little brat?’ I grinned as I walked up to her.

‘Watch what you say, little sister’, she winked at me. ‘I feel fine, though, this body can handle more than you think.’ Some of the recruits started snickering at that. ‘Oh, shush it!’, Sybil rolled with her eyes.

‘I wouldn’t doubt that.’ I winked at her.

Sybil looked up to me then, her big eyes questioning. ‘Who was that informant, you seemed to know her very well.’

‘She was my friend when I first… arrived here.’

‘Oh’

‘She was like a sister to me, like you are now. I learned a lot from her.’

‘She seemed quite full of herself.’

‘Yes, you two could be practically twins’ I grinned.

‘Yeah, thanks.’ Sybil huffed. ‘Why didn’t she come with us?’

‘She… had to go somewhere else.’

Sybil nodded and left it like that. ‘Are you Dalish too?’
‘No, I’m not’, I smiled sadly, ‘I refused to join them.’

‘Why?’

‘I didn’t want to learn how to defend the clan, to kill, so I had to live somewhere else.’

‘You didn’t want to learn how to defend yourself?’ She raised her eyebrows.

‘Yup. I know, it was quite foolish.’

‘Did this friend of yours learn you that weird language?’

‘Yes, partly.’ I scratched my head while thinking of Elgadira, and how she had tutted at me for my pronunciation.

‘Why didn’t you tell me of her? That she was like a sister to you, like I am?’ Sybil looked to the ground, blinking.

‘Because I didn’t want to think about who I left behind. I wanted to go forward. I had someone else to take care of.’ I smiled at her when she looked back up to me.

‘You know, Saeris, I’ve been looking for my mamae all my life now. I’ve come to terms with the fact that I will never find her.’ She shook her head. ‘But I found you. I think that my mother would’ve been happy to know I had you. I’m glad that you’re my sister, Saeris.’

‘I love you too, my dear Sybil.’ I smiled at her.

Sybil smiled back.

***

My stomach turned as I went back to bed that night. I looked at Sybil silently sleeping next to me. We had separate rooms, but tonight she wanted to sleep with me, which we sometimes did. I closed my eyes, and then opened them again. Good, she’s still here. Why do I feel so nervous? She’s here?

I kissed Sybil on her forehead, and she wiggled her nose in response.

‘Until tomorrow, sister’

***

I smiled as Pickles turned or her back.

‘Yes, I’ll rub your belly! Yes I will!’ I smothered. The fuzzy cat purred with content.

As I lay on my bed, hearing all of the familiar sounds, I could almost think that this was what heaven felt like. No prodding, no disturbance, no magic, no elfy ears, no rebellion, no war.

I heard my brother move in his beanbag.

‘Who do I choose?’ he was asking himself, walking from his TV to his door and back.

I smiled.

I heard my father curse as the lawnmower got clogged again.
'Mother of God! Just let it work, just for once!' he cursed while pulling the motor over and over again as the machine huffed.

I grinned.

I heard my mother yell through the kitchen window. 'Bart, just leave the thing be! Come get some banana bread, I just finished it!' She snickered as my father slumped towards the window, kissing her on her cheek.

I sighed. This was how it was supposed to be. I wish I could just stay here, sleep forever. Then, I heard someone laugh. I sat up from my bed, startling Pickles, who jumped up and looked at me with discontent.

'Shhh, sorry!' I hushed at her.

Someone laughed again. I know that voice. There it was again! Behind my door!

I crept closer. Was the presence back again? I squatted and looked through the keyhole and held my breath.

'Sybil?' She was standing there, a big smile on her lips.

'Hey! What are you doing here?' I cried to her.

Sybil looked at me, smiling and waving in the corridor behind my door. I touched the door knob, wringing, pushing. 'Open, dammit!' I yelled at it.

'Sybil, just wait!' Sybil waved, laughingly turning around.

'Sybil, stop it! Come back!' She winked at me, her big hazel eyes full of glee.

'SYBIL!' but she didn’t hear me and walked further away, disappearing into the distant horizon, towards what lay beyond the corridor.

***

My eyes flew open. My hand grabbed the empty spot next to me. It was cold. Sybil wasn’t there anymore.

I heard men scream outside.

I jumped out of the bed, still in my nightgown, and ran into the hallway, all the way down to the courtyard. Moira stood there, Erik at her side. The guards were running about, yelling incomprehensible things. Moira’s shoulders slumped, and her head dropped down.

‘MOIRA! Where is Sybil!’ I cried to her.

Moira’s shoulders straightened sharply. And then she turned around, her eyes filled with tears, a horrid look on her face. ‘Saeris, I’m sorry.’

‘What? WHAT DID YOU DO?’ I stormed towards her.

Erik stood defensively before her, his daggers drawn. ‘Saeris, calm down.’

‘NO! Where is Sybil!’
‘She wanted to go, begged me to’, Moira whispered, her breath sticking in her throat.

‘No’

‘I ordered her not to go.’

‘No’

‘But she said she would anyway. I gave her my blessing’, Moira shook her head, tears running down the woman’s cheeks. I had never seen her cry before. But now I didn’t care.

‘No, you promised me! YOU PROMISED ME!’

‘I gave her my blessing…’ Moira kept whispering.

The ground started shaking. Stones fell from the fortress’ walls. Cracks formed on the floor.

‘Saeris, stop this!’ Erik cried, Moira was looking at me, afraid. She was afraid of me.

My eye started coiling. Burning. I ripped the eyepatch off, my left eye spitting green sparks. Erik took a step back, pushing Moira behind him. They looked at my eye, and death reflected them.

‘They’re back!’ a guard screamed.

The gate flew open. The ground stopped shaking, my eye unfocused.

‘SYBIL!’ I screamed as I ran towards the parade of wounded guards. There were so few. With how many did they leave?

‘They knew it. We were ambushed. They were tipped off.’ The man moaned, a deep purple cut in his stomach.

‘WHERE IS MY SISTER!’ I cried to him, grabbing the man by his shoulder. He winced.

‘Saeris, stop this’ Moira begged, her once confident eyes now faltering. How had I ever seen this woman as brilliant? Radiating? Now I could only see a scared little girl.

‘I’m sorry’, a guard said and raised his head, Landolf. ‘I didn’t see them coming.’

‘No’ I whimpered.

‘She saved me’, he cried softly.

‘Please, no’

‘It all went down so fast…’

And then they brought her in through the gate, draped over a horse like a ragdoll.

‘NO!’ I screamed and ran towards the gate, towards the horse. I pulled Sybil off it, dragging her onto the ground and into my lap. How could she feel so cold? There was no blood, nothing. She looked perfect, serene. Like she was sleeping, like I had seen her last night. Her big hazel eyes were closed, a numb expression on her lips. Her brown hair draped flatly over her damp face. The tips of her droopy ears bent downwards.

‘Sybil, my dear?’ I whispered to her, slightly slapping her cheek.
'Saeris’, Erik said behind me, his voice cracking.

‘Little Sybil?’ I huffed, touching her cold cheek. ‘Wake up.’

She looked to the side, her neck bent the wrong way. How could a neck bend like that.

‘Sister?’ But she didn’t look up. I shook her body as she lay on my lap like a little child. I held her in my arms, my tears falling onto her perfect greyish skin. She had looked so tanned before. But now, the light she had always been radiating was gone.

‘Please’, I whispered again, my hands slightly pressing on her neck. My magic twisted and turned, shaping the neck like it had been before. But my Sybil didn’t open her eyes. I pressed again, my magic flowing through her body, through her veins, filling her up with a soft light. But when I stopped touching her, the light faded away again.

‘Please, no’

I pushed my forehead onto hers, crying, wishing. But Sybil didn’t look up to me. I whimpered and shivered as I held her, for what felt like hours, lulling her, rocking her like when she was still little, bright and so full of life. Now she just lay there. Cold. Silenced. Stilled.

‘My sister’, I whispered, not letting her go.

‘Saeris, she’s gone.’ It was Erik, silently touching my shoulder.

‘DON’T TOUCH ME’, I yelled at him as I hugged Sybil stronger.

‘She’s still here, she’s still here.’

But my Sybil, my sister, my child, was gone.

Chapter End Notes

If you liked this chapter, you can always leave me a comment or a kudo.
Sybil

I am strong. I am swift. I am true. I am who I want to be, and I’ll become even more. I can protect. I can fight. I can win. And when I train, I will be able to do even more. Saeris may want to protect me. But I don’t need protection.

‘You are not on this mission, Sybil’, the Queen nodded at me sternly, her steel armour rattling as she spoke.

‘My Queen, I need to. These are my men, my responsibility. I have vowed to protect you, to support you. And I do not break my vows.’

‘I order you, Sybil. You are maybe my Captain, but you will still listen to me.’ The Queen looked me in the eyes. This wasn’t like her. She had sense of duty, justice, she understood me, my will to fight, my desire to.

‘Did my sister put you up to this?’ Saeris always wants me to stay home, like she did. But I am not my sister. The guards standing behind me held their position, but slightly faltered as they heard my words.

‘I’m sorry, Sybil, but I…’

‘I am going.’ I lifted my chin up.

‘No. That is an order, Sybil.’

I always listened to Moira, my Queen. I respected her. Saeris talked to her like an elder would to a wild child, but I didn’t. Moira was my superior, and I her subordinate. I never questioned her, I always did what she ordered me to do. But for her cause, for Ferelden, for my home, I would do anything, even stand up to the Rebel Queen herself.

‘I will.’ I took a step closer, stretching my neck to look up to her. Why are humans so tall? ‘Don’t take this away from me. If I can’t join my men, protect them, it feels like a killing blow.’

The Queen grimaced.

‘Besides, I am the best you’ve got. If you want this mission to succeed, you are going to need me.’

The Queen shook her head again.

‘My sister won’t even notice!’ I lied, Saeris noticed everything. ‘Please, give me your blessing to join them. I won’t be able to live with myself if something happened and I wasn’t there. This is my choice, my life, don’t hold me here because my sister is afraid of death.’

‘I can’t Sybil. I gave her my word.’

‘But you are keeping your word! You have ordered me not to go! I just didn’t listen.’ I would crawl on my knees for this woman. ‘I just need your blessing to go into battle, like any normal soldier. I will be fine with just your blessing, not your order. A blessing will keep me safe.’ Please, please,
The Queen sighed, scratching the back of her neck, thinking, considering.

‘My Queen’, one of the guards, Landolf, bowed, ‘please, give us your blessing.’

The other guards of the chosen party nodded and did the same, bowing, asking.

‘Your blessing, my Queen.’

The Queen looked up, her eyes sparkling with confidence, caught in the moment of pride, not for her having power, but for her men having so much courage.

‘I will extend you, all of you’, she looked at me and sighed deeply, ‘my blessing for battle.’

The men roared, for their queen, but also for their captain. I held my head up high. This was my destiny. I am meant for this. Saeris would kill me if she knew. But I am doing this for her, I am fighting for her security, to give her a true home, where she won’t be afraid to lose anyone, where she doesn’t have to hide.

***

Saeris put the blankets on her bed. Her room was high up in the tower, where nobody would notice she was there. Why is she so afraid to stand out? She was beautiful, tall, exotic and mysterious. Everyone knew who she was. No eye could un-see her, she called every attention in the room. But she never wanted it, instead she crawled away in a dark corner. People would go to her to get healed, even if they weren’t wounded or sick, but just to get a small glimpse of her. She had somehow surpassed the disadvantages of being ‘just an elf’, she was considered more. Like I was, I was the Captain, I had power, but she was Saeris, she didn’t just have power, she had the grace to withstand it.

‘I spy with my little eye’, Saeris looked up to me, ‘a peeping Captain.’

I grinned at her, ‘a very beautiful Captain I hope, because I don’t see any other here!’

Saeris bared her pearly white teeth, squinting her blue eye as she laughed. Why was she always wearing that eyepatch, even when we were alone? Like she wasn’t just hiding her eye, but her true self as well.

‘Can I sleep here tonight, for once? For old time’s sake?’ I felt guilty for breaking the promise my Queen made to her. But she would understand, I’ll tell her after the mission. She will be proud of me.

Saeris cocked her head to the side, her white hair dangling partly over her flawless face. ‘Of course.’

She smiled again, ‘Are you having bad dreams? Do I have to set a ward over you while you sleep?’ Always the mother hen.

‘No, no I just wanted to, it has been a while, and I like your room’, I lied, her room is small and dark. ‘My dreams are great. Last night Erik…’

‘No, I believe you, I don’t want to know what they are about’ she snickered.

‘Are you going to bed right now?’ I looked at her, the sun had just gone down.

Saeris nodded. She always loved to go to bed early, like she was waiting for it all day. What did she dream about? Where did the Fade take her to that was so good that she wants to go there as quick as possible?
'I am joining!'

'This early? Sybil you don’t have to, you won’t wake me up if you come in later.'

'I know, I know, I’m just tired, trained hard today.' I lied again. Just white lies. Yeah, Sybil, keep telling yourself that. Sure.

'Alright’, Saeris nodded, her face suspicious, nervous. Why is she always like that?

I crawled into the bed as Saeris undressed to put on her nightgown. Her slim body was perfection itself. Milky skin, no scars, no blemishes. Was she even real? She wasn’t like any other elf. She was too tall, too perfect. I used to wish I could be like her. But I was strong in my own, imperfect way.

Saeris plopped into the bed, keeping close to me. She looked at my face, almost not believing I was here. I wanted to hug her, tell her everything was fine. And it was, but I couldn’t tell her just yet, not yet.

I closed my eyes, feeling how Saeris stared at me, watching over me, like I was going to disappear at any moment. I could hear the blankets rustling, how she came a little closer. I felt her soft lips that grazed my forehead, a loving kiss placed between my brows.

‘Until tomorrow, sister’, Saeris whispered.

I am sorry.

***

The moon twinkled now high in the night’s sky. I had left Saeris’ room, looking over my shoulder towards her serene face once more, before disappearing into the night.

‘This is the plan, everyone got it?’ Erik explained, his head concealed in his raven hood.

The group nodded. Ten of us ready for our mission.

The horses stood prepared, the fastest we got. Erik eyed us all separately, locking with my eyes two seconds longer. ‘Are you sure?’ he spoke, his soft deep voice filling my ears.

‘I am’, the Queen spoke, her voice louder than anyone had expected. She stepped from behind Erik, and we all straightened our backs respectfully.

‘Men, this is a very important mission. You will change this war.’ Her voice echoed through the deserted courtyard. ‘All of you already made me proud. Now make your country proud too.’

‘Hail the Rebel Queen!’ We cried as we raised up our swords, daggers and bows.

The Queen nodded, her eyes now again resting on mine. ‘I hope my blessing is enough’, she whispered.

‘It always was’, I inclined.

The Queen shook her head, took a step back, and bowed to us all, like she did before all of our missions. It gave us courage, we knew we were respected for this. We all bowed back once more.

The men walked towards their horses, preparing, checking everything one last time.

‘Sybil’, It was Erik, he stood behind me, his arms crossed in front of him. ‘Be careful, don’t do anything rash.’
I grinned, ‘Are you worried? For me? Aww!’

Erik shook his head and wanted to turn on his heels, but I grabbed his arm. He looked back to me, his eyes expecting, like I had forgotten to say something. I stood on the tips of my toes as I reached towards him. My arms twisted around his neck, pushing him down. My lips found his, softly kissing them, like a small prayer. I felt his warm breath flowing through my throat as he responded, slowly kissing me back, his lips harder on mine. I felt how his hand glided from my chest to my waist, holding me in place.

Then he pushed me away. ‘Good luck’, he grinned at me.

I licked my lips as I looked at him. Will he ever care for me like he had for his General? I knew he never would. He liked me, but love, no. But at least I gave it a try.

‘I’ll be back in no time!’ I waved at him as I raced towards my horse, jumping onto it, and riding off with my men into the night.

***

The leaves of the path rustled as the horses raced, almost separating the wind into two like a sharp blade. We had been riding for two hours now, the sky still dark, concealing our every move. All of our faces were serious, damp from sweat as we never loosened our formation. I rode in front, the rest in a V-shape behind me, checking for movement. I focused on the path, how it lead deeper into the forest.

Something rustled. I held my right arm in the air, whistling a short demand. The horses stopped, creating a deep silence. The only thing we could hear was the heaving breaths of the mounts, and our hearts bursting in our throats. Something was wrong. I squinted my eyes towards the treeline. Did something move in there? My men breathed slowly, they could feel it too. It was too still, too silent. Something wasn’t right here.

‘EN ATTAQUE!’

Orlesian soldiers ran out of the dark treeline, like a wave would over the beach. They hit us hard. My men cried as they pulled out their weapons, the horses staggering with excitement. But how did they know we were here? How did they find us?

We had been betrayed.

Men from both sides started crying as they crashed into each other, sword on sword. I swiftly pulled the bow from my back and arched the arrows. There, an Orlesian bastard ran towards me, two daggers ready in his hands to kill. I directed my arrow toward him and shot. Dead. Another soldier. There! Dead! And another one! My arrows followed each other quicker, faster, again and again striking its target.

One of the guards roared as a sharp dagger pierced his armour.

‘Dammit!’ I grunted, and turned my horse around, pointing the arrow towards the guard’s attacker. But then my horse whined, toppling over its own feet as a huge man cut its legs.

‘SHIT!’ I yelled as I jumped of the falling horse. It fell to the ground, whining as the blood seeped from its hind legs. A sword came crashing down to it, bashing its head in one second. I looked up. The Orlesian soldier, a chevalier by the looks of it, looked me up and down and smiled coyly.

‘This will be easy!’ He roared as he swished his longsword towards me. I dodged it, rolling over the
ground and jumping back onto my feet. ‘Stay still, now,’ he huffed and waved the sword again, but I jumped away as the sword came crashing down onto the ground. I might be small and not so strong, but I was fast. My body lunged forward as I jumped onto the man. I turned, swiftly snagging the small dagger that hung around my thigh. The man grunted and threw me onto the ground, trying to crash the sword into me again. But I pulled up my legs, flipping over again, dodging his attack. I grinned as the man stumbled when his sword crashed into rustling air. I jumped onto his back, buckling him even more. The giant tumbled over, dropping his sword on the ground.

‘Really easy!’ I cried as I plunged my dagger in his chest. The man grunted, squirming and then stopped moving altogether.

I wanted to rejoice, but I heard more men roar as a few more Orlesians jumped out of the forest. We wouldn’t be able to win this. We were outnumbered.

I looked up towards the small battlefield. How many of my men were left? I think I could count them on one hand.

‘RETREAT!’ I yelled as I eyed the panic in the Queen’s guards’ eyes. ‘Fall back! NOW!’

Go! Run! Fast!

I turned on my heels, dropping low as an arrow almost grazed my cheek. I need to run, I need to run. Three men followed suit, grunting as they jumped into the bushes. But then I heard someone cry for help. Someone I knew. I looked up again from behind the front. It was Landolf! The man grunted as another arrow struck his back. He squatted, eyes big and raw. Two men encircled him, like wolves ready to eat their wounded prey. I wasn’t able to protect them all, my men. But I would protect those I could. This was my duty. I am their protector.

I jumped up from behind my cover, rolling, sprinting, leaping over the bloodied path. Landolf looked up to me, his eyes dark and wet, begging me to run, leave him to die. But how could I do that? I arched an arrow, one, two, and struck one of the preying men as they wanted to drag another sword in the unarmed guard’s back. The soldier grunted as the arrow pierced his neck, blood splattering on Landolf’s face. The other Orlesian roared as his friend fell down face first. The last man standing, another giant chevalier, bawled as he swung his sword towards me. I stooped and felt how the sword nearly missed the points of my ears.

‘Landolf, run!’ I bellowed as I lost my balance, toppling over. I rolled towards the right and felt how the sword crashed against the sturdy ground on my left.

‘Merde!’ the chevalier shrieked as Landolf jumped onto him, disarming the giant. The Chevalier rolled onto his back, pulling Landolf underneath him, making sure the arrow in his back engraved itself deeper in his body. I crawled back up, screaming as I charged back at the soldier, crawling on top of him. But the chevalier was too strong and pushed me off him just as easily, throwing me back onto the ground, against a hard stone that was imbedded in the musky ground.

I heard something crack.

Landolf took the opportunity of the chevalier’s attention to me, and charged at him again. He readily pulled another dagger from out of his hood, slicing the chevalier’s throat with one swift movement.

‘Sybil!’ He cried, starting with a proud tone, but ending in a sombre one as he looked at me with tears in his eyes.

I wanted to smile at him, congratulate him, and then tell him to run. But I couldn’t move. I only felt how a silencing cold crept over my body, clawing its way to the top. What is happening? The cold
feeling slowly covered my face. The world went dark. Silent.

I whimpered, my voice coming out one last time, disappearing like a soft whisper into the wind. A soft voice answered, calling me home.

‘Mamae?’

Chapter End Notes

A short Sybil POV <3

Next up: another big (!) time jump! But we're going to get some answers too!

If you liked this chapter, you can always leave me a comment or a kudo!
Every day, you wake up knowing another adventure is waiting for you. You know you can get up and go on, grow, feel, let go. And even if your heart gets broken, when you lose everyone, you get up, knowing that there will come an end to it one day. And you can fear it, resist it, or even want it, but you can’t ignore it. It’s there. It’s what keeps you going.

But I couldn’t see the end coming, I couldn’t see what lay before me. The nightmare that I was living, seemed never-ending. And because I couldn’t see the future that laid before me, because I couldn’t grow, I couldn’t let go, forget. I was always looking behind me, imprisoning myself in my own past, in the knowledge of never being able to rest with those I’ve loved and lost.

I’ve thought about ending it myself, but how could I? I was afraid, afraid of that cold, dark place. So I lived, if you can call it living. I wasn’t a flower that grew and withered, I was stone. I stood still. Unchangeable. Was this it? My eternal hell? Living, loving, losing, and staying alone? Forever? Over and over again? My mother, my father, my brother, I lost them all. I lost Daniel. I lost Elgadira. I lost Nenhara. I lost Sybil. I will lose everyone I will ever meet. Everyone is allowed to rest, but not me. I will be staying. Nothing will change me. No storm, no love, not even death.

***

8:96 Blessed

They danced, their twirling skirts crossing each other mid-flight. Hands touched, drawing each other nearer. Smiling lips enhanced the flickering lights. Laughter echoed through the once barren room. A song filled the room with a tingling sound, the fiddle bursting with every note.


Sybil had smiled too once, had danced to this very song. Her hazel eyes had twinkled with delight. She had looked over her small shoulder, glancing at the tall dark Spymaster. She had turned around and looked at me, her lips slowly whispering my name.

Forget. Smile.

How her hands had felt so cold, her body so weak and numb, her eyes glazed.


Forgot to smile.

Smile. Nod. Again.

‘Have you heard?’ whispers from behind the bar, closing nearer so nobody would hear, but everybody could.

Bow. Smile. Another tune.

‘Betrayed?’ a hard voice cried, someone shushed him.

Nod. Forget. Sing.
‘Killed! Her son has fled!’ murmurs crept over the wooden dance floor. ‘Is there still hope? The boy, Maric, where is he?’

‘Quiet! I don’t know.’


‘Bann Ceorlic’, someone whispered, ‘The Rebel Queen has joined the Maker now.’

Stop.

The room went silent, eyes on me. I stopped playing, my hands slowly letting go of the old fiddle. It fell, splintering on the ground. The party-goers stared at me, a confused frown on their faces. I looked at my now empty hands, at my broken fiddle that lay on the wooden tavern floor.

Wet. Someone threw his cup at me, hitting me on the head. The cold spiced wine splashed in my sunken face, making my expression even more horrid. The alcohol dripped down from my wild, uncombed white hair, my ears twitching from the cold.

‘Stupid knife-ear! Who told ‘ya to stop!’ the bartender yelled with a thick French accent.

The dancing girls giggled, looking me up and down, at my raggedy clothes, ripped and dirty, at my clamped-up fingers, at my eye, bound away with a dirty cloth.

‘Get out!’ someone yelled, throwing another full cup towards me.

I could’ve dodged it, but my legs wouldn’t move, my hands trembling. Someone grabbed my arm, dragging me across the dance floor. The people laughed as I was kicked outside, into the dark. The cold rain splashed on my face, the raindrops mixing with the tears that were now streaming down my cheeks.

After Sybil had died, I had fallen into a black hole. I was there, but I wasn’t. My mind had wandered somewhere else. Maybe it had gone together with Sybil that day. I buried my Sybil in a small grave, together with the rest of the resistance’s soldiers that had died with her, for her. And then, just like that, I had turned around, my body slowly walking forward. But I had buried the rest of myself together with Sybil in that shallow grave in Ferelden.

‘Saeris, please, I’m so sorry’, Moira had cried, her hand extended towards my back.

I had shaken her off me. ‘No’, a tear had dropped from my now bare green eye.

‘She wouldn’t have wanted this’, Erik had said, his numb face staring down at Sybil’s grave. How dare he? He never loved her. He used her to forget! He had no right to even mourn for her. He let her go. He let her die. Just like Moira did.

‘You promised me to not let her go’, my voice had stumbled, cracking, ‘you broke your promise. Now, my Sybil is gone.’

‘But I never thought…’ Moira had begun.

‘You don’t think.’ I spat at her. ‘You might not keep your promises, my Queen’, I bit sarcastically, ‘But I do.’

Erik had shaken his head as I turned around, glancing one more time at the silent little grave. Then I strutted out of the courtyard, my fiddle strapped to my back.
Moira and Erik, they never tried to hold onto me. Like they had given up too. But while they were able to pick themselves up again after some time, I wasn’t. I couldn’t forget, crawl out of that black hole. I just started walking, wandering, forward. Always forward. But I wasn’t going anywhere really. I was blind, my eyes seeing where my feet went, but not what happened around me. The Anderfels, Nevarra, Antiva, the Free Marches, Rivain, and even some parts of Tevinter, I had seen it all, travelled them all. I had been in the Anderfels in 8:75, during the coldest winter in centuries. I hadn’t felt a thing. I had been in Nevarra in 8:77, during the Hundred Days Cough epidemic. I had healed so many people, but so many had died. But I never cried for them. I had been in Antiva in 8:78, when Moira’s son was born. Maric Theirin. But I never smiled. I had been in Starkhaven in 8:95, when a rumoured Witch of the Wilds in the Antivan Weyrs had shouted a prophecy about the return of dragons. I hadn’t even batted an eye.

But now, while I was standing here in the rain, in a small village in Emprise du Lion, Orlais, I felt something for the first time again. I felt cold.

I hated Orlais, the people, even innocent, reminded me of who I lost. Why had I come here? Why had my feet brought me here? How long had I been here?

The snow prickled my feet, seeped through the holes of my boots.

Why did I wake up? Why now? Why did I feel again? Because Moira had been killed? I had lost so many, why did this bother me so much? Why did something click in my chest just now? Why is my left eye coiling, whispering to me?

I am awake.

‘Well, well.’ Someone confirmed, slowly walking from behind the tavern door. ‘What have we here?’

I looked up, my voice not coming out.

‘Fate walks a peculiar path.’ an older woman said as she crept closer, white hair reflecting the snow, darkness gliding over the small wrinkles on her face, like a lover’s touch. ‘The wheels are finally starting to turn once more.’ Her voice sounded like warm honey.

It felt like I had turned into stone, and small cracks were suddenly forming, like something wanted to break free again.

Free like Sybil had once been.

The old woman tutted. ‘You are awake.’

I looked up to her, my eye searching her face. The woman took a step closer, her eyes pushing the darkness away. They were golden, bright yellow, glowing eyes.

‘Who are you?’ My voice felt so strange, like it wasn’t really mine.

‘You know who I am.’ The woman smiled, her thin lips curling, her deep eyes narrowing.

‘Asha’bellanar’, I whispered. How did my mouth remember those sounds, sounds I haven’t heard in over forty years, from a voice long gone.

The old woman smirked as she came closer again.

‘You… helped me. The poison’, I mumbled.
The woman smiled, ‘I nudge history, when it's required. Other times, a shove is needed. You needed a shove.’

I looked up, my left eye twisting under the eyepatch. ‘Your name’, my voice started to sound strong again, this question had been on my lips for too long, ‘what does it mean?’

The woman now fully laughed, it sounded loud, filling the void of the night.

‘Woman of many years. That is how they call me.’ Her eyes went big, ‘But you, my dear, can call me Flemeth.’

My heart burst in my throat.

I walked behind her, hurried back into the shadows from where she came. She walked gracefully, like a woman full in her prime, proud. Young almost? Why am I following her? What the fuck is happening? Should I trust her? Nenhara had told me to accept her when she would come.

‘It is not coincidence that we meet here and now, Saeris’, Flemeth eyed me, her bright eyes looking straight into my soul.

I swallowed.

‘You have been wandering for too long. A new path will open now.’

‘A new path?’ Was there a path before then?

‘Indeed. This world has yet plans for you.’

I looked up to her. ‘The Rebellion. Maric?’ I guessed. Was this why I woke up? Again seeing light shining in the dark hole where I slept?

‘No.’ Oh. Okay. ‘You do not play a part in that story.’

‘Then, what do I do?’

‘You need to see first. Grow. Your time has yet to come.’ Her eyes glowed, sparked. ‘Go to Antiva. To Seleny. You will find your answers there.’

‘Wait, who will I find there? Can’t you give me any answers? What’ll happen to Maric Theirin, Moira’s son?’ The words flew out from my mouth.

‘Still now. Time is sparse, for all of us.’ Flemeth nodded, shutting me up.

‘But… Will I see you again?’ I was desperate. Don’t leave me alone! Say something! Anything!

‘You will.’ She smiled coyly, her thin lips curling.

‘Wait!’ I reached out to her. She knows what is happening. Tell me! Don’t leave into the dark! I am so sick of the dark.

‘Remember Saeris, when you learn, that truth is not the end, but a beginning.’

And with that, Flemeth disappeared into the surrounding shadows, like she had never been here to begin with. Dissolving like a ghost.

***
Wandering can feel endless, because you don’t know where you are going. You are lost, no destination. But now, I had something to look forward to again. A beam of light in an eternal dark hallway.

Antiva was a very warm, damp country. Tropical forests spread across the land, moistened by the constant rain, which made the beautiful flowers grow. The people were hard here, and mostly drunk all the time. Their towns smelled like seawater mixed with wine and spice. And also a little bit of mold mixed with rotting fish. And Seleny wasn’t any different. The port town, which was built near the head of Antiva’s major river, was encircled by the Tellari Swamps. It had curling bridges and grand sculptures built all around. The population was a mere mix of nobles and pirates. Did Cecilia come from a place like this? Would the Raider still live? I don’t think so.

I only stayed for a very short time in Antiva city. I had lived here for some years, didn’t want anyone to recognize me. From Antiva City, I took a boat to Seleny. I hated sailing, but the marshlands were too treacherous to venture through alone. It was early in the morning when I arrived in Seleny, the sun still slowly setting over the little town. It reminded me of Venice. I had visited Venice once, a long, long, very long time ago. I would almost say it has been ages, but actually, it truly has been an age.

The voyage to Antiva had taken such a long time, months, a year at least. But now I was here. I took my hood further from my head as the cold morning breeze greeted me at the port.

I was promised answers. Where are they now?

I strutted forward, a new spark blooming in my chest. I was excited. Me! And I got more excited because I was excited. How long had it been since I felt excited! Since I felt something! How had I been living for the past years?

As I walked through the port, the merchants began to stomp out of their shops, placing their wares in the front. Leather, spiced wine, fish, and more leather. How could leather smell so good? I strolled through the little streets of the town. All kinds of people started appearing as the sun raised in the sky. Merchants selling diamonds and valuables, rich nobles littered with golden jewellery, pirates who eyed the jewellery, and prostitutes, who eyed everyone else.

‘Hey pretty conejita, so alone! Want some company?’ A young, round-busted woman smirked at me. She was standing in front of a brothel. That was Antiva for you. There were more brothels than there were humans.

‘No, gracias’, I smiled politely as I passed her. No wait. I stopped and turned back around towards her. ‘Disculpe, miss, puede ayudarme?’

The whore looked back up to me and batted her eyelashes. ‘Por supuesto, darling! I can help you with anything you like.’

Where could I find my answers? Who would know Asha’bellanar? There would be only one. ‘Have you heard of a Witch of the Wilds living near here?’

The prostitute’s eyes went big, and she spat cursing on the stone street. ‘Miralo ahora’, she swore, ‘you mean the Beast?’

‘The Beast?’

‘Sí’, she looked around suspiciously, her dark hair wiggling around her made-up face, ‘I can give you a way better time than la Bestia!’
‘I believe that’, I grinned, ‘But do you know where I can find her?’

The woman shook her head, ‘You don’t find the Beast. She finds you.’

I stared at her. This really doesn’t help me. ‘And… can she find me in a certain area?’ I prodded.

The whore sighed. ‘Maybe. For some coin, conejita, I will tell you everything you want to hear.’

I looked down to my pockets. I’m broke. ‘I don’t have anything on me. Can I give you something else in return?’

She smiled and looked me up and down, scanning every part of my body, or at least everything that could be seen under my cape. She doesn’t want me to… you know…?

‘That dagger you have there, muy útil, give it to me, and I will tell you where to find la Bestia.’

The old dagger that hung around my waist, I hardly ever used it. I had received it once as payment for singing. ‘Aquí’, I said as I gave the dagger to her.

She held it in her hands, touching the hilt. ‘Bueno’, she smiled. ‘The rumours say she lives near the end of the river, in the swamps.’ She mumbled, her eyes not leaving the little sword.

‘Great! Thank you!’ I smiled and turned on my heels.

‘Be careful, conejita, no guide will go there with you, because no one has ever returned. La muerte duerme en el bosque.’ The woman warned as I walked towards the city gates.

The Tellari Swamps were dangerous, treacherous, I understood that people avoided this place. They say beast men prey on weary visitors, and at night, you can hear the unborn babies cry from their drowned mothers’ wombs. But humans always try to explain the unexplainable. This place had a richness, an unspoilt virtue, and you could feel its ancient roots deep into your very being. This place was alive, as alive as any of us.

‘Just follow the river’, I mumbled as I stepped over a tree root sticking unnaturally out of the muddy ground. Just follow the river. Just follow the river. It’s just a forest. Something shrieked far away, its voice crying. No, just a bird. Just a forest. Just follow the river. I swear that tree is moving, it’s following me. No, just a tree.

Something purred, slowly, coming closer and closer. Please, let it be a cat. I turned around slowly, my eye frantically searching my dense surroundings. I can’t see anything through these leaves and branches and… there it was. Two bright eyes stared at me, no four eyes, no… more. Its legs must’ve been as long as a full-grown qunari, and there were eight of them, all covered in spiky dark green fur. From its mouth, or whatever it was, two giant fangs protruded, covered with thick greasy slime. And blood, fresh blood. Its long legs crawled, coming closer as it clicked its fangs together, making a purr-sound. It was hungry. A giant, monstrous, poisonous hungry spider.

Shit.

I took a step back, but my foot got stuck in the breathing mud. What doesn’t want to eat me? The spider lifted its leg, taking a step towards me. The ground shuddered in its weight.

Oh shit, run, run, run!

I turned around, clawing at the suffocating branches that were grabbing my throat. I could hear it creeping behind, slithering. The spider shrieked, purring as it smelled my panic.
I sprinted, my feet screaming each time I pulled them out of the mud, like I had been pulling them out of concrete. But while I struggled with moving for even an inch, the spider was crawling over the terrain swiftly, in spite of its ginormous size. My hand reached to the ground, freezing it in place, making it hard. I could run on this. But also could the arachnid, who spit its venom at me, I dodged it by jumping aside. But now I lost more terrain. The spider was closer than ever, its jaws clicking with content. It spit again, but this time it was a web. The sticky substance clung on my legs, making me fall over. The spider grabbed my leg, trying to stick me with its sting. Sparks flew out of my fingertips, electrocuting the monster. Then I kicked it and one of its eyes spat open like a pimple, blood now dripping down its slimy head. Two roots sprung out of the ground, trapping the spider in place, crushing it to the ground. See? I can defend myself.

But the monster stretched its legs, breaking the roots I had conjured with a loud snap.

Shit.

I tried to crawl up again, but the web was keeping me in place, so I wormed over the frozen mud, in hope to gain some terrain, to escape it for just a couple of seconds more. The spider clicked angrily, crawling over me again, its sting raising in the air, ready for its final attack. But just when it wanted to go down on me, a black smoke appeared on the ground, seeping into the spiders mouth and its open eye. The spider shrieked, a noise that would almost make you deaf. The spider crawled back, its legs squirming to all sides, moving like loose noodles. And then, it plopped onto the ground, making a last loud click.

‘You have come a long way’, an alluring voice said. I looked up towards the trees, and there she was. The Beast. A tall woman was leaning against a tree, a wooden staff in her left hand with an embellished ram skull attached to its top. She was wearing a revealing red and grey outfit, accentuating her voluminous body, animal bones hung around her neck as a necklace. She had long raven hair that waved on her back. On the top of her head, she wore a strange diadem made of a huge skull with ivory and black horns. The jawline of the skull aligned with her own, framing her beautiful face. Why did they call her a beast? She was beautiful.

‘You have been looking for me, I heard?’ she grinned, her full lips curling. Then I saw her eyes. Bright, golden, yellow eyes. Just like Asha’bellanar, like Flemeth.

My mouth hung open, gaping at the witch standing in front of me.

‘And you found me’, I mumbled.

‘I always do’, the witch grinned, looking me up and down.

‘Follow.’ She demanded, and with a flick of her hand, the webs that hung around my legs disappeared.

***

We walked around, the trees seemingly moving aside as we passed. The forest almost seemed to recognize her, to respect her. We entered an open meadow, a big white building standing in the middle of it. It had high columns, very Greek-like. You could say it was like the Parthenon in Athens, but better preserved. It was a very old, but graceful building, almost as ancient as the forest it resided in.

‘My mother had told me you would come.’ She finally said, looking over her shoulder to see where I stood.
‘Your mother?’

‘Flemeth. The old hag?’ She smiled coyly.

Well, that explains the eyes. I nodded at her. ‘Thank you, for saving me. I am Saeris.’

‘I know. My name is Yavana. At your service.’ She grimaced.

‘What is this place?’

‘The Silent Grove.’ Yavana inclined, her eyes sparkling with ancient knowledge.

‘What’s it for?’ I took a step closer to her.

‘It is a sanctuary.’ She stared at me, ‘for those long forgotten.’

I cocked my head.

She smiled. ‘Dragons, my dear.’

I stared at her. ‘There are dragons?’ What? Cool!

‘Once’, her voice sounded sad, tragic, ‘They were hunted down by so-called “heroes”.’ Her voice was now filled with disgust. ‘There was a time when dragons ruled the skies, a time before the veil, before the mysteries were forgotten. But mankind destroys what it does not understand. They destroy themselves. The blood of dragons is the blood of the world.’

I swallowed. Wow. ‘Are they still alive?’

She looked at me, her eyes squinting with thought. ‘They are sleeping, waiting.’

‘For what?’

‘Time will tell, Saeris. First, other things will need to be done.’ Yavana sighed. ‘Take of that thing. Let me see it.’ It was she who came closer to me now. ‘Let me take a look at you.’

I took a step back. No, I’m done hiding. Let her see it.

‘Wondrous,’ she gawked as I took the cloth from my eye. She laid her hand on my face, almost caressing it like a mother would. Her thumb grazed my cheekbone and her index-finger rested near my bottom eyelashes as she stared into my left eye. ‘You can truly see it’, she mumbled, ‘they were right.’

‘They?’ Not “they” again.

Yavana cocked her head, still peering into my eye. Let me guess, she can’t tell me?

‘I will tell you, come inside.’ Oh.

I followed her into the white building. Inside was a huge space. It was nearly empty, some corridors leading to different rooms where I guessed Yavana resided. In the middle of the huge hall, a deep pit was built, a spiral with stairs going down into the dark.

‘What’s down there?’ I looked up to her, my eye burned as the pit seemed to call me.

‘The ones I preserve.’ She nodded, staring into the abyss.
Okay, not going there.
Yavana turned around to me again, her golden eyes stern. ‘You came for answers. Let us begin. Ask.’

What? Just like that? ‘Uhm… who are “they”? ’

Yavana smiled. ‘Whispers of old, ancient. You can hear them only if you listen, and know where to look.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because of my mother. She knows where to look.’

‘Can I hear them too?’

‘Yes. You need to. That is why you are here. But you cannot hear them, speak to them, as you are.’

‘Have you spoken to them? And what do you mean as I am?’

‘No. I listened, they won’t speak to me, only whisper.’ She swayed her head. ‘And you are locked away. Not by any, but by yourself.’ Yavana came closer, almost touching me. ‘I cannot truly say what that eye of yours does. They whisper it is a connection to somewhere else, beyond, like a window straight to the Fade, or at least I think so. They whisper of a great power residing in the emerald window, your eye. It makes you limitless, powerful.’

‘But I can’t even defend myself? Let alone fight?’

‘You have been seeing magic as something you learn. And it is for others, but not for you. Magic is not a gift, it is your nature. You have to let it flow. You still think yourself human, mortal, but that only creates limits. Stop limiting yourself by urging those mortal restrictions onto your magic. You are not a human anymore. You are more, immortal. You have to let your past go, in order to move on. In order to hear them. In order to grow.’

‘I don’t understand!’

‘Where do you go when you enter the Fade?’ Yavana walked towards the hallway near the end of the big hall, I followed her footsteps.

‘My home, my room, where my family is?’

‘That is not your home anymore, Saeris. Your home is here now. You have to let go of it. Of them.’

‘But I don’t want to! I don’t want to forget!’

‘You don’t need to, Saeris. Your home, your family, they will always be a part of you. But you have to let them go.’ We entered a room through a big wooden doorway. It was a bedroom, filled with bookcases. In the middle of the room was a four poster bed, with red velvet blankets and raven furs on top of it. It looked luxurious, and incredibly soft.

‘How do I let them go then?’

‘You go further.’ Yavana said as her hand pointed to the bed. ‘You walk towards what is beyond.’

I took a step towards the bed.

‘The truth is never out of reach, Saeris. You just have to keep looking for it.’
The pink walls of my room greeted me, the white curtains near my windows softly swaying by the autumn’s breeze. Pickles purred, sitting in the exact same spot she always sat. Her face looked up to me contently, meowing happily. My mother was again baking her delicious recipe of banana bread. I sniffed, smelling it for one last time. Then I walked towards my window and looked outside. My father was mowing the grass, as usual. The blue pastel flowers were still in bloom, even though it wasn’t their season.

My brother was happily laughing, his voice trickling down my walls, filling my entire room. What was he laughing at? Was the game he was playing so much fun? I hope so.

Would they notice? If I leave?

I turned around towards the mirror in the back of my room, next to the dressing. I looked into it. And there I was. Tall, muscled and athletic. I was wearing my distressed jeans, and my favourite university sweater. My long blond hair curled around my face, my perfect imperfect face. I noticed how my freckles were disappearing into my tan skin I had gotten last summer. I touched my ears, and they were round, normal, not pointy at all. I smiled, my lips cracking from the cold breeze.

Yet, my smile faltered. This is not who I am. Not anymore.

My vision appeared blurry, like someone had suddenly thrown water on the mirror. When it sharpened again, another me was standing there. Still tall, but the muscles were gone, I looked lithe again, elven. My skin was again a milky white instead of tan. I wasn’t wearing my jeans, but my leather armour, my fur cape hung around my shoulders. Still the same face, but now even, no freckles. White hair was now framing my celestial face, my right eye had stayed the same, a bright blue. My left eye was green once more. An emerald window. My ears pointy, like they are meant to be.

Something creaked. I turned around and saw that my door was open. But I was still alone. I walked towards it. Once, I had been scared of that door. Of the presence that had been waiting behind it, but even more of the eternal hallway calling out to me. Now, though, I felt strong. I wasn’t afraid anymore. I was free.

I opened the door, looking towards that white hallway, leading to a place beyond.

‘It is time to go now’, I sighed as I looked at Pickles. She cocked her head, almost nodding, like she understood. And that was it then. Time to let them all go, my past, my family, my humanity. But I would not forget them. Never.

I took a step forward and closed the door behind me. I would never go back again.

Only forward.

Chapter End Notes

Some dialogue has been directly taken from the comic Dragon age: The Silent Grove.

If you liked it, you can always leave me a comment or a kudo :)
Awakened

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary wise, what is, it wouldn't be. And what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?”

— Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass

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My feet kept dragging over the cold stone floor. One before the other. For how long had I been running? I looked over my shoulder, not stopping my sprint. The door to my room had been lost behind the past horizon. No point in going back now. Better keep running.

The hallway was cold, white, almost like a hospital. I remember how the hospital had smelled when I had died, like soap, fresh, sterile. This place smelled the same. It looked the same too, white, bright lights lighting every corner of the corridor. The floor was made out of stone, like you would place in a garden. Small cold cobblestones. How out of place?

I had to keep running, but how long could I keep this up?

I stopped, out of breath. I had never run this long before. Suddenly, I heard something creak. At my right, a door appeared. It had white frills on it, like the horns of a halla, and a golden door knob. It looked like a fancy door, leading to a luxurious place. My hand flew towards the door, wanting to open it. But then, another door appeared on the left side of the corridor. As I turned around, the fancy door creaked behind me. Like it was sad I hadn’t opened it, that I had looked upon another door. The door on my left was made out of dark wood, almost black. A thick purple smoke trickled from underneath it, calling to me. This door could come straight out of a nightmare. But it strangely appealed to me.

Which door do I choose?

I don’t want to choose. Why do I even have to? It’s not like somebody is ordering me to. I took a step back and looked forward again. But now, the corridor wasn’t empty anymore. Hundreds of doors now appeared on either sides of the hallway. All of them had a different design, a different character. I slowly took a step forward, silently walking past each door. One door was made out of stone, a light coming from between the cracks. This door looked like one you would find in an old castle. Another door was bright pink, and green, and blue, and just about every other colour. And so each door held another story, another path. Do I have to go through one of them? Scrapping each possibility as I go through? But no door seemed to go where I wanted to go.

Some whispered promises, ‘Come, Saeris, open me, look inside, you will find what you seek. I will give you rest. I can provide you peace.’

Others cried, ‘Please! Don’t go there! Quick! Before it is too late! Open me!’

Too many voices, too many choices. I can’t do this. This is too much. Which do I choose? I kept running, faster, harder, my feet screaming. How can I feel this pain when I’m dreaming?

‘Open me’
‘My flower!’

‘Sister, please!’

‘Saeris, darling’

No. Stop. Stop. STOP! I sunk onto the floor, my knees scraping over the cobblestones. My hands flew to my ears, covering them to dim out the whispers. Be quiet! Please! Stop this! I don’t want to go through either of them!

What do I choose?

Left or right?

Why not up?

I looked up to the ceiling, my hands dangling at my sides as I slowly raised. There, between the blinding lights, there was a hatch. A very small one, you would barely notice it was there. It didn’t have anything special about it. No colours, no whispers, nothing but a soft green light seeping from between the latches.

I reached toward it, the ceiling suddenly closer than before. I just had to stand on the tips of my toes. But I could reach it.

‘The truth is never out of reach!’ I grinned as I opened the latch.

The doors screamed as I tilted myself from the corridor, up, towards the sky.

And what a beautiful sky it was! Bright blue, soft clouds waving, almost sweepingly, through it. I felt warmth, a glowing welcome. It must be the sun. Yet, there was no sun. Then how could there be light? Warmth? How curious.

I wiggled my toes and felt how soft grass tickled my feet, how the cooling dew touched my ankles. There was no eternal corridor here. No eternal screaming of doors. But a quietness you wouldn’t find outside your dreams.

I looked down, and the hatch was gone. No way back. I took a step forward again, looking around. This place was so much like.... Like the place I had first woken up in. Daniel’s cottage, the clan’s camp, the forest I had lived in for the first years of my new life. Why was I here again?

I looked up towards the forest now stretching before my feet. But this wasn’t the Brecilian Forest. It wasn’t as dense. This place was more open, lighter, greener, softer. The Tellari Swamps had been scary, alive and threatening. This place was alive too, but on a different scale. It was like it was alive just for me, the trees bending away to clear a path, the leaves making comfortable shades for me to wander through. This place felt like a home I had never known of. As I walked through the forest, just forward, nowhere in particular, all kinds of strange statues doomed up behind the trees.

A halla, tall, one leg forward, her big eyes staring towards the deep forest. She almost seemed to be guarding something, scanning for danger.

A statue of a man, a bow in his hand, raising it up towards the sky. Does he want to hurt the sky?

And then, after some wandering, I saw a statue of a wolf. It was made out of white marble, its tail curled around itself and its big paws resting at its sides as it lay comfortably on its stomach. Its face was turned to the side, my side, almost recognizing my presence. Its eyes were small, canine, but radiated a sereneness. While the other statues had been guarding, defending, the wolf just was. It lay
there, almost protecting me instead of the forest. Almost welcoming its guest. Elgadira had once told me they built statues for the Dread Wolf as a reminder to keep wary, his face turning away from the camp. Maybe as a saying that he was always watching, waiting to strike. But this wolf wasn’t preying. He was welcoming, protecting, kind. This wasn’t a wolf to run away from, but to bow to, to respect, as he would respect you in return. In the hollow carvings of his eyes, two glowing stones were placed, glistering a crimson red. But while the demon at my door had been violating me with its bloody eyes, these eyes were a different red. Not the colour of blood, not the colour of vile, but the colour of passion, a deep love. A love for what? I walked around the statue, almost feeling it was watching me. But it remained silent. The ever-waiting wolf, eternally alone. Like me.

‘Saeris’

I turned around. What was that? A whisper, no, more whispers, like hundreds of them all softly singing my name. I could feel them all through my body, through my naked soul, calling to me. Urging me to come. To make haste. I started running again. Forward, past the statue of the wolf, past the trees. I ran and ran, my body suddenly full of strength.

They are waiting for me.

As I ran, I stumbled upon a small open field in the middle of the woods. There was a small stone tower in the middle of it, overgrown by ivy. I slowed my pace, hesitantly walking towards the small ruin. The archway of the tower had small blue flowers curling around it, full in bloom. Inside the tower light from outside was shining through the cracks and holes of the roof. There were some books scattered around the grassy stone floor. Why do I recognize this place?

Between the soft rustling of the leaves in the warm wind and the crunching of my bare feet on the path, I heard a familiar soft humming again.

‘Saeris, suras. Melenir’

A small orb was hovering in the middle of the ruin, a beam of light shining right on it. The orb was like a light bulb, a blinding white light coming out of it, and it was moving, like it was struggling to stand still.

‘Vhallir, Saeris, andaran atish’an’, the orb spoke, but not with just one voice, but hundreds of them. A choir of whispers. ‘We welcome you at last.’

‘Aneth ara’, I choked as I slowly crept closer. Here they are.

‘We have waited for you for a very long time’, they said, its light flickering contently.

‘Who are you?’ I finally asked, my eyes squinting as I looked into the orb.

‘We are what you seek. We are what is left of all those forgotten. We are your guide.’ That was very… unspecific.

‘Why have you called me?’

‘We have been calling you for a very long time, da’lan.’

‘That’s not an answer’

‘We have been waiting for you, just for you, to tell you what was told to us. To set you on your path. Many have heard our calling, some answered in your place, but none could truly hear what we
‘Who? Who answered?’

‘A Dalish Keeper once came, Mythal guiding her’

‘Elkadira?’

‘What she heard alarmed her. The whisper of your power made her doubtful, made her protect, but also made you wander in the dark. Because of this, the time we have left is very little.’

‘The whisper of my power? What power?’

‘The power of the People’s salvation, but also the power of their destruction. Break the emerald window and the worlds will combine, exploding into one. The old and the new, the past and the future. The destruction creating a salvation, yet to heal is to burn itself too.’

‘What? Who are the people you’re talking about? And what window? Do you mean my eye?’

‘Those who were long forgotten, once destroyed by he who freed them.’ Huh? ‘The promise, the unbreakable, that is the emerald window. It is the key to the Beyond itself, you see its flaws, it cannot hide anything from you. It is the key to unlock the power to bend the worlds to your will, enter them freely. It is what has kept us waiting for you for so long. It is what lurks behind your every step. It is what will give you peace. All of us.’

‘Just… wait. What promise?’

‘The unbreakable vow that has kept us from the eternal rest, to warm the path for you. It is that which led you here, which made you reborn.’

‘I never made a vow?’

‘Not the current you, yet the other you in the past. The you who came before.’

‘The me who came before? You mean my ancestors? Why are you being so cryptic?’

‘We are just mere messengers, ordered to set you onto the correct path. Nothing more. We do not hold the answers you seek, the knowledge you need can only be found in yourself.’

‘Great! Here I was expecting some clarity.’

‘Clarity does not always come in answers, but in actions.’

‘Then what do I have to do?’

‘When your eye appears in the heavens, go to where the heroes are, and protect he who holds your eye in his hand, for he will lead you towards the vow you promised not to break. When in doubt, search for your memories, they will hold the outcomes. Your dreams will tell you the answers of your past, and of your future.’

‘My eye in the heavens? I don’t understand!’

‘You will feel the promise when you know. And you will right the wrongs made to us all. But beware of the wolf in sheep’s clothing, as both of you share the same eternal fate. Remember, your vow does not hold any alliance to him.’
'What? Who?’

‘He listens, he is close. He heard our call, now he is searching for the same answers you seek.’

‘That’s not an answer!

‘Quick now, time is running out’

‘Alright, alright... What will happen when I fulfil this promise another me made?’ Why is everything so god-damn complicated.

‘You will receive that for which you longed for. Death. Eternal rest with those lost to you.’

‘What happens if I die before I fulfil it?’

‘You will be reborn once more, until the promise is fulfilled.’

‘And what if I refuse?’

‘You will eternally wander these plains alone.’

‘So I will never return back to earth?’

‘Souls are not part of worlds, they can travel from realm to realm. The destination for your next journey is not fixed’

‘Great... So, when will my eye appear in the sky?’

‘In an Age where the mighty forgotten will dance once more in the sky, when heroes will conquer the vile and fight for the freedom of all, that is when the promise will be fulfilled’

‘Okay, and...’

‘He found us’

‘Wait’

‘Our time has come to an end’

‘But’

‘Silas, Saeris, banal nadas’

‘Wh...’

‘Dareth shiral’

The orb coiled and turned, the whispers echoing their last words as they dissolved into nothing. I stood there, confused, my hands dangling at my sides. How do I know more, but still less? What in God’s name just happened?
Something rustled, footsteps coming closer, no... something was coming closer. I heard a low rumble, almost a howl, before my body turned stone-cold, like all of my senses turning off in one go, my heart bursting in my throat. The creature rustled again, slowly coming closer, prodding, violating almost.

WAKE UP!
I breathed, hoarse, my chest pumping, my head turning upside down. I rolled on my side, my head hanging out of the bed. I vomited, my body shivering as bile spilled from my mouth, gagging. I rolled over again, my chest rising rapidly up and down as I stared at the roof of the four poster bed. How strange, had its colour been this vibrant before? Before I went to the Fade, the bed had been a soft red. But now… ruby, scarlet, auburn, crimson, maroon, every shade possible. The colours danced over the sheets like a canvas in motion. I choked on my own breath, the smells… books, dust, spices, sweat, bile, a soft feminine perfume with lavender, grass, mud,… I sat up, my hair waving over my shoulders, I could feel every strand. My eyes twirled with their new sight, my left eye burning. I flexed my fingers, once, twice, and saw the blue glow covering them, sparkling, burning, freezing, creating, all at once. I knew I had magic before, I could feel it as a soft reminder. But now, I was breathing it, tasting it, like it was just as alive as I was.

What happened to me?

How long had I been sleeping?

I jumped out of my bed, my legs reacting before my mind, rolling, flipping over like a gymnast during the Olympics. My feet rested on the soft ground now, and I could feel every pulse, every step, every dust mite trickling over the carpet. Had I ever been this fast before? This sensitive? Then I saw how lithe grass grew between my toes, embedded through the carpet and the stone floor. How was that possible? I wasn’t even focussing?

I am alive. Not just living, but alive.

Suddenly, the earth shuddered, drilling with a bare roar that stung my ears, dribbling through every part of my body, echoing in my mind. At first, I thought it had been me, my magic bouldering into the ground to make it shudder. But then I heard it again, a mighty roar screeching over the skies, almost ripping them into two, awakening everyone in this world. I turned around sprinting (I meant to walk but I was faster than I had calculated) through the door into the empty hall of the Silent Grove. Where is Yavana? I ran towards the dark spiralling abyss, and a shiver crept through my body. The pit felt… empty? Like something was missing?

‘Saeris, come.’ Yavana’s voice rejoiced outside, softly calling me near like a mother would to show off her child.

My feet reacted, leaping across the hall towards the forest. There she was, the Beast of the Tellari Swamps. I slowly walked towards her, following her gaze in the sky. What was she looking at, nothing was there?

‘You have awakened’, her voice whispered, almost emotionally.

‘How long have I been sleeping?’

‘I first thought you were dead. Breath was seeping so slowly from between your lips. But as the legend goes, immortals can enter an “endless dream”. It was wondrous. My mother told me you would wake again when you were ready. And so I waited.’

‘How is that even possible? For how long was I in that “endless dream”?’

A roar twisted through the skies again, almost making me lose my balance. Yavana grinned, her golden eyes burning with true passion. I followed her gaze, my body stilling, my breath stuck in my lungs.
A dragon. A giant beast was grazing the sky. It must’ve been larger than a boat, no two, maybe even three. Black and green and blue scales were glistering on its back and spread to its ginormous horned wings, obscuring every light and casting a dark shadow over us, over the entire swamp. It sucked up all the sounds, all the air, as it breathed out another roar.

‘Is that a…’

‘Yes’, Yavana laughed, ‘you are not the only one who has awakened, Saeris.’

I stared at the dragon as it turned its gaze towards us, eyeing me, seeing every part of my soul. And I stared back into its bright yellow eyes.

‘Where is it going?’

‘Towards the world, Saeris’

‘Towards the world? To do what?’

‘To start a new era’, she mused.

Yavana peered towards the horizon, the dragon disappearing towards the south. Her high voice coiled, cheeringly.

‘The Dragon Age has begun’

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY !!!!

If you liked this chapter, you can always leave me a comment or a kudo!
Learned

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They say that Moira Theirin, the Rebel Queen of Ferelden and the mother of the resistance against Orlais, had been a magnificent woman and leader. Her power and grace caught every noble’s attention, captured every man’s heart and darkened every monster’s fear. No Fereldan man fought braver against the bastard king Meghren than she had. She brought back hope in the people’s hearts, destroyed the horrendous poison that the Orlesians had made, freed prisoners from their camps, and helped the little people take back their rights. Nobles from all across the land fought under her banner. But not all. Bann Ceorlic became jealous of her power, a thing he could never achieve. Meghren saw his weakness, and used it. Ceorlic betrayed Moira, luring her with a promise of assistance. As the traitors slaughtered the Queen, she who had died fighting for what she stood for, her young son fled deep into the Korcari Wilds. At the tender age of 16, Maric Theirin had to assume command of a shattered rebellion, but he did not do it alone.

As Maric got captured by the Dalish, he thought he would soon meet his mother again by the Maker’s side. But fate had other plans, or at least, she who controls fate, for the Dalish did not kill the lone prince, but brought Maric to someone who had been anxiously waiting for him. Asha’bellanar, also known as Flemeth, welcomed the young man, saving him from Orlesian imprisonment. But everything comes with a price. To ensure his safety and victory, Maric made a promise to Flemeth. A promise he would never fulfil. Together with Rowan, whom was planned to become his wife, and a sly rogue named Loghain Mac Tir, Maric regrouped the resistance, making it bigger than ever before.

In 8:98 Blessed, the Fereldan rebels led by the band of misfits, took the isolated port town of Gwaren. No one had ever imagined it would’ve been possible, but they did it. The first victory in years. But certainly not the last. Yet, in 8:99 Blessed, they experienced a devastating loss at the Battle of West Hill. The confident Prince Maric led his forces to the small town, convinced by his elven lover it would become an easy battle. But the lover had lied, betrayed the king as she only truly listened to Meghren. The rebellion was almost wiped out by the royalist forces, blood covering West Hill until even this day. Orlais had seemingly won, the Rebel Prince buried with his foolish men. But nothing of this had been true. Deep underneath the ground, where no one roamed but spiders and darkspawn, Maric still lived, fighting bravely. The Deep Roads almost truly tied the noose around young Maric’s throat, had he not been saved by a peculiar group of dwarves, called the Legion of the Dead. Together with this new army, Maric Theirin resurfaced back in Gwaren, miraculously defeating the Orlesian troops and rekindling the Ferelden rebels.

The Battle of River Dane was a battle to be remembered, to be sung about, to be written about. Loghain led the rebels to their last victory, defeating the last chevalier forces sent by the Emperor. And Maric got his revenge on Bann Ceorlic and his fellow traitors, killing them in name of his mother. But while they fought, swords bloodied by the death of their enemies, a loud roar could be heard from the heavens as a huge dragon screeched the skies close by the Frostback Mountains. The roar demanded a new era. An era of blood and violence.

The Dragon Age.

The last thing I heard about Maric Theirin was in 9:2, two years after I had reawakened. It is said that
he had challenged Meghren for a duel, and killed him in single combat. The new King beheaded the bastard traitor, and they say he did it with one clear swing.
But they never told any stories about the General and the Spymaster, who had helped the Rebel Queen build her resistance. They never talked about the brave Captain Sybil, and how she had fought for her men. They never spoke of me, I who had made the antidote for the poison that would’ve wiped them all out. No songs were sung about us. No tales or books could be found. We were forgotten.
But I would never forget the rebellion, the war we had fought, the pain we had felt. I had tried to forget after Sybil had died, but now I refused to let it all go into oblivion. I would not forget my Sybil. Even if it hurt.

This was a new era, not just for Thedas, but for me as well. I was reborn again, and now I knew what to fight for.
Ferelden thinks it is at peace now. Yet, I know that peace never lasts. Chaos is a means to the world. And the Dragon Age would proclaim just that.

‘And where are you going now?’ Yavana arched an eyebrow as I dressed myself in the travelling gear she had given me.

‘They said my memories would guide me. So I’m retracing my steps.’ I said as I braided my hair and put on my hood.

‘I do not think they meant to just go where you used to go, Saeris’, Yavana leaned against her black staff.

‘Then do you know what I have to do?’ I sighed.

‘I do not know. What did the whispers say again?’

‘Uhm… to search for my memories? And something about my dreams holding the answers of the past and future. I think.’

‘So, are you just going to walk around and sleep?’ Why does she sound so sarcastic. It’s a good plan. At least it’s a plan.

‘I think so. I don’t remember much of my years as a hobo wanderer, so maybe I missed something? But first I’m going to Rivain. I once heard in a tavern that there are seers there’

‘Watch out for those “seers”, Saeris, they let spirits possess them voluntarily’, Yavana clicked with her tongue. Look at the Beast of the Tellari Swamps, a Witch of the Wilds, criticize other hedge mages. Ironic, no? ‘Do not get me wrong, some of the elders are truly gifted. But do not believe everything you hear.’ She meant it this time.

‘Alright, I will’, I nodded, ‘thank you again, Yavana, for helping me, and for looking after me while I slept.’

‘It was my pleasure, really. You have taught me things as well, as mother predicted you would.’

‘Is that why you took me in?’

‘Partly, yes’, Yavana grinned, ‘but perhaps I had also been somewhat curious’

I smiled at that. ‘What will you do, when I’m gone?’

‘Something else was promised to me, so I must wait.’ Her eyes glazed for a second, thinking about
'What promise?' I hate promises, since I apparently made one in my previous life that caused all of this mess.

'That, my friend, is my secret to keep', she winked.

'Alright, no point in arguing that', I smiled, flashing my teeth. 'Then, I’ll be on my way'

'Are you going without a staff? You are strong now, your magic is powerful. I have one…'

'No, thank you, I like casting with my hands. Feels more natural. Especially now.' I nodded as I glanced at my fingers, magic slithering across them. So much power.

'If that is what you want’, Yavana stared at me, her eyes squinting as she looked me over again.

'You are not going to wear that eyepatch of yours?’

'No’, I said seriously, ‘No more hiding. I’m done with that.’ Just my hood, to keep away from unwanted attention. But no more eyepatch. I will not be ashamed of my eye anymore.

'Good’, she nodded. She almost seemed proud of me.

‘Farewell then’, I smiled as I turned on my heels, looking at the white building of the Silent Grove once more.

‘Farewell, Saeris, and may we meet again someday’, Yavana blinked, straightening her back as I disappeared into the forest.

‘We will!’ I waved at her.

But in the end, we wouldn’t. Yavana got killed in the year 9:37 Dragon. I don’t know how, and I don’t know why. They say a certain King Alistair of Ferelden had “slain” her. Like it was a heroic thing to do. But the Beast of the Tellari Swamps was not a monster, not an enemy of Thedas. Yavana got killed because they couldn’t understand her. Ignorance was the greatest enemy of this world. Of any.

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Rivain is a peninsula, surrounded by the Venefication Sea and the Amaranthine Ocean, and can only be accessed by travelling a bridge of land that is connected to Antiva, so I didn’t have to travel much. I knew Rivain, I had been there before, but not for long, and not very deep into the country. I lived in Ayesleigh for some time, which is near the border of Antiva and on the bridge of land to the peninsula. I sang in a tavern there, and lived there as compensation. But I didn’t stay for many years, since the people were very… eccentric and I didn’t want to be included in their society. Back then, I wanted quietness. Now, I was kind of curious of the Rivaini. They had a society unlike any other in Thedas. Rivain was a matriarchy. The people here believed that women were best suited for ruling. And that’s where the seers came in. These women, or so I heard, I never really met one in that tavern, were mostly senior seers. They had a Circle in their capital Dairsmuid, but that one was just for show. They trained women to become seers and when they were finished, they were sent to villages to oversee them, to become an elder. And there, they trained their own apprentices.

I figured that I would find a seer nearly in any village. So I just started travelling, siding more towards the centre of the country. I crossed Ayesleigh, avoiding the tavern and keeping my hood tucked over my face. I didn’t want anyone to recognize me, if anyone I met back then still lived. And I travelled almost straight to Afsaana, another port town by Rialto Bay. The towns here were very
small mostly, but very densely inhabited. I smiled as the people looked my way as I let down my hood. It felt… liberating. I didn’t feel ashamed of my otherworldliness anymore. This is who I am. Some kept out of my path, but others were drawn to me. And as they stared, I stared right back.

Rivaini people were of a special kind. They had olive and ebony skin adorned with golden jewellery from head to toe. And they had tattoos and piercings covering their whole body. The Rivaini considered that the more someone was “decorated”, the more status this person had. So in short, everybody wanted to outdo the other.

‘Olá coelhinha’, a man grinned at me. He had short black hair and beautiful olive skin, black tattoos adorning his face and shoulders, golden jewellery around his neck, and piercings all over his ears.

I stopped, looking back at the man. ‘Boa tarde, ser, do you know where I might find a seer? Maybe the town’s elder?’

The man looked up from my sudden question, probably because he didn’t expect a foreigner to just bluntly ask. ‘Desculpe, Senhora,’ the man spoke with a thick accent, ‘but the seer has gone to Dairsmuid. I don’t think she’ll be back soon. Better try another town, or go to the capital itself.’

‘Obrigada’, I nodded at him and the man smiled.

‘Why is an estrangeira searching for a Rivaini seer?’ the man cocked his head.

I smiled, ‘To ask some questions.’

‘An estrangeira, coming to our leaders to ask questions? Muito interessante.’ He slithered. ‘Maybe I can tell you what you need, over some… bebidas? Não?’

I smiled. Maybe in another life. ‘Não, mas obrigada. I must be on my way.’

The man nodded somewhat disappointed, stepping aside so I could resume my journey. If I had not been immortal, if I could just be normal, I could meet new people, love, without a care in the world. When I fulfil my promise…

I left Afsaana and followed the main road inland, towards the capital, though I wasn’t sure if I would really go there. Dairsmuid was the only place in Rivain with a Circle, the only place where the Chantry had any power. And I wasn’t so fond of the Chantry. Not that I disliked Andrastians, but my time in Kirkwall had made me wary of Templars and the Chantry’s view on magic.

Rivain’s climate was very warm and moist, and people were dressed in a very exotic manner. Their clothes were full of colour, and reminded me of silk saris worn in India back on Earth. I stood out with my leather travelling gear and fur cape, and it was incredibly hot. I looked around me, forest clinging on either sides of the roads. I decided to leave the path to look for a stream for water. Not one of the best ideas I ever got.

As I stalked towards a little clear stream in the dense woods, the sun finally started to set behind the horizon.

‘I should set camp’, I mumbled as I squatted next to the stream. I immersed my hands into the tepid water, when I heard something rustling behind me. My ears twitched as I straightened my back, silently listening. Nothing could hide from me now. And yes, there, I heard it… or them. Must’ve been two men, “silently” creeping closer to where I sat. Thieves. I stood straight as I turned around, my eyes locking with theirs. The two men stared at me for some seconds, their faces surprised.

‘Mais bonita do que pensava…’ mumbled one man to the other, who huffed in response.
My eye coiled, twisted as I scanned the rogues. I smelled their sweat, heard every movement they made. One of them shifted as I took a step back.

‘Agora, pretty one, come here’, the man on the left smirked.

My body leaped, moving before I compelled it to, away, over the stream, running. I heard the men behind me curse as they tried to follow me deeper into the forest.
No. I stopped. I am strong now. No need to run. I can fight. I will fight.

The men stopped behind me, heaving. ‘Gave… up… didn’t… we’, one of them choked out of breath.

‘Terribly’, I grimaced as I slowly turned around, my magic glistening around my fingers.

The men grunted, ‘Foda’, and slowly retreated, their daggers unsheathed.

No one would mess with me again. I would not squirm with fear anymore, with incapability. I am limitless.

One of the thieves charged, running straight at me. I grinned as I swiftly jumped aside, letting the man stumble. Damn, I was fast. The man grunted while turning around, charging at me again. I rolled over the ground, my body turning towards him, my hands in the air. In his eyes, I could almost see assuredness, thinking I was surrendering. But I do not surrender.

Flames curled around my hands like a poisonous snake, ready to bite its prey.

The man cursed again and charged. I could hear his companion scream. ‘PARE! Ricardo pare! STOP!’

But it was too late. The thief jumped onto me, and the fiery snake bit. Fire spat out of my hands, twirling with electricity as it hit the man. He screamed, clutching his body as he burned alive. I swished again with my hands, the fire disappearing from his body. What am I doing? But the thief was in a frenzy now, charging at me with his dear life. It went so fast. I never really killed a man before. I saw people dying, I had seen Sybil kill people and watched from the side-lines, but I had never truly killed. But this thief had left me no choice. The man jumped at me with his two daggers like fangs in the air. I sidestepped, my body a blur of ice sliding across the path, appearing behind my attacker. The man turned around the same moment I did, but he had been a second too slow. My hand waved towards him, a sharp phantom arrow shooting from my palm. And it struck the man right in his heart.

‘RICARDO’, his companion screamed as he raced towards us, running.

What did I do? What did I do? I just killed a man. Took a life! Once, I made alive, I made whole. Since when did I empower death? Since when did I murder? I stared at my hand, tears streaming down my face. Since when had my butterflies turned into snakes?

I am a killer.

My left eye coiled, whispering as I saw the thief’s soul leaving his body. I was petrified, my body made of stone, unable to move. I killed someone. Murdered a being. Killed every potential he had. Did he have a family? Children? Friends? Who would mourn for him? My hands started shaking, trembling with my own deadly power.

Who am I?

The leftover thief cried as he stared at me. But I couldn’t stare back.
He ran towards me, his daggers drawn. The man leaped, his daggers ready in the air, ready to carve out my own heart. Let him do it. I deserve it. A life for a life.

I was prepared to feel his dagger digging in my chest, to feel the air gliding through, to feel the silencing cold. But then, the man grunted mid-air. I looked up, and saw how he slumped onto the ground, not far from his friend, with two arrows pierced through his head. Dead.

‘De nada’, a human woman said as she appeared from behind the trees, a bow in her hands. She had ebony skin that gleamed in the soft Rivaini sun, and black tattoos that curled over her face and body. She had some golden jewellery, but not much.

I stared at her, my mouth open, still shaking.

‘Are you alright?’ the woman mumbled as she took a step towards me, her brown curly hair waving over her round face. ‘It’s ok now, está segura agora, you are safe now.’

I faltered and took a step back. “No, stay away, before I kill you too. Go away. I am a murderer” I thought, but my mouth wasn’t moving. I shook. My legs gave out from beneath me, and I fell to the ground. Somewhere deep within, I wished that I could disappear. I wasn’t worth saving.

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‘Wake up, minha menina’, an old voice whispered as a rough wrinkly hand touched my hair.

‘What?’ I grunted, my eyes adjusting to the light. Where was I? I mumbled as I stared at the strange woman squatting before me.

‘Still now, you are safe’

Ah. Yes. The thieves. I killed someone. A tear ran over my cheek. The woman tutted as she wiped it away. I looked up at her. She had dark olive skin and strange white tattoos that partly disappeared into her deep wrinkles. The woman had pale white hair, put up in small braids twisting over her scalp. Tiny golden rings were pierced in her earlobes, and blue beads hung from the centre of each ring. Dozens of necklaces hung around the woman’s neck and shoulders, all made of white and ivory beads, pearls and plates. Then, I looked up into her eyes and choked. She had white eyes, clear ones. Was she blind?

The woman laughed, ‘It is good that I saw you coming. Had I not sent the hunter, you would have been dead’, the woman stated, ‘And you wouldn’t have been able to find me, would you. Saeris’, she smiled knowingly as she caressed my left brow and stared into my eye.

I swallowed, ‘You are a seer.’

‘I am’, the seer nodded. ‘My name is Turga. I welcome you in my village’

I breathed shallowly. Why would they allow a murderer in their midst?

‘The huntress told me you have killed. Was it your first, minha querida?’ Tsura leaned closer to my face.

‘I…’ I softly cried then, tears now freely dripping down my cheek, over my chin and onto my hands. The hands of a killer.

‘You are not at fault, Saeris.’ How can she say that? ‘Death is part of all of us. Sometimes, to protect one, we must kill another. The blame lies in the cruel world, the world which lead us to do cruel things. That is the Natural Order.’
'I did it so easily', I wept, 'how could I kill so easily?' With just a flick of my hand, I had taken away everything that person had. He had wanted to kill me. I had been protecting myself. But solving violence with violence, is that the answer?

'Tell me, when we kill a fish to gut and eat, don’t we do it easily? When we pick a flower to give to our loved ones, don’t we pluck it without thought? When we cut a tree to warm our houses, don’t we burn it readily? When a bear tries to eat you, don’t you defend yourself without thought? Is there a difference? Can you blame a mother for killing someone who is attacking her child? Everything in this world has a place, a potential. But we all kill. That is how it is, it always has been. You are not a killer for being what the universe has made you to be.’

‘But this is not what I am! I made alive, made whole! I created, not destroyed!’ I screamed.

‘Creation and destruction go hand in hand, my dear, like day and night. You destroyed a man, but created another opportunity for you to live. You cannot go back to yesterday, because you were a different person then. You created a new you, and destroyed the other. Yet, the destruction of the other means the creation of your true self.’

I shook my head. How can I live with myself? Sybil had killed. She had said that it was for duty, for her country, and for herself. She had said that it was kill or be killed. I knew that I had just defended myself, but I couldn’t un-see the blood on my hands.

‘You need to accept. The universe gave you power, but it is you who has to control it. Death will always be a part of your life, of your magic. Do not feel ashamed or guilty because of it. But accept it, and learn from it.’

I stared into the seer’s vacant eyes, and they reflected me. I saw my own eyes, red from crying, my wet and distraught face and my trembling lips. How could I be so powerful, and yet so weak? I will learn. My magic is my nature. But I wield it.

‘Now, come’, Tsura inclined, her wrinkly hands taking mine. I followed her out of the tiny cot where I had been laying in. The village we were in was tiny. I saw just a couple of wooden cots standing around, and some fields. This was a farmers’ village.

Tsura took me to the biggest cot near the centre of the little town, and motioned me to go inside.

‘Sit down’, she said and pointed towards the cushions laying in the centre of the room. I nodded and sat down.

‘You came looking for me. Or so I heard.’ The seer stated.

I cocked my head, ‘That is true. How do you know?’

Tsura grinned, flashing her yellowish teeth. ‘I am a seer. Knowing is my profession.’

I stared at her.

‘There is a spirit of Learning in me. She’s very rare, yet she chose to live through me, and I through her. Such is custom. She told me you would be coming, Saeris. To learn. But the spirit of Learning cannot help you.’

‘What? Why?’ Even a spirit of Learning cannot help me to learn?

Tsura sighed, and then dropped her head. When she looked back up again, the atmosphere in the room suddenly changed. Her eyes, her empty eyes, were now filled with a brilliant blue light. Someone else was speaking now.
‘Saeris’, Tsura’s voice sounded more like two voices combined, like “they” had sounded. ‘You have come to learn, such is my purpose. Yet, I cannot fulfil that purpose with you, for there is nothing more to learn.’

The rumours had been true. Seers let themselves become possessed. Why wasn’t I afraid? This spirit did not feel vile, violating, malevolent. The Dalish had thought me that all spirits were dangerous. But I did not feel like I was in any danger.

‘Like the whispers of old told you. The true answers can only be found in yourself.’

‘But’, I started.

‘Nothing can tell you more, other than yourself. I cannot give you answers, for I am not a spirit of Wisdom. I learn and let others learn in return. But you cannot learn anything from me.’

‘And can’t you “learn” anything from what the Fade is telling you?’ I was getting annoyed now.

‘The Beyond is silent’, the spirit whispered glumly.

Tsura coughed as the blue lights in her eyes dimmed until there was nothing there anymore. I could see the old lady shake. This was taking a toll on her body.

‘Sinto muito’, she said, ‘I listened, and I apologize for not being of any more help.’

I nodded sadly.

‘The spirit is not able to give you what you want, and I don’t think any will.’ Tsura mumbled.

‘They all say that I will find answers in myself. But I don’t know where to look.’

Tsura shook her head. ‘Maybe, before finding answers in yourself, you first have to find yourself. You need to live, discover who you are, and then you can discover where you are going.’

‘And how do I do that?’

‘You fight, you fail and so you will learn.’

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**9:29 Dragon**

I lived with Tsura in the tiny village in the centre of Rivain for some years. And they went by quite fast. Tsura contacted others like her, and sent me to towns all over Rivain. Yet, every seer I found, couldn’t tell me anything more. I was stuck. I knew that change was in the wind. It was the Dragon Age, the age of the game my brother had loved to play. And there must’ve been a reason for him playing it. Was it a sign that Earth and Thedas were linked? Was it destiny giving me a sneak peek of my next life? Or just a random coincidence? I knew that something big was going to happen during this age, and every day it got closer and closer. Maybe I just had to wait it out. Wait and watch the skies? Wait for my eye to appear in the heavens and for the "heroes" to gather? What more could I do?

I draped my freshly-washed cape over a rope I hung near the cot I was given in the village. I had not been wearing it in years. Hadn’t needed it really. But I would soon.

‘Saeris’, Tsura said as she slowly walked towards me, supporting herself on her tall wooden staff.
I looked up to her and smiled. She reminded me of Elgadira and Nenhara, and even maybe of my own mother. Tsura was understanding, and helpful. She had tried to give me the answers I sought, tried to guide me as the spirit advised her to, but she could do no more than was possible. But she gave me the chance to learn who I was, to learn to enjoy life. It was more than most could teach me. Magic was my nature, it wasn’t something I could learn. But learning who I was, was learning what I could do, learning what my magic held. My years with Tsura in Rivain made me learn myself, my new senses. These years had brought me a peace I wouldn’t have been able to find on my own. I needed that peace, and I would really miss it in the years to come.

Tsura walked up to me and suddenly reached out towards my shoulder, grabbing it intensely.

‘Daras anor Saeris’, Tsura’s eyes turned blue and Learning’s voice screeched through the silent Rivaini morning. I hadn’t heard her in years. ‘Asha’bellanar lahn, a dir’ven’an lahn’, Learning screamed and magic burst out of Tsura’s body, making the woman topple over.

I caught her in time as Learning disappeared into the Beyond again. ‘Tsura? Tsura? Are you alright?’ I whispered as I tapped the woman’s cheeks.

‘Maldito os deuses’, she mumbled as she opened her white eyes and stared into mine.

‘Are you alright? What happened?’

The seer breathed heavily as she blinked rapidly. ‘You need to go back’, she whispered.

‘Back to where?’ What was going on?

Tsura shook her head confused. But then I understood. Anor, it means home.

I pulled my cape from the rope and waved it over my shoulders. I grinned, the first sign in years. Destiny was on the rise, and I couldn't wait for it to find me.

It was time to go home.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so in my head, Antiva is Spanish and Rivain is Portuguese. I know Rivain was actually more based on Italy, but oh well. Now, this chapter was kind of a filler, but it was important for Saeris to learn where her power lies. We’re very close to the Inquisition now, 2 chapters to go... and I can't wait !

If you liked the chapter, you can always leave me a comment or a kudo!

Here's a sneak peek for the next chapter: Harrowed
A little bird hopped closer and closer over the damp grass. I grinned as I threw it some breadcrumbs. The bird chirped contently as it chugged the snacks down.

‘You want some more?’ I shushed at it as I thought of more crumbs, and they appeared in the palm of my hand. ‘Here birdy’, and I giggled as the little brown sparrow shyly took the bread out of the palm of my hand and flew away.

I looked around the meadow, staring at the ocean of grass and blue flowers. I had come up with this place as an alternative to my old bedroom. It wasn’t the same, nothing would ever be, but it was comfortable. When I had first made it, I had thought of my father’s garden, and Daniel’s farm and Nenhara’s forest. I had thought of a place where Sybil would play and sleep in on a shabby rug. And so, this meadow came to be. A small bubble in the Fade, protected from its scary vastness.

There was so much out there, and I was scared to explore it. The last time I did, I slept for two years. And so I stayed in the little bubble, warded from any outsiders. Just me, the meadow and the birds.

Sometimes, I could hear somebody knocking on the bubble of my dream. And I could see them standing near the treeline. Yet, they couldn’t see me. Demons and spirits alike just stared into the meadow, a paradise they would never enter. No, this was my place, and mine alone.

I don’t want to wake up, there is so much uncertainty out there, so much doubt. Here, in my dreams, everything could be clear, because I made it clear. If I wanted to read a book, I’d just think of one and it plopped down from the sky and into my hands. If I wanted to listen to music, I just thought of my favourite song and it played through invisible speakers that hung from the clouds.

I stretched my legs and looked at my bare toes as I wiggled them, the grass tickling me.

I could stay here forever. But sometimes, forever feels like just one second.

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The dark night sky greeted me as I opened my eyes. Thousands upon thousands of stars winked back at me. I looked to where my campfire had once been, and saw how it was still somewhat crackling in its own heat, the wood underneath burned up into black glowing coals. I had fallen asleep outside, instead of in my tent. The wind screeched through the spring’s soft air, and I shivered as it seeped through my clothes. I pulled my cape closer around my body, and my hood over my head.

The woods were silent. And for a minute, I felt safe as the ward around my camp buzzed to let me know it was still there. The moon lit up the soft sparkling grass as I stood up from behind the fire and brushed myself off.

I had left Rivain and Tsura as soon as Learning had told me to go home. I didn’t know why, and sure, it was quite random. But I knew that when a spirit tells you to go home, you go home. Though, I’m not quite sure where home is. I had had so many homes. Kirkwall had been my home, Antiva had been my home, and even Rivain had been my home. But those were homes away from home. There was only one place I had truly felt where I belonged, a place I had loved, a place I had defended. Ferelden. My first home.

And I was going back. How long had it been? Seventy years? More? At least no one would
recognize me. Everyone I had met back then, was dead. Would Daniel’s grave still be there? Or had nature already reclaimed it? And Sybil’s grave?

I should visit her.

I sighed and turned around, opening the flap of my tent and falling face first into my bedroll. With my knees tucked to my chest, I closed my eyes again, my ears twitching as they focused on nature’s sounds. I was in the Free Marches now, close to Wildervale, and it wouldn’t take long for me to travel through Orlais to Ferelden’s border. I know that taking the ferry was faster, and that way I didn’t need to go through Orlais, that hateful place. But I wasn’t planning on meeting another group of Raiders again. Once was enough.

I smiled as I felt sleep coming closer again, and my heart thumped with excitement. I wanted to go back to my dreams, back to my own bubble. But then, just before I could drift off, my ward suddenly went deadly silent. Somebody was close. Too close.
I sat up. Someone was running through the woods. I could hear their armour rustling, their breath rasping in their throat. Their footsteps, tumbling, panicking. I balled my hands into fists, my eyes focussing on the treeline as I swiped the flap of my tent open. And yes, there. A man was racing towards my camp. But not just a man. A Templar. I choked.

Shit.

The man ran, his helmet shaking on his head. The Templar’s left arm was bloodied because of a deep scratch that went straight through his armour. He held his sword dangling in his other hand. Where had his shield gone to? I could smell his sweat, his blood, his fear. I stood straight, bracing myself for the impending attack. Magic curled around my fingers. I must protect myself. The Templar stopped in the middle of my camp, his breath came out as a pained wheeze as he stared into my eyes and to my sparkling hands.

He whimpered. They never whimper.

I raised my hands upwards defensively as the Templar tried to scurry closer. I could see his eyes getting bigger, his pupils smaller, his lashes wetter.

Behind the man, I heard the bushes grumble, moving. Was it another Templar? No, that smell… that was no man.

‘Please!’ the Templar cried as my hands raised higher.

Small purple fiery sparks burst from my fingers. The Templar sunk to his knees, both of his arms defensively before his face. Yet, my sparks didn’t hurt him, but crawled over him, besides him and onto the bear that leaped out of the bushes. The giant beast growled loudly as its body smacked onto the ground. It moved its legs one last time, grunting, as the lights in its eyes died together with my sparks. The Templar loosened his hands and looked towards me surprised. He then stared behind him, at the dead bear lying just near his feet. The man stood up shakenly, looking back to me now, and swallowed. He then fell on his knees again, clutching his arm and grunting. I took a step closer.

‘Don’t come closer, apostate!’ he cursed, trying to get up again, but failing.

I snorted and took another step forward.

‘I said… stand back!’ he screamed, his eyes still big and afraid.

‘Shhh’, I whispered as I slowly raised my hands again and pulled down my hood. The Templar breathed shallowly as he stared into my left eye. ‘It’s okay’, I said, ‘I won’t hurt you.’
I came closer again, the Templar now silent as he was still staring into my eyes, mesmerized. I knelt beside him, my hands slowly touching his cold armour, reaching towards the deep scratch in his arm.

‘Don’t’, he whined.

I smiled reassuringly as I pressed my hands against his throbbing cut. The Templar winced, grunting as my magic flowed through my hands, shimmering a soft green light. It found his wound and seeped into it, slowly knitting it back together until there was nothing left. His skin gleamed as I let go.
The man stared at me, his mouth open, his eyes softened. I smiled back.

‘Thank you’, he muttered as he stared at his arm.

I nodded.

‘And sorry.’

What?

I wanted to jump up, pull away, but the Templar suddenly grabbed my arm as his eyes gleamed a bright blue. And then I felt it. Thousands of needles crashed into my skin. I screamed, hard, like I had never before. The needles stung in every pore of my body, ripping everything away. My magic, I felt it coil inside of me, burning, evaporating almost. My eyes trembled as I felt the needles pricking me in my head, my eyes, my mouth, stinging me everywhere, letting my magic seep out.

The world went silent as I fell to the ground. I stared up towards the thousands of shimmering stars. And then, the universe swallowed me whole.

***

‘She saved me’

‘Yes, good for you. But an apostate is an apostate.’

‘We should kill her, Maker’s sake.’

‘No! I did my duty, but I will not kill her. She saved me! She knew what I was and saved me!’

‘Fine. We bring her to the Circle. Let them do what they see fit.’

‘Sounds good, repays your debt, Simon.’

‘Where to?’

‘Kirkwall?’

‘No. They’ll eat her alive. I won’t do that. That’s the same as killing her.’

‘Alright there, good knight. Got a better idea?’

‘Ostwick.’

‘Fine.’

***
The chains rattled as I moved my arms. What? Where am I? What happened? I opened my eyes, my sight blurry. I tried to move, to turn around, but my body felt sore to the bone.

‘Calm there. Apostate.’ Someone said and took a step forward.

Shakenly, I looked up and stared into the hard eyes of a Templar.

‘Don’t you move’, he ordered and unsheathed his sword, resting its tip on my throat.

‘What?’ I mumbled as I looked around, panicking. I was encircled by stone walls, all closing in on me. My arms hung next to me, chained onto the cell’s wall.

‘Calm down, Tibald.’ A woman’s voice hushed.

A female mage stepped into the light of the torch that hung beside me. She wore long robes with curling patterns on it and a staff attached to her back with straps. She stared into my eyes reassuringly. ‘She’s still young.’

‘Watch it. She may not be an abomination, but she can still be a blood mage.’ Tibald cursed and almost spat at my face.

‘She is too old. Probably too far gone. We cannot let her study among the other apprentices.’ A man said as he walked towards the woman. He too was wearing long robes. But his face was sterner than the woman beside him.

‘Give her a chance. Let her do the Harrowing right now. Then we’ll immediately know if she’s too far gone or not.’ The woman’s eyes locked with mine.

‘She had no training! She won’t stand a chance!’ It was the Templar who I had rescued. He stepped before me, pushing away Tibald’s sword.

‘She must. It’s her only chance. Harrowing and stay. Or become Tranquil. Those are the rules.’ The woman didn’t break contact.

‘Senior Enchanter…’ the other mage butted in.

Suddenly, another man stepped forward. He was older than the rest, his robes more luxurious. He looked down on me, his eyes almost scolding. But then, he sighed.

‘First Enchanter Delbert’, the female mage began, her eyes pleading.

He looked towards her and nodded. ‘Let her choose’, he finally said.

They all focused back on me now. I swallowed. Harrowing? I had heard of the Tranquil, weren’t they like, cut off from the Fade? Let’s not do that. I don’t want to lose my dreams, my bubble.

‘What is this Harrowing?’ I lifted my chin, my eye gleaming in the dark.

The First Enchanter grimaced. ‘You will soon find out.’ The man then turned around, disappearing through the door of my cell.

The Templar called Tibald grunted as he unlocked my chains. I fell to the ground, no more strength left in my body. The stone floor almost greeted me, had the other Templar not caught me in time. I looked up to him. Why? I had saved him. Why had he done this to me? The man’s face was full of grief. Apologetic almost. If I had the strength to bite or scratch or even spit, I would have. But I was too weak.
‘I am sorry’, he mumbled again as he helped me back on my feet.

I’m nothing with an apology right now.

‘Simon, come. Take her to the Great hall. We will prepare the ritual’, the female mage, the Senior Enchanter, said as she stared at us. Her eyes almost seemed… kind. ‘What is your name, dear?’

‘Saeris’, I huffed. I still feel so weak. How can I do this test when I can’t even stand?

‘I am Senior Enchanter Lydia’, the woman smiled encouragingly. She then nodded towards Simon, who was still holding me straight. ‘Let us go.’

Simon carefully pushed me forward as I tried putting one foot in front of the other. When I have all of my powers back, I will kick all of their asses. Hard.

We walked out of the cell I had woken up in. I looked around and immediately noticed the round walls, a maze of rooms. This was a Circle of Magi. A prison for mages. A gilded cage. Fuck.

We entered a big room, the Great Hall I presume. It had large, colour-stained windows, reminding me of how a church had looked back on Earth. As we entered, a group of six Templars greeted us, all eyeing me suspiciously. I think Templars were born with suspicion on their faces. They were in full armour, except for their helmets, so they could all properly see me. In the middle of the ring of Templars, the First Enchanter stood. He eyed me almost with concern. In the centre of the room, there stood a large bowl filled with a glowing essence. Lydia walked in front of me towards the Templars, and took her place next to the First Enchanter.

‘Magic exists to serve man, and never to rule over him. Thus spoke the prophet Andraste as she cast down the Tevinter Imperium, ruled by mages who had brought the world to the edge of ruin.’ One of the Templars who stood in the circle said. It was Tibald, his eyes serious and murderous almost. His voice twisted in a repetitive tune. This was probably a speech for every mage to hear before they underwent this test. ‘Your magic is a gift, but it is also a curse, for demons of the Fade are drawn to you, and seek to use you as a gateway into this world.’

Yeah. Like I didn’t know that already.

‘This is why the Harrowing exists. The ritual sends you to the Fade, and there you will face a demon, armed with only your will.’ Lydia took a step forward, her voice calming.

Oh. Piece of cake. I swallowed hard. ‘What happens if I can’t defeat this demon?’ I met demons before, but never being as weak as I am now.

‘It will turn you into an abomination and we will be forced to slay you.’ Tibald grunted again, his lips curling into a smirk. That bastard wanted me to fail. I heard the other Templars twist on their feet as I glared at him. ‘This is lyrium, the very essence of magic and your gateway into the Fade.’ He mumbled and pointed to the bowl with the strange blue liquid.

Lyrium? I never had to use that before. I didn’t want to touch it.

‘The Harrowing is a secret out of necessity. Every mage must go through this trial by fire.’ Lydia interrupted again as she put her hand on my shoulder. ‘As we succeeded, so shall you. Keep your wits about you and remember the Fade is a realm of dreams. The spirits may rule it, but your will is real.’

I smiled. Lady, I am more than a hundred years old. I’ve been more in the Fade than you’ll ever be. Yet, why do I feel so nervous now?
‘She must go through this test alone, Senior Enchanter.’ The First Enchanter stated, his voice sounded pitiful. Tibald grimaced as he pushed Lydia’s hand of my shoulder. And I heard the First Enchanter grunt at that. But the old man didn’t move, yet just stared at me.

I straightened my shoulders as I heard Simon step back from behind me. I almost stumbled as I walked towards the bowl in the centre of the circle of Templars. All of them were looking at me now, waiting to turn on me as soon as I had failed.

The lyrium coiled as looked into the bowl. I don’t need lyrium to enter the Fade.

‘Saeris’, Lydia whispered, edging me forward, her eyes filled with sorrow.

I swallowed. Let’s do this. I’ve had worse, no? Let’s play this little game of theirs.

My hands dipped into the curling pool of magic. Lyrium strengthened mages’ magic, but not mine. Yet, I felt how it seeped into my pores, filling me with magic that wasn’t mine. This test would be harder than I suspected.

The essence exploded by my touch, filling the room with a blinding blue light, taking my mind further away.

***

I woke up in a strange forest. Why is it always a forest? But, where there should be grass, there was only dried mud. And the trees, all of them were dead, sucked dry, emptied of life.

How had my bubble changed?

Here, I felt naked. There was no ward protecting me, no sun warming my arms. I closed my eyes. Think of the soft sun, Saeris, of damp green grass. I opened my eyes again, but nothing had changed. My eye coiled, flickering with the lyrium’s power. But that was not my power. I felt… limited.

I looked around again, and saw how some stones were hovering mid-air, green moss hanging down from them. The sky was filled with red strokes, like blood twisting around the clouds. And then it occurred to me. This wasn’t my bubble, but somebody else’s.

I need to get out of here. And quick.

I slumped forwards, following the rough path. Suddenly, a wisp appeared next to me, a small orb of greenish light. I smiled at it as it twirled around me, almost warming my cold arms.

‘Hey’, I grinned at it, ‘thanks.’

The wisp chittered, and then moved forward again, away from the path. Should I follow it? Or should I follow the path.

‘Wait!’ I yelled, and the wisp stopped moving. I closed my right eye, only looking through my left one. The Fade cannot hide anything from me, the whispers had said once. Better make use of it. I sighed disappointedly as the pure wisp shattered, a wraith taking its place. It wanted to deceive me, to lead me astray.

‘Fenedhis’, I cursed at it.

The wraith screeched angrily. Its plan had failed.

I raised my hand as it leaped towards me, its magic curling angrily around its formless body.
‘Disappear’ I ordered, my voice filled with will as fire spat from my palm. The wraith screeched again, its body evaporating into mist as the fire bit.

I continued on the path, which lead deeper and deeper into the strange woods. This path probably leads to the owner of the bubble, which I presume was a demon. Great, go to the predator’s lair. What kind of demon would it be? Would it be like the smoking presence, with red violating eyes? Would it take the forms of my parents again? Of my brother? Of Daniel? Or Sybil? Would it tap into my desires? Would it search for my pride? For my fears?

The path lead towards a small open space, and continued further behind it. The small open space was littered with rocks and dirt. There stood three mirrors in the centre, all facing each other. I crept closer. What would I see?

The mirror to my left was the first one to catch my eye. Who was that? Oh. That was me from long, long ago. The girl in the mirror smiled back at me, her blonde hair waving around her tanned face, the freckles on her nose moving as she wiggled it. The little human girl looked up to me, her short, chubby hands reaching upwards, as if saying she wanted me to pick her up. Her round blue eyes sparkled with glee.

But I took a step back. ‘I’m sorry’, I whispered, ‘but you don’t exist anymore.’ The little girl looked down, fat tears dripping from her sad eyes. Then, she disappeared into thin air, the mirror now only showing an empty reflection.

I looked at the mirror on my right now and yelped. An old, elven woman knowingly nodded at me. She had long white hair and wrinkles waving over her ancient face. She was somewhat shorter than me, her back a little bit arched. But her eyes. My mouth fell open. I stared into my own eyes. One coral blue, the other emerald green. This was me, a me that could’ve been. Old, happy, aging. The me that I yearned for. Mortal. The woman held out her hand as an open invitation, urging me to come to her world. To grow, to love and to let go. To die.

But I can’t die yet. I smiled sadly towards the woman. The child had existed once. Had lived. But this was nothing but fake. A path I would never walk on. I am not her. She’s but a dream. The older me grinned and shook her head, almost proud. And then, she stepped away from the mirror’s frame. Into nothingness. A possibility never granted. And so, another mirror with an empty reflection.

I sighed, bracing myself for the mirror in front of me. But then I looked up, and stared into nothing. There was no reflection. It almost seemed like I wasn’t there to begin with. Only the dry forest could be seen. I was invisible. I snorted. I was invisible, lost into oblivion. Eternally there, but not at all. Maybe, the demon of this place had thought that this mirror would be the hardest one of all. And it would’ve been, if I had looked into it before my reawakening. But now, this was just a stupid joke. I knew I had an impact on this world. I knew because I had loved, and others had loved me. And some may have forgotten me, and I wasn’t eternalised in history books, but I would never forget. And as long as I would not forget, I wouldn’t fall into oblivion. As long as I loved, I wouldn’t disappear into nothing.

I am here.

The mirror shattered then, shards splintering across the open space. I picked one up from the ground. And there I was, in the shards. Not whole, but I was there. Little pieces of me everywhere. Shattered, but real. And maybe that’s how history will remember me. Little pieces of me here and there, like a puzzle.

I smiled at the three mirrors. Nice try. I then turned on my heels to follow back the track towards
whatever was at the end of. I strolled through the dried-up forest again, hearing the silent buzzing of the wisps/wraiths circling me like predators. Sometimes, one dared to hover closer, miming voices from long ago, taunting me, throwing down the gloves.

‘Sister! Hey! Hey! Come on!’ Sybil’s voice laughed with glee, the wraith glowing and screeching as I let it dissolve with a flick of my hand.

‘Dear, that’s not very nice’, mum’s voice scowled at me like she used to do. The wraith yelped as I spat at it, hiding back into the forest.

The voices kept on coming for the remainder of the path. Just until it ended. Then, all of the wraiths silently cursed and disappeared into the treeline, their lights dousing within seconds, off to torment others. The path led onto a big open field, its grass burned down to charred stumps. It was a vast ocean of burned grass and flowers, an ocean of black. Do I know this place? I walked further into it, and felt a strange sun almost burning my skin, the clouds a hovering warning above my head. It only occurred to me where I was, when I stepped onto something crunchy. I leaped as I saw what lay underneath my boots.

‘No’, I softly whispered as I looked at the dead sparrow near my feet. Its wings were spread as if it wanted to fly away, but its body was scalded with cuts and burns. The eyes of the bird, its once lively beady eyes, were still open, staring at the sky above. Towards its home. I started shaking. I knew the birds weren’t real, they were a part of my imagination, but they were my birds, my dreams. I looked towards the rest of the burned meadow, and saw how hundreds of birds lay on the ground.

This was my meadow. My bubble. Destroyed.

‘Are you angry now?’ A coarse voice lisped.

In the centre of the meadow, a creature stood, its body burning and slithering, like a massive mountain of coiling lava.

‘Aren’t you livid?’ it grinned maliciously.

I was angry. My dream. ‘Why?’ I mumbled.

‘Because I can. Does that make you pelting?’ the demon screeched again. ‘It does, doesn’t it? I can feel your rage.’

Of course. This was not a fear demon, or desire, or pride, or terror. It was rage.

‘You are so full of rage, creature, it fuels your magic, it gives you strength.’

I remained silent, staring into its radiating eyes.

‘You and I are the same. Anger is what drives us, drives you. Together, we will burn! Burn them all! Orlais! Up in flames! Templars! Ablaze! Think of that power! Killer! We are one and the same!’ it kept on screeching, coming closer, its body sliding over the burned ground, leaving a trail of mad fire.

I sighed. Calm down, Saeris. Calm down.

‘You are not calm! YOU ARE FIRE!’ the rage demon laughed.

‘No’, I screamed, my voice an eternal echo in the burned meadow. I was angry. Of course. But I was so much more.
'YES YOU ARE! COME!' it screamed, almost hearing my inner monologue. ‘You’ll come to me at last. Soon I shall see the land through your eyes, creature. You shall be mine, body and soul!’ the demon now raged towards me, its fiery claws extended towards my face.

Yet, I didn’t move. Rage, anger, it’s such a simple emotion. Everybody has it. It’s just there. The trick is to not let it control you. To be stronger. And if anger comes, use it to do good, not bad. This demon is only fuelled by rage, simple discontent. I am fuelled by so much more.

The demon reached towards me and I could feel its smouldering heat. I stared up into its eyes and felt a cooling calmness slither around my body. But I felt fire too. But this was not rage. It was passion.

‘I am fire’, I smiled as I looked up to the demon, ‘But also so much more.’

The demon screeched as it tried touching my skin, and a coldness grasped its body. I froze the demon in its place. I huffed as I balled my fists, and then I let go. Let go of everything. A cooling breeze whispered through the meadow. The demon cracked in its wintry prison. I looked up at it.

‘You burned my home’, I whispered and saw the demon’s eyes turning, ‘but I forgive you.’

And with that, the demon exploded, exuding a blinding white light. And I felt a sereneness returning to my body. And so the meadow disappeared, softly caressing my cheeks as it dissolved, waking me up.

***

‘She’s awake!’ Simon cried as I opened my eyes.

I stared at the high ceiling of the Great Hall of the Circle. And it took me a second to realize I was still alive. I was perfectly fine. I choked up my breath as I sat up, the chamber turning upside down together with my stomach. The Templars all still encircled me, staring with their swords drawn. But Lydia pushed them aside as she squatted next to me and smiled. She then rested her hands on my shoulder.

‘Congratulations’, the First Enchanter took a step forward, his face a stern mask. But I swear I could see some pride slip from underneath. ‘You are now a Circle Mage.’

Wait. What?

Chapter End Notes

Some dialogue was taken from Dragon Age: Origins.

If you liked it, you can always leave me a comment or a kudo!
“NO!” I screamed as Tibald grabbed my biceps harder, holding me in place. I cried while I wriggled against his cold armour.

“Stay still now, Saeris, it will be over soon”, First Enchanter Delbert said as he held a strange knife against the palm of my hand that Tibald was holding in place.

“DON’T!” I yelped as I felt the cold knife sliding against my flesh, cutting it open. A strange magic seeped into it, claiming it. I wanted to get it out of me. I felt sparks dancing over my fingertips, and imagined how Tibald’s eyes got bigger.

Delbert hissed, coming closer to my face as he held the knife strongly against my throbbing cut, and whispered sternly, ‘Stop it, he’ll smite you again. Where’ll you be then?’

I looked into the enchanter’s eyes as I let the sparks fly, feeling Tibald relax behind me. I could almost hear him smirk.

‘Please, I don’t want this’, I begged, feeling how my voice got more desperate by the minute.

Delbert shook his head and lifted my hand downwards. That was when I felt how the strange magic was curling itself around my blood, pushing it outwards. I felt it taking something extra out of me, like a real part of me, not just my blood. A part of me lost forever to the strange vial Delbert was holding underneath my cut. The glass vial had golden swirls on it, and strangely glowed when my blood seeped into it. No, wait, it wasn’t the vial that was glowing. It was my own blood. What kind of magic was this?

“This is a phylactery”, Delbert started as if he saw the questions troubling my eyes, ‘which contains an essence of your magic.’

I swallowed while looking at my glowing blood.

‘With this handy little thing, I will be able to hunt your pretty face down if you would ever escape.’ Tibald leaned closer, and I felt his breath tickling the hairs of my neck. ‘There’s no place in Thedas for you to hide’, he smirked and took the phylactery from Delbert’s hands.

‘Where are you taking it!’, I grunted as Tibald threw me into another Templar’s hands, who grabbed me even harder than Tibald had.

‘Far away’, he grimaced.

Shit! No! I need to destroy it! I need to get out of here! I need to get home! I wriggled again, feeling how my power slowly returned to my body. I will burn this place down before they can take that thing away. I knew I could. Just one flick of my hand, and all of these people would be dead.

Delbert took a step closer, and I saw something in his eyes that reflected almost apologetic.

‘Fen’Harel ma halam’, I spat at him as he tried getting closer.
Tibald’s laugh roared through the room, almost shaking the walls. ‘Throwing curses no one understands won’t get you far.’ He grimaced at me. But I saw hesitation slithering behind his eyes as his hand slowly reached towards his sword. He saw the threat that was me, he saw the fiery snake lurking. And I wanted to bite.

This place would crumble, so no one would be imprisoned again. And I was ready to let it burn. But then, I heard laughter from outside.

Children.

There where children here. Shit.

Delbert held out his hand to mine as he came closer. I balled my fists, but the Templar holding me snorted and pulled my arm forward, pinching my wrist so my hand would open again, exposing the already healing cut. The First Enchanter laid a small silver ring on the palm of my hand. The ring had blue strands curling all over the metallic band. The blue was glowing, pricking my hand with a familiar magic. This was lyrium-infused…

‘This ring is a symbol of the Circle of Magi. A symbol of you and of you belonging to this respected institution.’ Delbert held his head up high as he took the ring again and slid it on my ring finger. I wanted to throw it out. It felt wrong. Like so many things in this place.

‘As Knight-Commander of the Circle of Ostwick’, Tibald took a step forward, his brows furrowed, ‘I welcome you’, he glared at me again, ‘mage.’

Fenedhis.

The Templar who was holding me pulled me out of the Great Hall, into the narrow and cold corridors of the tower. I writhed against the Templar’s hold, but he was too strong. And I wanted to push out my magic, to let him squirm with my sparks, but I felt how the ring almost blocked me. Like a ward.

The Templar grunted as he finally threw me into a big room. The room was filled with bunkbeds and chests. People were hanging about as I was thrown in, and they all looked up at me curiously. I looked back as the Templar closed the giant wooden door behind him with a loud bang.

‘Are you new?’ someone said and crept closer.

I hissed as I stared forward, my left eye coiling and twisting. Delbert had asked about it before cutting my damn hand open. ‘Just a birth mark’, I had bitten. And he had just stared into it, seeing how it curled and twisted. They couldn’t say if it was my magic, if it was demon possession or blood magic. They couldn’t point a finger to it. But it still called to them, to the mages and the Templars alike. And they all stared.

The person who had asked the question faltered. It was a girl, maybe around eighteen years old. She wore a simple long robe, a robe that everyone else in the room was apparently wearing. There were humans as well as elves standing around me, all eyeing me curiously. They all seemed to be around their twenties.

The girl that was standing closest to me, stared at my hand and squinted her eyes. ‘You have the Ring of Study? You are a mage, no apprentice?’ her high pitched voice filled the silent room, that was now starting to fill itself with murmurs.

‘She must earn her place and learn the ways of the circle. Then, she may join the other mages.’ A familiar voice said. It was Lydia, the Senior Enchanter.
The apprentices parted as Lydia stepped towards me. ‘We have put you through the Harrowing, as we normally don’t allow apostates your age. Those are sent to Kirkwall’, Lydia knelt beside me, her eyes boring into mine, ‘but you saved a Templar, and he asked us for mercy, so we had to do the ritual immediately. It was the only way.’

‘I don’t want this’, I spat, ‘I don’t want to be here!’

‘This is your home now. You will learn with these apprentices, study the way of magic and how to control it. This is how all mages must live their lives.’ Lydia stated. How can she believe that she must live like this? That this is how it’s supposed to be? This is a prison!

A prison I will escape.

I jumped up, making Lydia almost topple over, and summoned fire on my hands. I will burn down these doors, and I will destroy that stupid blood vial, and I will get out of here.

‘Don’t!’ A girl screamed as I raised my hands.

Lydia leaped in front of me, her arms spread out like wings. ‘If you fight, they will kill you.’ She yelped.

‘No! I will kill them!’ I grunted as I tried pushing her aside. But the other mages now all leaped onto me, holding my hands back, pushing me down again. Why are they stopping me? Don’t they want to escape? Don’t they want to be free?

‘Please!’ a boy cried, really cried, as he held onto my hands.

‘Saeris’, Lydia huffed, her eyes desperate, ‘Please. If you escape, someone else will suffer in your place.’ Her voice turned angry now as she locked eyes with me.

The fire on my hands quenched. ‘What?’

‘It’s how they keep the strongest of us from escaping’, Lydia started, ‘to keep all of us in check. If someone escapes successfully and is not found, someone else will take the blame for it. Someone will be made Tranquil in your place.’

I stared at the Senior Enchanter.

‘It is worse than death. You do not want that on your conscience.’

The other apprentices nodded, all of them sighing when I slumped.

What do I do? I can’t escape and just let someone else become Tranquil. How could I live with myself? But I can’t stay here. The spirit of Learning, Tsura, had told me to go home. Did they know that I would be taken like this? I don’t age, the Templars will notice eventually. What will they do then? I can’t live here!

Lydia put her hand on my shoulder. ‘I’m sorry Saeris.’

I should’ve let that Templar die. I should’ve just turned around, looked the other way.

Shit! SHIT!

Lydia led me towards my bunkbed in the middle of the room, hushing me with motherly words. But I didn’t listen. I just stared at my feet, numb. How can I see the sky in this place? I need to see the sky! How can I see my eye in the heavens If I can’t see them! This is wrong! This isn’t supposed to
happen!
I crept onto the bed that had been appointed to me. It was hard, and cold. The other apprentices all
still stared at me. I could feel their pity. But I didn’t want it. I laid my head on my thin pillow, closing
my eyes and opening them again, hoping I would wake up somewhere else. Alas, that doesn’t
always happen.

‘Where are you from?’ a girl said as she crept closer to my bunkbed. She had long blond hair and a
pretty freckled face.

I ignored her, turned around on my back and stared at the slatted bottom of the bunk bed above mine.

‘Are you a blood mage, what’s with the eye?’ another boy, elven this time, hesitantly asked from the
bed behind mine.

I sighed and looked sideways, towards the other side of the room.

‘How have you been living outside for so long? You’re not a demon, right?’ again another girl asked
who was sitting next to the elven boy on the bed next to mine.

Fenedhis lasa! ‘I’m from Ferelden, I’m not a blood mage or a demon, my eye is a birth mark. Now
you leave me alone, alright.’ I cursed as I swiftly turned around again. I don’t feel like answering
questions, I don’t feel like making friends. I want to be alone and I want to just get out of here!
The apprentices faltered in their beds, their faces white. Some rolled with their eyes, others shook
their heads as they turned around into their beds.

Good. Silence. I don’t need them to like me.

I sighed as I was finally left alone, and turned on my side again. Please let the Fade take me away
from here.

***

‘Saeris’

I opened my eyes and the blue sky greeted me. I sighed. This is right. The grass tickled my cheeks as
I stretched my limbs. Instead of cold stone walls, a forest was encircling me now. The sun was again
a warming presence. This was my meadow, my home, my bubble. No demon could ever burn it, no
Templar could ever take it away. This was mine.

A little sparrow chirped as it twirled through the air and landed on my knee.

‘Hey, da’len, want some snacks, yes?’ I giggled at it.

But the little brown bird cocked its head and spread its wings wide. How curious. Normally it just
wanted some breadcrumbs. Yet, now the bird just took off again into the air. It hovered for a while,
almost urging me to stand up. And I obliged. I huffed as I rolled over from the grass and jumped up.
The sparrow chirped contently as it cocked its little head again.

‘Do you want me to follow?’ I grinned as the sparrow playfully leaped through the air. I’ll take that
as a yes.
The sparrow then hovered further and further away, each time waiting for me to follow. And I did,
taking one step in front of the other until I was at the border of my bubble, near the treeline. As
usual, multiple presences lurked behind the trees, trying to catch a glimpse of my paradise. But then
I saw something familiar. It didn’t hide behind a tree, or lurk in the dark, it just walked slowly from
underneath the shadows.
'Andaran atish’an, Saeris’, the spirit of Learning said as it hovered closer to the border of my bubble. It was the first time for me to see it without Tsur’a’s body. Learning’s body was neither male or female, but something in between. It also didn’t have a ‘real’ body, like they had in the waking world. It glowed, almost transcendent, its figure glowing a faint blue and white light.

I took a step back and covered my right eye with my hand. Yet, Learning’s appearance didn’t change, didn’t transform. This was no disguise. This was truly the spirit itself.

‘Aneth ara’, I mumbled as I took a step closer again.

‘Elan gara? May I enter?’ Learning spoke, its voice an echoing whisper.

‘Vin’, I said as I put my hand on my invisible ward. A small doorway appeared, only seen by me and who I permitted to enter. Learning’s body buzzed as it hovered through the portal.

‘I come to give you guidance, lasa ghilan’, Learning spoke as it walked towards the centre of the meadow.

I followed and stood behind it as I sighed assured, ‘Yes! I need your help! I need to learn how to get out of here! Mana. Ma halani!’

‘I know’, Learning hummed somewhat sadly, ‘yet, my guidance will not get you out of where you are now. Not without death and guilt.’

‘No! Isn’t there a way?’

‘Din, no, Saeris’, Learning came closer to where I stood, its presence glowing a compassionate warmth onto my skin, ‘I can only tell you to wait, iselena, for there will come a time when you will flee your prison without heaving guilt onto your shoulders.’

‘No, I don’t want to wait! I want to go home!’

‘Yet, you must’

‘For how long?’

‘I do not know’, Learning whispered, ‘but there will come a time to rebel, harilla, once more.’

‘But when!’ I cried desperately. For how long must I stay in this damned prison?

‘I cannot tell, Saeris’, shit, ‘yet, blood will be spilled.’

‘WAIT!’ I yelled as I felt a familiar tingling feeling.

I was waking up.

***

‘Hey, newbie, get up’, someone kicked against the woodwork of my bed. I swore as I sat up, blinking with my eyes. Fenedhis! Why do I always have to wait? Wait for the heroes to gather, wait for my eye to appear in the heavens, wait for another rebellion, dammit! I stared angrily at the person who woke me up. It was one of the girls I snarled at yesterday. She had her hands in her sides as she impatiently tapped her foot on the ground.

‘You need to get up. Classes are starting.’
What? Am I in school again? I’m too old for this shit. ‘Classes?’ I mumbled as I rubbed my eyes.

‘Yes. Classes. You need to study with us, Senior Enchanter Lydia said so.’ The girl clicked her tongue. ‘Come on now, don’t want to be late because of you.’

I looked around the empty dorm room. All of the beds were already made-up and the torches flickered a sharp light. Do they change colour when it’s morning and when it’s evening? I think so, how else would they know what time it is? There were no windows in here. The girl in front of me sighed again.

‘Put that robe on, and then go to the library on the fifth floor. I don’t have time for this.’ She said as she arrogantly turned on her heels and marched out of the giant room again. Seems like I don’t have to worry about making friends.

I checked the robe the girl had thrown on my bed. You could say it was like a very long, thick dress, made out of a simple blue fabric. The robe had long sleeves with quilted elbow and shoulder pads. The threading was also quite simple and there was a thin leather belt accompanying the outfit. It had a golden circle engraved in it. The Circle’s symbol. And finally, a pair of brown boots rested near the end of my bed. I put my hair up in a high ponytail and changed quickly, stomping out of the room while pulling my boots on. The giant wooden door that I had almost burned down yesterday, now stood open. I could so easily just sneak out. But how could I? Who would be turned Tranquil as punishment?

‘S… Saeris’, someone stuttered. I looked up and grunted. It was Simon, the Templar that had gotten me into this mess. ‘I… you look good in those robes.’

I tried walking past him, trying to ignore what he said. I could just break his nose, no harm in that? Simon pulled me back by my arm when I slid past him through the door. But he let go as soon as I hissed furiously at him.

‘I’m sorry for what happened’, he mumbled, his eyes pitiful.

Oh. He’s sorry? Alright, no harm done. Let’s just forgive the guy for betraying me when I saved his life and for putting me in a prison filled with arrogant mages. I don’t need sunlight at all. I lifted up my chin and glared at him from underneath my eyelashes.

‘I had to. It is my duty’, he started to explain, ‘But this place is good! Here you can…’

‘Oh quit it!’ I hissed. ‘I helped you, saved that stupid life of yours. And this is how you repay me? Smite the shit out of me and put me in a Circle?’

‘Saeris’, Simon lifted his hand and rested it on my shoulder, ‘Please I…’

I shook his hand off of me. What is his game? ‘Leave me alone’, I swore and stomped through the hallway. I felt his eyes burning in my back.

‘Hey, better luck next time!’ I heard another Templar yell at him.

If only I could burn this place down. But Learning said that the only way of escaping was to wait. Did I have a choice? Maybe, if I just held my head down, stay out of rouble, time would fly by. What was time for an immortal?

I walked up the steep staircase towards the fifth floor, which was two floors higher than where the apprentices’ dormitory was. As I slumped towards the centre of the corridor, looking into each room hoping it was the library, I stumbled upon a smaller classroom. Ten to twenty children were sitting in a half-circle on the floor. A mage stood in front of them, her hands making giant gestures. It was
Lydia.

‘And so Andraste heard His words’, she explained exuberantly.

There were children in here, taken from their homes, their families. Why do they put children into such a prison? This isn’t right. Why do they look so happy? How can one be happy here? Maybe because they don’t know any better. This cage was their life.

‘Ah’, Lydia clasped as she noticed me, ‘Saeris! How are you my dear?’

The children all looked up curiously and gasped. They probably didn’t see new faces very often.

I huffed. What do you want me to say? That I’m glad to be here and slept well? Instead, I just remained silent and looked down. I wanted to cry, like a little child would. I didn’t want to stay in this place.

Lydia took a step closer, her eyes filled with compassion as she tapped my slumped shoulders.

‘You’ll be fine. You’ll like it here!’ she smiled. ‘You’re looking for the library I presume? It’s that way’, she said and pointed towards the end of the hallway.

I nodded silently. The children snickered as I turned around and started chattering.

‘Come now’, I heard Lydia hush as I walked through the corridor. How nice would it be to just be so innocent? To not know the outside world, its dangers, but also its wonders? You cannot miss something you’ve never known. But how could I live here, knowing so much and unable to ever forget?

The library was indeed by the end of the hallway. I heard people speaking inside. They stilled as I opened the big door. I felt like a high schooler on her first day of school.

A small group of apprentices were sitting behind desks in a corner of the huge library, which was a rotunda filled with books, bookstands, and staircases. And a lot of dust. The mage standing in front of the students, was the grumpy guy I had met in the cells. Didn’t he say that I was “too far gone”? Great, guess I’ll be his favourite pupil. The man was wearing almost the same robe I was, but it was more elaborate, the fabric finer, the threading in gold.

‘Ah, yes, you’, he sighed as he laid eyes on me, ‘you are late.’

I crossed my arms and looked at him defiantly. Was he going to scold me? What… on my first day? I was almost one hundred and fifty years old… why did I feel like a child in this place?

‘Sit’, he grunted and pointed towards a chair in the back, ignoring my arrogant stance.

I just nodded and slumped towards my seat. The other apprentices tried to not take notice of my presence. Some were angry that I had just arrived and immediately went through the Harrowing, making me, an “incompetent” apostate, of a higher rank than them even though they had been in the Circle all their life. Others found me strange and scary, having only heard of monster apostates who were possessed and used blood magic. And my green spewing eye also did not help with my “reputation”.

‘Let us continue’, the enchanter coughed as I sat down, ‘with our study of the Canticle of Apotheosis.’

Classes lasted for hours on end, with no breaks. And almost nothing was about magic. Andraste this, Chantry that, Maker here, Divine there. And this would continue on for years and years. Sometimes, magic would be discussed, but mostly in a theoretical order.

After classes in the library, I was supposed to go to “practical classes” in the Great Hall with other
“lesser” apprentices. I might’ve been officially a mage, but in practice, no one treated me so. I had been an apostate for all my life, and all I knew was “wrong”. I had to unlearn everything I knew, and learn the way of the Circle, the “right” way. But only, I couldn’t. I couldn’t learn their kind of magic. I couldn’t use their spells. Magic was like a second nature to me, I just made it happen. I never thought about it. But in the Circle, you were supposed to only do certain “tricks”. But I couldn’t name the magic I used. When I moved with magic, they called it to Fade Step. When I set something ablaze, they called it “Flashfire” and so on. The Circle liked putting everything into little boxes. And so they did with magic. Fire magic was Inferno, ice was Winter, my healing was Spirit and my sparks were Storm magic. But I couldn’t separate my nature into tiny categories. It’s like when you step forward with your right leg, you just do it. You don’t think “alright, Movement Right Step”. And I just shut up about conjuring plants and butterflies, I presumed they would totally freak out if they knew I could already do that too.

And to make all of this worse, I had to use a staff. I used to call it a pretty walking stick, and now it was just that. Before my reawakening, I had used them and trained with them with Nenara, but now using my hands felt more natural. My magic was also too strong for the feeble apprentice staff they had given me, so I had to use very soft magic in order not to break the wooden thing.

Overall, the mages here all thought I was just a terrible mage. But in the end, maybe that was for the best. Most ignored me, except for Lydia and Simon, the latter always eyeing me swooning everywhere I went. And when I crossed Tibald in the corridors, he would always smirk arrogantly my way. As if by saying he’d won, he’d tamed another apostate mage. But boy, if only he knew that I was just waiting for this place to crumble down.

And so I waited. Years seemed to fly by. When you don't see the outside world, don't see it change, you kind of forget how much time passes. Had it been months? Years? Or just mere seconds? The Fade helped of course, offering me blissful escapes to a sunny paradise. Waiting was the hardest when I heard whispers of Blights, Archdemons flying about and of a Qunari invasion in Kirkwall.

But I would get out of here. My home was waiting for me, and I would go there. Time would not hold me, it never did. And while heroes raged over Thedas and legends were made, I sat in the cold tower and waited for my time.

And my time would come very soon.

Chapter End Notes

I was writing this chapter, and it turned out way too long, so I'm splitting it into two. This is so the introduction of the Circle to Saeris, and her first days as a circle mage/apprentice. I know not a lot happens in this chapter, but next chapter some more action will ensue...
Where there is war,
Where there is injustice,
There will be rebellion.

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9:40 Dragon

Somewhere deep into the cracks of the earth, a monster awakened. A tainted creature opened its eyes to wreak havoc across Thedas. It was an Old God, its name a thundering nightmare. Urthemiel. The worms in the ground trembled by its roar. And its call was heard. Botched and rotten half-men raised from their underground shelters, gathering under Urthemiel’s appealing banner. The waking world had not seen their doom coming as an army of Darkspawn marched to the above.

Grey Wardens heard their grumble, their screams for light and blood, and called for a war, for defiance. Yet, no human lord or noble would hear their pleas. An Archdemon so big and vile, would certainly be seen or heard. Why support a war against an invisible creature? Only the Fereldan King, prideful and young, engaged to fight the horde. The fortress of Ostagar stood strong, undefeated for many ages. King Cailan Theirin, son of Maric Theirin, grandson of the Rebel Queen herself, assembled his men to fight for their land, their world. Alas, not everyone believed in Cailan’s and the Grey Wardens’ abilities. And so, when the Battle of Ostagar raged, Teryn Loghain Mac Tir refused to further the assault, abandoning the King and the Grey Wardens on the battlefield. The darkspawn roared as they overran the once-proud fortress, and took everyone to their deaths. Yet, some survived. A young Fereldan noble named Aedan Cousland had just lost everything due to a bloodied betrayal, leaving his family murdered. Recruited by the Grey Wardens, Aedan left for Ostagar, never forgetting his family he will one day avenge. As the battle developed for the worse, Aedan and another Grey Warden named Alistair were rescued by a strange figure. An old woman who called herself Flemeth saved the Warden, setting in motion her own plans for fate.

Together with a group of companions, Aedan Cousland travelled Ferelden in search of assembling coalitions with humans, dwarves and elves alike. And all followed his call, even the mages bowed for their saviour. And so, Aedan removed Loghain, who had usurped the throne and had sparked the Fereldan Civil War, from his power and beat Urthemiel at his own game with an alliance never seen before at the Battle of Denerim. Aedan’s friend and companion Alistair assumed the throne, reclaiming his birth right, for he was Maric Theirin’s bastard son, and so the last of the Theirin bloodline. Aedan Cousland eventually avenged his family’s death, and strangely survived the battle against the Archdemon. As of now, no one knows where the Hero of Ferelden remains, for his existence is clouded with mystery and suspicion.

Never had a Blight been so short. But many people still suffered. A young warrior tried protecting his family when the small village of Lothering was overrun by the loose darkspawn horde. He fought bravely against the heaving monsters to get his family and other survivors away from the unsalvageable battlefield. But he nor his remaining sibling could hold off the preying darkspawn. Yet, when their end was near, a high dragon appeared in the stormy skies. The dragon annihilated the darkspawn that had encircled the warrior and his party, and saved them. And as the dragon
reformed its figure, an elderly woman remained. And so, Flemeth had yet again twisted fate to her own hand.

The warrior’s name was Garrett Hawke, or just Hawke if you were his friend. And he was a ruthless but righteous man, and quite funny, or so I’ve heard. He successfully fled the Blight with his mother and sister and friend Aveline, and started anew in Kirkwall. The city had not been welcome to him, and he worked off debts as a refugee for years. But all got repaid with friendship and love. And eventually, honour. When a group of Qunari soldiers refused to leave the city for a missing relic, ancient tensions started escalating once more into a bloody battle. But Hawke stood up for the town he had come to love, and having had both ties with the Circle and with the Templars, Hawke assembled them all into an alliance, stood up against the Qunari and bravely fought back. After killing the Qunari leader, called the Arishok, Hawke fell into grace with his new home. And soon, he would be called the Champion of Kirkwall. The city fell into a peaceful era, and Hawke lived well with his friends and family. But, like in so many worlds, peace never lasts.

The Circle of Kirkwall was a cruel place and often mages could be seen jumping off to their deaths, rather than staying within. Knight-Commander Meredith used dreadful tactics to hold the mages down, using the Rite of Tranquillity on all who defied the Chantry. First Enchanter Orsino was disgusted by the Templars’ misuse of power, and accused Meredith of tyranny, calling for the citizens of Kirkwall to revolt. The people turned once more towards their Champion, and urged him to put an end to the Circle-Templar ongoing fight. And soon, Hawke became embedded in another battle.

But all escalated when Anders, Hawke’s companion and lover, and an apostate mage, blew up the Chantry of Kirkwall, killing thousands of innocents and covering the once peaceful city with death again. No diplomatic compromise could now be made between the heated sides of the battle. Blood had to be spilled.

Meredith, enraged by the loss of her holy Chantry, immediately invoked the Rite of Annulment, ordering the death of all mages residing in the city and its Circle. Garrett Hawke stood at a crossroads, but then, did something no one had done in a very long time. He stood up for the mages, repressed and desperate, and promised to protect them all.

But, in war, there are no winners. Meredith had gone mad and paranoid, and Orsino, who feared Hawke’s help wouldn’t have been enough, had turned to blood magic, turning himself into a monstrous Harvester, a golem made of corpses, as a last attempt to protect his fellow mages. Both leaders died by the Champion’s hands. In the end, Garrett Hawke escaped Kirkwall during the night, and has not been seen again. Or so the rumours go. A book has been written about this by one of his companions. But I haven’t read it. My Circle did not allow books that don’t concern the teachings of the Chant of Light.

While Kirkwall was at peace again, Thedas was not, and would not be for a very long time. News of the Kirkwall Rebellion had spread through all Circles across Thedas. They heard of the Templar Order’s monstrosities, and so some started revolting against their own oppressions. And despite the Templars trying to quell the mages’ new thirst for freedom, the discussion of secession from the Chantry continued and finally, culminated when the White Spire Circle in Val Royeaux rebelled.

Many mages and enchanters died during the revolt, and all retreated to Andoral’s Reach, a fortress situated in northwest Orlais. There the surviving First Enchanters proposed a vote for independence, the Revolutionists winning only by a slim margin against the Loyalists.

The Chantry lost their power over not only the Circle of Magi, but also over the Templar Order and the Seekers of Truth. Word of this spread fast, and more and more Circles started revolting, refusing the Templars’ power. And Templars in return refused to stay at their positions to keep the mages in their towers, and wished to join their brethren in the fight against apostates. As all parties broke free
of all authority and regulations, they prepared for a full-out war with one another.

The people of Thedas once more looked towards their acclaimed heroes of the past years and called for somebody to stand up and defend the innocent again in a war that did not just affect one country, but all of the waking world.

‘No! We are neutral! We will stay!’ Lydia yelled against the assembled mages in the Common Room. ‘This is our home! If we leave it, we will lose it, and so our lives too!’

‘It is of the utmost importance that we hold our position. Let the rebels wage their war. And let them die when they lose it.’ First Enchanter Delbert said as he raised his head up high, staring every mage in the room in the face. Delbert was a Loyalist, and had voted against the secession. He looked around nervously as the mages in the room started arguing with one another.

‘This is our chance for freedom! I want to see the sun again!’

‘We got a roof over our heads, warm beds, food, let us stay!’

‘The rebels will kill us! And so will the Templars!’

‘We should take our chances! I want to join my brothers and sisters to fight!’

I leant against the cold wall in the back of the room. The time had come, I had known it since the destruction of Kirkwall’s Chantry. I had felt it. The Common Room was filled with angry faces as one mage turned against another. But I stayed out of this stupid discussion, and nobody really asked for my opinion. Who was I anyway? That once-defiant apostate. The girl who had done the Harrowing with no training. The pretty demon with the glowing eye. The tall knife-ear with the arrogant face. The silent mage of the tower. No one bothered to even look at me. I think that after 10 years, some still didn’t even know my name. And they didn’t need to. After three years of “studying”, I was allowed to leave the apprentice dorm and join the other mages in the Enchanters’ Quarter. No one really liked me being here. Some tried bullying me, others just ignored me. None really succeeded. I had just remained silent, studied with the rest of them. Most of them still thought I was stupid and untalented, but I knew what I could do, I could feel it. And I had been waiting for this chance, the chance to escape without guilt. I didn’t like anyone in here, and thought of escaping multiple times. Let one of these bastards become Tranquil for all I cared. But I couldn’t. It was wrong. And so I waited. But I will not for much longer.

‘Templar-Fucker!’ Someone in the room yelled at Lydia, whose face was struck with disgust.

Everybody knew she and Tibald had been canoodling for years. I saw them once in the corner of my eyes, stuck against a wall somewhere, humping the life out of each other. Somewhere, this wasn’t unusual. Many mages and Templars got together, and Templars with Templars, and mages with mages. But a Senior Enchanter with the Knight-Commander of the tower? That was unheard of. Lydia was one of the few that I kind of liked in here. She had been the only mage who didn’t just ignored me, and she even stood up for me when needed. I was not calling her my friend, I refused to, because I didn’t agree with her being content with this half-life. But I respected the way she respected others.

‘Let us all calm down now!’ Delbert raised his hands carefully.

Yet, I still heard someone snare in the crowd. This would end badly. I imagined the Templars having the same problems right now, gathering in their barracks, debating whether to stay or to go. The mages started to disperse again, and I stretched my back as I walked away from the wall I was leaning against. I heard some whisper as I crossed the Common Room.
‘Hey, you, don’t you have anything to say about this?’ one of the mages spat at me. I turned around, and I immediately recognized her. It was the blonde girl with the pretty face, the one who had woken me up on my first day. Her name was Ruth. She was of noble blood, and acted like it. She was a typical mean girl, the Regina George of the Circle of Ostwick. I immediately recognized her voice as the person who had yelled Templar-fucker towards Lydia. Didn’t surprise me it had been her. Ruth had always been hostile towards Lydia, mostly because of her good relationship with everyone, including the Templars. Jealousy is a nasty tendency.

‘Oh. You want to hear my opinion?’ I looked at her dead-pan.

I could hear the wheels turning in her plastic head as she thought of a snappy response. But I got there first.

‘I think that instead of yelling at each other like little children, you guys should just do something about it.’ I flipped my long braid over my shoulder and turned on my heels, casually walking out of the room.

I strolled through the empty corridor towards the library, where it was nicely silent. And even though I had read most of the books in here, and yes all of them were boring as hell, I still kind of liked this place. Here, I could just disappear. I sat at my favourite spot, high up the staircase in the left dark corner in the back of the rotunda. Between the shelves, there was a tiny “cave”, an empty space where a bookstand probably used to be, and it was quite concealed. The time I had spent here…

‘They are talking of revolt’, it was Lydia, her voice hushed.

I furrowed my brows as I secretly looked down the staircase. Beneath me, in the dark corner between the bookshelves, stood Lydia. She pulled her cowl down as she stared lovingly in the eyes of the Knight-Commander. Tibald stood in full armour, his now slightly wrinkled face gleaming in the dim-lit corner, a reflection of the flame of a nearby candle flickering on his chest plate. His face was stern, cold, like always. He never really showed emotion, and probably just used Lydia for his own game or pleasure.

‘The Templars are at it as well. It will not take long for them to abandon their posts.’ His voice was loud, even though he whispered. The man was just a very loud person.

‘What do we do?’

‘Nothing’, he stated, his voice monotone.

‘Maker, Tibald! We can’t just let our home go to ruin?’ her voice sounded desperate as she stepped closer to his figure.

‘I nor the remaining Templars can hold them down. The Chantry is not controlling us any longer, our duty lies elsewhere.’

Lydia shook her head in disbelief, ‘Can you hear yourself? Do you know what you are saying?’

‘I do. It is time for the Templars to join the fight against the other rebel mages. We will be retreating to Therinfal Redoubt in Ferelden soon. I am not staying in this dank place for any moment longer, while my friends and brothers die in vain.’

‘Then what about us? If you leave, then most of our mages will join the rebels up in Redcliffe! How can you just let them leave?’

‘The mages up in here are weak, Lydia! We have not trained them to fight! They will die before they
reach the village, and if they miraculously still get there, they will be slain with ease.’

‘Tibald!’, Lydia yelped, but composed herself and nervously looked around, ‘What about us? Don’t you care what’ll happen to me?’

Tibald took a step closer, pushing Lydia against the wall, and took her chin in his hand, lifting it upwards. He then stroked her lips with his, slowly grunting as she replied. As Tibald let go of their kiss, he moved his lips towards her ears, and I heard Lydia sigh and then choke in disgust.

‘I don’t.’ Tibald grimaced and dropped her chin as he stepped away.

Lydia swallowed hard as she tried not to cry, her face struck with grief and sadness. ‘But, I thought…’

‘You’re a stupid mage, Lydia, you don’t think. You are just here to serve. And you did plenty.’, Tibald left with a malevolent smirk on his face and left the room. I never wanted to kill a human more than him. Or at least right now.

Lydia sank onto the floor, her figure shivering as she silently cried for the love she never had. I crawled back into my dark hiding spot, and waited for her to stop and straighten herself again. When she left the room, I had a bad taste in my mouth. This was wrong. I felt pity for the woman, and could feel my stomach turn as my left eye coiled.

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In the morning I waited until most of the mages had already left the room so I could dress myself in silence. I had awakened with again a foul taste in my mouth and a dreadful twist in my stomach. Something would happen today. I could feel it deep in my bones. And I was ready for it, and for all it would entice. There was again a taste of change in the air, and it reminded me of my time in the Fereldan Rebellion, of the time I could feel the storm coming nearer.

My wait was almost over.

I slipped on my boots, straightened my blue robe with my hands and put my long, white hair up in a high ponytail, bound with a green ribbon. I washed my face casually, staring into the foggy mirror. I hadn’t changed at all. My eyes, my mouth, my nose, my hair, my shoulders, my body, everything still young, untouched. And somewhere, I found it a pity. People just thought of me as a pretty face. A girl who hasn’t seen anything yet. But I had seen more than any of these people, lived through more, loved more and lost more. Yet, nobody could see.

I left the dressing room after a while, turning left as I entered the Common Room. It was empty, nobody was even lounging in the chairs near the fireplace. Had everyone just gone to their classes? I left the room and silently walked through the curling corridor, my eyes focused on the ground. I yelped as I bumped face first into a cold steel armour, and almost toppled over. A hand grabbed my waist just in time, straightening me before I fell. The hand stayed there, warmth radiating through it. I looked up annoyingly.

‘Saeris’, Simon smiled at me, his eyes squinting as he did so.

I made a disgusted noise as I wiped his hand off of me. Him again.

Simon waved his hand through his short brown hair, his face looking awkwardly down. He had giant dark circles under his eyes and a slight worried look on his face, which lightened up as he stared at me. He looked like he had just woken up, like I had. He smelled horribly though, like spiced wine, horse and lyrium, a smell all Templars reeked of. I tried ignoring him like always, brushing aside him as I passed. But before I could, he stretched his
arm sideways and rested it on the walls, stopping me in place.

Not this again. Not the ‘I’m sorry Saeris’ and the puppy eyes. The guy had always felt some strange kind of “duty” to keep an eye on me, to protect me from myself and others. He was the one who got me in here in the first place, the damn bastard. He spent years trying to make up with me, trying to show me he had done me some kind of service. What did he think I’d do? Swoon for his looks and his loyalty to his Chantry and “sacred” duty? That I would just forget I had saved his life, and in return, he had hurt me, locked me away? No. I do not have Stockholm Syndrome.

‘They are gathering in the Great Hall. Something’s off.’ He said, his eyes serious.

I huffed as I tried pushing his arm out of the way. As I tried, he suddenly stretched his other arm out too, cornering me between the wall and his body. What now again?

‘Let me pass’, I grunted as I tried moving out of his grasp.

‘Saeris, it is happening. They are disbanding the Circle.’ He whispered as he stepped closer. I pushed myself against the cold stone wall. The more space between us, the better.

‘Good’, I said, looking away from his face, ‘Can I go now?’ If he doesn’t let go of me within ten seconds, I will make an ice cube out of his body. I swear.

One.

‘I must protect you. I must redeem myself and I will not fail you’, he said as he pushed his body against mine, almost squishing the air out of me, ‘not again.’

Two.

‘You are the biggest regret of my life, my failure.’

Three.

‘I will not let you down again. I still owe you my life.’

Four.

‘And I will give you mine.’

Five.

‘If you just let me’, Simon mumbled as he released one hand and softly touched my face with it, sliding away a loose strand of hair and putting it behind my pointy ear. I looked up defiantly.

Six.

‘Simon. Let. Me. Go.’

Seven.

‘Never’, he said with a trembling sigh as he pushed his body flush against mine. I choked, his face was too close. What is this mania thinking? I am no damsel in distress. He is not my knight. He is my jailor.

Eight.

His lips touched mine then, rough, persistent, demanding, violating. My first kiss in decades, taken
away by this stupid shemlen. Simon twisted his face, his lips wetting against mine, searching for response, for something but resistance. I put my hands flat against his chest plate, trying to push with all of my muscles. He didn’t even move an inch.

Nine.

‘Saeris’, he groaned as he caressed my lips again, his body pushing harder against mine as I tried writhing away.

Ten.

My hands exploded, sparks screeching away from them, crawling though Simon’s armour with a frightening ease. Simon yelped and let go, staring into my eyes with a gruesome look as he was bombarded through the hall. He smashed against the wall on the other side of the corridor with a loud bang. He roared as the sparks squirmed through his body like thousands of little needles.

Now he knows how that feels like.

‘Touch me again and I’ll kill you’, I spat furiously, my hair falling down on my shoulders as the ribbon snapped. ‘You are my biggest failure too, Simon. I should’ve let you die.’

Simon looked up, his face filled with utter terror. Good. I glared at him, lifting my chin as I wiped my lips with the back of my hand.

I am done. I’m out of this place. I will not wait anymore!

‘Saeris wait!’ Simon screamed as I ran through the hallway and down the stairs.

I stopped abruptly as I saw the sea of mages and Templars standing around in a circle. Some were clasping with fright, others were angry, screaming against one another. I came closer, and people stared as I pushed them aside. I probably looked seriously dishevelled, my clothes crumpled and my hair wild around my disgusted face.

I sighed sadly as I found the reason people were gathering here. It was Lydia. Her body laid twisted and torn on the Circle’s floor, her eyes spread wide open with fear. Two knives stuck into her, one through her throat, the other through her heart.

I knelt beside her, and touched her wet cheek. Cold.

‘MURDER!’ someone yelled. ‘It was the Templars! They are going to kill us all!’

Panic spread under the crowd.

‘We did no such thing!’ a Templar yelled.

‘Stop this!’ it was Delbert, his eyes never leaving Lydia’s corpse. They had been friends. He then looked down at me, his head shaking. ‘She is gone.’

I nodded silently, my face emotionless. Lydia had never known life out of the Circle. Maybe death had been her only escape. But that should’ve been her choice. This was vile and cruel.

I stood up and looked around suspiciously. But no mage looked away with guilt. They all stared.

‘Who did this?’ I cried, my hands shaking.

‘They did!’
‘No it was you!’

‘You hated her!’

‘You did too!’

‘STOP’, Tibald roared as he broke up the circle. Everybody breathed harshly as he waded through the crowd, throwing a quick look at Lydia’s body. I knew he couldn’t care less. He was a monster. ‘Take it away.’ He ordered coldheartedly.

Some of the Templars nodded as they encircled Lydia’s lifeless figure and pushed me aside. Delbert held me upright, but I could feel his hands shaking, the old man’s eyes teary as they carried his friend’s body out of the Hall.

Tibald entered the centre of the circle, standing on the place Lydia’s body laid just some seconds ago, his shoulders straight and his eyes gleaming. The doors rambled as Simon came rushing through, his eyes glancing at Lydia as they carried her out. He then found me. I quickly looked away, staring into Tibald’s victorious eyes. Had he killed her?

‘Templars! WE MARCH!’ He yelled, and the Templars all cried out triumphantly, their swords drawn and raised in the air.

The mages cried as they all backed down, fearing death by sword.

But Tibald hadn’t meant killing the mages. He meant to leave. And so he did. The Templars dispatched quickly, leaving the Great Hall for their barracks, their belongings already prepared for the journey.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ First Enchanter Delbert raised his voice.

Tibald grinned as he walked with a fast pace towards him. ‘It is time, old man, to kill some rebels.’ Tibald turned his back on us, his face to his fellow Templars, ‘We will help our brothers and sisters in the war against this filth! Magic is a corrupting influence in the world. Those who do not follow the way of the Chantry, the way of the Light, must be annihilated!’

The Templars roared, all but Simon, who stood impassive and slumped across from me in the Hall, his face heartbroken. He then turned around and disappeared with the rest of the Order. I hoped I’d never see him again, for it would mean his death.

The mages started roaring in return. ‘Freedom!’ They screamed and so, all hell broke loose in the Circle of Ostwick. As the Templars started leaving, taking away all precious belongings, the mages bombarded doors, throwing phylacteries on the ground, splashing magic and blood everywhere. Yet, some did not share their enthusiasm. Some mages and Templars alike cried for one another, for they had been friends, even lovers, and would now be separated for life, doomed to become eternal enemies. Some Templars shook their heads, but still followed their fellow Templars who raged to the outside world, to Therinfal Redoubt. Some mages cried, for they had lost their home, the roof over their heads, no place to go to but the city of the rebel mages, Redcliffe.

I ran towards the basement with the other mages, desperately looking for my phylactery. It stood in a dark corner, at the back of the collection, but I recognized it immediately, as it glowed brighter than anyone else’s. I grabbed the cold vial, and with a small sigh, I dropped it onto the floor and heard it crack and splash. I looked down at it, my blood glowing one last time as it seeped through the cold stone floors. As I looked back up again, I spotted something familiar. It was my fur cape, draped over an old chair. They hadn’t thrown it away. I smiled as I reached out for it, lifting it over my shoulders. It hugged me almost like an old friend would.
When all of the Templars had left, the remaining mages assembled in front of the great entrance of the Circle, on the ground floor. Nobody had seen it since they had entered the Circle, because nobody ever left.

Except for now.

‘Everybody calm down!’ First Enchanter Delbert said as he tried hushing the crowd. ‘Let us do this in a civilized matter.’

The mages murmured as they eyed the gate to freedom.

‘Those who wish to join the rebels, join up with me!’, Ruth yelled over Delbert’s voice as she stepped out of the crowd, ‘to Redcliffe in the Hinterlands.’ Most of the mages assembled behind her, and I saw Ruth’s eyes gleaming with pride.

Delbert sighed as he stared at me, his eyes pleading. But I didn’t want to have anything to do with the Circle for a second longer. I waited for so long to just get out of here, to feel the sun on my skin. And I will wait no more. I am done.

I am going home. To Daniel, to Sybil, to Nenhara. They have been waiting for me as much as I for them.

And I still have a promise to fulfil.

I turned around and passed the group of newly rebel mages. Ruth shared a look with me. I knew this wasn’t the last I’d hear from her.

The mages stared at my back as I walked towards the giant stone door. The staff that hung off my back creaked as I took it off swiftly. I stared at it, and then snapped it with a loud crack over my knee, throwing the stupid stick through the room. The Circle mages choked as they all stared at me.

‘Is she stupid?’ Ruth mumbled.

But I grinned wildly. Time to let these children see what I can do, who I really am.

I lifted my hands upwards, my palms turned towards the door. And then, I willed it, the stones bursting and screeching as my magic pushed, released. Finally, after all those years.

I am liberated.

The door exploded, the stones flying everywhere, taking even parts of the wall with it. My magic thundered through the halls, making the entire tower shake in its foundation. And I willed more. My magic had been locked up like me, screaming to get out. And here it was. A light burst out of my palms, making way for the sun to finally greet my face.

The sky was so bright and blue. I had almost forgotten what it had looked like. And oh, the sun, the marvellous sphere of warmth, of life. I smiled as a tear escaped my eye.

I stepped forward into the light, and it greeted me as its equal.

My eyes fixed on the welcoming horizon, the City of Ostwick behind me, and Ferelden out front, its arms opening wide to greet me once more.

I pulled my hood over my gleaming face.

A new destination was waiting for me. A place that was calling my name. There had been whispers of a Conclave, in the Temple of Sacred Ashes. A peaceful gathering to resolve the war. But this war
was not my problem. I had other interests. Rumours claimed that the Hero of Ferelden as well as the Champion of Kirkwall would be there.

*The heroes were gathering.*

I smiled as I took a step forward, and didn’t look back at the crumbling tower filled with confused mages. I was going where the sun was leading me, to where my promise would be fulfilled. I looked up at the heavens and smiled.

“*Go to where the heroes are, in an Age where the mighty forgotten will dance once more in the sky, when heroes will conquer the vile and fight for the freedom of all, that is when the promise will be fulfilled*”

Towards Haven it is.

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Chapter End Notes

FINALLYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY
I AM SO F* EXCITED AHHH
World fell away then, misty in mem'ry,
'Cross Veil and into the valley of dreams
A vision of all worlds, waking and slumb'ring,
Spirit and mortal to me appeared.
"Look to My work," said the Voice of Creation,
"See what My children in arrogance wrought."

- *Chant of Light, Canticle of Andraste*

‘How much for those pants and coat?’ I said to the merchant and pointed towards the light armour hanging behind the counter.

The merchant furrowed his eyebrows, cocking his head as he tried peering under my cape that I had pulled over my body and face. ‘No mage business here’, he grumbled.

Shit. I need that stuff. ‘I will give you my Enchanter Robes’, I said and pulled my hem up, showing the blue robe, ‘This is worth some coin.’

‘I said no mage business! Out!’ the merchant grunted, annoyed.

I sighed and grabbed the insides of my pockets. ‘And what do you think of this?’

The merchant’s eyes went slightly bigger. Dwarves really have a weakness for everything shiny. The man grunted slightly as he took the silver Lyrium-infused ring and studied it, holding it close to his eye, smelling the thick Lyrium band.

I lifted my chin as he nodded at me. ‘The ring *and* the mage armour’, he said deadpan.

‘It’s a deal’, I grinned and threw him the ring from underneath my cape.

The man didn’t look at me as he threw the samite pants and leather armour coat on the counter. The pants were fairly simple, and the coat had a built-in belt, lots of pockets and simple buttons. I nodded contently as I lifted them in front of me. This was made for a human, so it would definitely fit my body and length. I changed in the back of the shop, glad I still had my woollen undershirt on, and left my old robes with the merchant.

As I stepped outside from the merchant’s shop, the cold wind greeted me, blowing my hood off and tangling my hair in its grasp.

I had taken the ferry from Ostwick to Ferelden. I know, me… on a ferry. But it was the shortest route to Ferelden, and it was too dangerous to travel through the Free Marches and Orlais, since there was a wild apostate witch-hunt going about and rogue Templars could be found nearly everywhere. The trip back home had gone smooth, no Raiders. Guess they found it too dangerous. Raiding a ship that could be filled with rebel mages wasn’t the best plan, I guess, even for ruthless pirates.

Ostwick was a port town, and so lots of ferries left there towards Highever in Ferelden, which was on the Storm Coast. I sighed as I looked around. I haven’t been here in many, many years. I remembered this place of when I first left Ferelden for Kirkwall, and how I resided in a tower here
close-by during the Ferelden Rebellion. I stared up at the cloudy sky as someone knocked against my shoulder.

‘Get out of the way, ‘ya bloody rabbit!’ the person gnarled.

Ah, home sweet home.

I brushed myself off and grabbed the wrinkled map from my pocket. The map was quite small, and I had stolen it from a brawny man on the ferry. I didn’t like to steal, but desperate times called for desperate measures. At least I’d paid for my new clothes. Highever was a very busy town, and quite rich. Nobles from everywhere walked around proudly. The Hero of Ferelden was from this place, no wonder everyone walked around like they were the kings and queens of this country. Two richly-dressed nobles strolled down the path left of the shop. I swiftly turned, my cape wavering close to my body as I plopped flatly against the wall of a cabin.

‘Divine Justinia is mad for gathering all those hotheads in one place!’ one of the nobles chittered, his fat belly moving up and down under his thick robe as he spoke.

‘She’s gone mad! Our Most Holy even hired those Qunari wildlings as guards. The Chantry must really be desperate’, the other laughed with a full voice.

I closed my eyes and focussed, my ears twitching as they picked up their conversation.

‘Will you be going?’

‘Of course! I have an invitation and a reputation to uphold!’

‘Bollocks! You have no invitation!’

‘Yes I do!’

‘Truly? Can you get one for me?’

‘My arse, no! I already had to pull massive strings to get one for myself.’

This wasn’t helping me at all. The nobles muttered like sheep as they continued on their pace. I grinned under my hood as I inspected the map again. It would take me at least a month by foot to get up there high in the Frostback Mountains. Why in Mythal’s name did they build their temple in that place? It’s cold and… just really cold.

I left Highever that day, my hood pulled over my head and the map of Ferelden in my hands. That was all I needed. Taking a horse was too expensive, and stealing one too much of a hazard. I had just escaped a prison, I wasn’t planning on getting into another one. At least a map you could fit into your pocket. The path towards Haven, where the Conclave was held, was hard and forested. I sometimes had to claw my way through. But the smells, the sounds, everything was worth it. And I smelled more. Lyrium. Mages and Templars alike must’ve passed through here, on their way to the Conclave that promised them peace. Or more war.

Every night, I stopped when the smells and sounds would become too vibrant, and waited until morning, growing plants for dinner. And as disgusting and untasteful as that might sound, my plants were pretty good and full of vitamins. I hadn’t grown crops like this since my days with Daniel, and my magic curled with happiness now that I could use it again.

And every night, I slept under the starry sky. It was cold and wet, but the sky just took my breath away. Every star brighter than the other, forming strange patterns in the darkened heavens. I couldn’t keep my eyes off of them, because I’d missed them for too long. And you only know what you miss
when you don’t have it anymore.

Like real flushing toilets. God I missed those.

The trip had taken me longer than I had expected. The closer I was to the Frostbacks, the colder it became. And snow was a bitch to travel through if you didn’t have a mount. My boots got stuck in the thick snow, and every step took its toll. And then I hadn’t taken the thieves, other rogue mages, and Templars into account. Everyday some crossed my path, and those who weren’t killed by the harsh weather conditions, were taken down by me. I didn’t kill them though, it didn’t feel right. Just knocked them out and ran. Templars and thieves I could kill, but mages were…Strange. I could’ve been one of them.

And then, a good month or so later, Haven appeared on the horizon, covered in a fortress of icy mountains, and crowded with all kinds of people from all over Thedas. Humans were everywhere. Priestesses and priests, nobles, warriors, acolytes, mages and Templars alike all huffed as they walked up the high path towards their Temple of Sacred Ashes. Dwarves were standing near the sides of the roads, offering their wares to the stern pilgrims, and elves were running around, none Dalish, all servants and some mages. I covered my head further and further with my hood, and wished I could disappear into the sea of mortals.

‘Stop’, a Qunari guard said, ‘Only those with an invitation go further.’

I looked him up and down. Qunari men were strange, huge, their skin grey and tattooed, their horns pointy and some were even broken off, and their faces filled with a deadly smirk. I squinted my eyes as the man stared at me, keeping my head down and my hood hovering over my face. Why were Qunari here? No signs of Qun on them. Probably Tal-Vashoth, mercenaries, if they are walking about freely here. Those nobles had mentioned them, that the Divine hired them as guards. Really scary, but probably quite proficient.

But I need to get through, crap.

‘Pilgrims can go to Haven’, he grunted as I didn’t move.

Maybe I’ll just wait for a day or two in Haven, until the negotiations have started and people were more at ease. At least I was close to where “the heroes would gather”. They would come, right? Maybe I’d made a mistake, gotten the wrong signals. Maybe nothing would happen here at all, and that weird promise I’d supposedly made, would not be fulfilled for decades to come. But something urged me to go closer, to stay. Like the ancient whispers had called to me, so did this Conclave.

I grimaced under my hood and followed the rest of the pilgrims up the hill. Mages, all with a dark hood covering their faces, and a staff in their hands, walked left of the path. Templars, all in full armour, armed with swords and shields, walked right, separated by the giant Qunari mercenaries in the centre of the path. Never had I seen this before. Every creature was here. Humans, dwarves, elves and Qunari all gathered. Mages and Templars alike. Believers and non-believers, hundreds, maybe thousands of them, all walking the same path towards the village of Haven or the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

Only those who were invited could go on, and I was no spy, so sneaking wasn’t an option. If it wasn’t my eye or my white hair, my stature would take up too much attention. And so I turned towards the village, entering through its open gates. The village was buzzing, people running everywhere. Haven was a small village with not that many cabins, so it really shocked me at the amount of people standing around. Elven servants ran the paths up and down to fetch things for the shops and tavern. I smiled as I thought of a warm bowl of broth. Why didn’t I have some coin? I shook my head and walked slowly towards the tavern. It seemed quite big, and I felt the warmth
escaping through the cracks, voices laughing and singing, and the smell of hot soup, bread and spiced wine.

I wanted to push open the door when my stomach suddenly turned. I screamed as I knelt on the snowy ground, my left eye burning into my scalp, coiling, screaming almost, like someone was trying to rip it out of its orbit. People in the tavern heard my scream, and suddenly there was a silence in this town not felt before. But I kept screaming.
And I thought smite hurt, getting stabbed hurt, but no, this was real pain, thundering through my body and soul, ripping it apart. Breaching my very being.

A loud thunder scorched the skies. People looked up, but in a mere second, all were blasted away through the streets, the houses creaked and crumbled, wood scattering through the air. Humans and elves were thrown about, crying and holding on to what they could. An explosion had happened. Of the Temple? The Conclave? Why did it feel like the sky had just exploded? First, there was a bright white light, and then all turned an emerald green. A beam of light burst through the clouds, ripping the heavens apart. I braced myself as a green pressure wave reached out over whole Thedas. My boots buried themselves in the thick snow underneath as I threw a ward over my whole body to protect myself from flying debris. The sky was ripping open, like someone was pulling its sides apart, and an emerald nightmare greeted us from above.

My arms dangled at my sides as I looked up to the heavens and saw a green scar screeching through them. I saw it all, all of the Fade. I saw my bubble, my dreams, the dreams of others, the Black City hovering above. I could see it all. I could even hear it, calling my name like it knew me. Spirits peered down to the waking world, their bodies burning like the mortals below, and I saw how black smoking creatures poured out of the scar.

I focussed on the hole in the sky, and the sky stared back at me.

An emerald window to the Beyond. A reflection of my own left eye, breaching the world.

The tavern door got blasted away, and a strange, yet good-looking dwarf stepped outside, a crossbow in his hands. The dwarf looked up to the sky, his face a mixture of terror and annoyance.
‘Ugh, not again’, he sighed and reloaded his crossbow as all chaos ensued.

***

The magic curled, searching, knitting, severing, stitching, taking, giving…

He was too far gone. The man underneath my hands grunted and roared, his body twisting, and then, all of his being slumped. Dead. The woman next to him cried out, her voice filling the Healer’s tent. She cried, grabbing the man’s hem as she tried shaking his body to wake him up. But he did not respond. She screamed, her tears wetting her husband’s cold cheeks.

‘I’m sorry’, I sighed, my hands sticky with fresh blood, my hood still covering my face.

The woman ignored me as she cradled her love on the little made-up bed. Another one had passed, like so many. He hadn’t even been close to the temple. Everyone in its parameters had died, and even in Haven, many had lost their lives. Some had been crushed underneath houses and stones, others impaled on their chimneys. Up in the Conclave, none could be found alive, how much they searched, everyone was burned, leaving empty skeletons of screams and terror. Only one. Someone was found alive three days ago. They say he stumbled out of a rift, a woman standing behind him. No one knew who she was. The scar in the sky, they called it the Breach. A massive rift into the world of demons and spirits that grew larger with each passing hour. And it wasn’t the only rift, just
the largest. Soldiers came and went up the hill to battle the small rifts that were spewing out demons, holding them back before they came down to the village. The Breach was growing, swallowing the world, their world, my world.

The man they had found didn’t even have a scratch. He just stumbled there, like nothing had happened, and then fell unconscious. He was in the dungeons now, many believing all of this was his fault. How could someone survive such a blast? Did he truly create it?

I stepped outside of the tent and dipped my hands in the cold snow. I started washing of the warm blood, scraping under my nails. I couldn’t resist and looked up to the sky.

I had been right. My eye has appeared in the heavens. Everything is happening right here and now. The time has come.

I dangled my still reddish hands at my sides. The emerald window into the Beyond. While everyone looked at the ground, afraid of the tear, I looked up. It felt familiar, calling out to me. The Beyond was right there, I could reach it. My left eye coiled, twisted and burned, seeing everything beyond the scar, seeing every spirit flee its call, and every demon following it. I felt power.

My hood hadn’t left my head, covering my face in darkness. I hadn’t dared taking it down. My eye gleamed the same colour, the same origin as their Breach, the thing that would destroy them all. What would they do if they saw me? I wished I still had my eyepatch here. Luckily, no one really paid any attention to my presence. After the explosion I had helped people, healed them, setting up the Healer tent with other non-mage healers. They had been taken aback when I showed them I was a mage, but neglected it since I was so good at healing. There was just one other mage-healer in town, well, he was actually more of an alchemist, stocking the soldiers with potions and elixirs. But he was pretty good at healing. What was his name again?

I had healed many battle wounds in my days as the resistance’s healer. But never had I healed so many. They kept on coming. I only slept some hours during the night on the ground of the tent. I couldn’t save them all, but every life I could save was worth my own health. I hadn’t seen anything of Haven since the explosion, just the inside of the tent. Now, I was standing outside again, feeling a cold breeze caressing my face. I grabbed my hood nervously. Don’t let it fall down, Saeris. Don’t want to end up in the dungeon next to the other guy.

The townspeople were rebuilding their village, running around and working all day round. Most provisions were given to the soldiers who were camped outside. There weren’t many left, so lots of townspeople volunteered to enter the fight against the demons. Most of them died there. I could fight too, but they needed me here. Conditions were harsh, hygiene was nowhere to be found, and it smelled awful in the streets. This village was not made to withstand a disaster like this.

Suddenly, the humans and elves around me quieted, stepping aside and whispering harshly.

‘There he comes, seems like he woke up’

‘… the bastard, I’ll kill him’

‘Murderer!’

A man was pushed forward down from the Chantry, which was at the back of the village. He bowed his head in shame, staring at the ground as he walked through the crowd of people. A woman was pushing him forward. I had seen her entering the Healer’s tent once, helping a soldier who had been hurt. She had disappeared as quickly as she had arrived. The woman was human, really tall and muscular. She had short brown hair, modelled into a pixie cut with a small braid on the top like a crown. Her armour had the sign of the Seekers of Truth on it. A deep scar ran down her left cheek.
Her face was stern but beautiful, and reminded me of Moira Theirin.

The man, the prisoner, stumbled forward, his hands bound with a rope. He looked like a normal human and was quite tall himself, maybe even a little bit taller than the Seeker, but not much. His skin was slightly tanned, his waving short hair a chestnut brown, and his body lean but muscular. He seemed to be around his mid-twenties. A well-built, young human. He looked up then, his eyes following the huge scar in the sky. His eyes were hazel, like Sybil’s. But he looked so sad, his stare faltering. This man hadn’t created the Breach. He couldn’t have. When they almost passed me, the man suddenly screamed, holding up his bound hands as he fell to the ground. The people around us choked and stepped away. But I came closer. His hand. His left hand. It erupted green emerald sparks. He roared as he held it up, his face twisted in pain. In the palm of his hand, a strange scar had formed, a bright emerald light seeping out of it.

Like my left eye… He held my eye in his hand. I felt how my breath got stuck in my throat.

The man roared with pain, his body shivering. I stared at him, my eye coiling while it burned in my head, focusing on his palm, being attracted to it. He felt a harsh pain crackling through his very bones, but I felt power, a power I only had felt in the Fade, in my bubble. It was here now, in this man’s hand, and right up there in the sky.

I stepped forward into their paths. The Seeker grunted as I knelt before the man. I wanted to touch it, his palm, his scar, my eye.

I pulled the hood off of my head, my eye twisting as it met its brethren. The sparks in his hand subsided, his eyes big as he stared at me. I put my hand in his palm, closing my eye, feeling, searching, finding. He did not create this Breach. This power was not his, it was something… ancient.

‘Stand down!’ the Seeker screamed and pulled out her sword, pointing at my throat. I broke contact with the man’s palm, and looked up to the Seeker, who cursed as she saw my coiling eye, spitting the same light as the man’s scar and the Breach. ‘Who are you!’ She roared.

‘Stop this!’ a healer, the alchemist, ran out of the tent, casting a quick glance at my face. ‘She’s been helping us! She’s a healer!’

I smiled gratefully at the man.

‘Your eye’, the Seeker spat at me, ‘what is that?’

‘I don’t know’, I mumbled as I looked down to the prisoner again, who stared at me with an open mouth. ‘I’ve always had it.’

The Seeker raised her sword some more. They were going to the hole in the sky. I need to go with them, I need to find out what that Breach is. I need to know!

‘I will help’, I said then, and saw the eyes of the Seeker darken with questions. ‘I’ve helped all of these days, healing as many as I could. My eye… I don’t know what it is. I was born with it. Now, I must find out what it means. Maybe I can help.’

‘Fine’, she spat, her sword urging me forward. I knew this would happen, but I had to see the scar, and the scar had to see me. The man who held my eye in his hand. He’s here. The Seeker stared at me suspiciously. She didn’t trust me, and I couldn’t blame her. I looked suspicious, especially here. My skin and hair almost disappearing into the white snow, and my eyes, one stark blue, the other as green as the thing that was swallowing her realm.
‘Move!’ she said, and I fell into pace with the prisoner who was up his feet again.

The townspeople gnarled towards the prisoner, but furrowed their eyebrows as they saw me pass. I had healed most of their friends, relatives, themselves. I was no monster, but I was walking with one. And then my eye. They were considering my own guilt now as well.

What had caused this rift, really? What had such power? The man besides me didn’t, I could feel it. He wasn’t even a mage, I think. Why was he here? Was he like me, searching for something? Or had he been in the wrong place at the wrong time? And what did the scar on his palm mean? Was it connected to the scar in the sky? And so to me as well? And why was I connected to it? What in Mythal’s name had I promised!

‘The people of Haven mourn our Most Holy, Divine Justinia, head of the Chantry. The Conclave was hers.’ The Seeker’s voice broke in the last sentence as we walked out of the town, outside of its gates. Hundreds of tents were scattered everywhere, a large frozen lake overlooking the mountains. ‘It was a chance for peace between mages and Templars. She brought their leaders together. Now, they are dead.’

We walked up on a path towards a bridge, where more heavily armed guards awaited us. They nodded respectfully at the Seeker as she passed, ignoring us completely. The bridge was littered with supplies and weapons. They were at war, a war against the demons that were pouring out of the Breach. I knew how many lives had been claimed, I had tried saving them. Would they forget now because of the colour of my eye?

‘We lash out, like the sky. But we must think beyond ourselves. As she did.’ The woman stopped as we stood near the centre of the bridge. ‘Until the Breach is sealed.’ She then took out a small dagger, turned around and stared at the prisoner. ‘There will be a trial’, she nodded at him and then towards me, ‘I can promise no more.’ And then she cut off the ropes she had bound his hands with.

‘Come. It is not far.’

‘Where are you taking us?’ the man said again, standing somewhat defensively before me. He stared over his shoulder at me, gazing into my eye. He felt a connection too.

‘Your mark must be tested on something smaller than the Breach’, the Seeker answered and then looked at me, ‘we must first understand what it is that connects you to it. Your hand… and your eye.’

I nodded and took the prisoner’s hand in mine, squishing it to say it was alright. His eyes resembled my Sybil’s so much. The kindness behind them, but also the defiance. He nodded and smiled and we took a step forward, following the Seeker to the other side. Groups of soldiers were standing about, praying one last time before they went out on the battlefield, to an enemy unbeknownst to them, the enemy they had nightmares about, demons. All real in their waking world.

Oh Creator, see me kneel,
For I walk only where You would bid me
Stand only in places You have blessed
Sing only the words You place in my throat.

‘Open the gate! We are entering into the valley!’ the Seeker ordered and guards opened the gates towards another path.

We walked up towards the mountains, towards where the sky had been broken. Soldiers were hiding behind trenches, their swords in their hands, their faces confident. Green debris from the Breach was falling through the skies, raging onto the ground and exploding with emerald sparks, leaving traces
of black ichor on the once serene white cobblestones. The Seeker walked out front, the prisoner behind her, and me at the back. Suddenly, the Breach cracked again, and I saw the man topple over, grunting as his hand erupted. I huffed as I reached for my eye, coiling as it looked at the sparks.

*Touch them, feel them.*

The woman helped the man back on his feet, her eyes hiding a pitiful look. ‘The pulses are coming stronger now, we must hurry.’

What just happened?

I remained silent as the Seeker and the man started talking, putting one foot before the other. What was the meaning of all this?

‘…the larger the Breach grows, the more Rifts appear, the more demons we face.’

‘How did I survive the blast?’

‘They said you… stepped out of a Rift, then fell unconscious. They say a woman was in the Rift behind you. No one knows who she was.’

Did he go into the Fade physically?

‘Everything farther in the valley was laid to waste’, the Seeker continued, ‘including the Temple of Sacred Ashes.’

All of those people walking up the hill. Dead. Hundreds of them, gone in a mere second. Don’t cry, Saeris. You’ve seen death. They are at rest now. And soon, you’ll be too. My promise must come to light soon. It has to. And then, I can rest with them.

We ran onto another bridge. Suddenly, the Breach spat a green rock down towards us, and it crushed right in front of the prisoner’s feet. The bridge cracked immediately, the stones grinding on top of each other, and we fell onto the frozen lake beneath it.

I stared, my hand and knees shaved onto the ice, and looked into two familiar red eyes. It hadn’t been a rock that had flown out of the Breach. It was a demon. But real this time, not in my room, not outside of my bubble, but right here, in front of us. Its contours were sharper now, its rotten and twisted body vaster, its claws sharper, its eyes bloodier.

‘Stay behind me!’ the Seeker screamed as she unsheathed her sword and ran towards the damning creature. The prisoner put his hands in front of me, urging me to stand back as he stared at the demon the woman was battling.

‘Shit!’ he mumbled as the ice before us coloured an emerald green, black ichor bubbling and boiling. A demon ripped open the ice, scratching towards the surface as its body came to be. The man looked next to him, to where a rack of arms stood, filled with a bow, and two small rusty daggers. He reached for the daggers, pushing me back hard, making me trip over and fall onto the ground.

The demon screeched, its high voice hurting my ears, as it threw itself onto the man.

‘No!’, the man grunted as the demon tried scratching him, and he rolled onto his back, his daggers in the air. He reached for the creature, and it coiled as a dagger cut its stomach. It then opened its claws, grabbing the prisoner by his arm. He screamed as his palm sparked again an emerald light.
My eye. It’s hurting.

My body lunged forward before my mind had willed it to. My hands raised up, a powerful fire blast bombarding the demon away from the man. It screeched high, but I didn’t stop, and ran towards it. My hands turned to icy, pointy shards as swords and claws into my skin. The demon tried getting upright, but I pierced my ice-arms into its body, pulling out and feeling the wet ichor prick my skin. The man then jumped from behind me, rolling over the dying demon, cutting off its twisting head with a clean swoop. He then looked up at me, his eyes big, but then he nodded friendly.

‘Drop your weapons! Lower your hands! Now.’ The Seeker jumped to us, her sword raised towards our heads. The prisoner took a step forward, his back covering my front.

‘A demon attacked me! What was I supposed to do!’ he said righteous, and I nodded silently.

‘You don’t need to fight!’

‘This will happen again!’ I intervened, stepping from behind the man’s back, my hands lowered and my stance peaceful and calm. ‘We need to be able to protect ourselves.’

The Seeker sighed, ‘you are right, I cannot protect you, and I cannot expect you to be defenceless.’ She said towards the man. ‘But I will keep an eye on you, apostate’, she grunted. Great. I had been helping Haven for days now, healing without end, not sleeping and not eating. And I was greeted as an apostate. ‘Yet, I should remember you agreed to come willingly.’ At least one of us had.

She grabbed something from under her coat. ‘Here, take a potion’, she said towards the man again, eyeing the scratch on his arm.

‘Keep it’, I said, stepping forward. Did she forget I was a healer? I raised my hands, putting them on the man’s arm. My warm magic reacted immediately, knitting his flesh back together. He shivered as the wound disappeared, leaving no scar or sign of it. The Seeker looked towards me again, and I saw a softness in her eyes. Which was gone just as quickly as it appeared.

We started moving again. I didn’t know how many demons we killed, but it were a damn lot. It must’ve taken us hours to get where we were going. And I heard the man’s breath heave harder and harder.

I took his arm after another battle against three demons.

‘You need healing?’ I coughed.

‘No, thank you’, he smiled and then cocked his head. ‘Your name, what is it?’

I looked towards where the Seeker was standing. She stood somewhat further away from us, but I saw her head rise in interest.

‘Saeris’, I smiled.

‘I’m Maxwell’, he squinted his eyes as he heaved some more.

‘Come on’, the Seeker yelled at us and we nodded.

After a while, we came across ruins. This must’ve been the outer parts of the temple, I guessed. In the distance, I could hear someone scream, armours rattling, and swords clashing. There was a fight going on.

‘QUICK!’ the Seeker screamed as she heard it too. She ran upwards on a hill, Maxwell and I
following suit. Where a room used to be, now just laid mere stones. Soldiers were standing around a strange green cut in the air, hovering as it spit demons. This must be a Rift. Maxwell and the Seeker charged towards the demons, the other soldiers screaming victoriously as support finally arrived. But I stood still above the staircase, or what was left of it, that lead down the battlefield. The Rift, it felt like it saw me.

*Come, come and see, we are waiting. Quick now!*

I saw what was behind it, my paradise, just waiting for me. My eye coiled, seeing the wonders in the Beyond. Can I… enter that place?

‘Saeris! Watch out!’ Maxwell screamed and broke my trance. Right in front of me, a demon had appeared, its claws trying to rip my throat out. I sighed.

‘You are in my way’, I grunted and lifted my hand, willing the veins underneath the ground. A thick thorny root sprouted from beneath, cracking the stones, impaling the creature in one quick swoop. I saw the demon’s red eyes pop out of its sockets. I grinned and balled my fist, making the thorns extend throughout its body. Now, it’s just a bouquet.

I felt eyes burning in my back.

There, in the centre of the ruin, stood the dwarf I had seen just right after the explosion, the crossbow sturdy in his hands. He looked up at me as he shot an arrow through another demon’s gut, and smiled. He had muted, reddish-brown hair put up into a tiny ponytail at the back of his head. The small cut on his nose wrinkled up as he grinned. He had golden rings pierced in his ears, and was wearing an open shirt, showing his mighty chest hair.

‘Quickly! Before more come through!’ someone said.

No! I looked up to the Rift, it was twisting, growling, out of its source. Maxwell stood in front of it, the Seeker on his right, and another man on his left, an elf.

The elf grabbed Maxwell’s wrist, heaving his left, scarred hand up towards the Rift. Maxwell screamed as emerald sparks, a crackling light, burst out of his palm. And I could hear the Rift scream. Was I the only one who could hear it scream? The Rift creaked, its emerald power searching, latching on. And then, disappeared. Like it was sucked into its own being, leaving only a residue of black ichor on the ground.

I felt that it was gone, my left eye purging, twisting. A tear escaped from it.

Maxwell writhed his arm loose from the elf’s grasp, staring at it intensely. ‘What did you do?’

‘I did nothing. The credit is yours.’ The elf said.

‘You mean this?’ Maxwell shook his head while he stared at his palm.

I remained where I was, staring at the place where the Rift had once been, but now, there was nothing. No urge of power left. I felt… blinded.

‘Whatever magic opened the Breach in the sky also placed that mark upon your hand’, the elf continued, ‘I theorized the mark might be able to close the Rifts that have opened in the Breach’s wake. And it seems I was correct.’

The Seeker took a step forward, ‘Meaning it could also close the Breach itself’
‘Possibly’, said the elf, who was really tall for his nature. Like me. ‘It seems you hold the key to our salvation.’

Maybe that was my promise? Help this man close the Breach? Help him close the emerald window, my eye in the heavens? The whispers had spoken of a salvation. To break the emerald window? Did they meant “to close”?“Protect he who holds your eye in his hand, for he will lead you towards the vow you promised not to break”

It all made sense now! Right? I protect him, he closes the emerald window, all is saved, and…

‘Good to know!’ The strangely attractive dwarf said as he stepped from behind me, cuffing up his sleeves. ‘Here I thought we’d be ass-deep in demons forever.’ The dwarf looked up at me and chuckled, then walked closer to where Maxwell, the elf and the Seeker were standing. ‘Varric Tethras: Rogue, storyteller, and occasionally unwelcome tagalong.’ He grinned as he winked at the Seeker, who stepped back while making a disgusted noise.

‘That’s… a nice crossbow you have there.’ Maxwell said, I heard his voice sounding more relaxed. He found an answer to something. And so did I.

Varric grinned deeply while shifting on his feet, ‘Ah, isn’t she? Bianca and I have been through a lot together.’

‘You named your crossbow Bianca?’ Maxwell said with a smirk.

‘Of course!’, Varric nodded, ‘And she’ll be great company in the valley.’

‘Absolutely not!,’ the Seeker intervened, her face stormy, ‘Your help is appreciated, Varric, but…’

‘Have you been to the valley lately, Seeker? Your soldiers aren’t in control anymore. You need me.’ Varric smiled, looking over his shoulder to where I was standing and back.

The Seeker again made a disgusted noise at that. Maybe that was her thing, rolling her eyes and making disgusted noises.

‘Well, it’s good to meet you, Varric’, Maxwell smiled.

The elf now took a step forward to Maxwell. ‘You may consider that stance, in time’, he nodded.

‘Aww, I’m sure we’ll become great friends in the valley, Chuckles.’ Varric laughed. Was the elf’s name Chuckles? What a weird name.

I stared at him. He was tall, even taller than me. I had never met an elf taller than me before. He was wearing simple cotton clothes, a thick fur vest, and long leather breeches with built-in foot wraps. I smiled at that, I had worn those too once. Around his neck, the jaw of an animal hung on a rope. From what animal had that once been? A staff hung on the man’s back, a simple one, made with thick branches and steel. ‘My name is Solas’, he stated, ‘if there are to be introductions. I am pleased to see you still live.’

Wait. A. Minute.

I have heard that name before… where…

‘He means, “I kept that mark from killing you while you slept”’, Varric interrupted, his face full of
amusement. I figured they had been fighting for hours on end, maybe for days. How could he still casually laugh at that? Must have balls of steel.

I felt the elf, Solas, throwing a quick glance my way before he looked back to Maxwell, who respectfully nodded, ‘You seem to know a great deal about the mark?’

‘Solas is an apostate, well-versed in such matters’, Cassandra huffed. Ah, an apostate. Like me.

Solas shook his head, ‘My travels have allowed me to learn much of the Fade, far beyond the experience of any Circle mage.’

I suppressed a laugh. Knowing things better than a Circle mage wasn’t that hard.

‘I came to offer whatever help I can give with the Breach. If it is not closed, all of us are doomed, regardless of origin.’ Solas glanced towards me again, unnoticeable, but I noticed everything.

‘Then I owe you my thanks.’ Maxwell finally smiled again.

‘Thank me if we manage to close the Breach without killing you in the process.’ Solas answered with a chuckle.

Not on my watch. Maxwell will live.

‘Cassandra’, Solas said, turning towards the Seeker. So that was her name. ‘You should know: the magic involved here is unlike any I have seen. Your prisoner is no mage. Indeed, I find it difficult to imagine any mage having such power.’ He looked at me in the end, his cold, blue eyes curiously scanning my being. I could fully see his face now. He had fair skin, littered with freckles, a cleft chin, and a tiny scar between his furrowed brows. He also had a strong jawline, fairly handsome indeed. If only he had hair, the picture would’ve been perfect. But he was bald, the only hint of his hair colour in his auburn eyebrows.

‘Understood’ Cassandra answered pragmatically.

‘Saeris’, Maxwell said, taking a step towards where I stood somewhat further away.

I nodded as I came closer, feeling Solas’ eyes burning on my body.

Varric patted my back. ‘Hey, I’ve seen you before!’

‘At the tavern, during the explosion’, I nodded, saying the first thing in what felt like hours. My voice was soft, almost afraid of getting Solas’ attention. Why do I feel so nervous now?

‘Ahh yes! Where have you been?’ he grinned.

‘The Healer’s tent’, Maxwell said, ‘she… volunteered to come.’

‘Pretty eye you got there, kid’, Varric grinned while staring up at me.

‘I was born with it. I don’t know what it means. There must be a connection… between us’, I said towards Maxwell, who smiled at my voice.

‘You must let me study it’, Solas said, his eyes not leaving my face. Now, I felt utterly naked, ‘After we close the Breach of course.’

Varric laughed, his voice rumbling, ‘Yeah, if we close the damn thing’, and smacked Maxwell on the back.
'We must get to the forward camp quickly’, Cassandra stood between us, eyeing everyone, and walked towards the end of the ruin.

‘Well, Bianca’s excited!’ Varric grinned.

Maxwell sighed, and then locked eyes with me. I nodded at him.

Don’t worry, man, I got your back.

Chapter End Notes

And so it begins... Okay, this chapter and the next one and probably the one after that, are quite game-dialogue heavy, so sorry for that, but I just really like that part of the game and find it essential.

Hope you liked it! *flies away*
I was too excited so here’s another chapter. AGAIN, this one is somewhat game-dialogue heavy,... But I still hope you will enjoy it as much as I do!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“One dictum I had learned on the battlefields of France in a far distant war: You cannot save the world, but you might save the man in front of you, if you work fast enough.”

- Diana Gabaldon, Dragonfly in Amber

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‘So… are you innocent?’ Varric said.

We had been walking for a while, fighting demons that crossed our paths. And there were a lot of them. I couldn’t believe this path was once used for pilgrimages. Everything was blasted away into a rubble, burned down into ashes, ruins still soaring after days.

‘I don’t remember what happened’, Maxwell said while he climbed the stairs leading to the forward camp. I stalked near him silently, not uttering a word since we had left the ruins. I needed to stay close to Maxwell. I needed to protect him, which wasn’t so difficult. Maxwell was really good with swords, and killed easily. But still…

‘That’ll get you every time. Should have spun a story.’ Varric grinned.

‘That’s what you would have done.’ Cassandra said accusingly, making another disgusted noise.

‘It’s more believable, and less prone to result in premature execution.’

We ran up the path, more demons ahead, but all killed easily. I loved how I could use my magic again, even if it was in battle. Ice, fire, sparks, nature, everything was in sync, I just had to lift my hands. But my eye kept coiling, burning, especially if I was too far away from Maxwell. Was it telling me to stay close as well?

‘You are not Dalish, are you?’ Solas said as he suddenly appeared next to me. I jumped up. Holy shit that guy was quiet.

‘No, I’m not’, I nodded, my eyes forward, not looking to him.

‘Are you from a city?’

‘Not originally, no.’ I said again. What was this, an interrogation?
‘You are a mage, a good one at that. Were you trained in a Circle?’

I sighed. ‘I was in one for a while. But I’ve been an apostate all of my life.’

‘Well, technically we are all apostates now’, he chuckled. I walked more quickly, almost sprinting towards Maxwell. I didn’t like Solas to be near me. Something felt… wrong. I felt Solas furrow his brows as I left.

We walked through rubble and burning corpses. Those must’ve been… soldiers… once.

‘I hope Leliana made it through all this.’ Cassandra broke the silence. Who’s Leliana?

‘She’s resourceful, Seeker.’ Varric answered.

As we ran up another hill, my stomach turned again, my eyes twisting. Another Rift, I could feel it. Can they feel it too?

‘Another Rift!’ Cassandra screamed as we reached the top of the hill, unsheathing her sword.

‘We must seal it! Quickly!’ Solas yelled, his voice raised.

There it was, almost glorious, strange emerald minerals sticking out of its being. A Rift. It called to me again, and I could see into it, to where it lead. So close…

‘They keep coming! Help us!’ Soldiers were standing behind the hovering green scar, their faces bloodied and desperate.

Maxwell nodded immediately, pulling the swords from his sides. Varric untucked his crossbow, and Solas swiftly reached for the staff on his back. I just raised my hands, cold icy shards spitting from them, hitting each demon in the head as they plopped down before Cassandra could split them into two. She turned around and stared at me with open mouth.

Yeah, I can do shit.

Maxwell lifted his hand towards the Rift, his mark spewing again a crackling emerald light. I saw how his face contorted in a painful grimace, his body slumping as the Rift closed with a scream. It hurt, almost like it was blinding me.

‘The Rift is gone! Open the gate.’ Cassandra ordered as she stepped over the bubbling ichor that had once been a Rift. The soldiers were cowering near an almost broken-down wooden gate. The camp must be behind it.

‘Right away, Lady Cassandra!’ one of the least-wounded soldiers said, and pushed open the doors.

‘We’re clear for the moment’, Solas heaved, ‘well done.’

Maxwell smiled, standing back next to me, his hand on my back. ‘Damn Saeris’

‘Whatever that thing on your hand is, Maxwell, it’s useful’, Varric grinned as he looked up to the gate. Behind it, soldiers were getting prepared, refilling their provisions, binding their wounds. They looked up as we entered.

‘Ah, here they come’, an older Chantry priest said. He looked like an asshole, his face pulled into an angry snare. I hate the Chantry.

Behind him, a woman stood. She was wearing a chainmail, a subtle and light armour, a samite hood covering her angelic face. A short strand of red hair dangled in front of her cold, murderous eyes.
Never had I met a woman who had radiated such a deadly vibe.

‘You made it’, she said, her voice had a melodic tune. But that accent… is that Orlesian? Not Orlesians again… ‘Chancellor Roderick, this is…’

‘I know who he is’, the Chancellor spat. ‘As Grand Chancellor of the Chantry, I hereby order you to take this criminal to Val Royeaux to face execution!’ the old man rumbled and pointed to Maxwell. I stepped forward, my hands balled into fists.

‘Order me’? Cassandra huffed, walking forward before I could do anything. ‘You are a glorified clerk! A bureaucrat!’ Wow, I suddenly liked Cassandra a little bit more now.

‘And you are a thug, but a thug who supposedly serves the Chantry!’ the Chancellor yelled again.

‘We serve the Most Holy, Chancellor, as you well know.’ The cloaked woman took a step forward, her voice feminine but deadly.

Justinia is dead! We must elect a replacement, and obey her orders on the matter!

‘Don’t talk about me like I’m not here!’ Maxwell interrupted furiously.

‘You shouldn’t even be here!’ the Chantry guy spat again. ‘Call a retreat, Seeker. Our position here is hopeless.’

‘We can stop this before it’s too late’, Cassandra said, placing her hands on the table the Chancellor was standing behind, her eyes determined.

‘How? You won’t survive long enough to reach the temple, even with all your soldiers.’

Oh they will, they have me.

‘We must get to the temple, it’s the quickest route!’ Cassandra shook her head.

‘But not the safest. Our forces can charge as a distraction while we go through the mountains.’ The cloaked Orlesian woman nodded. I really hated her accent.

‘We lost contact with an entire squad on that path. It is too risky.’ The Seeker sighed.

‘Listen to me’, the Chancellor tried again cowardly, ‘abandon this now before more lives are lost!’

The Breach suddenly cracked again, an urge of power coming through. Maxwell moaned, his body shivering while he grabbed his hand, which was crackling with the same emerald light again. He huffed, and the mark spread on his arm.

Look into me, Saeris. See.

Why is it calling out to me? I want it to stop! I stared into the mark on his hand, my eye twisting and coiling again. It hurts! The power! I need to look away! But I can’t! I screamed as my eye seemed to burst in its orbit. And then I saw it, like looking through a window, an emerald-stained window. Men were screaming, their weapons stretched towards the window I was looking through. Soldiers. The squad they had lost. They were alive! Up on that mountain! The soldiers roared as their boots crunched into the snow, and I felt something vile creeping behind the window, almost next to me. And it jumped.

I cried as I fell to the ground. Two hands caught me in time, holding my body as I screamed, my eye splitting. The window closed, and I was back on the bridge again.
‘Saeris?’ it was Solas, his soft voice entering my ears as he held me.

‘They are alive’, I coughed up some bile, my head bursting, my heart thumping in my throat. ‘The squad, they live, a Rift, I saw them through… Maxwell… your hand… a window.’ I cried, tears streaming down my cheeks. Had I just seen through his mark?

Cassandra furrowed her brows. ‘How?’

‘No time! A Rift… they need our help.’ I huffed again, and Solas helped me up, his eyes clouded with questions. I stared into his eyes. ‘We need to help them.’

‘We will use the mountain pass then’, Maxwell said as he took me from Solas’ hands, wiping away the tears from my cheeks. ‘Work together, we all know what’s at stake.’

***

The pass through the mountains was probably the worst path we could’ve chosen. It was very steep and covered in slippery ice. I felt weak, my episode on the bridge had taken its toll. But I knew that the scouts still lived, I had seen them, and I would save them. And I needed to stick with Maxwell, so that didn’t leave me any choice.

‘You truly saw them?’ Cassandra said as she walked next to me, her breath like clouds in the air.

‘I did, like I was looking through a window, through the Rift’, I heaved. How was this possible?

‘Have you experienced this before?’ she said, her face stern.

‘No’, I huffed, ‘I just… stared into Maxwell’s mark.’

‘It is incomprehensible’, Solas said, he walked behind us, using his staff as a walking stick. See? I wasn’t the only one who used it like that. ‘Yet, so is the mark and the Breach.’ He walked up next to Cassandra, his icy blue eyes glancing my way. His face was a mask of correctness, like a scholar studying his work. It made me very uncomfortable.

We came across another ruin. It used to be some kind of tower, it seemed. Ladders were set next to it. We climbed upwards, Maxwell first, then Cassandra, Varric, me and Solas.

My arms protested as I pulled myself up. How much power had I used to look through the mark? Had my eye slurped away my magic? I could still feel it though.

‘Are you alright, Saeris?’ Maxwell yelled downwards, his face worried.

I heaved out of breath, ‘I am fine! Please continue!’ I yelled back.

‘The tunnel should be just ahead. The path to the temple lies just beyond it!’ Cassandra said as we neared the top of the tower.

‘What manner of tunnel is this? A mine?’ Solas yelled from beneath me.

‘Part of an old mining complex. These mountains are full of such paths’, Cassandra answered.

‘And your missing soldiers are in there somewhere?’ Varric said, he was out of breath too.

‘They were somewhere outside!’ I said as I recalled my vision.

‘Along with whatever has detained them.’ Solas again as he looked up to me.
‘I saw demons there, be prepared!’ I answered his look.

We entered the tunnel, which was actually like a hall, quite well-preserved. The stone walls were wet, and it smelled musky. I flickered my hand, a small flame resting above my palm. See, still got my magic. The flame cast shadows on the walls, and I saw tiny insects scattering about. The tunnel engraved itself deep into the mountain, all the way through. Some minor demons dwelled within, none we couldn’t handle.

As we stepped outside of the tunnel, on the other side of the mountain, the cold, scorching white wind greeted our faces. More like a slap in the face. On the stone floor near the entrance of the tunnel, three corpses were scattered around, their faces dull and covered with blood. The blood was still wet. Warm.

Varric sighed and dropped his crossbow a little. ‘Guess we found the soldiers.’

No, no! They were still alive! I’d seen them!

‘That cannot be all of them’, Cassandra said, nodding at me as she saw my face.

‘They must be held up further away! I saw them, they need us!’ I yelled. My feet started moving then, one before the other, faster and faster. I leaped, jumped down the slippery stairs, my body lunging around corners.

‘Saeris, stop!’ I heard Maxwell behind me, the others too. They couldn’t keep up.

‘Damn, that kid is fast.’ Varric huffed as his short legs stumbled on the snowy path.

Up ahead, I saw them! That Rift, I had looked through it, I recognized its surroundings! It was real! The scouts! Men were fighting six demons, all surrounding them, claws extended and eyes murderous. But they were alive, I wasn’t too late yet. The Rift reacted as I came closer, recognizing my stare. I had seen it, so it had seen me as well. The emerald scar erupted shards of minerals again, green sparks spitting from its core while it hovered mid-air. A wraith clawed at me, his essence like poison smoking my eyes. I cried, flames curling on my hands, which I lifted at the wraith’s core, burning it from within. A despair demon appeared behind me, its claws cutting my back open, through my cape. I cursed as I felt the stinging wound, and rolled over the ground, jumping up and moved my body through magic, “fade stepping” to the other side of the field. I raised my hands again, and two roots cracked through the snow, grabbing the arms of the demon and dragging it onto the ground. The demon roared as an arrow went straight through its head. I looked up and saw Varric’s gleaming eyes as he reloaded his crossbow.

Cassandra swooped in successfully, her blade meeting the head of another demon. Maxwell appeared as well, his daggers like fangs biting a wraith who was encircling a wounded soldier. Solas stood next to me, casting wards around everyone, silently glancing at my hands as I lifted them again, letting my roots slither through the snow, tripping every demon near it.

See me, Saeris!

The Rift crackled as Maxwell raised his hand to it, his mark reacting and connecting to it immediately. And again, the Rift disappeared, leaving a small trace of black ichor. I felt it again, the loss of power in the air, the feeling I was blinded, losing more and more of a sight I couldn’t even see.

‘Sealed, as before. You are becoming quite proficient at this’, Solas said as he neared Maxwell, eyeing the black residue.
'Let's hope it works on the big one', Varric shook his head as he stared at the black puddle too.

'Lady Cassandra!' A soldier yelled surprised as she eyed the Seeker.

'Lieutenant! You’re alive!' Cassandra said, a sigh of relief escaping her lips.

'Just barely.' The Lieutenant huffed and arched her back. ‘Thank the Maker you finally arrived. I don’t think we could have held out much longer.’

'Thank our prisoner and the healer, Lieutenant. They insisted we come this way.’

'If it wasn’t for Saeris’…’ Varric cocked his head, looking at me with squinted eyes. I shook my head, my hair waving over my face.

Maxwell straightened his back, nodding silently at me as he said, ‘It was worth saving you, if we could.’

‘Then you have my sincere gratitude’, the Lieutenant said and pounded her chest with her fist respectfully. I felt… proud. I didn’t need a thank you, I just needed Maxwell to be safe. But hearing others praise him, strangely felt like a compliment. Like, good for you Saeris, you kept the guy alive.

Cassandra smiled lightly and then turned to the group of soldiers. ‘The way into the valley behind us is clear for the moment. Go, while you still can.’

‘At once’, the Lieutenant nodded, urging her men forward, ‘Quickly, let's move.’

‘Let’s hurry ourselves.’ Cassandra nodded at me as she passed. ‘We will talk about all of this back at Haven.’

Why did that sound like a threat? Hadn’t I just helped them save people? But to be fair, it was strange. Maxwell, Cassandra and Varric walked further down the path to the temple. I grunted as I touched the wound on my back. It needed healing, and quick. But there wasn’t any time. Guess I have to let it heal naturally.

‘Are you alright, Saeris?’ Solas said as he still stood behind me. He spoke my name very slowly, the ‘r’ rolling from his tongue. The accent reminded me of elvish.

‘I am fine. Thank you.’ I said, straightening my back casually. Just go on. I really didn’t like having this Solas near me. He made me… nervous for some reason, like he was eyeing everything that was happening at the same time, with a meticulous observant look that seemed to hold all the answers.

We walked further down the path, towards the temple, closer to the dooming hole in the sky. The closer we got, the more nervous I became, my eye coiling and twisting.

‘So… holes in the Fade don’t just accidentally happen, right?’ Varric asked casually as we neared the temple.

‘If enough magic is brought to bear, it is possible.’ Solas answered scholarly. How did this guy know so much? I’ve been in Thedas for a hundred and fifty years by now, how did he learn in his short lifespan if I hadn’t learned anything in mine? Or maybe I was just dank and stupid.

‘But there are easier ways to make things explode.’ Varric said knowingly.

‘That is true’, Solas answered.

‘We will consider how this happened once the immediate danger is past.’ Cassandra grunted at them,
glaring at Maxwell as he stared forward. He was nervous too, the pulses in his hand coming stronger and faster. Poor guy. He had been so good and brave the whole time, he hadn’t deserved this, however he had gotten it in the first place.

We entered a staircase leading to a giant black crater. My heart pounded in my throat as I saw emerald cracks surge through the smoking stones, ash raining down from the sky instead of snow. This must’ve been where the temple once stood. Nothing of it was left. Only ashes. The Temple of Sacred Ashes, how ironic. Here is where Maxwell walked out of the Fade, where the soldiers must’ve found him.

Maxwell choked and stopped, staring at the sea of burning corpses. Men and women, charred into place, their carcasses still aflame. You could still see their faces, their arms covering their bodies, their last seconds eternalised. I have seen death, but not like this. The terror in the desolate, smoking faces of innocents. What had done this?

We walked under a broken stone archway, which gave me a glimpse of how glorious the architecture of this place must’ve been. Maxwell stood first, his chest heaving heavily up and down as he stared into the Breach’s glare. A deeper crater was spreading out in front of us, stones and broken ruins of a once great hall depicting how massive the explosion must’ve been. And in the centre of the room, hung a giant Rift.

I stared into it, the voices, all of them! I could hear them singing, see them dancing. The Rift was connected to the giant scar, the Breach, in the sky by a huge beam of emerald light, hard rocks hovering in it mid-air.

‘The Breach is a long way up’, Varric sighed as he stepped forward, hanging over the balcony we were standing on, which was overlooking the entire crater.

‘You’re here!’ A soft voice said from behind us. It was the cloaked woman, Leliana, the Orlesian one. She ran towards us, archers following her step, eyeing the Rift nervously. ‘Thank the Maker.’

‘Leliana, have your men take up positions around the temple.’ Cassandra ordered as she met Leliana on her path. The woman nodded pertinently, turning back towards her archers.

Maxwell shifted on his feet as he stared into the abyss. I took a step towards him, feeling how with every movement, the cut on my back ripped open more. My hand found his shoulder. He shied with my touch and then met my eyes. I gave him a slight smile, and he smiled faintly back. His hazel eyes are so like my Sybil, my sister.

‘This is your chance to end this. Are you ready?’ Cassandra said as she came in between us.

‘I’ll try’, Maxwell soughed, touching his shoulder slightly, missing the warmth of my hand that had laid on it, ‘but I don’t know if I can reach that, much less close it.’

‘No, this Rift was the first, and it is the key’, Solas nodded from behind Maxwell, staring at his shoulder too, and then back to the Rift. ‘Seal it, and perhaps we seal the Breach.’

‘Then let’s find a way down.’ Cassandra looked down to the cracked stone path towards the centre. ‘And be careful.’

Our party walked down, but as soon as we neared the Rift, a dooming voice could be heard. It rattled my bones, stung my very ears. I was afraid of it.

‘Now is the hour of our victory’, the heavy voice echoed through the crater, ‘Bring forth the sacrifice.’
‘What are we hearing?’ Cassandra shivered. The voice made her shed in terror too.

‘At a guess, the person who created the Breach’, Solas answered, his voice cold and calculated.

Harsh red stones were embedded into the smouldering ground, sticking out of it like crimson claws. A strange red glow evaporated from it, the air crushing in the sparks. I came somewhat closer, hearing soft voices singing my name.

‘Stand back’, Varric said, suddenly serious, ‘You know this stuff is Red Lyrium, Seeker?’

I hate Lyrium, and I didn’t think this red stuff was a good equivalent of the blue. It smelled stranger too, like normal Lyrium, but not.

‘I see it, Varric’, Cassandra huffed annoyed.

‘But what’s it doing here?’ Varric sounded worried, more worried than I had heard him before. What was this stuff if it scared him more than demons and Rifts?

‘Magic could have drawn on Lyrium beneath the temple, corrupted it…’ Solas cocked his head. I stepped back behind the rocks, closer to Maxwell.

‘It’s evil. Whatever you do, don’t touch it.’ Varric looked to me as a warning, I nodded quickly. I didn’t even wanted to touch normal Lyrium, so yeah, not touching this either. I had never seen it before, nowhere in all of Thedas. How much had happened while I was stuck in that Circle tower?

‘Keep the sacrifice still’, the eerie voice doomed again. I shivered, the cut on my back thumping like my heart. That can’t be healthy.

We all shared a look and ran forward on the path. Whatever we were hearing, it wasn’t good.

‘Someone! Help me!’ A woman’s voice echoed through the Rift. Who was she? And how did she get there?

‘That is Divine Justinia’s voice!’ Cassandra blinked her eyes in disbelief, her voice sounding hopeful. We started running faster, Maxwell out front. He jumped onto the ground floor of the crater, his face confident. I followed suit immediately. I need to stay close to him! Protect him! Maxwell’s mark flared again as he neared the Rift, my eye responding as well, coiling in its orbit.

‘Someone! Help me!’ the voice of the Divine rang again.

‘What’s going on here?’ That was… Maxwell’s voice? But he was right here? What are we hearing? Was this even real? I put my hand over my blue eye, my left eye scanning the field. Nothing changed, no disguises.

‘That was your voice’, Cassandra said, her voice a whisper almost, ‘Most Holy called out to you. But…’

The Rift crackled again. And then, we could all see it. A shadow lurked in its emerald light, its eyes glowing and looking down. My eye burned as it looked seemingly to me. This wasn’t real, I realized then. This was… a memory?

In front of the shadowy creature, a woman hung, her hands bound with unfamiliar magic, holding her tight. This woman was… Divine Justinia? She was very old, dressed in her religious robes, the high white and red headpiece on her head.
‘What’s going on here?’ That was Maxwell again! He was there! In the Rift! His vision looked confused. He wasn’t meant to have been there.

‘Run while you can!’ the Divine pleaded, ‘Warn them!’

‘We have an intruder’, the dooming voice appeared again, its shadowy figure pointing towards Maxwell’s vision. ‘Kill him. Now.’

Maxwell’s vision heaved, his face filled with terror. The Rift spat a bright light, and then, was empty again, silent. Maxwell stared at it, his eyes unwavering.

‘You were there! Who attacked? And the Divine, is she…? Was this vision true? What are we seeing?’ Cassandra’s voice raised, her eyes clouded and teary.

‘I don’t remember!’ Maxwell cried out. He was losing his temper. And I understood him. I too was once clouded with doubts, questions. And when they were answered, I knew even less.

‘These are… like memories’, I said, stepping forward next to Maxwell.

Solas nodded. ‘Echoes of what happened here. The Fade bleeds into this place.’

That was an understatement.

Cassandra paced towards where Solas stood, who stated; ‘This Rift is not sealed, but it is closed… albeit temporarily. I believe that with the mark, the Rift can be closed, and then sealed properly and safely. However, opening the Rift will likely attract attention from the other side.’

Oh shit.

‘That means demons!’ Cassandra heaved. ‘Stand ready!’

Archers were stationed near the balconies and borders of the crater, and I heard how they pulled their strings, ready to shoot. The soldiers on the ground prayed slightly as they unsheathed their swords and daggers. I braced myself, my feet spread wide, my magic curling around my hands. The pain in my back soared, but I ignored it. Whatever was waiting for us, I was ready for it. I’ve always been ready for it.

If I protect Maxwell, help him seal that Breach, maybe my promise will end.

Maxwell looked over his shoulder to Cassandra, who nodded, and then to me. I lifted my chin. Let them come. His hand raised to the Rift, another stream of crackling emerald sparks erupting from it, finding the Rift’s core fluently. The Rift answered, and then, I saw it, standing just behinds the Rift’s vision. A monster, peering down to us like he would be through a window. An emerald window.

‘That’s a Pride demon’, I whispered.

Solas heard me and arched his back, his staff gripped tightly in his hands.

And then, the Rift exploded, like glass breaking, the window cracked, and the demon could step through.

I learned about Pride demons in the Circle, had seen a drawing of it in an old hidden book near the back of the library. And this beast was its spitting image. It was large, like a three-floor tower, and had purple and grey scales covering its body, like a crocodile, or even a dragon. Four long, black horns protruded from its malformed head, six eyes staring down at us.
‘Now!’ Screamed Cassandra, and she waved her sword in the air. The archers let go of their strings, a storm of arrows raining down on the demon. But the arrows just toppled over its scales like raindrops. The demon roared, lifted its claws up as purple sparks erupted from its body. It opened its large mouth, and I saw maybe a hundred small but thick pointy teeth greeting our figures. This wouldn’t be easy.

Cassandra, Maxwell and the other foot soldiers immediately went for the beast’s feet and legs, while Varric, Solas and the archers aimed for its head and chest, keeping its attention away from his bottom half. I raised my hands like a conductor would in front of an orchestra, and the veins in the earth were my musicians. Roots cracked through the ashy surface of the crater, its thorns grasping the Pride demon’s wrists and claws, holding them tightly to its body while they tried to protrude his armour-like skin. I pushed my hands down, the thorns erupting in fire and flame, but the demon’s skin could not be breached.

I cried out as I pulled my arms down, my hands balled into fists to keep the roots tighter. The demon seemed to grin my way as it roared, a sudden strength surging through its body, and it lifted its arms upwards, the roots snapping with a loud twitch. I screamed as I felt the loss of power, arching my back and feeling the wound rip open, every piece of skin at a time. But I couldn’t give up. I lifted my hands again. If I couldn’t hurt it from outside, I must do so from the inside. To the other soldiers, my magic seemed banal. From my fingertips, hundreds of ethereal blue butterflies sprung, their bodies like essence, shining a bright blue light, their reflection a mirror through this world, almost see-through.

‘What is that!’ Cassandra yelped as the tiny insects fluttered to where they stood.

I smiled as the Pride demon waved its hands up and down, laughing at my seemingly stupid attempt of disabling it with pretty beings. They didn’t hurt it at first. The demon raised its hands, a thunderbolt spewing out of them, aimed for my body. I lunged sideways before the sparks of electricity crashed onto the ground. Yet, some of them had reached me, and I felt the residue of the purple sparks in my legs, prickling them like hundreds of needles. My body contracted, squirmed onto the dirty, ashen ground.

‘Saeris!’ Maxwell screamed as he’d noticed.

I looked his way and grinned. Now, it’s payback time. I balled my fists again, and the butterflies reacted. As the demon roared again, stomping around the crater, the butterflies bombarded into its mouth, its eyes, every opening possible, filling its body with a blue essence. I smiled again, because my butterflies were poisonous. The demon roared as it reached for its throat, clawing at it, scraping of its precious scales.

‘Quick!’ Cassandra screamed victoriously.

Solas flickered his staff, entrapping the demon’s legs and arms in a prison of solid ice. The demon faltered, toppling over the weight of its own body, and crashed down onto the ground. Maxwell than fluently jumped on the demon’s chest, his feet quick and his daggers firm in his hands, and with a clear swoop, cut the demon’s now exposed throat. The beast gnarled once more while black ichor escaped from its body, and my butterflies fluttered out of its open throat, disappearing with a blue flicker into the air.

The Rift spat and splurged as I crawled back on my feet, my ears flinching as my back protested. The Rift was open, vulnerable, I could see its heart and hear its pleas. But I ignored them.

‘Now!’ Cassandra screamed at Maxwell, who jumped off of the Pride demon’s bloodied carcass, and ran to the blasting emerald scar, ‘Seal the Rift!’
Maxwell raised his hand, power surging through his body, extending green sparks towards the Rift. I ran towards him, my tired arms raised one more time to defend him for the impending blast. A green pressure wave extended through the crater towards Haven as Maxwell’s mark connected to the Rift’s core, closing it and sealing its connection to the Breach above. The sky thundered in response. My hands grabbed onto Maxwell’s torso, a ward springing in to place. But it was too weak, I was too weak.

Together, Maxwell and I leaped through the air, our backs meeting the stone ruin of the crater. I screamed when my open scarred back scraped across the rough stone.

Maxwell slumped in my arms, the mark taking its toll.

But he was still alive. I felt his heart under my thumb. I let go, my arms dangling at my sides as I felt warm blood slipping down my back, dripping onto the stones.

And like Maxwell, my body gave way, a soft numbness taking over the pain and a familiar darkness reigning over my coiling eyes.

Did I do what I had to do? Was this it? Was I finally dying?

Was my promise fulfilled now?

Chapter End Notes

If you liked it, you can always leave me a comment or a kudo.
‘Hey, hey Saeris’, he pronounced it as “saarisse”, ‘Will you look at that!’

My brother jumped up and down on his beanbag, his console in his hands while staring at the screen triumphantly. I sighed, my back on the thick duvet on his bed, my chest heaving up and down while I stared at the cracks on the ceiling. Outside it was raining, drops hitting the window like tiny bricks. The window rattled in response, displaying the sorry weather and stormy clouds hanging in front of the sun, that must’ve been shining somewhere on Earth.

‘EYO! It downloaded!’

‘What… what downloaded?’ I said, rolling over onto my side. What could we do on a shitty day like this? Read a book? Who’d do that?

‘Dragon Age 3!’

‘What?’

‘Inquisition!’

‘What do dragons have to do with the Spanish inquisition?’ People these days do have a very… rich imagination.

‘No! No, not the Spanish one!’ he said excitedly, his short curly blonde hair laid flat on his head. He should maybe take a shower…

‘Seeeeee! Isn’t it nice! Ahh the graphics.’

I looked to his TV screen. ‘Uhuh, really pretty. Say, can we play a board game?’

‘Shhh, it’s starting! OW!’

Something on the screen exploded, I sighed as I plopped back onto the duvet, counting every crack in the ceiling again. Last time there were six… seven…

‘Human… ugh… I’ll just use the default guy… just some tweaks’

Is that a crack or just a cobweb? Nah, I’ll count it in anyway. Eight.

‘Wanna know the story, sissy?’

‘Sure’, I said again. There’s a spider in the corner of the ceiling. I hate spiders.

‘There’s this guy, this one here’, he said all that without breaking contact with his screen, ‘and he has this thing on his hand and he has to save the world because the sky is coming down.’

‘Cool.’

‘Yeah, it says so on the cover.’ He tapped the plastic case that laid next to his beanbag. ‘Lead them or fall…’
‘Uhuh’

‘Recruit legendary warriors to fight by your side as you hunt down agents of chaos and lead the Inquisition’, breathe, ‘A blast rips a hole in the sky, unleashing an army of demons from the mysterious realm known as the Fade’, breathe again, his voice was getting higher and ecstatic, ‘As the blast’s sole survivor, only you and your team can bring the world back from the brink of destruction!’

I was impressed. How could he say all that in one go?

‘Isn’t this awesome, Saeris? Saeris? YO, you listening?’

‘Yeah, sure, I’m still here’, what is mum going to make for dinner tonight? I hope it’s not broccoli, that’s just nasty.

‘Catch’, he yelled as he threw the plastic cover onto the bed. I moved my head to the side, seeing the tiny characters on the green cover-art. ‘I’m just so excited!’

‘I can see that.’ Like you were for Skyrim, The Last of Us, Mass Effect, those Batman games, Far Cry, and that remastered version of Jak and Daxter for the PlayStation 3.

‘Oh… oh it’s starting!’

I looked up, craning my neck. ‘Yuck, it has spiders in it.’ I groaned and plopped back down.

‘I know!’

The rain crashed harder into the window. Downstairs, I heard the front door opening with a flick of dangling keys. Ah, mum must be home. I’ll ask her about dinner.

‘Saeris! This shit is going to be fun!’

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I feel warmth. I see light. I am not alone. I am alive, not dead.

My promise wasn’t’ fulfilled yet.

Shit.

I turned on my side, the hard bed I was laying on creaking. My bones were sore, but that was it. I huffed deeply as I craned my neck, the sunlight seeping through my lashes, blinding me.

‘Call for Lady Cassandra. She has awakened.’ Someone said, a voice I recognized.

I opened my eyes fully and stared into the two kind eyes of the healer. I remembered him from the time after the explosion. The man nodded, he had big dark circles under his eyes, a shaven head and a long dark brown beard. What was his name again? I sat upright, noticing the cloth bound around my chest and back. It was clean.

‘You were hurt quite badly.’ The healer said, ‘but healed such as fast. You got lucky, kid.’

I nodded at him with a faint smile. I wouldn’t call it luck. And you wouldn’t call me kid.

‘You remember me? Name’s Adan.’ The man said. Ahh, he was the alchemist.
The flap of the Healer’s tent opened and Cassandra stuck her head in, her face concerned. The tent was full of soldiers, all severely wounded or recovering. I shouldn’t be here, make place for others who needed it. Cassandra walked in with a steady pace as I swooped my legs over the narrow bed. Solas appeared behind her, his hands on his back in a scholarly pose as he studied me.

Cassandra threw her coat over my naked shoulders, I shivered gratefully.

‘For how long was I gone?’ I said, my voice dry. I need some water. As if Solas had noticed too, he gave me a cup, which he filled with ice contracting from his hands. I took it, my magic on my fingertips, the ice melting immediately. I nodded thankfully.

‘Two days’, Adan said, ‘I think you needed sleep more than healing.’ I smiled at that. Yeah, that was probably true.

‘How are you feeling? Solas and Adan here helped healed you, but the wound on your back recovered quite fast.’ Cassandra cocked her head. Adan nodded at Cassandra, who nodded back, and then stepped outside, off to helping other, more wounded, people.

I shivered again while I sipped from the cup of water.

‘We must speak about what has occurred in the forward camp’, Solas took a step forward, his eyes scanning my face pertinently.

‘I need you to come with me first, Saeris. There’s a lot to discuss before we may continue.’ Cassandra interrupted Solas, throwing him a glare.

‘Maxwell’, I looked up to them, ‘is he…’

‘He is still unconscious. Closing the Rift has taken a severe toll’, Solas squinted his eyes at that. Why?

‘The Breach, is it closed?’

‘It is stable, but still a threat. But let’s discuss this when the Herald awakens.’

‘The Herald?’

‘Maxwell’

‘Why do you call him Herald?’

‘He is the Herald of Andraste. The Maker sent him to us in our darkest hour’, Cassandra nodded, her eyes further away into a gaze, confident. Solas shifted on his feet.

‘You think the Maker sent him?’ I asked, my voice more sarcastic than I had planned. ‘I thought he was your prisoner, not saviour?’

Cassandra grunted. ‘I was wrong, perhaps, I still am. I will not, however, pretend he was not exactly what we needed when we needed it.’

Humans and their beliefs. Will it ever stop?

‘And we will not forget you were there too.’

I looked up. Were they going to call me a herald too now?
‘Come’, she said and stepped outside. I passed Solas, my shoulder almost brushing his. He was at least one head taller than me. Quite disturbing. Solas took a step back, his eyes not leaving my figure as I left the tent.

People were gathered outside, staring up as I stepped out of the tent behind Cassandra. They muttered, their eyes filled with fear. These people… were they scared of me? I had helped them, healed them, why were they like this now? Was it because of my eye having the same colour as their Breach? I stared at the ground, feeling hundreds of eyes upon my shoulders, and I pulled Cassandra’s coat further over my body.

‘My cape’, I started.

‘…is being repaired.’ Cassandra said while looking behind her shoulder to where I stood. We walked through Haven, towards the back of the village where the Chantry stood. It wasn’t so big, just like a small church, but with a more simple architecture. The inside of the Chantry was big and warm. Candles gave the stone hall a comfortable and warm glow. Books were scattered about, and near the end of the Chantry, some bookcases stood. Most of the books I recognized. Statues of a praying woman stood on either sides of the hall, her hands together and her head down, candles were placed near her knees. It was Andraste, I had seen statues like this before.

At the back of the Chantry, there was a door. Cassandra opened it and revealed another, smaller room, with some bookcases and a big table in the middle. I stared at it and saw a map of Ferelden and Orlais spread across it.

‘You are up. Good.’ Leliana stood behind the table, her eyes watching my every move.

‘This is Sister Leliana’, Cassandra said as I entered the room, and closed the door behind me. ‘She is our Spymaster.’

‘Yes, tactfully put, Cassandra’, Leliana sighed. Ugh, the accent still bothered me.

‘I am Saeris.’

‘I know’, Leliana grinned slightly, ‘I know you volunteered at the Healer’s tent after the blast, and that you were a mage. You helped many, I’ve heard.’

I nodded. Wow. Erik was a kitten next to this woman. At least she’s good at her job.

‘Where are you from, originally.’ Cassandra urged me to come closer, and I did. So that’s what this was, an interrogation.

‘I am from Ferelden.’ I said. That’s not a full lie, just a small one, technically.

‘We need more than that’, Leliana smirked.

‘I am originally from… Gwaren. I lived on a farm’, I swallowed. ‘I also stayed with the Dalish clan nearby, but I left when…’ Daniel.

‘When?’ Cassandra cocked an eyebrow.

‘I had shown magical abilities. The Dalish had too much mages already, and my… I couldn’t stay on the farm’, I swallowed again and saw Leliana’s eyes squint at my last sentence. ‘and then I travelled.’

‘You travelled? Where to?’ Leliana cocked her head in interest.

‘Everywhere. It’s not wise for an apostate to stay in one place for too long.’ Good one, Saeris. ‘I was
“captured” by Templars some years ago… and stayed in the Circle of Ostwick until it disbanded.’

’Soo, do you consider yourself a Circle mage?’ Cassandra looked to me with a slight glare.

‘I do not. I never “agreed” with the Circle’s teachings. My magic had developed in a different way, and it was hard to just… conform.’

‘Your magic is indeed strange, where did you learn it?’ Leliana questioned again.

‘The Dalish taught me a lot, but I learned most of my magic by myself, by doing it.’ That wasn’t a lie either, right? How can I tell them that magic just came naturally to me? Like breathing.

‘Like Solas’, Leliana stated while glancing towards the Seeker.

I lifted my shoulders. How should I know?

‘Your eye… you said you were born with it.’ Cassandra stared at me again, into my left eye specifically.

‘Yes… it disturbed many people, so I was used to hiding it.’

‘Is that why you concealed yourself during your time in the Healer’s tent?’ Damn, this Leliana really did see everything.

I nodded. ‘I was afraid it would… cause inconveniences again. I just wanted to help.’ Cassandra’s eyes faltered, an approving look behind them.

‘Why were you here?’ Leliana kept asking straight to business.

‘I… heard that the Hero of Ferelden and the Champion of Kirkwall would be coming… I wanted to see.’ Cassandra glared at the ground. They weren’t here, I’d noticed that.

‘Unfortunately, they could not be found’, Cassandra huffed.

‘You, a rebel mage, an apostate, with a magical green eye, came to the Conclave, filled with Templars, just to see them?’ Leliana put her hands on her sides. She saw straight through me.

Okay, lie, but don’t lie. ‘I just… felt like I needed to come? Like it was… instinct.’

Leliana nodded contently.

‘I… when the Breach appeared, I wanted to help, but it called to me… my eye was hurting and… maybe I just wanted answers too.’

‘Maybe the Maker has sent you as well’, Cassandra said in awe, ‘He must have. Your eye as a sign of His fate.’

Wow there lady. ‘I’m not sent by anyone’, Cassandra looked somewhat disappointed at that, ‘or not that I know of’, and then she looked up again.

‘What happened at the forward camp?’ Leliana cut to the case.

‘It was… disturbing.’ I choked in my breath just by thinking of it. ‘I “looked” through Maxwell’s palm. I felt it was not only connected to the Breach, but to every Rift that has appeared from it. And I could see them, through my eye. You spoke of the mountain pass and I thought of that and looked through the mark and… and I just seemed to look straight through the Rift.’
Cassandra took a step back, her hand rubbing her temples. ‘You mean… you can see where Rifts lead to? See through them, where they are and what is happening around it?’

‘I… think so? I haven’t really tested it yet. When it had happened on the bridge it wasn’t… planned.’ I said, my eyes staring towards the map on the table.

‘This might be useful’, Leliana put her palms flatly on Orlais’ map, her eyes twinkling in interest.

‘Indeed. If you can truly see the Rifts, we can mark them on our maps, secure the environment…’ Cassandra and Leliana shared a look. Was that… enthusiasm almost? ‘Saeris… Do I pronounce that correctly?’

‘Yes’ I smiled faintly.

‘Good. Go to Solas, the… other apostate’ Cassandra stated, ‘Tell him what you told us, about your abilities… He is our Fade expert. Let him study you, maybe we can learn more, put you to the test.’ Cassandra crossed her arms in front of her chest. ‘And… thank you… for helping us.’

I smiled at her sincerely and then turned on my heels towards the door. When I closed it behind me, I noticed Cassandra and Leliana sharing a long and silent look. Then, Leliana walked towards the end of the table, a thick book with an old leather and steel cover laying there. The book was huge, an imprint of an eye with flames on its front. Leliana caressed the symbol as the door shut in front of me.

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I was given my old woollen undershirt back when I left the Chantry. An elven servant brought it to me, she almost didn’t dare to look me in the eyes. I had pulled the shirt over my head behind a corner of a cabin, giving Cassandra’s coat back to the servant to return it in my place. The servant had bowed deeply, which made me severely uncomfortable, and ran into the Chantry as fast as she could. I swore I could see her shake on her legs.

Cassandra had told me to go to Solas, to tell him what I told her, to let him study me. But I wouldn’t be myself if I listened to her, besides, Solas made me more… anxious. Even more uncomfortable than with the bowing elven servant. He… raised the tiny white hairs on my arms with his stare, and not in a remotely good way. Something was… off with the guy. Or maybe, I just didn’t like his smugness.

I crossed my arms as the cold Frostback wind whispered through my woollen undershirt. I should go and get my cape. It was being repaired, but where? Wasn’t there a smith near the stables?

But first, I needed to go to someone.

Maxwell.

The new Herald of Andraste. Sort of.

Now, if I where a highly new, unconscious religious figure… where would I be? I walked down towards the front of the village, my eyes flickering over everything that moved. There were so many people in here, so many running around and rebuilding themselves after…

A flock of humans and some elves had gathered near the gate of Haven. I followed their stare and noticed four soldiers standing in front of a somewhat larger cabin near the back of the village. I strolled towards them, noticing how the crowd parted as I walked between them. Their eyes couldn’t leave my face, and they all stared at my eye. I’ve never had so many people openly staring at it...

‘There she is…’
‘Look at her! It was true…’

People muttered. I lowered my head, feeling self-conscious again by their attention. I liked the feeling of not having to disguise myself, covering up who I was… but this was a step too far. I neared the soldiers guarding the cabin. I saw their eyes peering at me through their steel helmets as I came closer. One of them moved when I tried to pass them, his stance protective, but not aggressive.

‘The Herald is not to be disturbed’, the man mumbled, his eyes flickering to my eyes and then to the ground and back. Is this guy really going to stop me?

Suddenly, the door of the cabin opened. The people behind started chittering excitedly, until they saw it wasn’t their Herald. Adan stuck his head out of the door opening, his face in an annoyed grimace.

‘Maker’s sake, let her in. You know who she is?’ He lifted his chin towards me.

I smiled encouragingly at the protective soldier, who shied away as he stepped aside. I swear the skin beneath his helmet was getting as pale as a sheet as I passed him. Even the soldiers were afraid of me. I turned to Adan, who urged me to come in quickly. The alchemist shut the door behind him, sighing while I stooped forward. The inside of the cabin was lit through the fire place, giving the entire room a cozy glow. Some paintings hung on the wooden walls, and there stood a thick wardrobe in the corner of the cabin. There was also a desk with some clutter on it and an oil lamp, and next to it, a bookcase. A carpet was put on the floor, made of a soft luxurious fabric. And at the back of the cabin, a somewhat larger bed stood. The bed had multiple pillows and was covered in thick blankets, all made of red and blue thread fabric, a fluffy fur on top of them. And under all of those blankets, Maxwell laid. He was breathing somewhat heavily, but nothing that seemed drastically concerning.

‘Maxwell?’ I whispered as I came closer. He was alive, he was healing. Breathe Saeris, everything is fine.

‘I’d be surprised if he’d answer. He isn’t particularly coherent.’ Adan took a step closer as he took a small bottle off the nightstand. He opened the flask with a squeak, and dropped some liquid in Maxwell’s opened mouth.

‘What is that?’

‘Elfroot to hasten his recovery’, Adan grunted while putting the bottle back on the table. ‘I gave him the same thing after he stumbled out of Maker-knows-where.’ He sighed as he saw the worry in my eyes. ‘Stop that worrying, the Herald’s just tired. Think he’ll wake up soon.’ Adan looked over to Maxwell, sighing again with a tired look on his face. ‘I’m not a healer. I’m an alchemist, not a mother hen…’

‘I’m back now. I’ll take over.’ I smiled at him and Adan nodded, the man finally content at something.

‘Well, not much to be done now. Herald here just has to wake up from his nap.’ He said while staring at me. ‘Maybe it’s best you go looking for something warmer to wear. Don’t want you to be sick again too.’

The man was cranky, and a little bit mean, but he meant well… somewhere.

‘I’ll do so’, I nodded at him, ‘thank you. I’ll first just… stay for a while.’

Adan sighed again as he left the cabin. I heard the people outside gasp, and then grunting when they realized it was the cranky alchemist again.
I stepped closer to Maxwell’s bed. His face was serene, calm. Maybe he needed sleeping more than healing too. His scarred hand laid on top of the covers. I crept closer, my face almost pressed to it, blinking my left eye near the mark. It must’ve looked stupid… and it was. I couldn’t see anything. Maybe it doesn’t work that way, maybe the mark had to be flaring… or the holder of it to be awake. I hoped he would awaken soon, though. I wanted to know if the connection we had could be used, if I could really see through Rifts through his mark. And maybe, I would be a little less worried if he wasn’t unconscious anymore. It wasn’t like I just wanted him to be healthy so I could fulfil my “promise” and be done with it. I actually quite liked the guy, even if I only knew him for a day. He reminded me of Sybil, not only his eyes, but his spirit. It was alive, fighting, defying. Just like she once had been.

I stepped away from the bed, looking him over one more time. He was getting little brown stubbles on his chin. I wondered if he would grow a beard or not.

‘Hold on there, big guy’, I smiled at him. Maybe he would hear me in his dreams. I hoped it were good ones.

I walked back outside, thanking the soldiers with a kind nod. They kept staring past me, bowing their heads respectfully. Though I wondered if it was out of respect, or out of fear. I halted near the steps, looking up towards one of the soldiers. I didn’t know if it was the same one who had stopped me from going in, they all looked the same with their helmets on.

‘Is there a blacksmith near here?’ I asked politely.

‘Y… yes, my Lady, j… just outside of the gates to your r… right.’ He stuttered. Why so polite? Normally humans just called me rabbit or knife-ear or… “you there, elf”.

I nodded and stepped down, the people staring at me again, but this time, they were a little bit more subtle, speaking in whispers and putting their hands in front of their mouths. I tried ignoring them, lowering my head and wishing for my cape so I could put my hood up and disappear in its shadows. Hopefully, the blacksmith had repaired it already.

‘Hey! Twinkle!’

Wait… that is…

I turned around and saw Varric leaning against the ramparts of the village. He smiled nicely at me, his chest gleaming in the snow’s reflection.

‘Varric!’ I smiled and walked his way. He grinned back up at me. ‘Did you just call me Twinkle?’

‘Yes, I did.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s your nickname. That’s my thing, you know.’ He hummed.

‘Oh. Okay. You got one for yourself too?’

‘Nah, that would just be weird.’ The scar on his nose wrinkled while he laughed wholeheartedly. I noticed he was wearing a golden necklace short around his throat, a larger golden band at its centre.

‘You holding up alright?’


‘True. You might consider running at the first opportunity. I’ve written enough tragedies to know where this is going.’
‘You are a writer, then?’

‘Ow. Twinkle. You are hurting my feelings here.’ He rumbled. ‘Not a fan then, I take it.’

‘Oh, no, it’s just that I’ve been locked up for a while, so… kind of out of it all.’

‘Not to brag, but yes, I am a writer. Best-selling book’s called “Hard in Hightown”. Got a copy of it if you’re interested.’ He winked at me.

‘Sure! I’d love to read your work.’ I nodded. ‘Hightown, you say. Is it about Kirkwall?’

‘Yes! How’d you know? Ever visited the place? It’s a great town to get shit-faced.’ He asked, his face full of unsavoury curiosity.

‘Oh. No… no just heard of it.’ Crap. Got to keep your shit together, Saeris.

I actually really liked Varric. He was funny and a good distraction from it all. He also looked like he’d be a loyal friend. Those are very hard to come by. ‘Say, Varric’, I changed the topic quickly, and he noticed, but went with it, ‘You up for dinner in the tavern tonight? Bet you have a lot of nice stories to tell and since our Herald isn’t waking up…’

‘Ha! Sure, Twinkle! But, if you want to hear my stories, you’re going to need to tell me some as well.’ Typical.

‘You’re going to need a lot of mead to keep up.’ I winked at him.

‘Even better.’ He bared his teeth. ‘Oh, and before I forget. Chuckles was looking for you.’

Oh, fuck me.

‘Shit’, I swore, ‘Don’t tell him you’ve seen me, will you?’

Varric shook his head, a wide grin on his face. “Elves”. That’ll cost you an extra round.’

‘Gladly!’ I smiled and waved at him as I turned on my heels. At least Solas hadn’t found me yet. But I’ll run in to him one day…

I ran down towards Haven’s gates. They were opened, and I noticed people coming and going. Some were merchants, their wares on their backs. But most were soldiers, and I even noticed some pilgrims. Probably here because they heard of their “Herald of Andraste”.

Outside of Haven, a military camp was based. Soldiers ran up and down, recruits bashing each other with wooden swords and slashing hay dummies while sweating in the cold winter’s sun. I stared at them, reeling in the feeling of not being gaped at for once, they were too busy.

‘Master Tethras, have you seen Saeris, by any chance?’

Fenedhis. That was Solas’ voice. It was soft, coming from where Varric stood. I grunted as I jumped to my right, where three slightly bigger tents stood. I silently sneaked around one of its corners, grabbing the soft ivory fabric while holding my breath. I heard light footsteps. Someone heaved a sigh. Shit, shit, Solas was standing near the wooden gate of the village, his eyes scanning the grounds. He folded his hands behind his back, straightening into a cold stance as he turned on his heels again. I swear I saw a hint of annoyance in his pace.

‘Maker, what are you doing here?’ Someone tapped on my shoulder.

I supressed a scream and turned around.
For a minute, I stared at the man in front of me. His voice sounded just like Daniel… but it wasn’t him. Naturally. Daniel had been dead for more than a century now. The man in front of me didn’t even look like him, but was still kind on the eyes. He was tall, taller than Solas and Cassandra and Maxwell, the latter just some inches smaller, I guessed. He had blonde, wavy hair, swept back, and golden brown eyes, which you could drown in forever. He had a slight stubble beard, and a thin and fairly unnoticeable scar that crossed from the side of his upper lip to his left cheek. Around his shoulders hung a large brown fur pelt, which looked like a lion’s mane. Under the pelt, he was wearing a steel armour, red fabric crossing his middle and draping down at the back. He had a very faint smell of Lyrium around him, but he didn’t reek of it.

He looked at me suspiciously, his golden eyebrows raised. I blinked, and then looked over my shoulder. Good. Solas hadn’t heard me.

‘I’m… sorry, I was avoiding someone’, I said honestly. The man before me put his hands on his sides, his face twisting, like he was deep in thought.

‘You must be Saeris’, he finally said, staring into my eye like the rest of the world, ‘Good to finally be meeting you.’

‘And… you are?’ Should I know who this man is?

‘Cullen Rutherford’, the man’s lips curled into a faint smile, ‘Commander of the Inquisition’s Forces, well, as they are.’ He stared up at the training soldiers in the camp.

‘Wait. Inquisition?’ My first reaction would be, oh dear, inquisitions aren’t good. But then, I faintly remembered my older brother speaking of the exact same thing… and me thinking he had meant the Spanish one. Wasn’t his game about the Inquisition? Seems like I was right in the middle of it. He would’ve been so jealous.

‘Indeed, but at a guess, after the Herald is informed, plans will be made more concretely. Now, it’s merely in its reconstruction.’ The Commander signed me to follow him deeper into the military camp and I did so. ‘It is requested by Divine Justinia’s writ to restore peace between mages and Templars. Her Hands must be on it as we speak.’

‘Her Hands?’

‘The Seeker and the Nightingale.’ Oh. Cassandra and Leliana. ‘They have not yet told you of this?’

‘Obviously.’

‘Well, they might soon, since it is not official yet.’

‘Yet?’

‘More will be discussed when the Herald awakens.’ He looked down at me, and I couldn’t help blushing. For Mythal’s sake, Saeris, was I a teenager? An almost two-hundred year old teenager. ‘I was recruited to the Inquisition in Kirkwall, myself. I was there during the mage uprising. I saw first-hand the devastation it caused. Cassandra sought a solution. When she offered me a position, I left the Templars to join her cause.’ He stared at a scrap of paper a scout just passed him, his face concentrated.

I took a step back, my eyes filled with caution. A Templar. Fuck. That’s why I smelled Lyrium. Why was it so faint though? Maybe it was not the best idea to stay close to this… Commander.
‘Now it seems we face something far worse. Something you can help us with, or so I was informed.’ He looked back to me… and his concentration turned into a slight frustration. ‘I left the Templar Order, there is no reason to be afraid.’

I nodded at him, but couldn’t resist holding my protective stance. Even if he wasn’t a Templar anymore, he had been one once. The last Templar I was “kind” to locked me up in a Circle and forced himself on me. But perhaps, this man could not do much about it. ‘My apologies. Life as an apostate has made me… weary.’

Cullen nodded, ‘Your eye has a connection to the Breach, its power is yet to be concluded. Have you been to Solas, he…’

‘No, not yet.’ I interrupted with a loud sigh.

‘Forgive me, I doubt you came here for a lecture.’ He sighed, and I noticed the dark circles under his eyes, a tired undertone in his voice. This man was void of energy, how was he still standing?

‘Another time, perhaps.’ I looked up to him again, his kind eyes reflecting in mine. I almost felt guilty for doubting his truthfulness. This man was not like the Templars in the Circle, he didn’t look at me like I was a monster. The caution was there, I bet you could never get it fully out, but there was a slight understanding too. I cocked my head to the side, a strand of hair waving in front of my eyes, I put it back behind my pointy ear as I smiled up at the Commander. It was a warm smile. I should be afraid of him, but I wasn’t. Maybe it was because of his voice sounding like Daniel’s, or his own kind and loyal eyes.

‘I, ah…,’ he cleared his throat, his eyes suddenly looking down at my feet while he shifted on his own.

‘You must be busy’, I broke the awkward silence, ‘The blacksmith, is it that way?’ I found contact with his eyes again. The man straightened himself, nodding silently as I turned on my heels towards the stables. The Commander lingered for a while in the middle of the camp, his eyes on my back, then, he too turned towards his own work.

The blacksmith was built alongside the stables, and was incredibly busy. Multiple smithies were hovering above the fires and anchors. Soldiers stood about, waiting for their armours to be fitted, repaired or engraved. A tall man hovered above a sweating apprentice who was melting steel. He grunted as the young man spilled next to the sheath. He was wearing a cotton shirt that had gone dirty with sweat and ash. Drops of condensations dripped down his balding head, prickling into his thick ginger moustache. That man must be the head smith. The man knew, of course, exactly who I was. It was like the whole village of Haven was told to look out for the tall elf with one green eye. Nevertheless, the blacksmith, whose name was Harritt, had already repaired my favourite cape, and had added a fur hem on the brim of the hood. He had offered me a new one, but I had refused. The man also gave me an extra set of pants, undershirts and armour coats. But when he offered me a new pair of boots, I had refused, asking instead for leather foot wraps. I didn’t quite like Solas, he gave me the creeps, but also an idea. I remembered how I loved feeling the earth underneath my feet, how it had helped with my balance and connection to the earth. And if you put the correct wards on them, they didn’t get dirty so fast and would keep you warm as well. The blacksmith had looked me up and down, shaking his head while he gave me the leather wraps. When I brought up payment, he had simply said it had already been taken care of.

After leaving Harritt, I immediately waved my cape back over my shoulders, pulling my hood far over my head. With my new supply of clothes under my arm, I walked towards the tavern, which was called the Singing Maiden, looking around each corner to check if a certain apostate elf wasn’t lurking behind it. I figured that maybe the tavern had a spare room for me to sleep in upstairs, and I
would pay for it in instalments, since I wasn’t leaving this place anytime soon. I opened the tavern door, that got fixed after the blast, and a warm whelm of smells knocked into my face. The scent of sweat, meat, broth and bread, mead and ale and spiced wine called me in. This place smelled almost the exact same way as the Hanged Man had in Kirkwall. How could I forget that place? It had stayed with me throughout the years. The time that I had spent there singing with Sybil…

I pulled my hood down and felt how the room got a little quieter with it. I tried to ignore the stares as I stalked towards the bar. Behind it, stood a young woman. She looked at me, and I could hear her swallow hard as I approached.

‘Excuse me, do you have a spare room for tonight? Or for multiple nights?’ I asked.

The young girl blinked her eyes. ‘Y… yes I do, my Lady.’ There was the my Lady again.

I smiled kindly towards her, hoping she would relax a little. ‘You can put it on the name of Saeris. Can I pay for it in instalments?’

‘Oh, my, no… you don’t need to pay for it, my Lady.’ She peeked at my eye, and then looked down again.

‘Please, I insist, I…’

‘No, no, it’s quite alright.’ The girl nodded somewhat shaken, ‘I’ll prepare the room right away.’

‘Oh, please take your time.’ I smiled at her. She stretched out her arms and I gave her the clothes I was holding.

‘I’ll bring ‘em to the room already, my Lady.’

‘Hey, Flissa, get me another round, while you’re at it.’ Varric came to the counter, standing behind me while winking; ‘Mine emptied itself mysteriously.’

The barmaid, Flissa, nodded at him with a faint smile.

‘So, Twinkle, you’re ready for that round you promised me.’ Varric poked me with his elbow.

‘I forgot that I kind of don’t have any coin…’ I stared at the ground, how embarrassing.

‘Well, that complicates the matter’, Varric scratched his back. ‘I have a proposal. We play Wicked Grace, you win, and I pay the drinks, I win, and you tell me a secret.’

I hummed at that. Having played the game of Wicked Grace countless times during my stay in Kirkwall, I had actually gotten quite good at it.

I looked down to Varric and lifted my chin, ‘Oh, you’re on.’

Chapter End Notes

So, whaddaya think?

If you liked it, you can always leave me a comment or a kudo.
**Heralded**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“There is no such thing as an omen. Destiny does not send us heralds. She is too wise or too cruel for that.”

- Oscar Wilde

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Varric sighed deeply as he put his hand in the air again, signalling Flissa for another round of drinks. I sipped contently from my cup of ale, having won yet another game of Wicked Grace.

‘How are you so good at this?’ Varric sighed.

‘Raw talent, Varric’, I hummed contently. It had been a fruitful evening. I had eaten a warm bowl of broth, gotten some free drinks from Varric, and won some coin from other tavern-goers who had dared to challenge me for a round of Wicked Grace. Winner gets it all. And spoiler, I got it all. The alcohol buzzed in my head, making my fair cheeks blush with a warm glow. I’ve never been very keen on alcohol, avoided it most of the time. But tonight, I just felt like drinking. And it got to my head before I had realised it.

‘Tell me Varric’, I lisped as I saw him take another tankard full of mead, ‘Why did you name your crossbow Bianca?’

‘Mirabelle was taken’, Varric crooked an eyebrow.

‘Real funny, Dwarf.’ I giggled.

‘Speaking of funny, have I told you about the time Hawke and I broke into Chateau Haine.’ Varric took a sip from his cup and winked at me.

‘Yes! But you can tell me again!’ I grinned.

‘Great! It started, as most capers do, with a trap…’ Varric told his story again, his eyes turning in nostalgia every time he mentioned his best friend. My heart bled for him, you could see he missed the guy. ‘And then Hawke looks up and says, “looks like the duke… has fallen from grace”’. I laughed loudly at his story. I could hear him tell it all night long. It took my mind away from everything. It was a respite from all of the worries dangling in my head. Maxwell, the Breach, my eye, the promise…

‘Now, it’s your turn to tell me something, Twinkle’, Varric leaned over the wooden table, ‘You told me after our sixth game of Wicked Grace, that you travelled. Honestly, a pretty elf like you, travelling alone…’

‘Aw, you think I’m pretty’, I giggled loudly.

‘Don’t go changing the subject again’, Varric winked at me, ‘But, what did you do during all of that time?’ Varric’s eyes lifted up towards something behind me, and then back down to me again. I ignored that.
‘I sang!’ I lisped with glee, ‘Saeris the minstrel, at your service.’ I gulped from my tankard.

‘I would not have taken you for an artist’, Solas said from behind me, strolling to the table, and sat down next to me. I choked in my ale and feared the alcohol would be spouting out of my nose if I moved.

‘Fenedhis lasa!’ I cursed loudly and turned my head, staring into Solas’ slightly amused face.

‘Chuckles! Care to join us?’ Varric winked at me, and winced when I kicked his shin under the table.

Solas stared at the cards on the table. ‘I’m afraid that I’m not much of a gambler anymore.’

‘You don’t have to play for real coin, that’s just for keeping score.’

‘Oh really, Varric? Backing down with the money? Afraid you’ll lose it again?’ I grinned at the Dwarf.

‘I play for conversation, Twinkle. That way I win no matter how the cards fall’, Varric smiled back.

‘Tell that to your purse’, I giggled while sipping from my ale again.

‘Maybe I should engage in this game of yours, master Tethras’, Solas straightened his back some more.

Ow, shit.

Solas glared down at me while I sank deeper into my seat, ‘It was regrettable that we could not discuss the matter of the vehemence of your eye today. I truly hope we can get to it tomorrow.’

‘Ah, yes, my eye’, shit, ‘I… err… forgot.’ Varric smirked at me. I was a very bad liar. Especially when drunk.

‘Can I deal you in, Chuckles’, Varric was kind enough to change the topic. Solas nodded slowly, his chin inclining near the deck.

I will beat this elf…

I didn’t beat him. Varric gaped at us as Solas quirked an eyebrow, laying down his own deck of cards to display. I stared at his hands. Four of the same suit cards. The man had beaten me.

‘Well, shit’, Varric grinned, ‘Saeris the Unbeatable just became Saeris the Beaten.’

‘Oh, shut your cake-hole’, I cursed and Varric rumbled some more.

‘It is a cunning game. You must watch your opponent's moves as carefully as your own’, Solas looked to his side, his face a cold mask of neutrality. The smug bastard. I lifted the full tankard of ale to my lips, gulping it down in one go. I shouldn’t have done that.

‘I call for revenge’, Varric grinned as he assembled the cards again.

‘Do I not get a conversation, now I have won?’ Solas looked up at me again.

I saw the whole room turning upside down, pink elephants floating in the brown tavern air. I closed my eyes and focussed, but felt the room turn like a spinning wheel. And I was its needle.
‘You alright there, Twinkle?’ Varric suddenly stood up.

‘Maybe not… I should just… go to bed’, I lisped, my hands grabbing the table so I wouldn’t fall off. I flung my legs over the stool, wobbling as I tried standing on them. The room bared down on me, and my legs gave way. Solas was up as soon as I saw the floor nearing my face, and grabbed my arms, lifting me back up to my feet.

‘I will get you to your room’, Solas said politely.

‘I can go myself’, I mumbled and shied from his touch, ‘I am perfectly fine.’ And then I fell again. Solas grabbed my upper-arms, dragging me back on my feet.

‘Sure Twinkle’, Varric winked at Solas, ‘Let Chuckles here help you, just for safety precautions.’

I grumbled as Solas slowly helped me cross the almost empty tavern. Flissa nodded politely at him as she gave him the keys to my room. His hands were warm, and I felt them burn into my skin. This was embarrassing, uncomfortable. There’s something off with this guy, how nice and polite he was, I felt like he was hiding something. Living for almost a hundred and fifty years makes you know how to estimate certain people. Solas helped me to my door, opened it for me, and helped putting me into the gabble wooden bed. I groaned as I felt the soft furs caressing my cheeks.

I will never drink again.

‘Ma serannas’, I mumbled, almost drifting off. ‘Say, Solas, you are a Fade expert, right?’

‘That is correct’, he was walking towards the door, but stopped at my voice.

‘Can you see it too? In the sky? Do you hear it?’ I really didn’t know what I was saying. My eyelids pushed onto my skin below, darkness ebbing in my consciousness, taking me further and further away.

‘It screams.’ I sighed.

Solas turned around, his face filled with silent questions.

I left them unanswered as a dreamless sleep took control of me.

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My heart was pumping in my head, the pain waking me up. I moaned as I rubbed my temples, sitting straight in the hard bed. I swore it felt more comfortable yesterday.

Yesterday… what had happened? Varric and I were drinking and playing Wicked Grace and… oh, yes, Solas. I really hoped I hadn’t said something stupid. I opened my eyes, which felt incredibly heavy, and stared up at the small room I had rented. There wasn’t much furniture, just the bed, a dresser and a small end table with a roily mirror hanging above it on the wall. On the little table, my clothes laid neatly folded into a pile. I rolled out of the bed and put my feet down onto the ground. I was still wearing my boots, my clothes, my cape,… It could’ve been worse.

I walked towards the pile of clothes, still rubbing my sore temples. Now I remembered why I detested alcohol so much. I held the clothes in front of me. They looked somewhat small, made for a more “common” elven figure, I guessed. I took off my clothes, dumping them on the ground in the corner of the room, leaving only my breast band on. I re-bound it, not too tight, just comfortable enough, and slid my arms through the long-sleeved grey tunic. It was a little tight around my chest-area, but I was built a little bit… larger over there than most elves were, but not that much. I put on clean undergarments and a pair of long leather pants with build-in foot wraps. The sides of the pants
were bound together by strings, showing a slight sliver of skin from my thighs towards my ankles. I wrinkled my toes contently on the wooden floor when I finished tying them, casting a basic ward on my soles. I combed my long white hair with an old brush laying on the end table. After that, I braided two strands of hair that hung on the sides of my head, and bound them together at the back. I looked into the mirror contently as I inspected my half-up/half-down hairstyle and took a step back. I almost looked like I had with the Dalish clan when I first got here. I looked… Elven. I pulled a samite coat over my tunic and bound my cape over my shoulders.

Done.

I grinned and turned to the small window near my bed and then, I choked. The sun stood high in the heavens. Fenedhis, what time was it? It looked like mid-day! I cursed loudly as I ran out of the room and downstairs to the tavern. People looked up to me as I spurted through the crowded tables, pulling my cape over my face, the new fur brim tickling my nose. I turned left from the tavern, downwards and then up the hill to Maxwell’s cabin. The crowd that had gathered here yesterday was gone and only a few people lingered. They gaped at my confounded expression. The soldiers guarding the cabin were gone too.

Maxwell had awakened, and I had missed it. I ran up the stairs to the cabin, feeling how its door was locked. I knocked, but no one answered. He wasn’t here anymore. Where was he? I started panicking slightly and then leaped towards the Chantry at the back of the village. As I ran towards the Chantry, the big entrance door opened and Chancellor Roderick stormed out, a furious expression lingering on his already cranky face. He ignored me as he passed, grumbling in thought. I ran into the Chantry, just in time as the door to the room at the back opened, Maxwell walking out of it with Cassandra and Leliana at his back, their faces confident.

‘Maxwell!’ I called out and saw his head rise in interest. He looked… well-rested. He looked up to me with his hazel eyes, squinting them as he smiled broadly while opening his arms.

‘Saeris!’ he answered.

I ran to him and stopped right before his open frame, my eyes inspecting every inch of his body for irregularities. There were none, he was fine. ‘I’m so happy you’re alright.’ I sighed.

‘I am, thanks to you’, he nodded. ‘I heard you’ve been injured too. How’s your back?’

‘Fully healed’, I smiled at him. ‘I woke up yesterday.’

‘And had a rough night’, Leliana intervened, her eyes gleaming under her hood. Figured she had spies watching my every move. I lifted my shoulders and laughed under my hood. Nothing could be done about it right now.

‘Just had a bit of fun’, I giggled and saw Cassandra shaking her head slightly. ‘So, what happens now?’ I asked her. Cassandra, Leliana and Maxwell all looked at each other and then back to me.

Maxwell straightened his back proudly. ‘Since I can say it officially now; as of this moment, the Inquisition has been reborn.’

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Maxwell had a lot of things to do, everybody clinging to him for a million different reasons. He had to meet up with his advisors, set up the new Inquisition, write nobles, etc. He seemed to be enjoying it, like he had found a new purpose in life. I found it remarkable that these people wanted to restore peace in all of Thedas, save the world and believe in a stranger, but I couldn’t feel their enthusiasm.
The bigger this Inquisition, the more dangers it would face, Maxwell would face, and it concerned me greatly. I needed to help him, protect him, make sure he closed that thing in the sky, and they were only making it harder and harder for me to do so. I wanted to stay by his side at all times, but wasn’t even allowed to. Maxwell had a newfound authority, a rank in a new order, heralded into divinity. Yet, I was just a recruit, a soldier. And so, I stayed behind.

I also couldn’t delay my “meeting” with Solas any longer. Cassandra had already given me a scolding with just her eyes, and Solas would now know exactly where I would hide, and to be honest, the village of Haven was so small that new hiding places were incredibly difficult to spot.

Solas could be found near Adan’s apothecary, just left of the Chantry, down a slope. Some other cabins were situated in this part of the village, and Solas stood in front of one of them, his arms crossed over his grey woollen tunic. His jaw-necklace dangled around his neck. He stared up at the Breach, still thundering in the heavens, but not spitting and spewing like before. Next to Solas, Maxwell was standing, both of them in deep conversation. I neared silently, my ears picking up their voices with ease.

‘I’ve journeyed deep into the Fade in ancient ruins and battlefields to see the dreams of lost civilizations. I’ve watched as hosts of spirits clash to re-enact the bloody past in ancient wars both famous and unforgotten.’ Solas smiled a little as he was lost in memories, but the smile disappeared in a second. ‘Every war has its heroes, I’m just curious what kind you’ll be.’

I knew lost battlefields, I had walked them in real life. I slumped, my mind travelling to Greenthorn.

‘You go to ruins and battlefields?’ Maxwell broke the silence and Solas shook his head.

‘Any building strong enough to withstand the rigors of time has a history. Every battlefield is steeped in death. Both attract spirits. They press against the Veil, weakening the barrier between our worlds. When I dream of such places, I go deep into the Fade. I can find memories no other living being has ever seen.’ Uhuh, try me.

‘Wait. You fall asleep in the middle of ancient ruins? Isn’t that dangerous?’

‘I do set wards. And if you leave food for the giant spiders, they are usually content to live and let live.’ I hate spiders.

‘That sounds incredible’, Maxwell muttered, his eyes full of curiosity.

‘I will stay then, at least until the Breach is sealed’, he nodded while stepping forward, his hands again crossed on his back.

‘Was that in doubt?’ Maxwell asked, his back leaning onto Solas’ cabin. Please be in doubt.

‘I am an apostate mage surrounded by Chantry forces, and unlike you, I do not have a divine mark protecting me. Cassandra has been accommodating, but you understand my caution.’

‘Cassandra is here to protect you, she will not forget you came here to help, like Saeris did.’

‘That is true’, Solas inclined his head.

I coughed then, staring at the ground. Solas and Maxwell turned around. Solas’ cold eyes stared down at my cloaked figure. I pulled my fur hood closer over my head as the scorching wind tried to chill my bones.

Solas put his hands behind his back, his expression calm and expecting. ‘Good. You have come’, he...
said, his voice soft in the lingering wind. I held in a deep sigh as I looked up at him. I really didn’t feel like talking about myself again, while Maxwell had to go out and about in Haven. I needed to be around him, but had to take confidence in others to protect him. At least the village of Haven was quite safe with all the guards around, and Maxwell could hold his own…

‘Ah, Saeris, how has your day been?’ Maxwell took a step to me, his face kind and calm. He stretched his scarred hand towards me, but left it dangling at his side as I refused to take it. The scar was loud, calling out to me and I wasn’t sure if I was ready to take it again. Instead, I bowed my head respectfully under my hood and patted his arm with a friendly trot.

‘Calm’, I smiled faintly as I inspected Maxwell again. He stood strong, a warm coat pulled over his broad shoulders, his chestnut brown hair curling around his soft face, his hazel eyes boring into mine. He had shaven of his beard, leaving his chin bare and his face younger.

Maxwell’s lips curled into a smile, ‘Good. Well, I’ll let you two at it, got a meeting with the Commander coming up. See you tonight at the tavern, Saeris? Varric is teaching me how to play Wicked Grace.’

‘Oh, no, not tonight, thank you! But I’ll see you around’, I nodded, my hands waving up and down nervously. Did I hear Solas chuckle? Or did I imagine it?

Maxwell dipped his head towards me and Solas before turning around and trotting towards the military camp outside the village’s walls.

‘If you will’, Solas nodded casually and walked to his cabin, opening the door and signalling me to enter. I swallowed hard as I walked past him through his door. His cabin was small, a table stood in a corner, some papers and books laying on top of it. There was a small dresser and a bed in the back, neatly covered with fur. Candles were placed upon his bureau, flickering shadows onto the wooden walls. I fondled my hands as I stood in the centre of the room, my breath nervously in my throat. Why was I this nervous? Get your shit together, Saeris.

‘Please’, Solas cocked his head and pointed towards the stool that stood near his chest. I lifted the warm cape from my shoulders and spread it over the wooden stool. I felt Solas’ eyes burning into my skin. I spied him over my shoulder and saw his face folded in his normal, cold look. But there was something more behind those stern blue eyes as they looked me up and down. His face didn’t betray a single emotion, but his eyes told me of his intrigue.

I sat down on the stool, feeling how the cold snow on my shoulders melted by the candles’ warmth. ‘I will tell you what I told Cassandra.’ I said as Solas leant against the wall opposite to where I sat.

He cocked his head in curiosity, ‘I have already been given the report.’

‘Alright.’ I sighed. ‘Then what else do you need to know?’

‘I will test some spells onto your eye, cast the same wards on them as I had with the Herald. We must see all the possible reactions.’ He mused.

‘Just be quick with it, Solas’, I said flatly.

He took a step towards me and bent forward, his hand stretched towards my face. ‘May I’, he requested. I nodded slowly and swallowed hard as he took my chin in his long cold fingers. He stared at my eye, holding my face closer to his own. I felt a prickling sensation coiling in his fingers as a strange magic climbed towards my eye. I heaved as it found my curse, coiling around it, searching for a way in.
I cried out as I ripped my face from his touch. My eye coiled, burning in its orbit. Solas took a step back, his eyes utterly confused. I blinked rapidly as I covered my eye with my hands, my body shivering in response. ‘This magic is… unlike any I have witnessed before’, he whispered almost.

‘Can’t you make anything from it?’ I questioned while still heaving.

‘It feels familiar, yet unbeknownst to whatever magic others possess.’ Solas still stared at me to the point I was getting incredibly uncomfortable again. ‘The Breach, the mark, what do you feel when you become aware of them?’

‘I feel pain and… a power lingering behind it, almost familiar, like I know it, but don’t’, I mumbled honestly.

‘Yesterday, you told me you could hear it scream’, he said deadpan.

‘I what?’ I did not remember that.

‘Perhaps, the magic behind your eye is a connection to the Fade itself. That would give an explanation of the colour of your iris…’ Solas said to himself, ignoring my question. ‘May I… visit you in the Fade, in your dreams so to say’, I know what the Fade is, but thanks, ‘to feel if the connection is stronger there?’ he held his face up politely, his strong jawline showing from underneath his fur collar. I never allowed anyone in my dreams, in my bubble. It was mine, and mine only. And how could this Solas even find me? But maybe, this is for the best. If this man could discover what power lies beyond my eye, maybe I could dismantle it, get rid of it earlier? Or at least help Maxwell…

‘Alright’, I said staring back into Solas’ cold eyes, ‘whatever you think is necessary.’

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I put my feet flatly onto the damp grass of the meadow and smiled, feeling the soft sun tingling on my bare shoulders. A bird whistled wishfully through the soft blue sky as I stood up to brush off my long, soft green dress. It had of-the-shoulder long sleeves, and a fitted bodice with straps bound at my back. The skirt was long and reached my ankles, a split at my right leg letting in the soft breeze.

A quiet prodding was shuddering through the field and I felt it deep into my bones. I stared up towards the treeline that stretched outwards into an endless deep forest throughout the Fade. As always, spirits and demons alike stared into my meadow from behind the bushes. Their gazes followed my vibrant flowers, my soft grass, my lively sparrows dancing through the skies. They saw my paradise, and wanted it. But they could not see me through my invisible ward, they could feel my presence, but could never catch my figure. The bushes were rustling as Solas stepped out of them, his hands clasped behind his back as usual. He stared into my meadow, his eyes searching for me. I walked towards the treeline and stopped right before him, but his eyes were still wandering the ground, not seeing that whatever he was looking for, was standing right in front of him.

I kept staring at his being, his posture, his distant attitude. I saw his chest slowly go up and down as his necklace laid flatly on his shirt, the jawbone moving in sync with his calculated breath. His face was nestled in a scholarly gaze, his auburn eyebrows furrowed. I noted the dimple in his chin, and how it curled naturally, like an extension from his strong jawline. There was strangely something different about him, a different feeling. While his presence in the waking world disturbed me, made me anxious, in the Fade, it made me almost calm. He was calmer, more at peace, his eyes twinkling brighter. Maybe, he liked this place just like I liked it, a blissful escape of the darkening reality.

I could stand there forever, counting the faint freckles that darted over his cheeks and nose. When I
was awake, I could see them, but ever so slightly. But now, as I stood closer and wasn’t as anxious like I had been in his cabin, I could truly see the patterns on his full cheekbones. Then, I remembered why I was there. I had promised him he could see me in the Fade and I should get to it.

I placed my hand on the invisible ward that covered my meadow, and felt a small portal appear beside it. Solas noticed it too, as he looked next to him and a faint smile appeared on his lips. He walked through the invisible door and stared up at the blue sky, the serene meadow and then to me. There was a spark in his presence. I liked Solas more here in the Fade, or at least his aura.

‘Interesting’, he mumbled as he stared back to my meadow again. ‘Tell me, where are we?’

‘It’s a combination of places’, I said in response and walked past him.

‘Did you create this yourself, consciously?’ He said then.

‘Of course’, I nodded. Wasn’t this normal? Wasn’t it like this for everyone?

‘Then, you are a Dreamer, much like myself’, he stared at me, his eyes squinting suspiciously, ‘You did not know?’

‘A Dreamer?’ What’s that now? ‘No, I thought it was like this for everyone.’

‘Indeed, everyone dreams, but Dreamers shape the Fade to their will, enter it in full conscience. It is a very dangerous practice, one the Chantry likes to prohibit.’ Solas strolled through my meadow, his bare feet carefully avoiding the flowers. ‘I’ve yet had to meet one this age’, he continued, ‘for we are extremely rare, forasmuch demons are attracted to our presence. It calls to them.’ Solas lifted his arm towards the lurking red eyes hidden in the treeline outside of my bubble. ‘You can hear them, can you not?’

I nodded slowly. The shadowy presences have always made me extremely uncomfortable, a tingling pain in my eye as they stared at me. ‘I can hear them, yes. They try to hide, but I can see them too’, I mumbled while staring into the many red eyes.

‘See them?’ He repeated, his face still cold.

‘My eye... it discovers what they are, sees their disguises…’

Solas took a step closer to me. I could smell him now. Hints of elfroot and forest dangling in the soft breeze. ‘That must be it then. Your eye has a deeper connection to the Fade. It makes you see through the Breach, into the Beyond, lets you see through the Herald’s mark, for it is connected to the Fade too. And even in the Fade itself you see through its many layers.’ He stared at me openly.

‘So... what does that all mean?’

‘It means that you can help the Inquisition a great deal by discovering the Rifts’ whereabouts, like an all-seeing eye into enemy lines.’ Solas stared at me intensely and I felt like there was more to it then he just had said. This man knew more, or wanted to know more, and I could feel it. But I could feel it in myself too.

‘But how can I access this power? I couldn’t control it last time.’

Solas scratched his chin with one hand, while the other remained on his back. ‘Dreamers have an unmatched skill in shaping the Fade, seeing for what it truly is and bending it to one’s will. Yet, those untrained never reach their full potential. Perchance, if trained correctly in mastering this sight, you may also master the technique of seeing in the waking world, like through the Herald’s
This actually sounded quite logical and I was surprised I understood Solas so clearly. He truly was different here. ‘And who can train me?’

‘If you let me, I can take up the task. As I do not know any other who could.’ Solas gave me small smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes, for they remained cold and calculated. Almost like a wolf preying on his meal. And if it hadn’t made me uncomfortable yet, it had so now. But could I truly decline his offer? If I could truly help Maxwell with this, I would, even if it meant that I would be spending my dreams with this scary elf.

I pondered as I strolled through my meadow and stopped near the centre of it. A small pastel blue flower sprouted near my left big toe. I grinned as I picked it from the ground and twisted it lightly between my fingers. I craned my neck towards Solas again, who was patiently awaiting my answer with his hands again bound to his back and his face in a scholarly stare. Something was extremely off, my eye twisting every time the man spoke, but I couldn’t pin it down. He was intriguing in a way nobody I’ve ever met has been before. And I couldn’t say if it was positive or negative.

‘You may train me, Solas. For Maxwell’s sake.’ I said as he looked up to me with an approving look.

For his sake and mine.

Chapter End Notes

Drunk Saeris is the best Saeris.

If you liked this chapter, you can always leave me a comment or a kudo.
I swallowed hard as I stared over the wooden desk filled with books and scrolls and letters. My hands were folded neatly on my lap, but I couldn’t ignore the sweat appearing in my palms. In front of me the Ambassador of the Inquisition sat. She was Antivan, that you could see immediately. She had beautiful olive skin, high cheekbones and dark brown hair that was put up in a sophisticated hairdo. The woman looked up at me while scribbling something with a long feather onto a scroll. Then, she stood up, the scroll still in her royal hands, and walked with a steady pace to the scout standing in the doorway. They nodded at each other silently. The scout then left, closing the door behind him, and the Ambassador walked back to her seat behind the desk. She looked back to me then, a kind smile curling on her full lips, her posture straight but inviting.

‘Andaran atish’an’, she smiled at me, her voice like honey with a thick Antivan accent smeared on top of it. I noticed she was wearing a pretty formal attire with lots of ruffles and golden poufy sleeves.

I smiled politely back at her. ‘You speak Elven?’ I remarked.

‘You just heard the entirety of it, I’m afraid’, she smiled back at me while putting away a loose strand of hair behind her ear. ‘So, Saeris, right?’

‘Right’

‘My name is Josephine Montilyet, you might’ve already heard of me?’ She inclined her head.

‘Y… yes I have. I am pleased to meet you.’

‘Likewise’, she smiled again, ‘I have here your wage, since you’re helping the Inquisition, we are inclined to compensate you for it.’ She handed me another scroll and I saw my name with small numbers underneath it. They were giving me more coin than I used to make in a week.

‘Please, I volunteered, this is too much’, I said as I looked back up to her.

Josephine shook her head, ‘You may repay us by helping.’

I shut my mouth, not knowing how to truly answer. I was grateful, but I felt guilty for receiving money without having done anything yet.

‘In the reports I was given, it is mentioned you have rented a room above the Singing Maiden?’

I nodded.

‘Well, we will arrange a more… appropriate accommodation for you.’

I nodded again. I liked my room above the tavern, but I understood that I couldn’t stay there forever. Flissa had rented it for me for free, and I bet she was losing profit. Maybe I should indeed make place for pilgrims who actually paid for their stay.

Josephine scribbled something onto a paper and looked back up to me. ‘You are now an official member of the Inquisition, and, to be more precise, a member of the Herald’s own inner circle.’
'What does that mean?'

'It means you will be joining him on his travels to other cities and noble houses and help him when necessary. You will be representing the Inquisition on the front line, and as the Herald, eyes will be on you, not that they haven’t been already.' Josephine looked at me under her thick eyelashes.

'Is that a good idea? I’m not precisely a representative Ferelden and Orlesian nobility are used to, let alone respect.' I crossed my arms over my chest. I was better off behind the scenes, besides, why would they want an elf representing their “sacred” mission?

'On the contrary, tales of the Herald’s saviour are already spreading through noble circles. Rumours like these travel fast, and if influenced correctly, they can be used to our cause.' Josephine smiled innocently again. But I realized this woman was not just an innocent Lady, she knew the tricks and games of the court, of Orlais, the very country I detested. But somewhere, I really admired her. It mustn’t be easy to know your way around nobility and courtly gossip.

'You know a great deal about dealing with nobility, Lady Montilyet’, I inclined politely.

'For some years, I was the royally appointed Court Ambassador from Antiva to Orlais. The nobility of Thedas is a rather singular sphere. Those I’m not acquainted with, I know through reputation.’

‘Then, the Inquisition is really lucky they have you as their advocate.’ If she knew how to deal with Orlesians, she must already have some balls of steel.

‘Thank you’, she smiled, ‘Let us hope so. Thedas’ politics have become… agitated as of late. I hope to guide us down to smoother paths. Our situation is in dire need of resurrection.’

‘Why? Is our situation so bad? I thought this Inquisition was justified by the late Divine Justinia’s writ.’ I lifted my chin and was proud of my question. See? I have been paying attention…

‘We are a symbol of everything that’s gone wrong. We’re heretics for harbouring a self-proclaimed Herald of Andraste and the Chantry is frightened. The remaining clerics have already declared it blasphemy. They can bury us simply with their words.’ Josephine bent over the desk, locking eyes with me. There were very few people who had dared to do that. ‘Yet, the Herald can help by speaking to the Chantry cleric who goes by the name of Mother Giselle. She has asked to speak with him, and the Herald has already accepted. You will travel with him, and other Inquisition members, to the Hinterlands, near Redcliffe. Her assistance is invaluable. You must help the Herald find agents to expand our reach beyond this valley. And who’s better suited than the Herald and his saviour to recruit them?'

I nodded dutifully. As long as I was close to Maxwell, I didn’t care where they would send me to. I only needed to be able to protect him.

Josephine took another paper that laid on her desk and handed it over to me. ‘In this report, you can read everything about the Hinterlands’ situation. It is at your best interest if you read through it carefully, since you’ll be leaving in three days’ time.’

‘I will be prepared’, I answered instantly.

Josephine gave me a faint smile again, and then dropped a bag of coins on the table. My wage. I took it silently and bound the pouch on my belt. No gambling with this money.

‘But please excuse me’, Josephine took another scroll from her desk and dipped her feather in black ink, ‘I’ve much work to do before the day is done.’

Every noble house, every throne, was eyeing this newfound organisation. Ambassador Josephine
had a tough job, one I was happy not to have been troubled with.

I smiled at Josephine and bid my farewells. After I left the room and entered the big Chantry hall, my shoulders slumped a little. Josephine was a good woman, but under that mask of politeness, I saw a viper who knew her way around everything. And sometimes, words are the most powerful weapons. And after meeting her, I was sure she could win over any noble she wanted to. Secretly though, I prayed that Orlesian nobles would stay away. I still detested them, even though they weren’t guilty for what their ancestors had done. I knew that, and shouldn’t keep being bitter about it.

Going to the Hinterlands, on the other hand, made me even more nervous. Not that I didn’t like the area, it had luscious green forests and beautiful, picturesque meadows and valleys, but it was the mage-Templar war that had me shivering to my bones. I wanted to forget the ten years I had thrown away being in that Circle. I could’ve helped refugees in Kirkwall, or help battle darkspawn in Lothering, but no, I was curled up somewhere, learning nothing at all but how great Andraste must’ve been. I didn’t want to see those Circle mages, who were probably in Redcliffe, who had looked down on me. I didn’t want to be around Templars, the few that had joined the Inquisition already gave me the creeps and they weren’t even hostile towards me. I imagined Tibald crossing me on the bloody meadows of the Hinterlands or Simon dragging me back to the tower where he would prey on me. I imagined killing them all, and loving it. I was scared of myself and what I could do. When multiple Templars and mages would start attacking me, I would not have time to just merely knock them out. I would need to kill again. All of them.

I walked outside with a fast pace stuck on my heels. I needed to be alone for a moment. Haven had become so busy the last couple of days, there wasn’t even enough room for all the pilgrims. Haven had become a town instead of a village, but hadn’t grown in space, just in people. You could see everyone was becoming uncomfortable, and the streets were starting to smell like sweat and… well I guess you could imagine.

I doubted that Josephine would even be able to find a new cabin for me. Maybe I had to share one. I could live with that, everyone but Solas though. In the Fade, he had almost given me a calming feeling, but when I woke up, my stomach turned again at the sight of him. I felt anxious if he was near, as if I was in danger. Nobody seemed to share my feelings though, and I started wondering if it was all just in my head. I had promised Solas I would let him teach me shaping the Fade, but he hadn’t shown up yet. I was quite comforted by that actually. Every night as I wandered through my meadow, I dreaded his return as I stared at the treeline. Maybe he was giving me time to adjust to everything, or he was busy himself.

I walked towards the military camp outside Haven. The Inquisition had only been up for a week at best, and already hundreds of able men and women had joined the cause. Recruits were training just outside the gates. You could hear the clashing of swords and the grunts of the soldiers even in the Chantry hall. It thundered through the village, and only at night, peace returned to the sacred landscape. Hundreds of tents were scattered throughout the open space outside Haven’s walls, all the way down to the frozen lake below.

I looked up to Maxwell who was standing next to Commander Cullen, his back towards me. They seemed deep in conversation. Maxwell was a good fighter, and he loved to train with the recruits. The men looked up to him, not only as the herald of their holy prophet, but also as a brother in arms. Cullen pointed towards the valley and Maxwell nodded and put his hands in his sides. I neared them quietly, but was discovered when the recruits that were training in front of Maxwell and Cullen, suddenly looked up to me and straightened their backs, their eyes shifting to me and back to the ground. Maxwell turned around as he followed their gaze and smiled broadly as he saw me nearing. Cullen stepped back as he dipped his head in acknowledgement, a soft but polite smile on his lips.

‘Saeris!’ Maxwell stomped towards me, his hazel eyes glimmering in the sun. ‘Heard you and Josephine had a little rendezvous. Seems like you survived.’
‘The Ambassador was most delightful’, I smiled back, ‘and look! I got a wage.’ I pushed my cape away and showed the little pouch that hung around my waist. Maxwell stared at it and nodded in excitement. Cullen threw a glance at my hips and then quickly looked away. I swear he was blushing.

‘That means drinks tonight!’ Maxwell threw his hands up in the air.

‘Maybe not, I think I’ll save this for the Hinterlands.’ I grinned back at him.

‘You’re going with us? Great!’ Maxwell put his right hand on my shoulder, giving me a small pinch, ‘You and Varric’ll be better company than grumpy Cassandra and Solas…’

‘Do mind your words, Herald, she might hear you.’ Cullen snickered, covering his chin in his fur cowl.

‘Where are you going now? Shall I accompany you?’ Maxwell lifted one eyebrow as he put his arm up with swagger.

‘I was planning to go for a walk’, I lifted my chin towards the open forest at our right that followed the path that lead away from Haven, ‘but you seemed busy, I don’t want to intrude.’ I looked to Cullen and cocked my head.

‘The Herald and I were more or less done’, Cullen nodded back to me, his eyes squinting. How could a man look so tired? Was he even sleeping, like ever?

Maxwell wiggled on his heels as he poked me with his elbow. I chuckled and folded my arm around his. Maxwell craned his neck towards Cullen as we strolled towards the path leading to the forest and said, ‘I’ll catch you later, Curly!’

‘Let me guess, you got that from Varric?’ I smiled up at Maxwell.

‘Who else?’ he lifted his shoulders up.

We hadn’t been walking for long when we encountered a small wooden cabin behind a big rock, almost buried between the trees. As we neared it, I immediately noticed that the cabin had been abandoned. The door was slightly crooked and the curtains behind the windows were swung open. I let go of Maxwell’s arm and walked towards the cabin door. It wasn’t locked.

‘How spooky’, Maxwell giggled.

But inside, the cabin wasn’t creepy at all. Papers were scattered on the ground. There was little to no furniture, just a table, a chamber pot and a rickety bed, all covered with a thick layer of grey dust. Yet, it had charm and instinctively reminded me of my apartment in Kirkwall I had shared with Sybil.

‘It’s actually quite nice’, I remarked as I looked around. There was a fireplace, but it clearly wasn’t used in a long time. But I could make something of this. And then, an idea popped into my head. ‘Maybe, after some cleaning, I could stay here?’ I mumbled to myself.

‘You mad? I’ll ask Josephine for a much… cleaner cabin if you want to’, Maxwell gawked at his finger as he swiped it across the dusty table.

‘No, no I’ll clean it up, put some fresh flowers here and there… and maybe some candles…’ I muttered while I glanced at the fireplace and imagined the cosy room this hovel could become. It wasn’t far from Haven, and I wouldn’t be disturbing anyone. But most of all, it was almost quiet
here. I relished in the soft sounds of the camp not far away, of the gentle whispers of the forest. I could hear the leaves rustle here, the gentle scratching of critters on the grassy grounds,…

‘I’ll help you’, Maxwell sighed while crossing his arms over his chest. He resembled my Sybil so much…

‘Thank you’, I said softly.

We rolled up our sleeves and started right away. I found a broom standing in a corner of the room and tasked Maxwell with swiping the floors, while I opened all the windows and let the gentle breeze enter the cabin.

‘Am I doing this right? Or should I swipe it… like this?’ Maxwell said as he swished the broom through the room.

‘You never cleaned a room before?’ I cocked an eyebrow at him.

‘Not really, no, I had servants for that.’ Ah yes, Maxwell was from noble lineage, a Trevelyan. He had said so not too long ago, and I had read it in a report Leliana had given me. A noble from Ostwick, out of all places. We silently had decided not to talk about his home. He was missing it, and I hated it with all of my being, so talking about it didn’t feel right. Or at least not with each other. I knew he could talk to Varric for that. I didn’t need to be reminded of the city my prison was in.

‘Ah, I forgot, your majesty’, I bumped my fist against his chest and took the broom from his hands. ‘Let me do it, you’re just spraying dust everywhere.’ I winked at him and he scratched his back awkwardly. ‘Here, take this bucket and go fill it with ice, so I can mop the floor with it.’

‘Yes, Serah!’ Maxwell straightened his back laughingly and marched outside.

I think I could become friends with him.

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It took us about two hours to clean the room up a bit. Maxwell had run back to Haven and had brought some blankets and pillows with him. The cabin still required some repairing and cleaning to do, but I could make it work. After Maxwell and I were done, we strolled some more through the small forest. I think Maxwell also needed to be away from it all for a moment. I couldn’t imagine what he had been feeling up to now. He had been bombarded into the Fade, walked out of it with a painful glowing mark on his hand, thrown into prison, thrown out of prison to close the hole in the sky, and then turned into a Herald of Andraste, running a new organisation to stop a war and a world from being destroyed. And after all of that, the guy just picked up where he left, lifted his chin up, smiled and started working. He should receive a reward or something.

He was worth protecting, worth giving my life for.

After our stroll through the forest, the sky had begun darkening with night and stars. We walked back to the Singing Maiden, harassing Flissa for free drinks. The girl was still somewhat afraid, but I noticed she was warming up to me already. Most people still pissed themselves when I barely glanced at them, so I was winning ground.

I didn’t drink that night, maybe one cup, but I had learned my lesson. Together with Maxwell and Varric, we played until the moon stood high in the starry sky.

‘Come on, Twinkle! One more game! Allow me some dignity’, Varric grinned, small hairs falling out of his bun at the back of his head.
Maxwell stomped with his feet on the ground like a little child, ‘Yes, Saeris c’mon!’

I stood up from behind the table. ‘Be happy Varric! One more game and you’re broke!’ I grinned as I assembled my profit and dropped it into my pouch. ‘I will return for the night.’

I looked over my shoulder to Flissa, who nodded. I had told her I was moving out. She had been relieved, and I wasn’t sure if it was because she was still nervous around me, or because she could rent it for payment again. My belongings and spare clothes were already brought to the cabin by Elven servants, who I had tipped generously. Elves already had a hard life, and here in Haven, it wasn’t much better. Leliana and Josephine were doing everything in their power to make sure the servants were treated with respect, and paid accordingly, like anyone else. But I knew how hard it was to live as a second-class citizen.

Tomorrow, I would send a letter to Josephine to tell her I had found new accommodation by myself and that I didn’t need help furnishing it. The woman was busy enough as she was, and so were the Elven servants.

I walked through the dark streets of Haven towards the gate and the camp that laid behind it. I heaved and counted the clouds that drifted from my lips. As I passed through the village’s high wooden gates, I noticed the silent and deserted military camp outside. During the day you couldn’t hear your own thoughts through the loud noise of swords clashing and men grunting, but now, everything was silent. No clashing of swords, no screaming captains, no heaving breaths but my own. Everyone seemed fast asleep or up at the tavern drowning their worries.

I silently waded my way through the thick snow towards the forest and my new cabin. And then suddenly, I heard someone scream loudly. The camp, though, remained quiet, nobody moving to check for danger. The scream rang through the camp again, and sounded almost frightful, like someone was being buried alive and begging for help. And I recognized the voice, because it had echoed in old dreams of myself. It was Daniel’s voice, but not at all, for he was dead. Yet, this voice was real, the person in terror and maybe even in pain. I ran towards the tent the screams were coming from, which was bigger from the rest, and I heard heavy rustling inside.

Inside the tent, it was utterly dark, only the moon was casting grey shadows through the ivory fabric of the tent. My eyes adjusted slowly and I saw the contours of a table in the centre of the space. Papers were spread across it, and I noticed a burned candle that had melted over the edges of the desk. And in the corner of the tent, at the far left, there stood a chair. Clothes were draped over it, something with fur and steel, if I guessed correctly. At the far right of the tent, a bed stood. Blankets were laying on the floor next to it and I could hear someone breathe heavily and quickly. Carefully, I took a step closer and saw the figure of a man curled up in the shaky bed, sweat gleaming in the moonlight.

Suddenly, the man in the bed started roaring again, his hands grabbing the bed’s edges like he was about to be thrown out of it. His knuckles turned white as the bed creaked and he screamed again in agony. I leaped through the tent now, towards the hurt man. This person was not in any physical pain though, he was having a nightmare, a terrible one at a guess. His face was contorted into an angry, but also sad grimace as he kept screaming. My hands started glowing as I reached towards his head to calm his mind, when all of a sudden, the man’s eyes flew open. He cried out ferociously and grabbed my wrists, pulling me down onto the ground, his body toppling over the bed and crashing into mine, crushing the air out of my lungs.

‘CULLEN!’ I yelled as I stared into his wild golden-brown eyes.

It took the Commander a moment before he realised that he was awake, his nightmare had ended. His anxious eyes softened, his strong chest moving slower against mine as his conscience returned to him. His hands on my wrists relaxed, but still held onto them as he stared into my eyes, blinking once, then twice. His face was right above mine, and I could feel his shivering breath on my cheeks.
He smelled like elderflower and oakmoss. I held in my breath as I suddenly felt him shift.

‘Maker’s breath’, he whispered and let go of me, fumbling to get back on his feet.

I laid on the ground while letting what just happened sink in.

‘Lady Saeris? Are you alright?’ Cullen reached one hand towards me, ‘Maker, forgive me, I…’

‘It’s quite alright, Commander’, I interrupted and took his hand. Cullen lifted me back on my feet. I noticed he was wearing a long, damp nightshirt, but I didn’t dare look down. That would’ve been inappropriate, right? ‘It was my fault, I shouldn’t have come into your tent. I just heard you scream and it was… I just wanted to help.’

‘Thank you… I merely had a nightmare.’ Cullen scratched the back of his neck while I took a step back and looked away as I noticed his nightshirt lifting up with his arm.

‘I’m sorry, but if I may… I can help you sleep?’ Maybe he had this nightmare every night? Who knew? And the recruits were already used to it? Perhaps, that’s why the man looked so dead tired.

‘N… no, I will manage.’ Cullen looked as uncomfortable as I was.

‘Please’, I said then. I wanted to help. This is what I do, I help people, heal them, make whole. ‘Let me help you.’

Cullen slightly grunted awkwardly. I was secretly happy that it was so dark in the tent, so he couldn’t see the expression on my face. I was being awkward, my face dishevelled. ‘Andraste preserve me, if you insist’, Cullen dipped his head and I heard him shuffle back to his bed, pulling the blankets that laid on the ground over him. I slowly walked towards his bed, standing behind it. The Commander flinched as my hands started glowing. Was he afraid of my magic? Well, he had been a Templar after all, I knew they didn’t like magic even if it was healing magic. I remember how Simon… no stop thinking.

‘It is alright, close your eyes.’ I whispered. Cullen breathed heavily as my long fingers hovered over his temples, and my magic curled over his forehead. ‘It’s okay’, I hushed again and felt Cullen relax, my magic buzzing softly in his head, rocking him to sleep, a ward protecting him from nightmares. I counted his breaths, how they went from heaving to humming and then slowly to the soft inhaling and exhaling as he entered the Fade, a good dream waiting for him. I carefully retracted my hands from his temples and stood up, closing my eyes for a second, recollecting myself before I walked out of Cullen’s tent. I was ashamed of myself. I shouldn’t have barged in there like that, making the man so uncomfortable. But what should I have done then? Let him scream? At least now, he could rest properly, at least for one night.

I looked over my shoulder as I closed the flap of the tent, throwing one quick look at Cullen’s dark figure in the bed, and I saw the blankets slowly rising up and down. A soft smile appeared on my lips as I dropped the flap and continued my walk to my cabin.

I hoped he was somewhere nice now.

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The sun seeped through the cloudy sky, entering my room. I sighed. I had fallen asleep so quickly, dosing off between the soft warm blankets Maxwell had given me. I had slept so deeply, I didn’t even enter the Fade. A dreamless night. The old bed creaked under my weight as I pushed myself up, wiping the rheum out of the corners of my eyes. Iiggled my toes as I placed them on the cold, wooden floor. I should put a carpet in here somewhere, for warmth. I slept in a long, woollen shirt,
and walked out of the door with it, the wind hugging my bare legs. Then, I filled up a bucket with ice, put my hands in it and summoned fire, until the ice turned into steaming water. I washed my body quickly, using fresh herbs I bought from Adan, and wetted my hair, the wind drying it with ease. After that, I put on my regular clothes, my foot wraps and my cape, leaving my long white hair down to my back.

On the table in my cabin laid some scraps of paper and some ink. I wrote a short letter to Josephine, stating I’d found new accommodation, that I could give to one of the scouts later to deliver it to her.

Tomorrow, we would be leaving for the Hinterlands, so I had to head towards Harritt and Adan for supplies. I needed some daggers, as extra protection, and some herbs for the trip. There was also the question of what my mount would be. I knew the Inquisition was short on mounts, but I knew we would all require one if we were to travel fast.
It was still quite early when I crossed through the military camp. Some soldiers were already up, running around doing their daily tasks. I eyed the camp, the tents, but could not see Cullen anywhere. Was he still sleeping? I honestly hoped so.

As I walked up the path towards Adan’s apothecary, I noticed the light behind Solas’ cabin’s window. Seemed like he too was up early. I lingered for a moment, my feet stopping in front of his door. What was he doing? Was he researching the Breach? There was a slight noise coming from inside, papers rustling, feet walking from one corner of the room to another. I took a step forward, my feet crunching on the snow. The noise from inside stopped, and an uncomfortable feeling gnarled in my stomach again. I took a step back and continued towards Adan’s place, feeling how the tension in my body disappeared the further away I walked from Solas’ cabin.

Adan was up too, rubbing his hands with a strong-smelling lotion while a small woman was talking to him.

‘Flissa said to check with you to make sure these are safe to serve’, the woman said with a high voice, holding a little pouch in front of her filled with brown mushrooms.

‘They’re fine.’, the cranky alchemist snorted, ‘Nobody will take sick as long as she boils them right. Smart woman for asking, though.’

The woman nodded and closed her pouch. She turned on her heels, but faltered as she noticed me standing there. She hurried past me through the door, mumbling a polite, but scared curtsy.

‘I should keep you here, let you stand in the doorway. Nobody will dare to come in’, Adan snickered as he looked up to me.

‘A scarecrow has always been the career I imagined I would be having.’ I dipped my head, smiling. Adan hummed with content and said, ‘Well, what can I do for ‘ya?’

‘I need some herbs for the trip to the Hinterlands. Two pouches of dried elfroot and half a pouch of spindleweed, if you have some of course.’

Adan nodded and turned around, looking into a big barrel at the back of the room.

‘Half a pouch of spindleweed I can do, but two pouches of elfroot… it’s going to be just one if you don’t mind. Short on supplies.’ He inclined.

‘That is alright, I’ll gather some during my travel, if I require more.’

‘Is that all?’ Adan asked while scooping the herbs in tiny, leather pouches.
‘Yes… no, wait. Is there a… potion or tonic for… a good night’s rest?’ I asked, suddenly thinking about the Commander again.

‘Trouble sleeping?’ Adan commented as he gave the two pouches to me.

‘It’s for… a friend. Could you help?’ I didn’t know if other people knew of Cullen’s nightmares, but maybe it was best if I kept quiet about it. It wasn’t my place to spread rumours.

‘I can craft some’, Adan scratched his long beard and turned to his table. I stared at how swift his hands were at crunching and pouring and liquefying and boiling. His face was always in a cranky snare, but while crafting potions, I saw a light in his eyes. This man truly loved his job. After a couple of minutes, he was done and held up a medium-sized bottle in front of him, containing a dark, muddy green liquid. ‘Here’, he said, ‘this will help. It deepens one’s sleep, making the chance of entering the Fade less likely. Though, it won’t help every night…’

‘Thank you!’ I smiled as I took the bottle and studied it.

‘Three drops before going to bed. No more than that.’ He hummed.

I nodded and handed him the payment. Herbs were covered by the Inquisition, but potions I had to pay for, and they were quite expensive. But I paid it gladly, for I knew I could make someone happy with it.

I left the apothecary and walked down towards the blacksmith with a confident trod.

‘Greetings, Saeris.’ Solas stepped onto my path. I yelped and almost stumbled, but recollected myself just in time. That sneaky elf, why was he so damn quiet?

‘Good morning’, I mumbled, looking up to him. There it was again, that anxious feeling.

Solas peered down to me, his favourite cold and scholarly look behind his soft blue eyes. ‘It has come to my knowledge that you will be joining us to the Hinterlands.’ He said while clasping his hands behind his back.

‘That is true’, I quirked an eyebrow. What was he up to?

‘I hope you have rested well, it will be a consuming journey.’ He glanced down to the pouches I was carrying, in particular to the bottle with the tonic.

‘Just doing some last preparations’, I smiled politely. ‘If you’ll excuse me.’

Solas nodded and stepped aside, but I could feel his gaze pricking in my shoulder blades like a sharp needle. My heart thumped in my throat maybe a million times per second.

My pace quickened and my heart was nearly springing out of my chest when I turned around the corner, shadowed from Solas’ gaze.

I placed my cold fingers on my chest, willing my lungs to calm down. What was wrong with me? Or in better words… what was wrong with Solas?

I walked back down the path towards the gates of Haven, to the blacksmith outside. Most soldiers were up now, and the familiar clashing and grunting wallowed through the mountains. I glanced up at the tents, and noticed the Commander standing in front of the training ground. He had his hands on his waist, his voice raised as he yelled at the sweating recruits.

‘You there! There’s a shield in your hand. Block with it.’ He grunted. ‘If this man were your enemy, you would be dead!’ He then turned towards the soldier standing next to him. The man straightened his back, his look respectful. ‘Lieutenant, don’t hold back. The recruits must prepare for a real fight,
not a practice one.'

‘Yes, Commander.’ The lieutenant said and pumped his chest with his fist.

I walked towards them, but grunted as I saw the symbol of the Templar Order on the lieutenant’s chest. I had seen him training recruits before, and always felt his angry stare on my back. Templars gave me the shivers, but I knew were here to help. The man turned his head towards me a second before Cullen had, a disapproving look on his face. Cullen followed the lieutenant’s gaze and gazed up towards where I stood. His confident eyes faltered a little.

As the Commander walked towards me, the lieutenant looked away and took off towards his struggling recruits.

I smiled softly as Cullen stopped before me, but noticed the people around us quieting and staring. ‘Good day, Commander.’

Cullen looked uncomfortable. ‘My Lady, I wanted to thank you… for…’, he exhaled deeply.

‘It’s alright’, I said, noticing the dark circles under his eyes had lightened, his skin gleaming like it hadn’t before, ‘I hope it helped.’

Cullen dipped his head, like he wanted to say something, but didn’t know what.

‘But I apologize for barging in there like that’, I shook my head. What does he think of me now? And why did I care?

‘No, I understand why you did. And… I thank you for it.’ He gave me small smile, but it didn’t go to his eyes.

‘Perhaps, I should leave you be, I think there are more urgent matters in need of your attention.’ I said politely, taking a step back to distance myself as I noticed the scouts impatiently waiting for the Commander near his tent, piles of reports in their hands. ‘But, to make things right, I asked Adan to make this… I didn’t tell him why or for who, just in case you… never mind.’ I took the potion from underneath my cape and presented it to him. ‘It’s… to help you sleep deeper, so you’re less likely to enter the Fade and… receive bad dreams.’

‘You should not have…’ Cullen’s eyes were big and full of questions, his eyebrows furrowed. But he took the bottle, staring into the muddy green liquid, almost suspiciously.

‘It’s perfectly safe, just herbs and plants, no magic. Adan has written down the ingredients at the back, on the label, so you can check.’ I said to soothe his suspicion. ‘Three drops before you’re going to bed, nothing more. It might not work, but maybe it’s worth the try.’

Cullen hummed, a soft expression taking over the worried one.

‘Just to make sure I don’t have to barge into your tent again’, I grinned, trying to make the atmosphere lighter.

‘Truly, thank you, Lady Saeris.’ He smiled while dangling the bottle in his hands.

‘I hope it helps.’ I said and then lifted my chin towards the scouts that were shifting on their feet as they stared at us. ‘I will leave you be now, Commander.’

‘I, ah, yes. Of course.’ He looked to the bottle in his hands and back to me. ‘Another time then, my Lady.’
I dipped my chin as Cullen turned towards his scouts, his back straight, his voice confident as he spoke to the men. My lips curled into a soft smile, knowing I had helped someone. Even if it was just a little. I was helping.

I turned back towards the blacksmith, my heart lighter again, to get my daggers. I would need all the protection I could get in the Hinterlands.

And it was going to be a tough journey.

Chapter End Notes

So, this was more of a filler chapter, but I wanted to put some more things into the story before going to the Hinterlands, otherwise I think it would just feel forced. Next there will be some more action! Hope you liked it <3
The horse whinnied and tapped its hooves impatiently on the ground. I hung my bags on the hooks of the saddle, making sure everything was there. My pouches of herbs, my extra clothes, water and food,... everything was on there. I checked the two small daggers that were strapped to my thighs, feeling if none of the belts holding them were loose. My foot wraps were tight as well, hair up in a ponytail and my armour was clean, light and ready for any battle. Everything was ready, except for me. But can you ever be ready to kill?

‘Hush there’, I combed through the horse’s short dark manes with my long fingers, entangling them as the brown horse neighed with content. It was a large beast, a mount that was good for crossing through rocky paths and mountains, perfect for the trip to come.

‘Hey, Twinkle!’ Varric walked towards me, holding the reins of his horse and nudging it with him. His horse was smaller than mine, but otherwise I didn’t think he would be able to get on top of it. ‘You ready?’

‘Yup! Everything’s in order’, I smiled and patted the horse on its back.

‘Bianca can’t wait to get out of here. Out in the open again’, Varric huffed while looking at his crossbow strapped to his back, the polished metal gleaming in the morning sun.

‘She’s not the only one’, Maxwell laughed as he strutted towards us, his dark curly hair swaying in the soft wind. He was wearing a chainmail, leather and darkened samite armour, with lots of belts and some metal straps. A scarf made of wool and cotton laid around his sturdy shoulders. On his chest hung a steel and gold insignia with the symbol of the Inquisition engraved in it, the eye with the flaring flames glistening as he walked. He looked well, more ready than any of us. He smiled contently at me, squinting his kind hazel eyes.

‘It appears all of us are present.’ Solas walked to where our little group stood, eyeing us all individually, me longer than the rest of them. He was wearing his green and grey woollen vest and tunic lined with fur, soft cotton pants and his foot wraps bound on top of them. His jawbone necklace hung proudly on his chest between the open buttons of his vest, bound with simple double cords, and a long, simple staff was strapped to his straightened back. He dipped his head towards me as a polite greeting. I nodded back, quickly looking away.

‘We’re missing our favourite jolly Seeker’, Varric said while looking around, breaking the awkward silence that had crept over the party. At that moment, Cassandra strutted towards us, Leliana, Josephine and Cullen at her back. Maxwell, who was standing next to me, straightened his back, lifting up his chin.

‘My scouts have already crossed the paths to The Crossroads. Mother Giselle has been tending to the wounded refugees there as apostates and Templars alike are wreaking amok.’ Leliana gave a small report paper to Maxwell, who quickly scanned it with his eyes and then nodded affirmatively.

‘Some of our troops are already present at the fighting, but many are left wounded.’ Cullen said to Maxwell, his eyes deadly serious. ‘So be careful.’ He then threw a quick look my way, and I nodded slightly.
‘Let us move then, we have a long journey ahead of us.’ Cassandra inclined, guiding her horse towards her and mounted it. Maxwell, Varric and Solas did the same. I stared up at the horse, calculating how much force I needed to use to get on top of it. I had ridden on an elk and a horse before, though this had been a very long, long time ago.

‘Do you require assistance?’ Solas rode his horse towards where I stood, and I heard the Commander behind me take a step towards me.

‘I think I’ll manage’, I smiled politely over my shoulder. Cullen nodded in response, taking a step back to the other advisers. I grabbed the hilt of the saddle and put one foot in one of the stirrups hanging from its sides, pushing my body up and onto the horse. The animal nickered nervously as I crawled on top of it like I was a mountain climber, but eventually, I settled and positioned my body correctly into the saddle. It wasn’t as comfortable as I thought it would be, but I could live with it. Solas stared at me, his brows slightly furrowed.

‘You never rode on a horse before?’ Varric grinned at me.

‘I have, but it has been a very long time since I did so’, I answered, holding the reins neatly in my gloved hands, ‘I preferred travelling by foot.’ And I lifted my shoulders.

‘Don’t worry, Saeris, if you fall, I’ll catch you’, Maxwell winked at me.

‘Come on’, Cassandra made a slight grunt as her horse tapped its hoof in an equally annoyed manner.

We guided our horses with a small trot towards the path that led downwards to the east. It would take us approximately a week to get to the Hinterlands, and with the ongoing war between rebel mages and Templars, the trip would not be a relaxing one. The party remained silent, everybody focussed on guiding their mounts carefully through the rocky paths that led away from the mountains, and into more forested terrains. The path quickly changed from snow and ice to mud and soft, damp leaves, the scorching wind now somewhat softer and warmer, the view lush and green instead of flat and frozen.

After a couple of hours of silent riding, the sun had risen high into the scarred sky, and Varric had guided his horse towards Maxwell. They started talking of his home, telling humorous stories about their childhood. I closed my eyes when they started talking about the city of Ostwick, and instead started focussing on the soft but familiar noises of the woods. They comforted me, the swaying of the horse guiding me into a trance-like state of tranquillity.

‘You were from the Circle of Ostwick, were you not?’ Cassandra drove her horse next to mine, her voice neutral but her eyes curious.

Maxwell craned his head towards me, his eyes apologizing.

I swallowed, ‘Yes, I… lived there for some time.’ My heart thumped in my throat as I thought about my time there, never seeing the sun, the skies,… the constant tiptoeing, the anxious feeling of being watched, always waiting…

‘For how long did you reside there, if I may ask?’ It was Solas, his interest peaking.

‘Too long’, I answered shortly. Solas dipped his head, the questions still clouding his eyes.

‘Where were you before that?’ Maxwell smiled, changing the topic swiftly. I liked what he was doing, but answering questions about my past were never my favourite pastime.

‘Rivain’, I answered, ‘and before that, Antiva.’
'Ah, Antiva, I visited that place before! They have the best spiced wine’, Varric snickered while licking his lips in delight. He then drove the conversation into one of his drunken stories about how he and a Rivaini Raider called Isabella had been drinking all night and had ended up in a jail, and someone’d had to bail them out.

I focussed again on the breathing of my horse, on its head slightly towing the reins I was holding. Varric was laughing with Maxwell as they started telling each other of drunken stories, and every now and then, I could hear Cassandra making a grunt or a disgusted noise while shaking her head. I remained at the back of the party, my eyes never leaving Maxwell’s back while we followed the trail. Every rustle I had seen, every sound I had heard, nothing would escape me. Solas rode with me at the back of the pack, his eyes staring to the path before us. Sometimes though, I felt him glance my way, but I tried ignoring his curious stares as well as the anxious feeling in my stomach. Solas hadn’t done anything to make me doubt him, and everyone else truly welcomed his help and guidance. Why was I being so… distant? He had not deserved my coldness, but I couldn’t help it. Perhaps, I should let go of my reservations, be nicer to the guy? Maybe he hadn’t started teaching me yet, because he could feel my anxiousness? Or maybe, he disliked my presence as much as I did his.

The first day of our journey ended when the sun was nearing the horizon again, colouring the blue and green sky, a soft purple.

‘We should set camp here’, Cassandra said as she pointed towards an open space, covered between the thick forest. We all agreed, and dismounted, binding our horses to the trunks of the trees. I could hear a stream running nearby, so I could take the exhausted animals there to drink later on. Now, I held my hands together and summoned ice that turned to water. My horse gladly nuzzled his snout in my cupped hands while gulping down the lukewarm water.

Maxwell and Cassandra started setting up the tents. We had brought two, one slightly bigger than the other one. I would share the smallest tent with Cassandra, while Varric, Maxwell and Solas would claim the bigger one. Cassandra had made up hers in less than a minute, while Maxwell still fiddled with his. The Seeker sighed deeply and started helping the Herald, yelping as the saggy tent nearly collapsed on them because Maxwell had forgotten to tie the sides. Varric almost fell onto the ground while laughing his arse off. Cassandra grunted disgustedly as she set up the tent again, respectfully, but definitely pissed, asking Maxwell to just start up the fire. The Herald slumped to the centre of the camp, where Varric sat proudly staring at the pile of dried branches he had already assembled and piled on top of each other. Maxwell squatted next to Varric, taking two hard stones and scratching them to one another. Varric tried hiding his bright smile behind his big hands as Maxwell cursed while the rocks sparked but left no fire. I dropped my hands from the horse’s mouth and smiled slightly at them. Solas was standing not so far behind me, his body leaning on his staff comfortably.

I caught Varric’s eye and winked at him playfully as I lifted my hand and secretly snapped my fingers the same moment Maxwell hit the two stones together once more. My magic invisibly spurt out of my thumb, right onto the dried branches as the stones made a sizzling sound. Maxwell jumped up making a loud and gleeful sound as he threw the rocks into the air.

‘Hey, Cassandra! I did it! See?’ He cried out. Cassandra answered with a quick but slightly amused grunt.

Varric shook his head while he huffed lightly, throwing a responsive wink my way. ‘Good job kid’, he smiled at Maxwell.

‘Did you see, Saeris?’ Maxwell turned around to me and smiled brightly, flashing his teeth while he pointed at the crackling fire.
‘Oh, yes, just like a professional.’ I laughed and clapped my hands.

Solas chuckled behind me. It was a soft chuckle, not meant to be heard by anyone. I looked over my shoulder to him, ignoring the biting anxiety in my stomach, and gave him a small, but sincere and kind smile. Solas straightened his back and cocked his head, returning with a very small upwards lift of his lips. I was never really kind towards Solas, and he hadn’t deserved my meanness, so giving him a small smile was the least I could do. No?

The sky started darkening. I had lead the horses towards the small stream not far from the camp to let them drink, and when I returned, the fire was crackling nicely while Varric roasted something on top of it. Cassandra was sitting on the opposite side of the campfire, cleaning her sword with a soft piece of cloth. Maxwell sat next to her, going down on a piece of bread he had brought with him from Haven. I bound the horses to the tree trunks again, and they gladly started chewing on the damp grass below their hooves. As I bound the reins of the last horse to the tree, Solas appeared next to me. His face was very much steeped in concentration as he swiftly motioned his hands up and down near the border of the camp, a protective ward appearing from his long fingers. I stared at the swift gestures of his pale hands as they glowed a soft blue hue. I felt the ward springing into place, as it muffled the sounds of the forest a little. It must’ve been unnoticeable for the rest of the party, but I felt it clearly. And just like the ward I made, it buzzed softly as there were no threats near.

‘Wards are necessary’, I said softly to Solas, who almost shied at my voice, ‘too bad they muffle the sounds.’

Solas looked to me, his face neutral, but his eyes slightly squinted. ‘The sounds?’ he mused.

‘Of the forest, the animals, everything.’ I lifted my shoulders and patted the horse on its back again, the beast shuddering with delight in response. I dipped my chin to Solas and walked towards the campfire. Solas lingered near the horses for a moment, staring at my back, his eyes stern, before he too walked towards the campfire and sat down next to Maxwell.

‘Who wants the first shift?’ Varric clasped his hands and writhed them together in front of the fire.

Maxwell repressed a yawn as he finished his loaf, ‘I can do it…’

‘No, you should rest, Maxwell’, I said as I sat down between Cassandra and Varric, ‘I can take the first one, you guys get some sleep.’ I smiled at Cassandra, who looked tired too, ‘I’m not sleepy anyway.’

The party nodded and one by one, they left for their tent, until only Solas and I remained. He stared into the fire while he held a soft piece of bread, fiddling with it rather than eating.

‘You can go too, Solas’, I said, ‘I can handle myself for a couple of hours.’

‘If you don’t mind, I would rather much like to sit here for a little while longer’, he smiled politely while ripping a very small piece of bread from the crust he was holding, nibbling on it ever so slightly. He ate like a mouse… or like a supermodel.

‘Alright then’, I sighed and lifted my arms up in the air, hearing some of my bones pop as I stretched my body. My hands reached towards my hair and I pulled the tie loose holding my ponytail up, and let my hair down to my back as I turned and plopped down, face towards the sky. I stared up at the bright, star-speckled heavens. The Breach lit up even the darkest nights, a soft green hue creeping through the moonlight. I could feel it, the scar, everywhere I went, like it was looking straight at me. I could feel its power, the Beyond lurking right behind it. I stopped focussing on the screams of the spirits some time ago, letting it fade into the background. The sounds of the forest, even though
muffled by the ward, waded through the air like a symphonic orchestra, and I rather focussed on them. The stream kibbling nearby, small animals creeping through the night’s shadows, the trees waving in the soft wind, my breath slowly following the hum of Solas’ ward, all the sounds that made me love this strange, wide world.

I turned my face from the sky and towards Solas, who was glancing my way. ‘The stars hold many stories, did you know?’ I asked as to break the silence.

‘As many tales as there are stars’, Solas murmured, his eyes hiding a great deal of knowledge.

I smiled and lifted my arm up, pointing towards the skies. ‘There, you see it? The pattern shows a figure of a wolf.’ I smiled softly in memory of a tale I had heard during my travels a long time ago.

‘Ah, yes, the White Wolf. The Dalish’ tales tell it is their Trickster God, do they not?’ Solas said with almost an annoyed undertone.

‘They do, but it’s not the story I remember when I look at it’, I turned my fingers towards the glowing stars, ‘I lived with the Dalish for a while, they see Fen’harel, the Dread Wolf, everywhere they go. But that is not Fen’harel, it is Fenrir.’ I hummed. I had looked at the stars for a long time now, and just like me, they moved, but never changed. There forever, forced to look as time goes by.

Solas squinted his eyes, his breath calculated, his posture straight. It was the scholar in him now that stared at me.

‘I once heard a story telling of his fate’, I looked at Solas and he dipped his head curiously. ‘They say that the wolf was neither a man or a god, yet something in between, born strong and wild. The gods were afraid of the wolf, of Fenrir, and tricked him. One day, the gods lured the wolf from his home to a place, far, far away. Once there, they tied him down as a challenge. Fenrir thought he was strong enough to break any chain, but this was no normal rope. The breath of a fish, the beard of a woman, the spit of a bird, the roots of a mountain, the sound of a cat’s paws and the nerves of a bear, all forged into one thin, soft necklace. It looked like silk, but was as strong as Fenrir’s willpower. The wolf trapped himself, punished for an eternity in the sky. And only when the end dooms upon this world, he will break free of his chains, and devour us all.’

‘That is indeed an interesting tale’, Solas stared at me, his eyes squinting, ‘Where have you heard this?’

‘I don’t really remember’, a soft smile turned on my lips, ‘I only remember that it made me sad.’

‘How so?’

‘The wolf is forced to look down, never changing, never loving, the only way to break free is to destroy all he ever knew.’ My breath made soft white clouds into the dark air. ‘I’m sorry, I’m getting melancholic’, I grinned. ‘Please, Solas, get some rest. You’re next for the shift, it’s better if you sleep first.’ I sounded like an old hag, but I truly meant it. We all had to be on our best when guarding the camp. For Maxwell’s sake. That and Solas still made my stomach turn, even though I tried ignoring it.

Solas peered into the fire for a moment, his face cold and neutral like always. Sometimes I asked myself if it was all just a mask, just like the one I used to wear in the Circle.

‘I shall take my leave then’, Solas said softly, using his staff to get upright. He then nodded at me again with a polite trot, before silently strolling to his tent. I could hear Varric and Maxwell inside, fast asleep, one of them snoring.
As Solas left, so did again the twisting uneasiness in my stomach. The soft sounds of the woods crept over the campfire again. I sighed and stared back up at the stars, the White Wolf almost looking back to me with his great big eyes. My voice came out naturally after a while, starting with the soft hum of a familiar melody, and ending with words I hadn’t sung since before my reawakening. My voice carried the tunes swiftly, letting them slowly roll of my tongue and into the dark night. A song for the everlasting wolf. My kin.

*Up on Howling Mountain*
*Underneath the sky*
*They are forging magic metal*
*As the torn clouds scream and fly*

*For Fenrir must be chained*
*Or Chaos will be king*

*Up on Howling Mountain*
*Within a bubbling vat*
*They put the first ingredient*
*The footfall of a cat*

*Up on Howling Mountain*
*To seal a wolven weird*
*They next put in the cauldron*
*A gentle woman’s beard*

*Up on Howling Mountain*
*With many a magic word*
*They throw into the mixture*
*The spittle of a bird*

*Up on Howling Mountain*
*With chant and lyre and flute*
*The sorcerers are shouting as*
*They drop in mountain’s root*

*Up on Howling Mountain*
*As stars above them stare*
*They circle ’round the fiery pot*
*And add the nerve of bear*

*Up on Howling Mountain*
*With many a prayer and wish*
*They toss the last ingredient*
*The silent breath of fish*

*Up on Howling Mountain*
*The wolf forever banned*
*But Fenrir rages in his chains*
*And peace is on the land*

*For Fenrir must be chained*
*Or Chaos will be king*
*And Chaos is no king*
*For Fenrir has been chained*
Everything had gone smooth that night. After my shift, Solas silently took over. I tiptoed back to my tent and silently crept inside the warm bedroll next to Cassandra. I noted she was a really heavy breather, and she slept with her mouth open, which made her actually look really young. The moment I closed my eyes inside the tent, I fell fast asleep, again skipping the Fade for an entire night. It almost made me sad, I liked the Fade, I liked my bubble, but I knew that when my body was drained, my mind needed rest.

Last night I had sung and it had been such a very long time since I had done that. My voice hadn’t faltered, yet sounded just like it had so many years ago. I had sung so much during my time in Kirkwall and my time as a wandering minstrel. But where had I heard that tale and song before? I think it must’ve been the Anderfels or maybe that town on the border of Tevinter…

‘Twinkle, you want a bite?’ Varric threw a piece of bread my way. I yelped and caught it just in time before it hit the ground. Varric laughed at my dishevelled expression while putting the campfire out with a bucket of water. Cassandra was putting the last pieces of the tent away onto the back of her horse, and Maxwell was doing the same with his tent. My horse tapped its hooves as I placed the saddle on her back.

‘Come on now, beasty, we have a long day before us’, I smiled at it while munching on the bread I had cramped in my mouth in its entirety. My back felt a little sore after sleeping on the ground. I used to travel like this all the time, but my time in the Circle and then in Haven had made me spoiled. Sleeping in a bed was much more comfortable now. I took some dried elfroot from my pouch that hung at my horse’s side and chewed a little bit on it, feeling its healing properties soothing my lower muscles almost immediately. I could heal it with my magic, but we didn’t have time for that.

We left the camp early in the morning and started riding again until the sun was high in the sky. At midday, we stopped when we neared a small kibbling creak, the water gently surging through the valley. We dismounted and let the horses gulp down the fresh mountain water. Maxwell jumped towards the creak, took off his shoes and dipped his sweaty feet in the water. The horse next to him nickered annoyed at the sickening smell of his toes. Cassandra rolled her eyes and placed herself on a rock in the shadow alongside the creak, rolling back her shoulders.

‘Do you want some?’ I said to her and dangled the pouch of elfroot in front of her. ‘It helps against sore muscles.’ Cassandra nodded, a faint smile quickly appearing on her lips as she chewed the herbs. Her tense shoulders relaxed a little.

Varric squatted next to the drinking horses and took some water in his big cupped hands, letting it fall down his face as he too drank from it.
I stared at the party while sitting on the grass next to Cassandra’s rock, wiggling my feet in the dancing shadows cast by the trees. Just when I wanted to take my cape off, I noticed a strange feeling in my stomach, like I was being watched. I craned my neck towards where Solas stood, but it wasn’t him. It just occurred to me then that it was too silent. I knew this feeling, this silence.

My eyes flew open and I turned to Cassandra, who looked at me the same moment I tried warning her.

‘APOSTATES!’ She yelled as several mages jumped out of the bushes. Varric cursed loudly as he snatched Bianca from his back, pushing the horses deeper into the shallow river. Maxwell leaped towards us, his daggers drawn.

‘Halt!’ Cassandra warned, ‘We are no Templars!’
The mages grunted, their staffs creaking in their hands, their knuckles whitening. The robes they were wearing were Circle robes, or had once been, because they were ripped, dirty and tattered. Their eyes were bloodshot, their pupils wide with fear, their limbs trembling. I didn’t recognize any of them, and that somehow made me more restful, but it wouldn’t make what was to come any easier. One of the mages screamed, the staff in his hands buzzing as ice evaporated from it, flying straight towards Cassandra, who jumped away right on time. Solas swiftly turned his staff and bounced with it on the ground, a protective ward springing into place over the bodies of our party. The battle had begun.

I raised my hands and started blocking all incoming attacks, making sure Cassandra’s and Maxwell’s path to the mages was clear as they ran to them, sword and daggers ready. Cassandra jumped first, her shield bashing into one of the mages’ faces, knocking the person out. She turned her sword and its point landed right in the knocked-out mage’s heart. I heard the mage huff a last breath as the sword went through flesh and bone. Maxwell’s daggers had found their own victim, the mage hadn’t even seem him coming. Maxwell pierced the mage’s open back. The mages screamed loudly and stumbled forward, almost dropping his staff. She cursed and pointed it towards Maxwell, but before her magic could even be called to her being, Varric had already shot two arrows through her face and throat. Another one dead.

Solas was busy with another mage, who was definitely aiming right for him. The mage, who was a very tall man, pointed his staff towards Solas’ head, a fireball spitting out of its core. Solas turned easily on his feet, his back arched as a green light erupted from his own staff, hitting the mage’s body and sucking all of his energy out. The apostate fell on the ground and Maxwell leaped to him and cut the man’s throat. A quick and clean death.

I swallowed as the last mage ran towards me, desperation in her bright green eyes. Almost out of instinct, I raised my hands, wind summoning around my fingertips. I pushed my hands outwards and a cold blast swept towards the crying mage, throwing the girl over the meadow and right onto a thick tree. I heard her bones snap as she crashed onto the ground, her bright eyes dimming, her expression filled with terror. Gone. Like I had thrown a twig. She had snapped so easily, died so easily, how young had she been?
The rest of the party sighed as the battle was over. Solas shook his head as Cassandra assembled the corpses and lined them up on the ground.

‘Can’t we bury them?’ I asked while still looking at the lifeless figure of the girl. Like a ragdoll, that is how she looked now. Like Sybil. She had been someone’s daughter, maybe someone’s sister or friend. And I had taken it all away. This was how life was, you give and you take it. It was her or me, and death had taken her. It should’ve been me.

‘No time, I am sorry’, Cassandra looked sad as she stared at me, but mounted her horse professionally. She had seen death too, like a warrior should. But that didn’t make it easier either.

We left the meadow and rode towards the path again, the party silent. If only I had listened better, paid more attention, we could’ve seen them coming, maybe convinced them…

‘They had made their choice, Twinkle’, Varric guided his horse towards me, his hand patting my shoulder. ‘Was it the first time you… I remember the first time I took someone’s life. I wish I could say it gets easier, but it never does, kid.’ Varric looked at me with a serious face.

‘No, it wasn’t my first’, I said then, Varric dipping his head in response.

The rest of the day, we all remained quiet, focussing on the path before us. And when the sky greeted the moon again, we set up another camp. This time, Solas and I put up the ward together,
making sure it was stronger than ever before. We were entering enemy territory, and couldn’t take any chances.

And while Varric, Cassandra, Maxwell and Solas all sat around the fire, their soft voices filling the silent atmosphere, I leant against a tree, looking straight up at Fenrir’s all-seeing eyes. Maybe the wolf had it easier. At least he was up there, safe and sound. He knew he would destroy the world one day, all in one go, while I was doing it one young mage at a time. I closed my eyes and focussed on my breaths, counting them one by one. Tsura’s voice doomed inside my head, saying over and over again that it wasn’t my fault, life was giving and taking, destroying and saving. But my heart still felt heavy.

Maxwell was gazing my way, and I looked back at him, at all of them sitting around the fire. They had all killed, and I was happy they did, or they would’ve been dead instead. And I would kill for them, if it meant their safety. I knew that this would happen. This was war. And this time, I could not escape it.

Sybil had fought with bravery. I would not let her down.

Everybody was doing what they had to do. They lived, they fought and then, they moved on. And now, it was time for me to do the same thing. I pushed myself away from the tree I was leaning against and walked towards the party. They all looked up to me, a welcoming expression on their faces. They all worked so hard. And I knew what to do to help them. If Solas did not find me in the Fade tonight, I would go search for him. It was time to leave my bubble. It was time to train.

I would not stand by and just stare like Fenrir does. I have a sight and I will use it.

Chapter End Notes

Poem/song Howling Mountain - Kathy Mar (changed to fit the story)

Next up: some fade training - shit's getting professional ;-)
“I was shown vast oceans, containing not water, but memories, drawn from the minds of dreamers. I drifted through frozen moments, like paintings, perfect in each detail.” —Magister Callistus

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The skies were coloured a baby pink and soft blue hue, the trees wailing in the hushing whispers of the gentle wind. Everything was perfect as it was. The bright green grass, the stars that unnaturally encircled the pleasantly glowing sun, the flowers growing as I gazed at them, the birds twirling through the protective space that was my home. Our home. My bubble. I knew that it would never get so perfect again once I changed it. But I knew change was necessary, I had done it so many times. Yet, it still hurt. But this is inevitable.

I smiled towards my paradise.

I can create another.

I will.

My wards buzzed softly as I stared up at the treeline at the border of the meadow. The eyes of demons and spirits looked back at me, wanting, willing, but staying in place. I locked eyes with each one of them. And for once, I felt like they could see me, see everything. And now, I had nothing more to hide. I counted the eyes as I stared at them. All so unnaturally real. And when I had counted them all, a new pair appeared in their midst. But these weren’t crimson red or phantom white, they were a soft, greyish blue. Cold, neutral, but with a hint of curiosity. Excitement. Those eyes were the most beautiful eyes I had counted. They were the only ones that seemed like a dream.

Solas’ figure appeared near the border of my bubble, his eyes scanning the meadow. And now, he could see me too. He wasn’t wearing his travel gear, yet a simple cotton tunic with his worn-out green pants and brown leather foot wraps. As he walked towards the entrance of my bubble, his jawbone necklace swayed from one side of his chest to the other. His face was cloaked in shadows. I walked to where he stood and laid my hand softly on the invisible ward. Solas looked beyond me, the anticipation twisting in his pupils. And for a moment, I lingered. If I let him in, then that was it. I would learn to shape the Fade, change my paradise, change everything. My dreams would never be the same.

But I had waited long enough.

This wasn’t my paradise. It was my prison.

I had created yet another one, one I didn’t dare to leave. I had been locked up for so many times now. It was time to free myself. And I couldn’t do it alone. He was here to help.

I can grow.

I willed a portal in my bubble, and Solas took notice. He walked towards the door, and found it open. My feet wandered back to the centre of the meadow, the young grass crunching underneath me. Solas’ eyes were burning into my back. I sighed deeply, expecting the uneasiness to gnarl in my stomach again. But like last time, Solas felt different now. He didn’t feel menacing, violating,
intruding. He felt calm, relaxing, almost strangely familiar. I turned to him, his face now exposed in the welcoming sun. He gave me a polite nod and I stared at the freckles darting over his straight nose and high cheekbones, at his little scar above his eyebrow that broke the perfection in his skin, which was brightly fair in the bathing sunrays.

‘It seems you have finally decided to take up my proposal for your training’, Solas dipped his head kindly. Yet, how did he come over as slightly annoyed?

‘Your… I had accepted that more than a week ago, but I haven’t seen you since?’ I said, almost apologizing. Why was I apologizing? He was the one who hadn’t shown up yet.

Solas cocked his head, his stance staying in a scholarly pose as he clasped his hands behind his back while slowly walking to where I stood. ‘Your ward is strong. I cannot find you here unless you want me to. I have not been able to reach you until now.’

‘But…’

‘If it is by will or even by potion, unless you truly want to learn, I cannot hear your invitation.’ Solas said, his eyes still cold, almost like a glare.

‘A potion…?’ I hadn’t taken any. What was he talking about? Why did he seem mad here, but in the real world he had seemed so unbothered. How thick was the mask he was wearing, and why was it shifting now, here, in the Fade?
And why was he speaking of a potion? Did he mean a sleeping potion… oh, wait. ‘Oh, you mean Adan’s sleeping potion?’

Solas didn’t move, his eyes not stopping his cold glare.

‘That… wasn’t for me. I would never willingly… I like the Fade, I don’t like sleeping over it. It happens sometimes, when I’m too tired, but…’

That seemed to catch Solas off guard, his head now cocking to the other direction. ‘My apologies, then, I presumed…’

‘No, I would’ve thought the same thing.’

‘Then, what was stopping you from starting your training?’ He shifted on his feet, straightening his back to a more friendly posture.

I held in my breath, my eyes suddenly ashamed of his stare. ‘I hadn’t realized I had been… blocking it. Maybe…’, I sighed again, my shoulders slumping.

Solas remained quiet, his gaze not showing anything but encouragement to continue.

‘Maybe, I was afraid. This place had become my home. I’ve had to leave so many homes already, I didn’t want to lose this one.’ My eyes flickered towards Solas and back to the ground. ‘Maybe, I didn’t want to change it. I want to learn, but… it still hurts to leave it all again.’

And then, Solas seemed to falter a little, like he understood. It was his understanding that made me shiver to my bones. No one had understood it before, the loss. But I could see the very same thing in his eyes. Like looking through a mirror.

‘Nothing is ever lost in the Fade. It remembers, just like you do. What may change now, may come back later. Perhaps, nothing will even be the same again, but only if you want it to. The Fade changes like we do, and reflect that who we are at the moment, inside. But if you will your past
memories onto it, it will obey.’ Solas’ voice was calm and echoed through the now silent meadow.

I nodded silently. ‘Teach me.’

There was an approving smile curling on his stern lips, very softly, yet definite. He walked towards me and stood next to me, his body close but distant. I turned to him, lifting my head slightly to look at his own.

‘Close your eyes’, he ordered calmly.

I dipped my head and complied. One more time I stared at my meadow, and then I closed my eyes to greet the darkness. My heart stomped in my chest nervously.

‘Remain calm. Focus on your breathing.’

I hummed and willed my heart. Breathe in. Thump. Breathe out. Thump. My ears picked up Solas’ calculated breaths, and I could hear the wind clashing to his figure like he was a rock. All would change, but not him. And for one reason, that was quite comforting.

‘Good’, he said, his voice almost a whisper, like he didn’t want to disturb me. I focussed on the cracks in the deep timbre of his words, my face as serene as my body now was. ‘Picture yourself where or what you want the Fade to shape itself in. Do not worry, we are safe.’

Haven. That was the first thing that came into my mind. I felt a shift.

‘Envision all that this place enfolds, the smells, the sounds, even the tastes.’ Solas hushed. I felt his body behind me, close, protective.


The world seemed to change from underneath my feet, trembling as it shifted.

I knew where I was now, but didn’t dare open my eyes.

‘Excellent’, Solas’ voice almost clashed into my ears, his tunes filled with marvel.

My eyes willed themselves to open, to look at what I had created. And there it was. Haven. Like we never left. I stared up at the big wooden gate of the village, the military camp behind me. I could hear swords clashing, people’s whispered voices, but no one was here. It was almost like there were only shadows of the villagers’ presence, but nothing more. But, the village itself was… almost real.

Solas shifted behind me. I craned my neck and looked over my shoulder towards him. He nodded, his eyes soft and understanding, edging me forward. Go have a look.

I pressed my hands against the gates and they opened, exposing the familiar square with the campfire Varric often warmed himself by, the path that led towards the chantry and split towards the tavern, the hardened road with Maxwell’s cabin at its end, Leliana’s tent, I could even hear her ravens. Everything was here.

But my paradise was gone.
'I did not expect you to be so competent already.' Solas chuckled, his eyes boring into mine, like he wanted to unravel me piece by piece. And when he did that in the waking world, he made me incredibly uncomfortable. But here, I almost wanted to let him do it.

‘Me neither’, I mumbled while looking around me. I squatted and touched the snow underneath my feet. It felt cold, wet, real. ‘How strange, it does feel like it, but it isn’t real.’ My meadow had been simple, the grass soft, the flowers soft, the sun soft. But this coldness, this texture…

‘That is a matter of debate.’ Solas nodded and I wondered what he meant by it. ‘Let us try again, focus on a place from your past, something that is not so vivid in your memory like Haven.’

I dipped my head, feeling the scorching wind blow my hair all over the place again. I wanted to go somewhere nicer now, warmer.


The wind stopped blazing around us, the ground slightly trembling again. I felt the sun pricking on my arms, caressing my face and reddening my cheeks. I opened my eyes again, and here we were, in the old, small village. The middle of nowhere, yet everywhere. I could feel the ancient spirits of the seers dwelling about, their essences dancing across the shadows cast by the trees.

‘Where are we?’ Solas said, his voice filled with interest.

‘Rivain’, I whispered while looking around. This place was still, like me, in time.

This place was still fresh. I could go deeper.


Solas behind me nodded his head. ‘Impressive. You are getting better.’

I stared at the small streets of the city of Seleny. We were standing on one of its bridges, or viaducts, it seemed. The salty river greeting us, its waves wailing high. It was night, the sky and the stars above us, the city filled with lights from the houses. Small and big boats were bobbing near the shore.

‘Antiva’, I smiled while looking at Solas, who stared at the city lights in slight awe, ‘Seleny.’

‘You have travelled a lot.’ He inclined.

‘Indeed.’ I smiled slightly. He had no idea.

I was getting the hang of this. And how exciting? I could revisit all again, every city I’d seen, every street I’d walked. It was here to discover. I could go as far as my memory could take me.

I closed my eyes again. Deeper. I can go deeper.

Here I was again. Another home lost. I stared up at the high stone tower. Proud in its cause, in the thought of victory. A victory they would not gain for many years to come. The courtyard was empty, the stables were abandoned, the healer’s hut was void. But this was no ruin yet. It was just like I remembered it to be. How many years had I given this place in hope for peace and justice? And was it ever given to me?

I turned around, my eyes prickling with fresh tears. There. Through that gate they had taken her body. Limp like a deer fresh from the hunt. The gate was closed now, the thick forest behind it silent. Her laughter had filled up this place, brightened it like it was heaven itself. And unlike the other places I had shaped the Fade into, this place just felt fake. Everything was missing. Her grave should be right there. Small. Unnoticeable. Forgotten. But I couldn’t imagine it here. I refused to.

‘Interesting’, Solas walked around, turning towards the barracks and then to the stables. But I saw it in his slightly tensed shoulders. He could feel the dread here. The lingering sadness. The loss. ‘What was this? A town perhaps?’

‘Nothing. This place was just nothing.’ I whispered. It hadn’t even been a home. Sybil had been my home, and they had taken her from me.

I closed my eyes again. I needed to go somewhere else. But where? Kirkwall? No, I had said I hadn’t been there. The Anderfels then, but I couldn’t remember much of my time there. I couldn’t go to a place on Earth. Solas would freak out.

Home.

My first home.


I opened my eyes and smiled. We were in the camp, the Dalish camp. And although it was silent and abandoned, I felt them here. Like a family, they never really left.

‘I thought you were not Dalish?’ Solas said as he walked past me and into the camp. The grass was flat, like a lot of people had walked on it. You could smell the woods, hear their sounds whisper into the tents of the camp. Solas looked around curiously, his eyes lingering on the wooden carvings of the Elven gods in the ancient trees. He walked towards them, his slender fingers caressing the rough patterns.

‘I’m not’, I answered while I walked towards him, staring at his hand and how it trailed Mythal’s figure. ‘I visited them while I... was young. Their camp was close to the farm I lived in.’ I smiled with nostalgia. ‘They taught me so much.’

Solas’ face looked faintly annoyed by that. ‘They learned you about Elven culture, did they not?’

‘Some...’ I started. ‘Why?’ What was his problem? Why was he annoyed? Wasn’t he Elven as well? ‘You got a problem with the Dalish?’

‘They are children acting out stories misheard and repeated wrongly a thousand times.’
‘And you know the truth, then?’ I cocked my head curiously. How Elgadira would’ve liked to meet this guy. What a fight that would’ve been.

‘While they pass on stories, mangling details, I walk the Fade. I have seen things they have not.’

I smiled. Though I had lived for so long, I had never come across someone like Elgadira again. ‘The Dalish can be… alhasha… wild in their teachings.’ I grinned. ‘They told me so many stories, and that’s what they were. Stories. Or at least for me.’

Solas looked up into my eyes when I spoke Elven.

‘Maybe, you can tell me what you know, Solas.’ I smiled at him and Solas nodded back, a kindness in his eyes I hadn’t yet seen before. ‘I loved listening to their tellings. The wonders of the ancients…’

Solas looked up towards the soft blue sky. ‘The Dalish strive to remember Halamshiral, but Halamshiral was merely a fumbling attempt to recreate a forgotten land.’

‘Arlathan’, I whispered. It was a word Elgadira whispered in her sleep. Her voice lost in hope.

‘Elvenan was the empire’, Solas looked straight at me as he spoke, his eyes looking for something in mine, ‘and Arlathan its greatest city. A place of magic and beauty. Lost to time.’

Lost like so many. ‘That place must’ve been… marvellous.’ I smiled and looked at Solas’ lingering fingers on the old tree.

‘We hear stories of the Ancient Elves living in trees and imagine wooden ramps or Dalish aravels. Imagine instead spires of crystal twining through the branches, palaces floating among the clouds. Imagine beings who lived forever, for whom magic was as natural as breathing. That is what was lost.’ Solas looked to his hand trailing the wooden carvings. He then let go of the tree trunk.

The Elves had been immortal. Their magic like mine. Something twisted in my stomach. They were like me. But I wasn’t ancient. I was old. But ancient…

‘The legend of Elven immortality… did they use magic to increase their lifespan?’ I stared up at Solas’ face. And it resembled mine when I had looked at my memories. It was nostalgia. Strange.

‘No. It was simple part of being Elven. The subtle beauty of their magic was the effect, not the cause, of their nature.’ Solas stared at my hands. ‘Some spells took years to cast. Echoes would linger for centuries, harmonizing with new magic in an unending symphony. It must’ve been… beautiful.’ Solas smiled sadly when he stared at me, his eyes it gazing into mine. A silence crept over us and I swallowed hard.

‘I wish I could’ve seen it.’ I whispered, breaking the contact we had. If only those Elves still lived. I wouldn’t be so lonely, they could’ve shared that eternity with me. ‘Come’, I said, ‘I want to check on something.’

Solas nodded, his face back in his favourite neutral gaze. I tracked the hidden path through the woods, the trip shorter than I had imagined. And then, there it was. Just past the treeline. The cottage still just like I remembered. I smiled brightly and ran towards the wooden cottage, the door was open. I pushed it, and somewhere deep within, I wondered if Daniel would be sitting there at the table. The vase would be in front of him, filled with fresh blue flowers. He would’ve taken off his worn-out boots. He would’ve smiled at my entrance. But the cottage was empty inside. The flowers in the vase had withered. I closed my eyes and felt my breath shaking in my throat. It’s alright, Saeris. Don’t cry. It’s okay.
I turned back around and walked outside to the back of the cottage, to the fields.
And there he was.

I found him.

Just like I left him.

I squatted in front of his nameless grave, the stone still polished and clean. The field was still covered in blue flowers, except for the one green flower that firmly sprouted on top of Daniel’s grave. The colour of his eyes. I wiped away a small tear that had formed in the corner of my eye. Solas stopped behind me and for the first time ever, I felt comforted by him. He put his hand on my shoulder very lightly, like he didn’t want to startle me. The man remained silent, letting me grieve over the nameless grave.

‘This was my home’, I whispered.

‘What has happened here?’ He asked genuinely.

I smiled and stood back up. Solas let go of my shoulder as he stared at me while I straightened myself. My body shuddered as a warm wind greeted our figures, like Daniel was waving goodbye one last time. If he was a spirit, I hoped he could see that I never forgot him, and I never would. He had been my first home in this strange world, and he will always be. The sun lowered in the sky, and I felt my body slumping, the vision of the farm blurring slightly. ‘I’m waking up.’

‘I know.’ Solas whispered as he too shifted on his feet. The field and the flowers and the farm and the camp and the forest and the grave… all were falling away into the waking world. These memories belonged to the Fade now. And I let it claim them.

‘You have progressed a great deal. Perhaps, we should leave the rest for another time.’

I looked back up at Solas and smiled at him, the tears still in my eyes. Daniel’s grave buzzed as it contours appeared blurry. I would visit him again.

Solas dipped his chin, his eyes kind towards me. ‘But for now you should wake up.’

***

And that was how it began. I rolled over in my bedroll, the morning sun seeping through the ivory fabric of the tent. Cassandra laid next to me, one leg over her bedroll, the other inside, her arms stretched above her head and her mouth half open. I swear she was drooling. I gave a small laugh as I stared at her. The fearsome warrior. The serious Seeker. The drooling sleeper. What a sight.

I slowly raised the furs I was sleeping under and grabbed my clothes, pulling my armour over the woollen tunic I had slept in. I took my foot wraps and folded them under my armpit, walking outside barefoot. The soft, damp grass tickled the soles of my feet, the glowing sun greeting me for another day.

I had lost my bubble, the paradise and prison I had created.

But this world was a paradise in itself. An imperfect paradise.

Maxwell sat at the campfire, which he had put down just before I left my tent, but I could see the wood underneath still smouldering with soft fresh smoke. The Herald looked up to me as I walked to where he sat. He stretched his long arms above his head and I heard his bones pop. He’d taken the last shift, so he had been up for a while already.

‘Good morning, Saeris’, Maxwell gave me a sheepish smile, his familiar hazel eyes sparkling in the early light of the day.
I smiled back at him, feeling how my green eye quieted with his presence. I sat next to him on the ground, and we silently enjoyed the waking sounds of the woods as I bound my foot wraps. Maxwell nibbled on a piece of bread, and I noticed the scar in his hand lightly buzzing.

‘Does it hurt?’

‘Sometimes’, he smiled, ‘but it gets better when you’re around.’ Maxwell winked.

‘It’s the eye’, I grinned and lifted my shoulders.

Maxwell stared at me and smiled back. Sybil would’ve liked him. Daniel would’ve liked him. And I guess that if they were watching right now, they would’ve told me that I had done well to help him. I learned. I trained. And I got better.

For once, I had grown.

I had changed.

And I would do so more in the days and weeks and months and probably years to come. I was even excited for it, and couldn’t wait. Now, time could go slowly, and I could enjoy the progress.

Solas opened the flap of his tent. He looked to where we sat, and he smiled. It was barely noticeable, the mask still firmly placed on his face. Yet, this time, it seemed he had changed somehow too.

Slowly, the whole camp started to rise. Varric got up, and it looked like he had even combed his chest hair. Cassandra nodded at us as she opened the flap of her tent too, and I noticed how her hair stuck to the sides of her head in a dishevelled manner. I couldn’t resist laughing at her genuine bedhead.

We all changed. Every day was different. And I felt alive because of it.

And now, the Hinterlands were closing by, the battle nearing us. But I was sure we were all ready to face what was to come. And if we weren’t, we would learn to.

Chapter End Notes

Shout-out to my beta, nerdsaretotallyawesome, who cried while reading the part about Daniel and Sybil <3 Don’t worry gurl, I cried too.

The Hinterlands are close-by, y’all ready for it?
The horn of the departing train echoed through the nearly empty train station.

‘Please take care of your belongings’, a feminine voice doomed over the thundering rails, the old radio beeping as the robotic voice read her lines, ‘Mind the gap!’

I tapped my foot impatiently on the wet cobbled stones of the platform. The grey weather had cast a depressing glow over the little brown pub at the end of the stone runway where sleep-drunk commuters sipped their morning drug, the faint smell of watery coffee filling the dreary air. I stared up at the message board.

Two minutes.

My fingers grabbed the sides of my beanie and I pulled it down further over my head as the wind whispered cold chills behind my ears.

‘I think it’s late again’, my brother sighed, his hands rummaging in his deep pockets, the change ringing as he played with the loose threads of his beige winter coat.

‘It’ll come’, I mumbled and stared at the message board again. Still two minutes. It had been two minutes for half an hour by now. Or so it felt like.

‘It should be here already’, my brother kicked a lost stone and it clashed over the brim of the pavement towards the rails. My eyes followed the little thing down. How strange. Why was it so brightly green? It was too vibrant between the grey mud and the steel bars. A splash of unearthly colour that seemed to light up every shadow cast by our hovering figures.

I took a step closer, my body bending over the yellow safety lines. It was green. Too green. Maybe it wasn’t a stone but a piece of plastic? I stared at it closely, the weird thing enlightening the misty fog a lime-ish colour. And then, I noticed how it wasn’t formed like a stone either. Was it a glass marble maybe? Had a kid lost it on his way to school? I took another step closer, my eyes focussed on the glowing orb. How was this thing buzzing, trembling in my ears? Was it radio-active?

Suddenly, the green orb turned on its own, like it had received thousands of little legs and it turned around just to stare at me. My breath got stuck in my already sore throat. It wasn’t a piece of stone or plastic. It wasn’t a marble.

It was an eye.

The dilated pupil of the emerald eyeball focussed on my figure, and I saw my reflection in it, my face as pale as a ghost. Holy shit.

I wanted to scream, and just then my brother yanked me back by the collar of my jacket. I yelped and I fell back on the ground as our soaring train rushed over the rails before us, coming to an abrupt halt.

‘Are you crazy!’ My brother screamed, his eyes big and frightened. ‘If I hadn’t pulled you back you wouldn’t have a head!’
I breathed harshly and stared at the opening doors of the train. ‘There was an eye there! A human eye!’ I cried and crawled to the edge of the platform.

My brother stepped forward and stared into the gutter. ‘There’s nothing there. Wake up god-dammit!’ he grunted.

I gawked at the rails below. There was nothing. No eye, no blood or anything that showed the eye had ever been there. Had I just dreamed it? I must have imagined it. I need to start drinking coffee.

We entered the train after that, just on time before it departed again. But I swear, every time I closed my eyes that day, I could see the dark pupils staring back at me, its gaze terrified, like I was the abomination.

***

‘The Herald of Andraste! I’ve heard the stories. Everyone has. We know what you did at the Breach.’ A young female dwarf greeted our party as we entered the camp. Inquisition soldiers gaped at our group as Maxwell straightened his back and stared down at the freckled woman.

‘It’s an honour to meet you, my Lord.’ She said, her braided red hair curling nicely on the top of her head, her armour gleaming, ‘Inquisition scout Harding, at your service. I, all of us here, we’ll do whatever we can to help.’

I heard Varric next to me chuckle before he said, ‘Harding, huh? Ever been to Kirkwall’s Hightown?’

‘I can’t say I have. Why?’

‘You’d be Harding in… oh, never mind.’ Varric hummed with his joke, and I poked him with my elbow while hiding my grin as Cassandra made a disgusted noise.

‘It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.’ Maxwell said politely with a smile on his face.

‘We should get to business. The situation’s… pretty dire.’ Harding nodded, ‘We came to secure horses from Redcliffe’s old horsemaster. I grew up here, and people always said that Dennet’s herds were the strongest and fastest this side of the Frostbacks. But with the mage-Templar fighting getting worse, we couldn’t get to Dennet. Maker only knows if he’s even still alive.’ The scout stared at the ground for a moment, but then looked back up to the Herald. ‘Mother Giselle’s at the Crossroads helping refugees and the wounded. Our latest reports say that the war’s spread there, too. Corporal Vale and our men are doing what they can to help protect the people, but they won’t be able to hold out very long… So you best get going. No time to lose.’

The Hinterlands were one of the places Ferelden was most known for. It had those famous green fields and quiet farmlands filled with wild rams and picturesque cottages. Yet, what was left of it now but burned crops and charred corpses of nature’s proudest forests? As we travelled down from the main Inquisition encampment, we found out that the old Hinterlands were gone, and an empty no-man’s land remained, desolate of what had once made it beautiful. Life.

And we helped cause it. I don’t remember how many rebel mages and Templars we had killed. And every single time, we pleaded with them to stop, that we were there to help. But no one listened, and in the end, it was going to be them or us. And it was them. After most of the attackers were annihilated, the village called the Crossroads was safe again. We set up beds while surgeons and healer mages who had not turned rebels helped refugees and soldiers alike. The villagers were happy to see us coming. Maxwell shone like the prophet they took him for, and he acted like it. Righteous,
Maxwell smiled proudly as we walked towards two Inquisition soldiers who ramped the Inquisition banner in the silent ground. The soldiers turned to us, their faces filled with hopeful looks, and they pumped their chests towards Maxwell, who returned the favour. The Inquisition flag waved calmly in the soft wind. At that moment, I couldn’t help but feel this spark of pride, and I noticed our whole party having the same expression. We helped this village, the Inquisition helped.

‘Mother Giselle is with the wounded’, Cassandra said as the soldiers returned to their posts.

‘I will go and speak with her. You guys rest, go have something to drink and eat, we’ll regroup in an hour or two.’ Maxwell ordered like a true leader would. He winked at me then, whispering under his breath ‘but stay close’ before he turned around and walked up the stairs towards the healer’s tent.

I saw the Chantry Mother up on the hill tending to a wounded soldier. She was wearing the traditional red and white Chantry robes. I couldn’t see from where I stood, but it seemed like her eyes were kind. Yet, I couldn’t help myself. I had to keep an eye on Maxwell, I had to protect him, and I didn’t trust the Chantry at all.

‘Come on, Twinkle, let’s grab something to eat’, Varric slapped his broad hand on my lower back.

‘I’m going to look around for a bit… You go first Varric, I’ll join later.’ I hummed and strode off deeper into the torn-up village while Varric and Cassandra turned to the tent where scouts were distributing small loaves of bread and bowls of steaming broth. My eyes followed Maxwell as he and Mother Giselle walked further away from the tent, deep in conversation. I slowly trailed them along, my feet dragging over the cobblestones. I noticed how people were staring up as well, some silently praying. Their faith had been rewarded, and the person who’d given it to them was standing right there talking with a revered Mother of their holy Chantry. The picture was perfect.

But Maxwell wasn’t a promise of faith for me. He was a promise of a future. And in my own way, he was a promise of hope as well. I was just like the villagers and the refugees, looking up to a saviour. Maxwell was carrying such a weight on his shoulders, I couldn’t imagine…

Suddenly, I found myself in another healer’s tent, spotting Maxwell still standing with Giselle from the corner of my eyes. A young man was moaning on a makeshift bed, holding his arm that was impaled by ice shards that didn’t seem to melt, the magic still curling heavily. I squatted next to his bed, my hands already hovering to his arm.

‘Andraste?’ the man wailed.

‘Let me help you, shhh’, I hushed while my magic slipped from my fingertips.

‘NO! DON’T TOUCH ME’ the man suddenly screamed, his body contorting, trying to get away.

‘I’m just trying to help, I won’t hurt you.’ I tried to smile kindly, but the man kept screaming, not in agony, but in fear. ‘Please’, I tried.

‘He won’t let you’, a human surgeon stopped next to me, ‘Magic is evil in his eyes, he won’t let you help him now.’ The surgeon crossed his bloodied arms in front of his chest. ‘Go, you can’t do any good here now, mage.’

‘But if you hold him I…’

‘No. We can take care of it, we don’t need your magic.’
I dangled my arms to my sides disappointedly. ‘I… am sorry.’ And then I turned around and left the tent while the healer picked up a scalpel to pull the shards out of the man’s arm manually. Why didn’t he want my help? I could heal him with just a twist of my hand. My magic wasn’t evil? I wasn’t a rebel? How shaken were these people, what had they seen, gone through, to be so fearful?

‘Do not take it to heart’, Solas bound his hands at his back, eyeing me from the wall he was leaning against.

‘I don’t get it. I just wanted to help, I can help! Why are they looking at me like I’m a monster? I’m so sick of being feared.’ I was angry, I am angry. Why? WHY? I’m always helping, I’m always healing and considering and trying to be good and not to kill and not to hurt and to create and to make whole and… Even after a hundred years, why do people still fear me?

‘People are scared of what they do not understand.’ He dipped his head in response, his eyes almost compassionate. Or was it pity?

‘But they’re not even trying to understand!’ I sighed.

‘They may not have the ability to’, he said, his voice soft.

‘Fenedhis’ I cursed, throwing my arms up in the air.

Right then and there, when I was about to blow my shit, I heard children crying. Solas had heard it too, and we both looked up towards the cabin located in a corner of the village.

Orphans. They must’ve lost their parents. Probably dead. A bony elf was waving her hands up and down to make the dozens of children stop crying, but it didn’t seem to work. My eyes locked with each teary face, round and red and swollen and dirty and desperate.

‘Mamae!’ I heard a little voice cry, but I couldn’t make out which child it had wept. But it struck me, for I had thought for a second that it had been little Sybil. The anger I’d had, melted away like foam in the ocean.

Would they fear me too?

My feet moved without me noticing, and I heard Solas’ footsteps behind me as I strode towards the group of orphans. They swallowed as they looked up to me, their big and teary eyes frightened. A little human girl stood in front of the crowd of orphans, her blonde hair curling from underneath a dull red hood. I smiled kindly. Just like Little Red Riding Hood. Sybil had loved that story.

‘Oh my! What a beautiful cape you have there!’ I smiled towards the awe-struck girl.

‘M… My father gave it to me’, she hiccupped.

‘I know a girl with the exact same one! Do you know her?’ The children went silent, their tears still stuck in their eyes.

‘N… N… No’, the girl stammered again.

‘Well…’ I looked up at Solas, who was standing next to a cabin somewhat further away where the children couldn’t see him, only I could. He nodded encouragingly, his eyes full of intrigue. ‘Her name was Little Red Riding Hood…’

The children gathered around, and slowly, some adults did too. And they laughed, their eyes drying up as I told them the story of how a little girl lost her way and about the big bad wolf preying on her
and her grandmother and about the hunter who came to save them all. I named the hunter Maxwell, just to make it more real. And just like Sybil had on the ferry towards Kirkwall, the children stopped their whimpering while listening to my hushing voice, cuddling closer to each other as my story came to an end.

Who's that I see walkin' in these woods?
    Why, it's Little Red Riding Hood.
    Hey there Little Red Riding Hood,
        You sure are looking good.
You're everything a big bad wolf could want.

Little Red Riding Hood
    I don't think little big girls should
Go walking in these spooky old woods alone.

What big eyes you have,
The kind of eyes that drive wolves mad.
    So just to see that you don't get chased
I think I ought to walk with you for a ways.

What full lips you have.
    They're sure to lure someone bad.
    So until you get to grandma's place
I think you ought to walk with me and be safe.

I'm gonna keep my sheep suit on
    Until I'm sure that you've been shown
That I can be trusted walking with you alone.

Little Red Riding Hood
    I'd like to hold you if I could
But you might think I'm a big bad wolf so I won't.

What a big heart I have-the better to love you with.
Little Red Riding Hood
    Even bad wolves can be good.
    I'll try to be satisfied just to walk close by your side.
Maybe you'll see things my way before we get to grandma's place.

Little Red Riding Hood
    You sure are looking good
You're everything that a big bad wolf could want.

The adults that had gathered applauded as the story had ended and the children smiled happily as they started retelling the story already, but now with dragons and monsters and princes and so on, their smiling faces lighting up the entire village. I grinned, feeling like I had done something now, just like Maxwell was doing. I wasn’t useless. And no one was looking at me like I was a monster. Not a big bad wolf. Maybe not Little Red either, but well, I’m content with being the grandmother. I turned around to look at Solas, who hadn’t moved from his place, his stance still stoic and scholarly. But he had a strange look behind his eyes, one I couldn’t place. At a first glance, you would say it was an amusing look, but thinking about it now, it seemed way much darker than that. And then, I got that uneasy feeling in my stomach again, twisting and turning and warning.

***
We talked to Corporal Vale, to the hunter asking for food resources, to the scout asking for blankets, to a refugee pleading for a potion for his wife’s pneumonia, and so on. Maxwell noted it all down in a little leather journal he carried, promising he would try to help them, that he wouldn’t forget. We then headed westward, towards the famous horsemaster’s home. There was so much fighting, and we killed so many, but we kept on going. We were midway when the sun started setting and we had to make up camp. Everybody had to do a double shift, making sure there were always multiple people up in case we were attacked. Luckily, we weren’t. I had two shifts with Cassandra, and I didn’t mind it. The Seeker didn’t speak much, let alone about herself, but I was happy enough with the silence so I could hear the woods and the fields and the blowing wind. Sleep was a necessity now, and my body was screaming for it. I think that night, I wasn’t the only one skipping the Fade in order to sleep deeply.

The next day we rose early, the sun had just risen out of its slumber when we packed our horses and rode towards the abandoned farmers’ settlement in the west. When we arrived, wolves were awaiting us, their eyes red and violating. The eyes of demons. It was a shame to kill such magnificent beasts.

‘No normal wolf would fight with such determination’, Cassandra huffed as she wiped the sweat off her forehead. I stared down at the dead animals, their black and grey fur sticky with fresh blood, their eyes dulled.

Solas looked at the dead wolves too, his eyes stern, ‘The Breach may have driven them mad… or perhaps a demon took command of the pack.’

It had indeed been a demon, we killed the thing a day later. The wolves had howled mournfully when they had reawakened, staring at us, their eyes almost intelligent, as they slowly retreated into the mountain. Back to nature.

We walked further to the farmers’ settlement, noticing most cabins were abandoned, probably due to the fighting and the wolves. The stone hedges were already decaying, looking like old rubbles of ruin. The fields had not been tended to for a long time, but I could still see some stubborn crops growing, druffalos grazing the sweet grass, and some horses trotting in the meadows. Maxwell walked up front, his pace confident, towards the cabin up the hill.

‘This must be the horsemaster’s’, Solas nodded.

Inside, the Master of Horses was waiting for us, his cranky face lighting up just a little when we entered. The elder human man knew we were coming, of course. We asked him for his help, and he wanted to, but only after we promised to build watchtowers to safeguard the mounts against bandits and thieves. When we went back to our camp that day, Cassandra immediately sent a raven to Cullen.

The last days in the Hinterlands we spent by travelling across the land, helping people with menial tasks, but gaining so much more respect in return. We sent out scouts to hunt for rams, ordered soldiers to locate supply caches with blankets for the refugees, we destroyed the main rebel mage camp and Templar outpost, and after a week, the area felt like a huge weight was lifted off its shoulders. There was so much more to be done, but so little time to do it. Maxwell seemed to have a hard time accepting he could not help everybody. And though people threw themselves in front of his feet, I could see by the expression on his face he felt guilty for not doing every single thing in his power to help. He was being too hard on himself.

We tried to help the Herald however we could. We set up camps, secured the area, hunted for food, located directions on the map, and so on. We also came across some Rifts. They all made my skin creep and my green eye boil. I could still feel their presence, I could sense their proximity, but I could not yet see them. Solas told me that I would soon, that I would learn the more we practised. We
hadn’t had any Fade practise since before we arrived at the Crossroads, and to be honest, it was my fault. I was empty, my body ransacked, especially after closing Rifts. When Maxwell closed them, I could feel the Rifts searching me, claiming my magic to stay just a little while longer, pleading for me to help like they were alive like you and I. And when Maxwell’s mark zapped the tears in the Veil apart, I felt blinded, like they had succeeded taking some of my power, and it was lost forever.

Maxwell was dead-tired, Varric couldn’t keep his eyes open, Cassandra was making more sighs than disgusted noises and Solas didn’t seem to be able to walk without his staff. We all needed rest. So, finally, we decided it was time to leave for Haven again.

***

‘I think I know how to shape the Fade to my memories now…’ I said to Solas and dropped my hands to my sides, the scenery changing from one of our previous campsites to an open generic field.

‘You can indeed’, Solas hummed, ‘Perhaps now, we can take it a step further.’

‘Further?’

‘The Fade is formed by our memories, and as you already know, sometimes memories combine. But Dreamers are no normal Fade travellers. We can shape it to our will, not just our memories. What you know was just the first step. Try to escort us to a place you do not know or haven’t been yet, to somewhere new.’

‘New? How do I do that?’

‘By your imagination. Go to wherever you want, show me only what you want me to see.’ Solas stared at me sternly, his eyes unwavering.

‘I… Alright’, I said, trying to ignore his gaze that seemed to know it all.

But where do I want to go now? I’m not creative… I can’t even draw or…

‘Don’t stop focussing, Saeris’, he said, pronouncing my name with his deep Elven accent.


Okay, fairy tales! A princess castle!

The ground started to shudder again, and I could hear Solas take a breath.


I stared at the place I had created. It could’ve been straight out of a story book by the brothers Grimm. It was serene, peaceful and… fantastic. It couldn’t be real, and it wasn’t pretending to be real. It relished in being a fantasy, in being imaginary, and it was better than anything out there in the real world.

‘I am impressed. You train your will to control magic, shape the Fade like only a trained professional would. You have an indomitable focus I have not yet encountered before.’ Solas hummed, his icy blue and grey eyes boring into mine. And for a moment, we stood there and kept
staring. This place I had created went quiet. I think I forgot to breathe after a while. Maybe,
somewhere I was waiting for that uneasy feeling to creep over my shoulders again, for the need to
hide, to shy away from his stare. But that feeling didn’t come. Now, we just were, and I became
uncomfortable on a whole other level. A level I couldn’t really place.

‘I… Thank you’, I smiled and broke our eye contact. Solas blinked his eyes, and his face became
very neutral and distant. And so did the atmosphere, like we both knew that we had been spacing out
and we had nothing left to say.

This place still needed something. Think of something, Saeris. What does a castle need? A princess?
Yes. A damsel in distress to wait for her prince to come. And she’ll be waiting in her… tower. A high
waiting. For a chance to flee. For a sign of hope. But the stones are staring. No windows. Only
screams. Shouting. And magic. But it has nowhere to go to. All locked up. They are watching. And
Unwavering. Unchanging. Like the stones.

‘Saeris?’ Solas’ voice sounded distant, too far gone to be heard in my clouded mind.


‘Saeris, wake up. Saeris’, Solas’ tune sounded cautionary, but I couldn’t stop anymore.

One. Two. The want to protect. Three. He will never let me go. Always watching. Four. Failure.
want this. I need to breathe. I want to be free. I have to see the sun. Rebel. Break free. Let go of me.

‘SAERIS’, Solas was shaking me, my tears drowning my face. I blinked, staring up in his worried
eyes, his mask slipping off. ‘It is alright. You are alright. Take a deep breath.’

I hiccupped, noticing where we were. I started panicking again, my chest tightening, my head
exploding with a million and one thoughts. It’s the Circle. Solas’ hands were warm on my shoulders.
And it made me think of…

‘It’s alright’, he sighed again, and closed his eyes. My breaths came out shallowly, and I tried to
focus on the little scar between his brows, on the brown freckles that spread across his cheekbones
like a galaxy. And then the ground started shaking again.

No more darkness.

We were back in a meadow, simple. But not. I noticed that we were standing on a floating rock,
cascades of clouds hanging near our chests, water falling down to another world below us. And
above, the heavens were colouring a baby blue and a soft pink hue, accommodating the sparkling
stars in a symphony of night and day. There were large trees, larger than skyscrapers, with twisting
trunks. And there was magic. Everywhere. I could feel it, the Fade could feel it too, like a sheer
blanket covering our beings.

And I could breathe again. I’m still free. I can still see the sun when I wake up. I’m fine.

‘Ir abelas, Solas’, I huffed out of breath, ‘I… It was an old memory I thought I’d forgotten. I’m so
sorry. I don’t know what came over me… I…”

‘The Fade can become a dangerous place if you do not focus. Dreams are easy. Nightmares are on
a whole other level, one you cannot escape with just a mere thought. Dark memories are loud, and there are too many here that will feed on them. You must never give in, unless you know you have the control.’ Solas sounded like he was almost scolding me like a teacher would. He let go of my shivering shoulders, folding his hands back behind his back.

‘Ma serannas. Thank you, it will not happen again’, I looked down at my hands, and noticed they were still shaking.

Solas remained quiet, his eyes focussing on my hands as well. For a moment, I thought he was going to take them, place mine in his, and give me a small encouraging pinch. And it seemed like he was thinking of doing exactly that, considering all the possibilities. All the consequences. What were the consequences?

‘Where are we now? Did you make this up as well? How did you do that so quickly?’ The words tumbled out of my mouth like vomit.

Solas looked up from my hands and back to my face. ‘it is imaginary, yes’, he said, his voice cold. I wondered if this place was as imaginary as my castle. Or was it something more? Because while my fantasy had felt like a fantasy, a fairy tale, this place felt real, like Haven had when I had created it last time. ‘Your mind is exhausted, we should not have trained before you’d rested. We shall continue our training back at Haven.’ He said coldly and reserved, detached, unapproachable and withdrawn.

‘I’m sorry I…’ It was by accident, I can do better!

‘It is fine, Saeris.’ He took two steps back. Why was one not enough? ‘Rest well.’

***

But how could I “rest well” after that? Who could? That night, I didn’t sleep anymore, but took the two last shifts out of Varric’s and Maxwell’s hands. It took us two more days after that to get back to Haven, where I knew another pile of work was waiting for us.

Our horses were trotting calmly on the sandy path that was slowly becoming more frozen and cold. A sign of home.

Home.

Chapter End Notes

Song: Little Red Riding Hood - Sam The Sham & The Pharaohs, but Saeris' version was inspired by this cover: https://youtu.be/PTzLgnT9UF1

Since the holidays are nearing, and it’s going to be my birthday soon, I will not have a lot of time to write, edit and publish. So, next chapter will probably appear somewhere in January...
I hope you liked this chapter, and if you did, you can always leave me a comment or a kudo!

Happy holidays everyone! See you in the next year♡ !
Resolved

Chapter Notes

Hi! Sorry I haven't been posting these last few weeks, but because of the holidays and my finals, I couldn't really write! But I'm back now and got loads of time :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Your kind killed the Most Holy!’

‘Lies! Your kind let her die!’

‘Shut your mouth, mage!’ The angry Templar stepped forward to the defiant mage, his hand reaching to his sword. Was this the only thing Templars could do? Solve everything with mindless violence? The crowd of people, mostly humans, tensed, waiting for the blow to come, and for the mage to strike back if he had to.

‘Enough!’ Cullen strutted forward, his gloved hands shoving the two bickering humans apart like the little children they were.

‘Knight-Captain!’ the Templar’s voice sounded relieved, respectful. I hid myself behind the stone wall of the Chantry, my eyes glaring from Cullen to the Templar and back. What would he do? Would he support his old comrades?

‘That is not my title. We are not Templars any longer. We are all part of the Inquisition!’ Cullen pointed his threatening finger towards the Templar and then to the mage, his voice soft and careful, but stern and confident. I suppressed the smile that was curling over my lips and folded my arms closely over my bodice, my eyes gleaming as they took up the towering T… no ex-Templar. Commander. I liked the guy more by the minute. And now that I was looking at him, it seemed he was getting better-looking by the minute too. The dark circles under his eyes were almost completely gone. And his skin looked healthy, glowing from the confidence he was radiating while standing there before the Chantry gate.

‘And what does that mean, exactly?’ Oh, for the love of… whatever, not that guy again. I grunted and shifted on my feet as I saw Chancellor Roderick step towards the restless crowd. His hands were resting behind his back, like Solas almost, and his face was smug, also like Solas.

Cullen sighed deeply, a gesture I could return, ‘Back already, Chancellor? Haven’t you done enough?’

‘I’m curious, Commander, as to how your Inquisition and its ‘Herald’ will restore order as you’ve promised.’ I’ll show you, stupid man… whatever, not that guy again. I grunted and shifted on my feet as I saw Chancellor Roderick step towards the restless crowd. His hands were resting behind his back, like Solas almost, and his face was smug, also like Solas.

Cullen sighed deeply, a gesture I could return, ‘Back already, Chancellor? Haven’t you done enough?’

‘Of course you are’, Cullen sighed again, shaking his head disappointedly. He then stepped forward, ignoring the Chancellor’s accusations like they were nothing but the cries of an infant. ‘Back to your
duties, all of you!’ He ordered towards the crowd, and I saw all the humans shrink a bit. The Chancellor bit his old cracked lips as the crowd did what Cullen had told them to and dispersed. Everyone except Maxwell, who didn’t move one inch. But the Chancellor’s back was turned towards the Herald, and the old man only had eyes for the Commander who seemed to have more power over the people the Chancellor lived for.

‘Can someone please enlighten me to what’s going on?’ Maxwell’s warm voice almost caused the Chancellor to shit his white robes. But the cleric held his poise, his back straightened, his eyes still towards the towering Commander. Roderick refused to acknowledge Maxwell being there.

Cullen stood his ground, but nodded politely at Maxwell as he came closer. ‘Herald’, Cullen curtsied, ‘Mages and Templars were already at war. Now they’re blaming each other for the Divine’s death.’

‘Which is why we acquire a proper authority to guide them back to order.’ The Chancellor spat, still ignoring the Herald’s presence.

‘Who? You?’, Cullen almost snickered, ‘Random clerics who weren’t important enough to be at the Conclave?’ I almost cheered loudly at that.

That had seemed to hit a nerve, but the Chancellor tried to stay in control and slowly said ‘The rebel Inquisition and its so-called “Herald of Andraste”? I think not.’

‘You know I’m standing right here?’ Maxwell smiled, like nothing was bothering him at all. It showed who was really in control. ‘And so far, you’re the only one who’s insisting we can’t work together.’

The Chancellor straightened his back some more, his eyes on the Herald, finally acknowledging his existence. ‘We might’, Roderick said, ‘If your Inquisition would recognize the Chantry’s authority.’

‘There is no authority until another Divine is chosen’, Cullen sighed again.

‘In due time, Andraste will be our guide, not some dazed wanderer on a mountainside.’ Roderick smiled, but the sneer on his face made sure Maxwell had understood his point.

The Herald in turn, sighed while scratching the back of his head, ‘Remind me why you’re allowing the Chancellor to stay?’

‘Clearly your Templar knows where to draw the line.’ Roderick huffed proudly.

‘He’s toothless. There’s no point turning him into a martyr simply because he runs at the mouth.’ Cullen answered. Ha! Take that, Chancellor-my-ass. I held in my breath and tried not to go over and fist-bump Cullen. Who knew the man could be so sarcastic?

‘The Chancellor is a good indication of what to expect in Val Royeaux, however.’ Wait, are we going to Val Royeaux? In Orlais? I was always up to kick some Orlesians, but I rather not have Maxwell there. Orlesians are the kind of humans you don’t know what to expect of. Why were we going there? To appease the Chantry? Would they even listen?

‘Fine’, Maxwell huffed, ‘Just… don’t let anyone riot while we’re gone.’ No, you’re not going.

‘The walls will be standing when you return. I hope.’ Cullen said more seriously than I had hoped.

The Chancellor seemed to be happy with the stir he had made, and turned around proudly to go and mope somewhere else. I bet the man dreamed about annoying people. He was just another example of why I really hated the Chantry. I wasn’t against Andristians, they could believe in the Maker, it
was their choice. But I just really detested the institution of the Chantry and their dictatorship over the people.

I saw Cullen nod at Maxwell, and I knew they would go into the war room soon. I wasn’t allowed in there, so I took my chance and showed myself. Maxwell tutted when he saw me smoothly stepping from behind the stone corner I had been spying from. I skipped at him with a kind smile on my face.

‘And there I was, thinking you would help me.’ Maxwell chuckled.

‘Lady Saeris’, Cullen bent his head politely, his eyes searching mine respectfully.

I nodded at him, but then turned back to Maxwell. ‘You are a big boy, I presumed you could handle yourself.’

‘And so he did.’ The Commander tried his very best not to snicker, and almost failed.

‘You’re a great friend, Saeris, really. Always there to support me.’ Maxwell huffed sarcastically.

‘I know, I’m terrific, aren’t I?’ I winked, ‘So… what a day huh? What was that about Val Royeaux? It sounded like we’re going there. We’re not… right?’ Please tell me we’re not going.

‘You hear everything’, Maxwell winked back at me, ‘I’ll tell you after I’ve discussed what just happened with my advisors. Cullen.’ Maxwell looked at him and the Commander nodded.

‘I think everyone is waiting for you at the war room.’ Cullen was back to serious again.

‘Well, seems like I need to go immediately.’ Maxwell lifted his shoulders playfully.

‘Hey now, wait, just tell me…’

‘Maybe I would’ve if you had helped me just now… oh well.’

‘That’s not fair…’ I started.

‘I’ll take a while, so don’t wait for me. Be the good girl you are and go spy on someone else.’ He winked and turned away from me towards the Chantry. Cullen gave me a small, but apologetic smile and followed the Herald into the Chantry.

Shit.

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I kicked the snow from underneath my feet, making a hole until I could see the ground. We had been back for one day and Maxwell was already occupied in the war room to plan another journey. Doesn’t he need to rest? I know, maybe there wasn’t any time to rest, but can’t Maxwell handle everything safely from Haven and send others to go out into the field?

No… he has to go. He is the face of this organisation. He gives people hope. If anyone could handle others, it would be him. I just couldn’t help myself but worry. I needed to protect him, not only for myself, but for the whole of Thedas. I knew he had to go out there, but why out of all places, did he have to go to Val Royeaux in Orlais? This was a diplomatic trip, but still… Val Royeaux was the headquarters of the enemy, of the invaders… But… Is Orlais still the real enemy now? They are no invaders any longer, they are at peace with Ferelden now. Maybe, the only way to close the Breach is to work together, no matter the past.
But I still want to kick their Orlesian guts.

Yet, I will stand with them if Maxwell does. I will protect him and this world at all costs. Even if it means working together with the kind that had killed my friends.

‘If you dig deeper, you might end up on the other side of the world,‘ Varric slammed his broad hand on my back.

‘Hmm‘ I answered absent-mindedly while staring at the pit of earth I was digging.

‘Twinkle, hey, you awake?‘ Varric said again, now stepping in front of me.

‘Yeah… Just thinking.‘

‘That doesn’t sound healthy,‘ Varric grinned, ‘Time for a round of cards, it seems.‘

‘Don’t really feel like it, shouldn’t you be pestering Cassandra at this time of day?‘ I huffed, my breaths forming white clouds that drifted off into the midday sky.

‘Normally, yes, but it appears that the Seeker is in the war room with the rest of them.‘

‘Cassandra is in there too?‘

‘Yup. Seems like everyone is invited to the party except the three of us.‘

Great. That means Solas is around here somewhere too. We hadn’t spoken to each other since my misstep in the Fade. Was he so disappointed by my mistake? Or was he shaken by what I had let him see? Would he now stop training me, especially now when I was making such progress? Maybe I should have a word with him? Staying stubborn and waiting for it to get solved won’t happen, and I need Solas to train me if I want to use my eye for good.

‘Silence is consent, you know‘ Varric grinned.

‘Huh? What?‘

‘Wicked Grace, Twinkle, focus.‘

‘Yes… No, maybe later. Have you seen Solas? I need to speak to him.‘

‘Oh, how the tables have turned. I think Chuckles is outside somewhere. Said he was off to gather herbs when I asked him for a game of cards. At a guess, he’s too scared to lose against me and is hiding somewhere. I get it.‘

‘Thanks, Varric, I’ll tell you his hiding spot when I’ve found him.‘

‘Yeah, yeah.‘ Varric waved his head as he turned around, off to find someone else to play cards with.

Varric had been right. I found Solas wandering in the woods not far from my cottage, close to the frozen lake where elfroot could be found. That herb could truly grow everywhere, even in frozen grounds. Solas was standing with his face towards the frozen lake and the horizon that spread far behind it. His hands were held behind his back, his natural pose, but his face was almost nostalgic. If I hadn’t seen the little white clouds drifting from his half-open mouth, I would’ve thought he was a statue. How could a living being stand so silently, unmoving? Even the gingery rams that were roaming about grazed not far from his feet.
I scraped my throat as I took a step closer. It was like I had lifted a spell by my voice. The rams jolted up and stared warily my way before sprinting away behind the trees. Solas, however, didn’t move, but I saw his shoulders tense just a tiny bit. He knew I was there.

‘Solas… I was looking for you.’ I started, my voice soft so that I wouldn’t scare the gentle silence away.

‘And you found me.’ His voice was soft, like a whisper, and I wondered if I had taken away a priceless moment of peace and quiet from him. I immediately felt guilty.

‘I… Can we talk?’

‘We are already talking, are we not?’ Still soft and in control, like he always was. Solas then sighed, his shoulders slumping just a little, and then turned around. My stomach turned with him as his eyes found mine, but I tried ignoring it. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘I would like to discuss what happened… in the Fade.’

Solas nodded, his face still scholarly.

‘I… made a mistake by not focussing. And I put the both of us in danger.’

‘Errors are only normal. No one is perfect.’ He tried to smile softly, but his eyes failed to meet that gesture.

‘True, yes, but… What you… might’ve seen… it wasn’t something I like to show others and I know… that you might be disappointed that I let go like that…’

Solas’ eyes didn’t betray any feeling, and I felt colder by the minute.

‘I just wanted to ask if you… haven’t changed your mind about teaching me?’

‘No, I have not.’

I sighed, ‘Good. I… still have so much to learn and… I kind of enjoyed exploring the Fade like that, I was afraid you… didn’t see any potential anymore.’

‘I am sorry if I made you feel that way, Saeris. But I am still your teacher, you my student. Nothing has changed that.’ He almost sounded sad as he stared into my eyes. My stomach kept turning to the point it almost started to hurt, but I couldn’t break our eye contact.

‘Great. Good. Perfect.’ I smiled nervously, why was I like this? ‘When can we… start over?’

‘Soon. First, let your mind rest for some nights. The Fade can be fickle if your mind is tired.’

‘Alright’, I smiled at Solas again. He then let loose of his formal pose and dangled his hands at his sides. I stared up at him for a while longer, taking in the soft smell of herbs that was drifting off his woollen tunic and cotton pants. I noticed something strange about him and spotted the soft purple circles underneath the icy grey eyes that were boring into mine. This was very unlike him… didn’t he sleep last night? He looked… tired, almost worried.

‘Anything else I can help you with?’ His voice suddenly sounded deep.

‘Uhm… Can I prepare in some way for our next lesson?’

‘No, only to rest well. We will soon be off to Val Royeaux I have heard, and we will visit the Fade
again during our travels.’ Even Solas knew we were going to Orlais?

‘Yes, of course’, I nodded politely, ‘I’ll think of new places to create for our lessons, then.’

‘That should not be necessary. You showed me you can shape the Fade very well on your own last time.’ I stared at the ground, maybe I had showed him too well.

‘Then what will we do?’

Solas nodded encouragingly, almost approving of my questions. His stance became softer, like he was letting go of whatever was spooking around in his mind. ‘This world, or its memory, is reflected in the Fade, as you might know.’ He waited a second for me to nod and then continued, ‘Dream in ancient ruins, and you may see a city lost to history. That is what we will try next. Let the Fade decide what you see, let it find your place in the world. The spirits there will show you past memories that belong to that certain place. And perchance, in time, you may use the power of your eye to turn the roles, so that you can see into the Fade and pinpoint where and what you are looking at. To train your sense of… orientation.’

‘That sounds… amazing’, I whispered and imagined myself looking back at the old battles I had witnessed and at the old cities I had dwelled in. All the possibilities, all the memories I had forgotten and could relive…

Solas chuckled again, a sound that filled my ears. ‘Some of my fondest memories were found in crumbling cities long picked dry by treasure seekers. The best are the battlefields. Spirits press so tightly on the Veil that you can slip across with but a thought.’

‘Anyplace in particular?’ Has he seen battles with me in it?

‘I dreamt at Ostagar.’ Good, I wasn’t there. ‘I witnessed the brutality of the darkspawn and the valour of the Ferelden warriors. I saw Alistair and the Hero of Ferelden light the signal fire… and Loghain’s infamous betrayal of Cailan’s forces.’

‘I’ve… heard the stories… what was it like?’ I knew Cailan’s grandmother. If I had not been locked up in that tower, I would’ve been there. I could’ve helped.

‘That’s just it. In the Fade, we see reflections created by spirits who react to the emotions of the warriors. One moment, I see heroic Wardens lighting the fire and a power-mad villain sneering as he lets King Cailan fall. The next, I see an army overwhelmed and a veteran commander refusing to let more soldiers die in a lost cause.’

‘And you can’t tell which is real?’

‘It is the Fade. They are all real.’ Solas stared at me then, as if we both seemed to remember my last outburst in the Fade. The screaming and the prison of stones… it had all been real.

‘I… look forward to it.’ I sighed to stop the silence from spreading again. I hoped I would see good memories, things that I would be happy about being real. But, like history had showed me many times, there are no winners at war, everybody loses something. Everything always had two sides to it.

Solas nodded and stared back at me, trying to figure out what I was thinking again, like I was a mystery screaming to be solved.

‘I… ’ll see you around, then.’ I tried smiling but my stomach was turning to the point I felt like vomiting.
‘Goodbye.’ Solas said while he folded his hands behind his back again, but his face remained open, like he was expecting me to say something else… waiting for something more. But I just bowed my head silently and turned around to quickly walk back towards Haven again, asking myself if Maxwell would be done in the war room already. Yet, as I strutted away, I felt Solas’ lingering gaze on my back. When I had entered past the treeline, I dared to stop and look back behind my shoulders. My breath got stuck in my throat as Solas stared back at me from the distance. I don’t really know for how long we kept this distant and silent conversation up with our eyes, but after a while, I turned around again to disappear in the forest once more, leaving Solas to resume his soundless pondering over the eternal frozen lake.

As I ran back to the village, I wondered if it had been a good idea to talk to him. We resolved what had happened, and Solas would still teach me. Nothing had changed, but how come it felt like everything had?

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‘Well, time to talk to the Chantry.’ Maxwell pushed strands of his brown, curly hair away from his face as he lifted the saddle onto his horse.

‘I’m sure they’ll be having a huge welcome party for us. Clerics love me.’ Varric grinned as he tapped his hand on the back of his horse.

‘I am sure they love you as much as everybody else does.’ Cassandra mumbled sarcastically as she walked up towards us, her horse already prepared, her armour gleaming.

Varric had a snarly remark to that, but I was already staring at Maxwell. He was nervous. A lot depended on this trip. If the Chantry would listen to us… they could rally the people. I hated them, but I couldn’t deny they could help our cause. The more united we were, the sooner we would get enough power to close the Breach. Maxwell knew this all too well, and just like me, he feared that he would be talking to a brick wall.

‘Don’t you worry.’ I rested my hand on Maxwell’s shoulder, and he craned his neck to look at me, his eyes soft. ‘They will listen.’

Maxwell placed his hand on top of mine, his lips curling every so lightly, ‘I hope you’re right.’

Cassandra mounted her horse, saying loudly, ‘We should go, the Chantry is not prone to wait.’ The Seeker looked at us, and Maxwell quickly let go of my hand while staring at Cassandra’s peering eyes. I hid my smile as I let go of Maxwell’s shoulder. Was Cassandra jealous? How cute.

We all mounted our horses. Solas, who was standing near the back of our party, was the last one to mount his steed. He kept looking at me as I clumsily climbed on mine, and waited until I was fully seated before he would mount his. Was he checking if I needed help? No, probably not. Stop thinking too much. We steered our horses towards the path opposite to the one we had taken last time. This path crossed the valley and led westwards into Orlais. We would pass through a small northern part of the Dales, but stick to the roads called the Imperial Highway since they were the fastest route to get there. Val Royeaux was situated on the northern coast of the far inland tip of the Waking Sea. It would take us maybe a month and a half to get there, a month if we were lucky.

We used the paved pass that led through the Frostback Mountains. Many pilgrims coming from Orlais had taken this passage to reach Haven. I knew many probably lost their lives here. Though the passage lead mostly through the valley and the roads were paved nicely, it was still deadly cold here. If one wasn’t wearing the appropriate clothing, death by frost was very likely. But we were prepared, dressed with coats and capes, and especially, magic. Solas had cloaked our party with a heating
ward, and after two hours, I would take over, and so on, to make sure we were warm until we were out of this area. I pulled my fur cape deeper over my head, making sure the tips of my pointy ears wouldn’t freeze and break off. I had put my hair up in multiple braids that covered the back of my neck and my ears, but the chills could still slip through them. No one could survive this place hurt or way-worn. No one.

‘Why does air come in different temperatures?’ Varric huffed, his teeth clashing, ‘If we freeze to death and get eaten by wolves, I’m blaming the Seeker.’

‘Don’t be such a baby, Varric’, Cassandra bit, annoyed.

I felt Solas covering Varric a little bit more with his heating ward, and the Dwarf threw the Elf a grateful look.

Luckily, it took us only a couple of days to cross the passage, and when we entered Orlais, a nice warmth took over from the freezing cold. It was strange, I was happy to be out of the Frostbacks, but I was also very uncomfortable entering this previous enemy territory so openly. When I had arrived in Thedas, the Orlesians had always been one of the enemies. And after so much war, injustice and death, people seemed to have forgotten what had happened. The new generation had another enemy to focus on, one greater than Orlais had ever been. But for me, they still felt like the enemy. I was a relic of the past, and maybe I should move on too. These people were not the Orlesians that killed Daniel and Sybil. Can you blame others for what their ancestors had done? Can I still blame them for it?

Our horses whinnied thankfully when we stopped near a clearing and dismounted. I bound the horses near a running creak and let them drink the clear water blissfully while the others started making camp. Solas did his rounds making protective wards that covered the clearing. I stared at him and wondered about our previous conversation. If I would dream here, would I see lost battles against Fereldan armies? And would the spirits shape the dream according to the Orlesian warriors’ memories? Will I see their side of the story, where the side I fought with is evil? There are always multiple sides to a story, and all of them are as real as the other. Was I prepared to face them all, I wondered?

I grinned as I heard Maxwell struggling to put his tent up again. Will he ever learn? Though this time, I noticed Cassandra helping him without a word or complaint.

‘Hey, Twinkle, come light the fire for me, will you?’ Varric called at me, waving his short hairy arms.

‘Coming!’ I nodded and patted the horses gently as I left them.

I got the fire burning with a snap of my fingers and then placed myself next to Varric, who gave me an all-knowing look when he opened his satchel and took a book of cards out of it. ‘You promised me a game…’ He winked.

‘How not-surprising’ I laughed.

‘Deal me in.’ Maxwell smiled and wiped his hands on his trousers. He sat down next to me and waved to Cassandra, who made a disgusted noise before sitting next to us.

I turned around and noticed Solas leaning against a tree near the back of the clearing. I nodded my head at him, and he nodded back politely before leaving the tree and walking towards the horses, where he would stay for another two hours while the rest of the party played cards.

After two rounds, we ate and then decided who would have the first shift. I wanted to go first, and
Varric would take the one after me. Solas agreed to be last. And after everyone went to their tents and I was left alone in front of the fire, I started counting stars again. Humming and smiling each time I found a familiar pattern. The sky was the same everywhere, even in damn Orlais. We weren’t even deep into the country, only at the foot of the Frostbacks and near the Fereldan border, but I couldn’t help but be uncomfortable. Yet, I knew I could overcome it, ignore it, just like I did with the stomach-turning feeling I got when I was near Solas. Even so, this feeling kept lingering, it felt… different, like we were walking into a trap or something. My guts just told me something was wrong, and that that something was waiting for us to come to Val Royeaux.

It was something vile… almost… demonic.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Bonjour to you Orlesians. Soon, we will be arriving at Val Royeaux.
Y’all ready, ‘cuz I aint! *Val Royeaux theme intensifies*

Hope you liked it, and if you did, you can always leave me a comment or a kudo!

I quickly jumped over the fallen tree trunk I had been hiding behind to see if the rabbit wasn’t completely obliterated. Last time I had shot an animal with my lightning bolts, it had completely turned into ashes. But this time, I had controlled my force, and it seemed like it had worked. I twisted the gammy carcass of the rabbit and smiled a little. Dead with one clean shock. I hung the rabbit on a cord at the side of my hip next to the bird I had shot with a phantom arrow. Hunting was a perfect way to use my power during our travels, and it was great exercise. Sitting on a horse all day made me palsied, and I yearned for some running and jumping and sneaking and blasting things away with my fingertips. I could never get enough of using magic. Holding it in felt… unnatural. But I can’t go around firing bolts everywhere all the time, and making heating and protection wards really became quite boring after a while.

The sky was turning a soft orange and pink, so I decided to turn back. Varric had gone out hunting too, and I was sure Bianca caught some game with her accurate aim. But just then, when I turned around, I saw a small deer tiptoeing near the shallow ravine at the back of the forest. Elgadira would’ve told me Andruil was guiding me today. Quickly, I hid behind some bushes and focussed, my eyes peering through the branches. It definitely was a doe, not a halla, for it was robust, brown and had no horns. The creature stretched its hind legs to bow down and nibble on some grass, and I saw the muscles flex in its back. Just think about it, a tender venison stew cooked in a thick wild mushroom sauce over a young crackling fire. Maxwell still had some spiced wine left we’d bought in a tavern some days ago… it would go just perfect with it… The forest became deadly silent, and I could hear my thirsty breath heaving as I crawled closer. Now, it was just the doe and me. Predator and prey. Huntress and game. Life and death.

The lightning bolt came to life between my hands as I silently lifted it above the bush. Breathe in. And out again. The doe moved a little, and I re-levelled the electrical arrow again. Pointed right at its heart.

Breathe…

And let go.

The doe raised its head alarmed, its eyes wide as it stared into my eyes. And there, I saw my reflection. Until the bolt struck… and my reflection faded. Dead. The doe plopped down noiselessly, just like the rabbit had. I ran up to it and inspected my catch. Its big eyes were still opened wide. I stretched my hand and caressed the deer’s head, sliding down and closing its eyes carefully.

‘Dareth shiral’, I whispered silently.
Survival of the fittest.

We had been travelling for almost two weeks now. The passage through the Frostback Mountains had been cold, and though it got warmer when we passed over the Orlesian border, snow had still been covering the paths and the trees until some days ago. Now, everything started to melt the closer we got to the Imperial Highway. This meant more game to hunt, more food to eat and a faster travelling rate. Not that we haven’t been travelling or eating well, it all just got somewhat easier now. Two days ago, we slept in the first tavern we had come across. And I must say that I really preferred sleeping in a bed. The tavern, called The Hungry Chevalier, had been almost completely empty. Customers had been scarce since the Mage Rebellion, so the tavern owner had been happy to see us coming. But now, we were again on our way, hunting and scavenging and sleeping under the stars. I was very lucky to have been sharing a tent with Cassandra, because Maxwell still couldn’t put up his tent, yet, he insisted on setting it every single evening. It once fell down during the night. Varric’d almost screamed like a little girl.

Travelling like this reminded me of my lost days as a minstrel. Between 8:55 and 8:96 Blessed, I had been mindlessly wandering around. Though those years hadn’t been my happiest, I still learned how to survive on my own. It had almost become a second nature when I was visited by Asha’bellanar not so far from here, in Empriese du Lion. Everything that had happened back then… felt like it had been a lifetime ago… oh, wait, it had been a lifetime. Sometimes I forgot how old I was. Years stop being significant when you have an unlimited amount of them.

I dragged the dead doe back to the camp. Cassandra looked up when I appeared through the bushes. She looked alarmed first, always on her guard.

‘Good catch I see.’ The Nevarran woman stated.

‘I got lucky’, I smiled while dragging the doe towards the fire Cassandra had made.

The Seeker nodded and stared at my catch hungrily. ‘I’ll prepare the meat immediately’, she said.

‘Great! I’ll help.’ I said while plopping down beside her. ‘Where’s Max?’

‘The Herald’, Cassandra quirked an eyebrow at me, ‘is off with Varric to hunt. They should be back quickly now.’

I hummed quietly. ‘And Solas…’

‘… is gathering herbs and refilling our water supplies.’ Cassandra dragged her dagger along the doe’s throat, letting the cold blood flow down into a pot. After that, she accurately skinned the creature of his brown winter coat. I picked the plumes of the small bird and skinned the rabbit carefully. The fur of the doe and the rabbit could be sown into a hat or maybe some gloves, or I could line Maxwell’s boots with them, for extra warmth. The meat we would turn into a stew which we could eat for dinner, and maybe we could have the leftovers for breakfast too. I was boiling the stew when Varric and Maxwell walked into camp, their boots sticky with mud and their hair wild and filled with branches and leaves.

‘You were supposed to hunt animals, not attack the forest’, I smiled as they strolled my way. I stared at them, and noticed they had returned empty handed. ‘We’re lucky I hunted for the three of us, or we would be going hungry.’

‘Yeah, I know, but there was this huge druffalo and we ran behind it and…’ Maxwell started.

‘But it seems like those beasts are actually quite fast… and strong… and thick.’ Varric laughed and
took Bianca off his back.

‘You should’ve seen me, Saeris.’ Maxwell started. ‘I really hung onto that beast and it charged straight at me and I was leaping and BAM and…’

‘In short’, Varric grinned, ‘Our Herald here got beaten up by a big cow.’

Maxwell grimaced at Varric. I wanted to pester him about his pride being hurt, when I noticed the deep cut on his arm. Drufallo were bison-like creatures with big, pointy down-turned horns. While docile when approached gently, if you attack them, they turn into vicious animals more dangerous than Bronto. I tutted disappointedly as I stood up from behind the pot filled with stew, rolling up my sleeves and staring at Maxwell angrily like a mother would.

‘You should really be more careful’, I growled, ‘Maxwell, if you die, we would all be doomed.’

‘But I know I have this really good healer back at camp that can fix me right up.’ He grinned while looking down at me.

I sighed deeply and shoved his sleeve up. ‘Damn’, I whispered while looking the deep cut up and down. It was a clear strike, deep, but no arteries had been breached. ‘You really fucked up. I should just punish you and let you sit this one out instead of healing it.’

Varric tried muffling his laugh when Maxwell started pouting, ‘But it stings…’

‘Come on, Twinkle, have mercy on the kid.’ Varric coughed jokingly.

‘Please, Saeris! Before Cassandra comes back…’

‘She’ll beat him up even worse than that druffalo!’ Varric heaved again, slapping on his knee with laughter.

I hummed and placed my hand gently onto Maxwell’s wound. The Herald smiled when a familiar tingling sensation curled from underneath my fingers. My magic twisted around his arm like tender tentacles of bright blue-green lights, sewing the wound back together, rekindling the ripped tissue and seamlessly stitching the skin. In a matter of seconds, the wound was gone, like it had never been there before. Only the dried-up blood on his clear skin and ripped jacket gave away the previous cut. ‘Don’t thank me. Just be more careful next time.’

‘Understood, Serah!’ Maxwell saluted me mockingly.

A couple of minutes later, Cassandra appeared. She had gone to wash her hands in the river below, since they had been sticky with blood and animal guts. Maxwell had bribed Varric with half a portion of his stew to keep him from talking about the wound to Cassandra. But Varric still couldn’t help himself and kept making strange druffalo noises the whole night.

Solas had appeared when the sun had gone down. He soundlessly stepped through the damp grass and sat down in front of the fire next to Varric. Solas had been quiet lately. We still talked, but something had changed. We always had been distant, but now, it felt like there was a whole ravine growing between us. I guessed we would never be the best of friends, but I had figured our lessons would at least bring us on a “good-acquaintance-basis”. I should be happy we weren’t close. At least I didn’t feel like vomiting all the time now. Yet, I couldn’t help but feel… sad, maybe? I don’t know. Our lessons had come to a halt. I trained on my own in the Fade, and sometimes, I could feel him watching me from afar. Some nights ago, I had seen a glimpse of him when I’d been practising shaping the Fade to my imagination, but he was gone as quickly as I had noticed him. Tonight, however, we were sleeping close-by an old ruin. This was our chance to sleep where the Veil was
thin, and I could feel spirits pressing to the air, calling us to come and see what had happened here. Maybe a battle? Or a heated fight between enemies or... lovers?

‘The stew is absolutely divine’, Maxwell smiled, his head high like he was some stupid noble. Never mind, he was.

‘Cassandra cut the meat really well, that’s why it’s so tender.’ I huffed.

Cassandra smiled at that, her eyes kinder. A woman that loved some compliments. ‘Thank you, Saeris’, she said while swallowing a spoon of stew, ‘but without you, we wouldn’t even have meat tonight.’

‘True, but our Herald here almost caught a... Owch!’ Varric yelped suddenly.

‘Oh my, didn’t you see? There was a bug.’ Maxwell contorted his face to a mean smile.

‘What meat is it, if I may ask.’ Solas said politely. I looked up at him, it was the first time he had addressed me this evening.

Before I could say anything though, Maxwell smiled ‘Halla.’

Solas almost choked on the bite he had just taken while Varric rolled on the floor while laughing, holding his stomach as if in pain.


‘Aren’t we all in a good mood tonight.’ Cassandra said deadpan, but I saw her mouth quirk slightly upwards.

Varric scraped his throat, ‘I blame the half a bottle of spiced wine Saeris dumped into the stew.’

‘You know the alcohol is boiled away by now... it’s just the flavour.’ I grinned.

‘You say that just because you haven’t eaten as much as I have.’ Varric smiled. We all ate in silence for a couple of moments, until Varric suddenly turned to Maxwell, who was nibbling on a piece of rabbit. ‘So, Herald, who do you think is the toughest? Josephine, Leliana or Cassandra?’

‘I’m right here, you know’, Cassandra gnarled.

‘That doesn’t rule you out, Seeker’, Varric hummed.

Solas bent forward, chuckling to Varric, ‘Cullen’s not up for consideration?’

‘Curly? They just keep him around to look pretty’, Varric grinned, winking at me as I felt my cheeks turning red.

‘I would go for either Leliana or our Cassandra here’, Maxwell said and smiled at the Seeker, who shyly looked away.

‘You’re just saying that because you’re scared of Cassandra.’ Varric grinned. ‘Twinkle, your opinion, give it to me.’

‘Josephine.’ I said confidently.

‘Josephine? But she’s... so sweet?’ Maxwell said surprised.
I stared at the ground while saying, 'Josephine knows her way around people, friends as well as foes. Leliana is a fearsome Spymaster, wonderful at what she does, and I think she’d kill me in a second without me even knowing it. And you, Cassandra, I think you’re even stronger. But in the end, you two are straight-forward. Josephine… she’s indeed really sweet, but it are those who smile innocently that often hide a hidden strength. She knows her opponents, their secrets, their thoughts. She doesn’t strike with a sword or dagger, but with words and consequences. She could fool the whole Orlesian court and get away with it. She could bring down an empire with just her quill and ink. That is a strength none of the others possess, which makes her, in my opinion, the strongest.’ I felt Solas looking at me, and I dared lift my head, staring into his grey-blue eyes. They were filled with something similar to surprise, but not entirely. I stared at him, smiling a little bit. He smiled back faintly, before breaking our contact.

The rest of the evening Varric and Maxwell kept babbling on, while Cassandra occasionally intervened with a disgusted noise. Solas joined the conversation occasionally with well-rounded answers or intriguing questions. While the others were in deep conversation, I took up my courage and pulled gently on Solas’ sleeve. He stared at me, his eyes open and filled with questions.

‘Solas… You told me some days ago there is a ruin near here…’ I whispered so the others couldn’t hear me, just in case I’d get rejected.

‘Indeed. An hour away to the West.’ He started.

‘Can we sleep together?’ Wait, rephrase, ‘I mean, there, can we go sleep there? See what happened?’

Solas chuckled, his eyes softer, ‘I did not expect you to be so eager about this.’

‘About what?’ Maxwell said and broke away from his conversation with Varric and Cassandra, who bluntly turned towards us now.

‘I want to go sleep in a ruin, to see what happened there in the Fade. It’s training.’ I said with a high voice, like I got caught or something. Solas nodded silently, his back straightened.

‘Alone? Absolutely not!’ Maxwell’s voice became deeper, his shoulders perfectly aligned.

‘I’m not alone. Solas’ll be there. Besides, I’m fully capable of surviving without you for one night.’ I knew Maxwell’d be safe, I trusted Cassandra and Varric. And I wouldn’t be far anyway. ‘I need to train, how else will I learn how to use my eye?’

‘Solas’, Cassandra squinted her eyes at him suspiciously, ‘You say you’re going to witness past events in the Fade, or the memories of them. But the Fade distorts reality. Surely it cannot offer a true reflection of what occurred.’ I stared at the Seeker with my mouth open, and so did Varric. That girl had been paying attention. Who knew?

Solas chuckled, his answer already perfectly formed in his mind like he had said it a thousand times already, ‘Are your own memories any different? The truth is never precise, regardless of where you are.’

‘That is true’, Cassandra dipped her head, ‘Then, you should go.’ She looked at me in the end, her eyes filled with interest.

‘But… then what about your night shifts?’ Maxwell smiled nervously.

‘We can do a double shift for one night.’ Cassandra smiled back vaguely.
I grinned towards them excitedly, ‘Great! Thanks! We can go, right Solas?’

‘If you insist.’ Solas said back with a polite face while he stood up from his seat and straightened his coat. I followed directly, almost skipping like a puppy behind Solas. What can I say? I was so thoroughly excited for this. What was I going to see? What great battle was awaiting? I knew Solas might’ve not felt like going, but I was finally going to learn something new in weeks!

Solas and I silently walked towards the forest, and when we left, I heard Varric slapping Maxwell’s back, saying laughingly, ‘Cheer up, Herald, I’m sure they’ll keep it decent.’

‘Oh shut it, Dwarf.’

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Solas and I had been walking for what seemed like hours, in complete silence. The only noises that could be heard, were our feet rustling through the dried-up leaves on the ground, the swaying of the trees in the wind, and small animals skittering around. Solas walked up front, his arms bound on in his back, making no noise whatsoever. After a while, I started wondering if the Elf was even breathing. I squinted my eyes and followed him quietly, trying to scan my surroundings in the pitch-black darkness. My eyes lit the way, seeing where I could step and where I needed to be careful. I figured Elves had better eyesight than most humans, since our eyes were slightly bigger. Solas was a good example of this, as he waded through the woods like he knew them by heart.

‘We are here’, Solas said as he suddenly stopped. I yelped, still blinded by thought, and bumped right into his back, almost stumbling on the ground. Solas turned around quickly, gripping my arm to hold me upright. He pulled me forward, back on my feet, until my face was right in front of his. I swallowed hard as I tried to ignore the sickening feeling in my guts as I stared into his eyes that seemed to light up even more in the moonlight, his freckles resembling the night’s sky. And for a second, I heard him swallow hard too, his eyes bigger than usual.

My heart skipped a beat.

‘S… Shall we?’ I huffed and felt my hot breath hovering in the small distance between our darkened faces.

Solas let go of me, stepping back with care, like I was some kind of dangerous animal. ‘Yes. Come.’

I stared up at the ruin before me, lit up by the moon’s light, like nature itself deemed this place worthy of showing even in the dark. We were standing in a small round meadow, its borders encircled by short rectangular stones that led inwards to the monument in the middle, or what was left of it. I walked closer, almost brushing Solas’ shoulder as I passed him. But my focus was completely on the marble woman standing in the middle. Not much was left of her but her pearly white body, stretched out towards the heavens. Her face had been broken in half, but no one could miss its abstract beauty. At her feet vines and flowers had started to grow, climbing their way up towards her shoulders, almost hugging her like long-lost friends.

This had not been a battlefield. It was a shrine. Forgotten by time itself.

I turned towards Solas, who was sombrely looking up to the stone woman, his expression cloaked in shadows. Thrilled, I took out my bedroll from my backpack, laying it down flatly on the ground near the statue. My fingers spat out a protective ward over the meadow and then I quickly laid down on the bedroll, pushing myself up by my elbows and looking eagerly at Solas, who was standing awkwardly near the border of the inner circle of the shrine.
‘Come on!’ I smiled, forgetting we were alone at night, in the dark, in the forest. But I couldn’t wait much longer, feeling the Veil prickling my skin, almost whispering in my ears to go and sleep. To see. My eye was doing its rounds, twisting and turning in its orbit, spitting emerald sparks into the air. We were physically close to the Fade, the Veil separating us so thinly, I could almost touch it.

Solas dipped his head in silence, spreading his bedroll on the grass somewhat farther away from me. He laid down his head, and in some seconds, I heard his breath following a rhythmic pattern. Was he asleep already? I stared at him with an open mouth. He truly was the Fade expert. Or Sleep expert to say the least. It took me at least fifteen minutes to get where he was. I laid down on the hard ground, my eyes counting the stars, searching their familiar patterns. The statue of the woman was hovering above me, her half-face looking towards the forest serenely, as if by saying I was protected by her. Like a mother. The stars seemed to come closer and closer, the wind gently lulling me into a Fade-filled sleep.

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‘Briathos, venas son, ane then.’

‘Ar eolasan. Shalir vhen’alas.’

I stepped closer to the cloaked figures, my eyes big. Solas held out his hand, stopping me in place.

‘Can they see me?’ I whispered.

‘No’, he chuckled, his face bright with intrigue, ‘these are memories. Watch them.’ Like a film?

Two cloaked males were standing near the statue of the woman, who was now no longer a ruin. The meadow was lit by the midday sun, burning on our skins like it was summer. I looked around and saw the broken circle now as rebuilt, the small rectangular stones now large and arched at the tips, almost like in a cathedral. In the middle, the statue of the woman was gleaming brightly. Her long arms and slender fingers reached towards the sun that was almost glowing exactly between her palms. I could now see she was wearing a long gown, simple and classic, with long sleeves. Her face, now complete, gleamed with an expression of eternal love. My eyes focussed on her little smile, her all-knowing eyes and her long, pointed ears. How could I not have seen before?

‘This is…’

‘Mythal’, Solas finished my sentence, his voice almost softer than a whisper.

I dipped my head, looking back at the Elven Goddess of Love, Motherhood and Justice. The Protector of the People. The All-Mother. Elgadira’s patron. Before Mythal, the two cloaked men were walking up and down nervously. They were wearing an emerald green armour with golden decorations, made of a metal I had not seen before. The armour looked strong as well as delicate, fitting perfectly along their lithe figures. Their chest plates had strange writings on them, encircling the lime green seal of a leaf crossed by a bow. Their hoods, which seemed to be made out of an emerald-tinted velvet, had slits in them where their pointed ears could slide through. The tallest of the males had bright long red hair curling from underneath his cowl. He turned towards the statue, towards us, and I saw bright black vallaslin curling over his face, but I couldn’t see which Elven God it represented. The other one, the one who had spoken with a hushed voice, had long black hair that fell in braids over his shoulders, and a grey vallaslin of Andruil was glowing on his olive skin.

‘Emerald Knights’, Solas whispered to me.

‘Who?’ I said without looking at him.
‘The Dales used to be an independent Elven nation protected by their Dalish warriors of old, the Emerald Knights’, Solas’ voice felt close to my figure, too close, ‘During the Second Exalted March, these warriors protected their lands. I know only that they perished all. Now, they barely exist as mere remnants of a time when freedom of the Elvhen was as true as the sky. Now, those times have long since disappeared together with their heroes, lost to history told by those who’ve won.’

‘But how…’ I started and looked to my side, but Solas’ gaze was focused on the two knights who were still nervously walking up and down the shrine. I wanted to ask so much more, but understood that now was a time of silence. Suddenly, I noticed two large wolves flanking the Elven figures. Their pelt gleamed like the armour of their companions, their bright canine eyes never leaving them.

‘The Knight’s Guardians’, Solas inclined his head towards me, his eyes gleaming like they never had before, ‘Tales tell of wolf companions so loyal that they never left their Knight’s side, even in death. An unbreakable bond. It is truly remarkable to see it here and now.’

I remembered, long ago in a strange and awakening dream, I had once came across a wolf with the same expression in his eyes. Like the statue of Mythal, the wolf had been made out of a white marble, its tail curled around itself and its big paws resting at its sides as it laid on its stomach. It had been welcoming, protecting, kind, its face serene, as if waiting for its Knight to return to him at last.

The air was starting to feel anxious, like it was pressing down on us. Could Solas feel it too? The Knight’s Guardians growled cautionary, their strong bodies closing on their companions, their trustful eyes peering at the forest behind us.

‘Enemah, lethallin. Elas josa!’ The black-haired Knight whispered in a nervous tone to the other one. I saw his terrified face from underneath his cowl, the sweat dripping from his eyebrows. The other Knight remained calm, his voice deep and confident. ‘Shalir Halamshiral sule’din. Halam’shivanas.’

The nervous Knight eventually nodded, his eyes on the bushes that were now moving slowly. Their wolves bared their yellow-ish jagged teeth, ready to attack. As the tall Knight took his bow and arrow from his back, his friend did the same. Whatever was coming from outside the forest, it felt vile, intruding and violating. What kind of horrendous monsters would we see? The Emerald Knights both raised their weapons to the thundering horizon when our vision transformed.

Suddenly, Solas and I were in the forest, its density blocking out the light. The air felt different now, like we were here for a reason, the sun guiding us towards the path. Solas grimaced quietly as we now saw what, no who, had been approaching the nervous Knights. A large group of Templars marched on the path before us, their helmets gleaming and their shields at hand. Behind them a group of Chantry priests held their banners high.

‘Let us move quickly, now they are alone.’ One of the Templars said, his face obscured by his steel helmet.

‘First’, another Templar stepped forward, his voice sounding like the tall Emerald Knight had sounded moments ago, full of confidence, ‘Let us pray.’ Strangely, the man sounded righteous, and he felt like he was the hero of the story, even though I thought otherwise. Solas and I simultaneously tutted disapprovingly as the humans knelt down, their voices monotone. They bid the Maker to help and for Andraste to guide them.

Blessed are they who stand before
The corrupt and the wicked and do not falter.
Blessed are the peacekeepers, the champions of the just.

Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadow.
In their blood the Maker’s will is written.

My whole body screamed in protest, but my mind believed them. They felt like they were the good guys. And in their minds, they were the good guys. The Elves were the bad ones. In their minds, they were doing the world a favour, they were protecting their country, their race, their beliefs. They were doing this to protect their children, to do the Maker’s will, so that He may look upon Thedas once more.

I knew how this story would end.

The Templars marched through the forest until they reached the shrine of Mythal. Two vile creatures were standing there with two monsters on their sides hungry for blood and death. Gone were the shining Knights, their beautiful armour and their soft faces. Now, all I could see were heathens, faces that were unnaturally wrong. Their armour was made out of black magic, splurging and screaming like demons in the void. The Knight’s Guardians were all but loyal companions. Now, they were huge, demonic, their eyes red and big. This was what the Templars saw. This was their version of history.

And then they attacked. An army against two. The Knights were doomed.

I pressed my eyes together, my hand finding Solas’ chest. ‘Saeris’, he started but I shivered in a quiet response.

‘I know how this’ll end. I don’t want to…’ I whispered, but my voice felt lost in the air when I heard the screaming and fighting. I didn’t care anymore what Solas thought of me, I just pressed myself against his chest, my eyes filled with tears as I felt the Templar’s minds scream in victory. And I knew the Emerald Knights had lost. Solas’ hand rested on my back while he watched the battle unfold. Slowly, his palm caressed my shoulder blades as the tears kept flowing from my eyes.

And then, everything went silent. Our vision moved again. I turned away from Solas’ chest and screamed silently, my hands raised to my face in agony. Mythal’s shrine was covered in blood, and two corpses laid near her feet. The Goddess’ now broken face stared sadly at her Knights, who had lost their lives for her. The Templars were gone, advancing further and further until the Dales would become overtaken. I felt the dreaded air weighing me down, the feeling of hope lost. Only one Knight’s Guardian remained, wounded and barely alive. The wolf limped towards his dead companion, the tall Knight, or what was left of him. I knew he had fought valiantly, he had done everything in his power to protect his people, just like the Templars had thought they had been doing. The wolf pushed its snout against the dead Knight, and howled sadly into the night.

I leaned with my back against Solas’ chest, whose hands rested on my shoulders, pinching to let me know he was sad too, though his face didn’t betray any feeling. I kept crying, even when the wolf slowly laid his bloodied head on the Knight’s open chest, howling one last time. A cry for his companion, his Knight, his friend. And then the wolf died in silence. Off to see his friend on the other side.

My voice trembled as I softly whispered to them, ‘Falon’Din enasal enaste’.

Solas let go of my shoulders as I could feel his voice thrumming through his chest, ‘Dareth shiral.’

Survival of the fittest.
I opened my eyes, the purple sky greeting me first. The stars were still there, yet the moon was gone, replaced by the sun that was hovering near the horizon. Above me, Mythal’s half-broken face stared at me, like she knew what I had just seen. I pushed myself up and felt how my cheeks were wet from crying in the Fade, my hair sticking to the sides of my face. I was laying right where the Emerald Knight had died, in front of his Goddess mother. Near these stone feet, blood had been splattered and a wolf had died from grief.

A calming wind brushed passed me, soft whispers of sadness, but also of hope. Another last tear escaped from my left eye as green as my pupil, and it fell onto the ground. I raised my head, my feet trembling on the ground as I stood upright. Solas was standing behind me, his back straightened as well, but I heard his breath sticking in his throat when my voice finally left my mouth, saying silently;

“Mythal, All-Mother, Protector of the People, watch over us, for the path we tread is perilous. Save us from the darkness, as you did before, and we will sing your name to the heavens.”

I raised my hands, just like the statue, and felt my magic curling around me. Blue pastel flowers sprouted near her feet, dozens upon dozens of them. A sign of a silent death, a sign of needless spilling of blood. Just like Daniel’s grave, like Sybil’s grave, the grave of these two Emerald Knights would be covered in my flowers for eternity. I did not believe in Mythal, but if she ever existed, I hoped that she’d liked them. My flowers curled along the shrine, along Mythal’s ruined body, all the way up to her face, where only one flower sprouted under her remaining eye. A tear for her Knights.

‘Let’s go’, I said, my voice stronger than before. ‘Before our Herald wakes up and starts panicking.’ I turned around to Solas and gave him a sad smile. He stood there, staring at the flowers I had just created. There was awe in his gaze, and some kind of gratitude. He stared back at me after some moments, his mouth opening as if he was trying to say something, but it seemed like even Solas could be lost for words. After some minutes, he just dipped his chin. We started packing our bedrolls immediately after that and left the shrine to walk through the forest, back to camp. I turned around one more time to look back at Mythal’s shrine, now not so dreadful anymore, but filled with the blooming flowers of hope.

When Solas and I walked back to camp, we didn’t walk in line anymore, but next to each other. The sun gleamed soft rays through the branches and onto our skin.

‘Are you still angry with me, Solas?’ I finally spoke after we’d walked for at least thirty minutes.

‘I… No.’ He answered, his voice softer than I had expected.

‘Good. I just felt you had been… maybe avoiding me these last couple of days.’ Actually, it had been at least two weeks.

‘That has not been my intention.’ Solas remained polite, no feeling seeping through whatsoever.

‘Great, that’s… great. I was afraid you’d start to dislike me.’ Talking felt strange after what we had seen, but maybe I wanted this awkwardness between us over with. We might never be friends, but we had to be companions. We had to work together.

Solas remained silent for some moments, until he finally said, ‘I thought it was you who disliked me?’ he stopped in his place, staring at me as I stopped too, our gaze meeting each other midway.

‘I don’t dislike you Solas… I… admire you.’ And you make me feel like vomiting most of the time.
‘You’re strong, you don’t turn away even if the odds are against you. You’re wise and to be true, you can be quite imposing sometimes. But that does not make me dislike you. On the contrary.’ I just felt strange around him, like I had to be careful. But I didn’t dislike him, for he had not given me any reason to. Maybe I had disliked him in the beginning… I had never met someone like Solas before. He reminded me too much of myself, those eyes hiding an ancient sadness I knew all too well.

‘Thank you…’ He spoke softly, his straight posture hanging just a little, like he was… reassured? ‘You are… admirable too.’ He said awkwardly, but in a kind way.

‘I am?’ I shied away playfully, giving the atmosphere a friendlier feel.

Solas seemed to form his words carefully, like they were well thought-out, ‘You use your magic in ways I had never seen before, you protect and attack like a second nature. You cast spells like it is the only thing you have ever done in your life, and you seem to do it with such ease and grace. You have chosen a path whose steps you do not dislike because it leads to a destination you enjoy. As have I.’

Wow. It was me now who was at a loss for words. But I tried not to think about what he had said or implied, but grinned childishly, ‘So you’re suggesting I’m graceful?’ I wiggled my eyebrows. Was the stoic Elf giving me a compliment?

‘No’, he said softly, and I felt like vomiting, ‘I am declaring it. It was not a subject for debate.’ And just like that, the anxious, stomach-turning feeling was gone.

We continued to walk to camp then, the atmosphere lighter now, our faces more serene. Who knew, maybe after a while, Solas and I could become friends?

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A couple of days later, we reached the Imperial Highway, and then it only took us another week and a half to spot a glistening city near the horizon. Our last days travelling were quiet. Solas and I talked occasionally, especially about what he knew about the Emerald Knights and the downfall of the Dales. I hoped we would come back here one day, and maybe discover more about their history. We didn’t come across any other significant place to dream in, but I kept training in the Fade. Sometimes, Solas would even visit me, though he would remain silent and stand at the border of my dreams, only looking at my creations.

The Imperial Highway was a long paved road with many taverns close-by, so it was great to finally sleep in beds. We also didn’t have to hunt anymore, but travelled from tavern to tavern where warm meals were served in the evening. And the closer we got to the capital, the fancier the taverns became. I kept my head down though, not wanting to talk to any Orlesian that looked my way. My cape was fully covering my body and face most of the time. Yet, I tried to not get distracted by my past conventions about this country. Our cause was way more important, Maxwell was way more important than any grudge. My attention was fully focussed on his back, on his mark. Time went faster this way. Travel, protect, eat and sleep. Don’t think about where we were, don’t think about what people we came across, just look forward.

And I kept looking forward until I had to divert my eyes from the brightness of the stones and the golden ornaments. I got more nervous by the minute. My hands got sweatier and my mind more focussed. We crossed a long, extravagant bridge, and at the end, gates made of steel and covered in a golden façade started dooming upon us.

The Sun Gates leading to the capital of Orlais, Val Royeaux.

But something worse than clerics and Orlesians was awaiting us there.
Chapter End Notes

Translations:
‘Briathos, venas son, ane then.’ - 'Briathos, walk carefully, remain alert.'
‘Ar eolasan. Shalir vhen’alas.’ - 'I know. We must protect the land.'
‘Enemah, lethallin. Elas josa!’ - 'It’s about to begin, my friend/kin. You have to flee!'
‘Shalir Halamshiral sule’din. Halam'shivanas.’ - 'We will protect Halamshiral unto death. Do your duty to the end.'
'Falon’Din enasal enaste’ - A prayer for the dead
‘Dareth shiral.’ - Farewell (“Safe Journey”)

Now, we are really entering Val Royeaux! *excitement*
If you liked this chapter, you can always leave me a comment or a kudo.
There was no place more colourful and bright as the city of Val Royeaux, but there was also no place as fake and superficial. The bright colours were mere paintings on bloodied brick walls, the statues were vague heroes written by romance writers and the pride of the people was based on the deaths of so many innocents. Val Royeaux was a fiction, its people were frauds. Think of this city as a cake, a high wedding-style cake with many tops and layers. Every layer was decorated in detail, sugar twirls and frosted rose petals laid on top of pastel chocolaty letters. On the very top of the cake, you could find its owner, a beautiful woman, an empress, standing gracefully above the decorations, her all-seeing eyes skimming her properties. Yet, if you’d cut into the cake, you would see its flaws. The inside of the cake was uncooked, its flesh a melting pot of ingredients that don’t mix well together. And if you would take a bite from that cake, you would find out that its sweetness had a very foul aftertaste that wouldn’t leave you for hours to come.

The cake was a façade.

Val Royeaux was a façade.

And its core was bittersweet.

Cassandra, Varric, Solas, Maxwell and I walked across the bridge that led into town, the Sun Gates already behind us. Soft pink, blue and yellow castle-like mansions doomed close to the horizon, sided by high arches topped with golden statues of winged lions. It would’ve looked marvellous, if my stomach wasn’t hurting so much. My heart stuck in my throat and pounded painfully with each step we took. Maxwell was walking next to me, on my left. I walked close beside him, my shoulder almost brushing his. My magic was twirling, spitting like my green eye in anxiety. I didn’t trust this place.

Cassandra appeared next to Maxwell’s right shoulder, her face more at ease than mine. ‘The city still mourns.’ She said, her voice lowered. It was then that I started to notice almost no one was around. There were three explanations. One: everybody was busy doing their beauty sleep. Two: everyone mysteriously left for vacation. Or three: they were gathered somewhere else.

Suddenly, two strangely-dressed civilians strolled our way across the bridge. The man was wearing a blue shirt with poufy sleeves, a richly decorated brown tunic and a dark green undercoat. He looked like most Orlesians we had crossed during our travels. But his companion… a woman walked next to the man, giggling at whatever he was saying. The woman was wearing a long gown with a wide skirt and a decorated corset. Her hair was weaved into a dark green turban with golden swirls on it, with two golden feathers sticking out near her hairline. The mask was white with pink and blue sparks on it, and it covered almost her whole face. Only her eyes and her mouth were visible. And by what I could see, she was clearly wearing tons of make-up too. I wondered how many masks she was wearing and where her real face actually started. Maxwell glanced at the woman as we passed them, and she lifted her gloved hands to her face in agony, her voice trembling as she gasped.

‘Just a guess, Seeker’, Varric mumbled, ‘But I think they all know who we are.’

Cassandra sighed, ‘Your skills of observation never fail to impress me, Varric.’

We walked over to the next golden gate on the bridge, a gate that was already opened. When we
passed it, an unknown scout ran our way, the Inquisition emblem on her chest. The scout bowed deeply in front of us, her hooded eyes glancing to Maxwell and then to Cassandra and back. ‘My Lord Herald’, she greeted, her voice softer than I had expected, and bowed on one knee in front of our party.

‘You’re one of Leliana’s people.’ Cassandra stated as she looked down on the scout, ‘What have you found?’

‘The Chantry Mothers await you, but…’, she threw a quick look on Solas and I before staring back at Maxwell, ’so do a great many Templars.’

‘There are Templars here?’ Cassandra’s voice almost sounded hopeful. I couldn’t share her enthusiasm, though.

The scout bit her lip as she said, ‘People seem to think the Templars will protect them from…’ she failed to meet Maxwell’s eyes when she said, ‘From the Inquisition.’

Our group stared at her with open mouths. Protect them from us? But we were here to help?

‘They’re gathering on the other side of the market. I think that’s where the Templars intend to meet you.’ The scout finished as she stood up again.

‘Only one thing to do then’, Cassandra sighed, her hands resting on her hips. She looked around her and met my eyes for a second. And then I knew what we had to do.

We had to go and face them.

We walked through the Avenue of the Sun, which was a long corridor-like path with statues on either sides, that led towards the Belle Marché, the marketplace. If you would look up, you’d notice the houses were as blue as the sky. The windows of the rich apartments were open, and the soft breeze made the golden curtains float through the air, casting cooling shadows that were stark against the blinding sun. You’d almost think it was peaceful. But the closer we got, the louder the murmuring got. Soon, I saw that the whole marketplace was swarmed with people. I eyed Maxwell, who seemed to get nervous too now as small drops of sweat started to form near his eyebrows. Behind me, Varric and Solas seemed to walk more carefully too. Solas had seemed to be more at ease in the beginning, his eyes skimming every building, every statue, with a scholarly intrigue, but now, he too started to feel the impatience of the nervous crowd before us.

I feared I was getting a heart attack. My chest was heavy, pounding like a mad man, and my stomach was turning so hard, I thought my intestines would come right out. I felt even worse as we waded through the crowd towards a stage where an enraged Chantry priestess was ranting. I wondered why I felt so sick. Was it because of the Orlesians? The Chantry Mothers? The Templars? Or was it because of something… worse?

The people gasped as we pushed them aside to get closer to the stage. Cassandra and I flanked Maxwell like bodyguards. Varric and Solas had our backs, eyeing every single person that came too close or gasped too loud. With each person we pushed aside, with each step we took, my heart exploded. Something was wrong here. This feeling, this sickening, twisting in my guts… this wasn’t like the strange ache I had when around Solas, it was… a threatening feeling. A warning.

‘Good people of Val Royeaux! Hear me!’ A Chantry Mother stood in the centre of the stage, two priests flanking her with righteous looks in their eyes. Next to the ranting Mother, a Templar stood. His soft brown skin gleamed against his silver armour, the flaming sword on his chest blinding me as I looked at it. The eyes of the Templar were strong, but also alarmingly valiant. Maxwell neared the
stage, his eyes only on the Mother, who had now noticed him too. ‘Together we mourn our Divine. Her naïve and beautiful heart silenced by treachery!’ She nearly spat at Maxwell with her last word, but she composed herself and took a step back. ‘You wonder what will become of her murderer. Well, wonder no more! Behold the so-called Herald of Andraste! Claiming to rise where our beloved fell.’ She pointed her skinny finger at Maxwell, and I had to restrain myself from chopping it right off of her accusing hand. Cassandra growled, and I bet she was thinking the very same thing. ‘We say this is a false prophet! No servant beyond anything but his selfish greed!’

Maxwell exhaled deeply and straightened his back. When his voice finally came out, he sounded calm, annoyed, but confident. ‘We came here in peace, simply to talk. And this is what you do?’ Yes! You go tell her Max! ‘I implore you: Let us sit down together, to deal with the real threat!’

Cassandra looked at him with awe, her eyes gleaming with pride. ‘It’s true! The Inquisition seeks only to end this madness before it is too late!’

‘It is already too late!’ The Mother cried out angrily, and pointed to the group of Templars who marched through the crowd and to the stage. People started to cheer, and the Mother glared at us with a victorious grin on her face. ‘The Templars have returned to the Chantry! They will face this “Inquisition”, and the people will be safe once more!’

But the leader of the group of Templars ignored what the old woman had said, and walked straight past her while one of his men punched the woman right in the face. The crowd gasped, all of us gasped, as the Mother cried out and fell to the ground. I could hear her jaw snap as she gulped up blood while her priests knelt beside her. I stared at the Mother. I had wanted to slap her too, but not like this. This was wrong. Maxwell growled towards the leader of the Templar group.

‘Still yourself. She is beneath us.’ The leader of the Templar group had a thundering voice. The tall, grey man patted the Templar that had been standing with the Mother on the stage, who looked at his leader with a confused grimace on his face. But my heart stopped as I stared at the grey Templar leader. The alarming feeling in my stomach stopped, and my body fell to complete silence, incapable of doing anything but breathe as I looked at the man… no… thing on the stage. I saw a Templar, but it wasn’t a Templar. I don’t think it was even human. The contours of the man were smoking, curling with bile and green erupting sparks. Its form was human, but I saw through it, through its glamour, its reflection.

A demon.

I wanted to scream, to tell everyone to run. But my voice couldn’t come out. Instead, my legs turned to jelly and I fell with my back against Solas, who was standing behind me. He grabbed my shoulders as I pressed myself against him. ‘Saeris?’ he whispered to me, since no one had noticed the change in me but him. Solas tried to look at my face, but saw my blank expression while I tried to make out any words while staring at the abomination before me. An abomination no one could see but me.

‘You’re not here to deal with the Inquisition?’ Maxwell stared at the demon Templar angrily, his voice controlled but his body clearly shaking.

‘As if there were any reason to’, the demon Templar said mockingly. I could hear its two voices. One of a man, one of a monster, mixed into one. But the monster’s voice was silent, tucked away into the shadows. This demon was powerful. The demon Templar left the stage, taking big steps while his men followed suit.

The crowd murmured when Cassandra stepped forward, her voice high and confused. ‘Lord Seeker Lucius, it’s imperative that we speak with…’
'You will not address me’, Lucius, or whatever its name was, said while ignoring Cassandra, disgust seeping from its words.

‘Lord Seeker?’ Cassandra’s voice almost sounded upset, her eyes big and sad. What was going on here? We walked over to the group of Templars that had now left the stage with the wounded Mother. Well, everybody except Solas and I. I couldn’t move my legs, couldn’t raise my voice. I could only stare and hope Solas would keep me upright. And so he did.

‘Creating a heretical movement, raising up a puppet as Andraste’s Prophet. You should be ashamed.’ Lucius spat at Cassandra, who looked completely shaken now. Maxwell gnarled and took a step forward. He was too close! I need to protect him! He needs to get out of here, away from… it! ‘You should all be ashamed! The Templars failed no one when they left the Chantry to purge the mages! You are the one who have failed! You who’d leash our righteous swords with doubt and fear!’ The demon raised its hand and pointed towards Maxwell. My body felt like it was on fire. I’m a coward! I need to do something! I need to move! ‘If you came to appeal to the Chantry, you are too late. The only destiny here that demands respect is mine.’

‘What we truly need is an alliance that will seal the Breach.’ Maxwell said, taking another step to the demon Lord Seeker. No!

‘Oh, the Breach is indeed a threat. But you certainly have no power to do anything about it.’ The demon spat.

‘But Lord Seeker’, the Templar who had been standing on the stage took a step forward. I now noticed the kindness behind his eyes, the doubt that was forming in his mind, ‘what if he really was sent by the Maker? What if…?’

‘You are called to a higher purpose! Do not question!’ One of the Templars interrupted his comrade. And I wouldn’t be surprised if he too was a minion of this demon.

‘I will make the Templar Order a power that stands alone against the void! We deserve recognition! Independence!’ the group of Templars held their fists against their chest as the demon ranted, the doubtful Templar now complying with his comrades like he had lost his will to think, ‘You have shown me nothing’, the demon Lord Seeker took a step closer to Maxwell, and I think something in me exploded, ‘And the Inquisition… less than nothing! Val Royeaux is unworthy of our protection! We…’

‘You never protected this city.’ My voice finally came out. First soft, and then louder and louder. Solas let go of my shoulders as I took a step forward, the power in me returning. That demon was too close to Maxwell. I need to protect him. I need him.

The demon Lord Seeker laughed maniacally, but before it could speak, I interrupted it again. ‘You’re not even a real Templar, let alone a Seeker, are you?’ I took two more steps now, my confidence growing and my heart pounding with adrenaline. Everybody had turned silent, even Maxwell, who now stared at me with an open mouth.

‘How dare you’, the demon spat, but I wasn’t done yet. I would get its filthy demon ass away from my Maxwell.

‘What are you, Lucius?’ I spat and pushed Varric and Cassandra aside, until I was right next to Maxwell, where I could protect him. Solas followed and stood right behind me.

‘Your Inquisition has gone mad! Is this how you stand? Letting a knife-ear childishly throw accusations at me? Do you even know what I am capable of?’ The demon’s voice thundered through
the marketplace, and even the crowd went completely silent now. The Lord Seeker’s eyes pierced
into mine, and I saw only rage in them. Yet, deep within, I saw confusion, fear. It knew that I knew.
My heart pounded, but I wouldn’t give this demon the pleasure to know I too had fear. I will protect
Maxwell. I can’t let this demon go. I can’t stand by idly.

‘I know exactly what you are capable of, demon.’ Try to remain calm, controlled. Confront it, like
you did last time during the Harrowing. ‘You can fool them, but not me. Maybe, you’re not so great
after all?’

‘Saeris, what are you doing?’ Cassandra whispered cautiously, putting her hand on my shoulder but I
shook her off.

‘You have all been fooled!’ I yelled and pointed my finger at the demon. ‘This is not Lord Seeker
Lucius!’ The demon gnarled and changed his stance from stoic and confident to outright mean and
vile, hunched like a predator to attack. The Templars murmured, their hands on the hilts of their
swords. ‘What is it you want?’

The demon’s eyes glanced towards Maxwell, and then I knew. I saw it. Grudge. Jealousy. Envy. It
wanted Maxwell. It wanted to be Maxwell. This was an Envy demon, I could see it now, sense it,
feel it. ‘You will NEVER have him!’ I screamed, but the demon Lord Seeker was too fast. It hurled
inhumanly, its face turning even more white than before, its pupils dilating. I ran to the demon as it
charged at me, but it pushed me aside with sheer force. It was so quick, I didn’t even had time to
react, to spin around and push my magic out.

‘WATCH OUT!’ Cassandra screamed as the demon lunged at Maxwell. I fell to the ground a couple
of feet away, my back slamming against a marble statue of a lion. I screamed when I saw the
demon’s hands pulling on Maxwell’s chest and a strange power blasted from them.

‘At last!’ The demon Seeker gurgled.

And now, I could no longer touch them. A large barrier blasted around Maxwell and the Lord
Seeker. It looked like a wall made out of a scorching emerald wind and crystals, with black bile
drooping from its corners. I jumped up and ran to the barrier, my mind in disarray.

‘MAXWELL!’ I cried, my hands barging on the wall. I felt it stinging my fingertips, like little
needles. When I let go, my palms were covered in a strange lime goo, and I tried not to vomit at the
look of them.

‘Maker help us…’ The Templars started to mutter, their faces as white as a sheet. Their bodies had
turned to statues, unmoving, in total shock.

‘What in the Maker’s name was that!’ Cassandra’s voice sounded high, a panic in it I hadn’t heard
before. I turned to her, and saw her sunken face, full of terror, as she put her hand on the barrier.

‘A demon, I presume?’ Solas said, his voice deep with a hint of concern.

‘Of course it’s a demon! It’s always a demon.’ Varric huffed, he had sprinted towards the barrier as
soon as it had erupted, the familiar smirk on his face now completely gone.

‘Envy’, I huffed between my crying, ‘It’s an Envy demon.’

Solas nodded while Cassandra’s face turned whiter by the second.

‘What is going on?’ One of the Templars stepped out of the group, his voice trembling, but he
looked more confident than the others. I recognized him as the brown-skinned Templar who had
stood on the stage, who had stood up against the Envy demon. ‘The Lord Seeker is…’

‘That is not him!’ I sighed, why wasn’t I getting through to these people? ‘It’s an imposter.’

The Templar’s face became more terrified, and he shook his head in disbelief. ‘That monster ensured we weren’t prepared.’

‘We need to get the Herald out of there!’ Cassandra shrieked as she interrupted the Templar while still pushing the barrier with her steel gloved hands.

‘This barrier, what is this?’ Solas crossed his arms when he walked up to the barrier, his eyes big. ‘Saeris?’ He looked at me and caught me caged in thoughts, my face probably the scariest one out of us all. ‘Can you see something?’

My mouth fell open as I understood what Solas had meant. This emerald wind and crystal sparks… I knew I had recognized them. It was a barrier pulled from the Fade by the demon. A barrier I could look through. My eye!

Solas smiled a little when he saw I understood, and then nodded. I turned to the barrier that was still standing tall near the centre of the marketplace. I knelt beside it, lifted my right hand and covered my normal eye. And there. I could see them.

‘What do you see?’ Cassandra huffed. The Templars still stood confused in a corner, but the Templar who had spoken, stepped closer, his eyes now fully focused on me as I said, ‘They are in there. It’s holding him… I think.’

‘What does it want’, Varric sighed.

‘It wants our Herald. And it has him right where it wants him.’ Solas stared at me and I nodded. ‘They are in the Fade, where the demon’s tricks are the most powerful, where it can control what happens.’

‘How do we get him out?!” Cassandra’s patience was running low.

‘I’m going there.’ I sighed eventually while still peering at the figures within the barrier. One figure was dark, almost invisible. But Maxwell was bright. He was still alive and had not fallen yet.

‘No.’ Solas’ voice came out louder than I had expected, and he looked angrily at me. ‘It is too dangerous.’

‘We cannot lose Maxwell.’ I said calmly. ‘He is of the utmost importance. He and I are connected, like I am connected to the Fade, I can feel his mark too. I will go in his mind, in the Fade. The demon’s tricks won’t work on me. I can see, remember?’ I smiled a little at Solas, but he still stubbornly shook his head.

‘You must go then.’ Cassandra’s voice sounded more confident. Better. She had hope.

‘Saeris…’ Solas started.

‘Let me do this. This is what I’ve trained for! Let me put our lessons to the test.’ I stood up and straightened my back, and Solas slowly nodded.

‘You!’ I pointed at the Templars, unable to hide the hint of disgust in my voice, ‘Make sure every citizen is evacuated.’ The crowd was still there, had witnessed everything from a distance across the market. I could hear them gasping and gossiping throughout the events. Some had fled already, but most nobles stayed put, eager to use every information they could get to get higher up in society. But
if I could release Maxwell, Envy would surely not give up without a fight. I looked up at the
Templars, and they nodded one by one.

‘Varric, Cassandra, stay put and ready to attack in case something comes out.’ The two nodded,
knowing exactly what could come out of the Fade by raw experience. Adrenaline was surging
through my body as I commanded like I never had before. I was the quiet type, the one who helped
backstage. But Maxwell being in danger released something in me. It was something I’d had when
Sybil was still alive. I would’ve done everything to protect her too.

‘Solas, you have to shield me if something happens, I can’t fail. Even if I scream or whatever, I
cannot wake up!’

I saw a sadness and a concern behind Solas’ stoic eyes, but he knew that I had to go in there, that I
had the highest chance to succeed. I looked up at the tall elf, and felt the familiar ache in my stomach,
but it wasn’t as strong as the alarming feeling I had from the Envy demon, and so, the ache faded
into the background while a more urging sting took over. Fear. We were running out of time, and
Maxwell needed help. My help. And I would give it to him, whatever the cost may be.

The Templars marched towards the citizens, pushing them away, out of the marketplace. Cassandra
and Varric armed themselves, their eyes stuck on the barrier. I knelt down again, put my hand on the
barrier and let it rest there, ignoring the stinging feeling. Solas knelt behind me, his hands on my
shoulder, and I felt a protective barrier covering me. It was a warm feeling, a feeling that said I would
be alright.

‘Good luck, kid. Don’t let that demon get to you.’ Varric tried to smile confidently, but there was a
tremble in his voice that betrayed his feelings. Cassandra nodded at him, and then at me. They had
me covered. I would not disappoint them.

I focussed on the barrier in front of me, and again, covered my normal blue eye. I saw the vague
figures of Maxwell and Lucius behind the wall. My green eye spat and twirled and twisted, until it
had found the mark. Suddenly, I felt it focus, and it saw the mark shine brighter and brighter through
the barrier. I could hear Maxwell breathing, smell his sweat, feel his heartbeat. More and more, my
mind got sucked within that feeling of Maxwell, until there was nothing but him around me. My
body weakened, but I bit my tongue and the pain reminded me not to sleep, but to seek. To find.
Solas’ hands tightened around my shoulders as my body slumped, but my eye was still focussing,
and my mind was travelling. Beyond. To Maxwell.

‘Venas son, Saeris.’

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The air felt dense, heavy, burdened almost. There was a thick mist sticking to the ground and the
walls, making it uncomfortable to breathe normally. I took a step forward, and felt the muddy grass
wetting my soles, almost too real. The grass came up to my knees, and it felt like I was wading
through a swamp as I took a couple of steps forward. Above me, there was no sky, but a stone
ceiling that you’d see in a cathedral, or a temple, with big pillars of hard stone coming down. It
reminded me of the ruins of the Temple of Sacred Ashes, but I tried not to think about why Envy had
put up this particular reflection.

Where was Maxwell?

I felt him, I felt him near me. He was close, but so far away. And I had very little time to reach him.
The demon’s powers weighed me down. I was the intruder, I didn’t belong here. This nightmare
wasn’t meant for me. Did Envy already know that I was here?
I bit my lip and felt pain. Real pain, though subdued a little. My mind was in deep, deeper than any dream before. If I got hurt here, it would surely affect my body in the waking world. Please, please let Maxwell be alright.

My feet dragged me along, my muscles cramping because of the heavy mud, but it didn’t take long to come across a familiar scene. Hundreds upon hundreds of flaming corpses were spread across the open space, as far as I could see in this strange mist. Their faces were eternalised in their last screams, cries and prayers. Some were covering their heads, their bodies, others were covering someone else, hoping their arms would stop the blast from killing their loved ones. This was the Temple of Sacred Ashes, or a nightmarish reflection based upon it. This was one of Maxwell’s most vivid memories, one he couldn’t remove from his mind.

I stepped closer, my heart pumping. Don’t look at their faces, Saeris. You’ve already seen them once. Once was enough. Find Maxwell.

After running and not looking for some minutes, I came upon an open space littered with more burning corpses. But something was different here. There was a puddle of blood on the muddy ground. The brightness of the red was stark against the grey of the earth. I looked around some more, and found multiple puddles on the ground. This blood was fresh, yet there weren’t any corpses. I closed my normal eye as I focussed on the blood and saw that it actually wasn’t blood at all. As soon as my green eye focussed on it, the bright red blood turned into bubbling black bile. A sense of relief washed over my body. Maxwell hadn’t been hurt here.

But where was he now?

‘What do you see?’ A dooming voice thundered through the open space, echoing against the stone pillars of the fake Temple. Envy. But its voice hadn’t been directed to me, but to someone else. Maxwell. They were close, and the demon hadn’t noticed my presence yet. It focussed solely on him, on Max.

I ran forward to where the Temple ended, and Haven’s chantry began. A stone archway led me into a darkened room. The dungeons. Cells with cold steel bars could be seen built into the stone walls, and some almost-empty candles were burning in each corner of the room. In the middle of the room stood four guards, their swords out, their faces disguised by a hood. In front of the group of soldiers, Cassandra stood, or at least a reflection of her. My right eye saw the grunting Seeker I had come to know, but my left eye saw but a shadow, a reflection in a biased mirror. The soldiers’ swords were pointed to the centre, but no one was sitting there. It seemed like someone should, but it was empty. The purpose of the reflection that’d been there, was gone.

‘Our one chance to make peace between the mages and the Templars. And now it’s over.’ Cassandra’s angry voice filled the room. She looked down at the empty spot in the centre, not noticing she was talking to empty air. ‘You think me a fool? Explain this!’ Cassandra started to walk up and down, ignoring the silence. ‘Do you deny it? Do you dare deny your crime?’

I bit my tongue again, and felt the familiar pain, but now, more and more real. I was getting sucked in. I needed to move, and so I ran past the empty spot in the centre and the accusing reflection of Cassandra, and left the dungeons behind me. I now stepped into another room again. The first half of it was grass and open air, the other half was a stone building, a building I didn’t recognize. I looked at my feet and saw the grass had been burned, that something here had been obliterated.

But I did not see any blood.

Maxwell must still be alive. I can feel him.

Wait. No. I can hear him too!
In the distance, I heard a familiar voice crying out a muffled curse. My heart was exploding, my throat full of tears I was gulping down. Maxwell. He is here. He is alive. And close. A smile tugged on the corner of my lips as I took a big step forward, towards the sound of his voice. Suddenly, the air got knocked out of my body, and I saw the ground coming closer as I toppled over. I wheezed as blood flowed from my mouth. My head hurt, I couldn’t think, and my sight became blurry. The air around me pushed down on me, holding me against the ground, helpless. What is happening?

‘You shouldn’t be here! You cannot be here!’ Envy’s voice ringed inside my head, its magic trying to find its way in. But my body was fighting, my mind was closing, making sure there was no way in. I shivered as Envy spoke again. ‘He is mine! You will lose! I am stronger. I am better!’

‘Oh, shut up!’ I gnarled, and felt my magic push around me, pushing Envy out until his voice became silent. We were in the Fade, I wasn’t helpless here. I willed the air to stop pushing me down, to become quiet and light again.


I sighed as I found my breath again, the air around me now softly swaying past my spine. I got back up again and took a couple of breaths. Envy knew I was here now. I didn’t have much time left before it would figure out how to push me out of Maxwell.

‘Is imitating what you can’t have your only pleasure, demon?’ Maxwell’s voice echoed through the room. I started to sprint then, to run as fast as I could. Maxwell had sounded like he still had control, he wasn’t falling for the demon’s tricks. He was stronger than Envy thought.

It will never get to him.

I ran into the stone building that started past the open air, and noticed it looked like the inside of a castle. Strong, stone pillars and wooden beams held the stone building strong, and I noticed vacant Inquisition guards standing about, probably there to sell Envy’s reality show. At the back of the stone room, there was another door, and I wondered what was behind it. The only thing I knew, was that Maxwell was in there. I could feel him there. My green eye was thrumming and I felt the soft vibrations of his mark beyond the gate.

I didn’t doubt and opened the door carefully.

And there he was… standing in front of… me?

Maxwell, the real Maxwell, not a reflection or a demon, but the man I had come to care for. My friend. He was okay. I didn’t make a sound though, as I stared at the strange me that stood seductively before Maxwell’s protective stance, his shoulders pushed up and his hands curled into fists. The fake me was wearing a soft blue dress and my favourite cape hung loosely on her bare shoulders. Her hair waved in soft curls down to her chest. She smiled coyly, but the expression in her eyes seemed vacant, empty, dull. She was almost a statue, and I wondered if she was even breathing.

‘Is this what you want?’ Envy, shaped into Maxwell’s appearance, stepped from behind the fake me, its hand slipping behind her back and resting above her hip casually. The fake me moved her head, and her white ears slit through her hair, its tips turning a soft red. She smiled faintly at the demon, like a maiden in love.

‘Or do you prefer this?’ The demon grinned at Maxwell, and I saw the muscles of his back tense as Cassandra appeared on Envy’s other side. The demon placed its free hand on the Seeker’s hip, just like he had done with the fake me. The fake Cassandra, who was wearing the same dress as the fake me, her face slightly made-up, looked at the demon lovingly, and the demon grinned back with
Maxwell’s face. ‘What is it you want, Herald? Tell me.’

‘You truly think Maxwell is that stupid?’ I finally said, my voice ringing through the room.

Maxwell turned around, his face lighting up as he looked at me, his shoulders still tense, but he knew, he felt I was different, I wasn’t fake. ‘I’m here Maxwell’, I nodded at him, ‘We’re inside your head. Nothing of this is real. It’s a charade.’

The demon gnarled as the fake me and Cassandra vanished into thin air. ‘You will not have him. GET OUT!’ The demon hurled and vanished as the room started to shake and change.

‘Maxwell! Watch out!’ I yelled and grabbed his arm, pulling him to where I stood just in time before a strange pillar appeared before him that blasted a green fire onto the floor. The fire seemed to burn even stone, and soon, the room became engulfed in flames. Maxwell grabbed my wrist, and I finally saw how pale his face was, how tired he looked. He needed to get out of here. But I also saw bravery and confidence in his eyes, and I knew he still had strength.

‘We have to get out!’ Maxwell cried and dragged me forward towards the back entrance of the room.

But before we got there, Envy’s laugh doomed over the room again. Or maybe it was standing next to us, and we just couldn’t see it. I only saw raw green flames gnarling on the walls, too close to my skin and I felt them burn every pore slowly, one at a time. The pain ringed through my mind.

Too real. Way too real.

Maxwell grunted as the door seemed to be locked, and I felt the fire closing in on us. ‘Step back!’ I yelled and lifted my hands to blast to door away. Maxwell jumped aside as he saw a raw whirl of wind escape my fingertips, but the door didn’t budge. The air around us started to get thicker again, weighing down on me more and more. I tried to shape the Fade, like I had done before.

Please! A cool breeze. No fire. But rain. Cold rain. Trickling down on us in an open meadow. A calming meadow. Like the one I had created in the past.

But the Fade didn’t change. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t focus. Too warm. Too much panic! I wasn’t ready for this. Please! I need help, I can’t do this alone, I need someone. Maxwell needs someone. What if I get knocked down again? I feel my mind giving up, I feel its inexperience and I’m waking up because of it. Envy is pushing Maxwell, not with force, but with mental violence. Will he remain this strong? The fire came closer and closer to where we stood, and we pressed ourselves against the unmoving door. A fake door. One to give hope to then take it away.

But Envy doesn’t want to kill Maxwell just yet, it still needs him. It hasn’t fed on his mind fully, Maxwell hasn’t given in yet. It just wants to kill me. It wants me out. What if I just…

‘You’re hurting, helpless, hasty. What happens to the hammer when there are no more nails?’ A voice whispered to our figures, and Maxwell’s eyes got bigger as he heard it too. It hadn’t been Envy’s voice, it was too soft, too kind, too much out of place. This voice didn’t hurt, it healed. We looked to our sides to see where the voice had come from, and a room to our left had appeared, its doors open.

‘GO!’ Maxwell yelled and we ran to the corner of the burning room, and I hoped this was real. I hoped this room wouldn’t disappear before we jumped into it. Or the flames would take the both of us. We sprinted and jumped into the safe room, and as soon as we entered it, the burning room behind us disappeared behind the wall that seemed to knit itself together again. We were saved.
‘What now?’ Envy’s voice echoed again, thrumming through our temples. It sounded more annoyed than angry. ‘Get out! This is my place!’

It became quiet again, the only sound being Maxwell’s and my rasping breaths. He was safe. He was okay. I hadn’t failed yet.

‘That was close.’ Maxwell rasped, a small smile on his lips as he turned to me. ‘How did you get here, Saeris?’

‘It’s…’ I heaved, ‘It’s not that hard to get into that silly mind of yours.’ I chuckled and then coughed to get the smoke out of my lungs.

‘Always there to be my knight in shining armour.’ He laughed and spat on the floor. His spit was black. ‘Now, since you’re the expert here. Tell me, my friend, why is there a chair on the ceiling?’

‘What?’ I gasped and looked up. We were… this room was upside down?

‘Envy is hurting you. Mirrors on mirrors on memories. A face it can feel but not fake. I want to help. You, not Envy.’ There was that boyish voice again. Soft, swaying, caressing our minds, trying not to intrude, but still seeing everything. I wheezed and stared at the upside down painting of a noble woman, my mind too weak to focus.

‘Who are you? I’ve seen you before. Have I?’ Maxwell said and I looked up to see if there was a body connected to that boyish voice, but couldn’t see. My vision became blurry again, and I tried to control my breath. Do not panic, Saeris. Stay calm. For Maxwell.

‘I’ve been watching. I’m Cole. We’re inside you. Or I am. You’re always inside you.’

Maxwell and I saw the boy at the same time, because we nearly fell on our asses together as we stared at the young man standing upside down on the ceiling. Or on the ground, and we were on the ceiling. I don’t know. I squinted my eyes to look at the creature. Cole. He had blonde hair, concealed under a big hat. I couldn’t quite look at his face, he was standing too far for that. But I could clearly see the youth around his eyes. The kindness.

‘It’s easy to hear, harder to be a part of what you’re hearing. But I’m here, hearing, helping. I hope.’ The boy looked at me then, or at least I saw his head move slightly. ‘You called. Desperate. Save him. Panic. I need him.’ My mouth fell open as I heard Cole speak. How did he know? ‘You see like I hear. I will help like you wanted to.’

I closed one eye, letting my doomed curse do the rest. Fear was making me shake, fear of this boy being a demon. But if he wasn’t, if he could help me… help Maxwell… My green eye twisted and twirled, but the boy’s appearance didn’t change. Yet, something stranger happened. The boy… was a boy. But not.

The boy looked back to Maxwell. ‘Envy hurt you, is hurting you. I tried to help. Then, I was here, in the hearing. It’s… it’s not usually like this.’

‘I don’t think anything is usual here.’ Maxwell said and looked back to me, a frown on his face as I stared at the boy, at… was it a boy? He was shining, his body, his contours. No shadows, no foul taste on my lips, but warmth. I felt kindness, loyalty… Compassion.

‘She knows me. She sees me. But she is too weak. She has to leave us soon.’ Cole looked at me and I looked back. I looked back in awe. This was no demon. This was a spirit. But not just a spirit, he was also a boy, human.
Suddenly, we heard a screeching behind the walls, nails being sunk in stone. Maxwell took a step back, his eyes big. The screeching didn’t stop there, though. I felt it tremble through my body, nails scratching on the inside of my head, of my mind. And I was weak. For how long could I keep Envy out? Solas had been right, I wasn’t ready for this.

‘You are always ready, too ready, too old not to be. But this is new. New and it hurts. You need to let me help. I can help.’ Cole’s voice sounded desperate, like he felt my panic.

Maxwell turned to me, ‘Saeris?’

I fell on my knees as the scraping of nails on my bare scalp didn’t stop, and they sunk deeper and deeper, tore open my flesh.

Get out. Get out. GET OUT!

Blood dripped out of my nose, and I coughed and spat and the blood found my lungs and I couldn’t breathe.

Maxwell ran to me, knelt beside me and lifted me in his arms. ‘Saeris, you have to get out of here.’

‘No, I can help. I…’

‘You can’t. I will get through this. Cole here will help me. Is he safe? Is he…’

‘He’s…’ I coughed, ‘he’s fine. No demon.’

‘Good. Good.’ Maxwell smiled as he wiped the blood from my mouth with his slightly burned sleeve. ‘You being here has helped me already. But I need you not to die. Who else will be my knight?’ He tried to laugh, but failed. ‘Go. Prepare the rest for battle. I will get out of here soon, and we’ll kick Envy’s ass together.’

I nodded as my body felt weaker and weaker, like all of my strength was being sucked out of me. And before Maxwell could say more, before Cole could hear my thoughts, even before I could close my eyes, I felt my connection to this place break. Like a rope cut into two.

And I woke up.

***

‘Saeris? Saeris!’

The sun blinded me as I opened my eyes. I was back at the marketplace in Val Royeaux, sitting just like I had before I left to help Maxwell. My knees gave way and I sank to my side. Solas hovered above me, his hands turning a soft green and blue as his magic sought any wounds. But there were none. He looked at me with big eyes, a huge frown creasing his forehead. He seemed really angry. Like a mother whose kid got into a hospital because it was playing too wildly.

‘Where is the Herald! Is he alright? Tell me is he…’ Cassandra’s face hovered next to Solas’, blocking out the sun. She sounded desperate, her face pale and concerned.

I groaned and felt my chin and my lips being wet. I touched my face carefully, and saw my fingers covered in blood. The blood had been real. Solas must’ve been surprised. But I felt fine. ‘He’s alright. He’s fighting, but he’s not alone. He has help.’ The group stared at me, surprised. Varric came closer too, an assured look on his face as he looked me up and down.
‘Prepare yourselves.’ I continued and pushed myself up while Solas supported my lower back. ‘Maxwell is on his way. We will have to finish this soon.’

And I will rip that Envy demon to pieces.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was quite long, but I hope you liked it!
The first of the Maker's children watched across the Veil  
And grew jealous of the life  
They could not feel, could not touch.  
In blackest envy were the demons born.

- Chant of light, Canticle of Erudition 2:1
'HERALD!' Cassandra nearly dropped her sword as his figure appeared in the fog, shoulders straight, face determined. There he was. Maxwell.

He smiled at the Seeker confidently and nodded.

'GET READY!' Cassandra nearly sang from happiness, but her tone was serious. If Maxwell was free, then so was Envy. The Templars moved forward, their swords ready to attack. Bianca’s arrow sprung ready in Varric’s hands, and Solas’ staff creaked as his magic surged through it.

But I could only stare for a moment, my heart thumping a familiar ache. An ache I had felt when I had walked into this city. This ache that warned me to stand up, to raise my hands, and to kill whatever moved first.

And I was so angry, so ready to kill.

Behind Maxwell, Envy finally raised its ugly head. I have seen demons before, through Rifts, in the Fade, in my dreams even, but never were they so monstrous.

Envy’s body was almost humanoid, but its limbs were too long and bended the wrong way, like it had no joints. Its skin was a pale-ish pink and instead of two, it had four arms protruding from its bust, with those long, familiar black demonic claws sticking out from what I thought were its hands. But Envy’s face was the thing that enraptured me the most, because it almost had no face. Was that why it wanted to steal other’s faces? It had a head, don’t get me wrong, but there were only veins and bloodied scars that turned inwards on a white dry canvas. It looked like an experiment gone wrong, faces melted into each other to create no face at all.

Envy screamed, its mangled body turned to Maxwell, who didn’t move one step as the demon opened its bloodied mouth filled with way too many human-like teeth. I think I even saw some teeth puncturing the skin where its brow should be. But Maxwell only smirked as he said mockingly, ‘I get why you wanted my face, you ugly bastard.’

Envy screamed again, a furious scream this time, not just annoyed. I saw the muscles flex beneath its thin skin, and I knew this battle wouldn’t be an easy one. The Templars that were here weren’t with many, and I bet they were low on Lyrium seeing how pale and tired they appeared. But I knew they wouldn’t give up without a fight. Templars were too cocky for that.

‘I touched so much of you. But you are selfish with your glory. Now, I’m no one.’ Envy’s voice gurgled and sneered. But Maxwell didn’t bat an eye.

Dark and desperate. Death to make yourself alive. I used to be like you.

Cole’s voice ringed through the market, but it seemed only Envy, Maxwell and I were able to hear it. I looked around from my place behind our party, but didn’t see the boy standing anywhere.

I’m not anymore. You shouldn’t be, either.

Envy screeched with anger, and I felt Cole’s presence disappear from our minds, gone to wherever he was now. Maxwell screamed victoriously as he finally charged at Envy. ‘Let’s end this!’

‘NOW!’ Cassandra demanded and the Templars didn’t hesitate and ran up to the screeching demon. And that's how the battle began.

Cassandra threw herself onto the demon, and I heard her scream ‘Maker take you!’ in raw anger and desperation as her sword hit the demon’s skin, clashing through its brittle veins. Black bloodlike bile splurged out of the demon’s body as it screamed to find one of its hands cleanly cut off from its arm. Maxwell smiled and hurled to Envy, his daggers biting like fangs into Envy’s back. Envy cried out
and waved its bloodied arms around to get the Herald off of it, but couldn’t as the Templars reigned upon him with their swords and shields, bashing and slashing at the enormous demon’s feet. Solas immediately stepped up and casted strong protective barriers around every single soldier, and I saw it took its toll as Envy tried puncturing so many men, and sometimes, it succeeded as its claws cut through Solas’ barriers and into the limp bodies of the Templars. Solas huffed as he bended beneath the power of the demon, trying to hold up his wards. Varric cursed as his arrows found Envy’s missing face, some failing to hit their target by inches, and some cutting through the demon’s scars that crossed its face. Envy hurled, bursting out a raw power that made everyone around fly a couple of feet away.

Maxwell cried out as he lost grip of his daggers and fell down from Envy’s back and onto the ground. The spineless demon bended its body backwards to look at the disarmed Herald. I felt the strength in my feet return and ran towards them, jumping over the dead Templar corpses. My magic twirled around my fingers, and electric bolts sparked from them. I raised my hands to Envy, who crawled closer and closer to Maxwell, not noticing me coming for it.

‘HEY! Remember me?’ I screamed, and Envy turned its faceless figure to me.

‘YOU!’ It screeched.

Magic left my hands and surged towards Envy, hitting it right in its nerves. Envy groaned and stomped towards me with its many limbs. It drew out its poisonous claws towards me, trying to gut my eyes out, but I jumped aside quickly, running swiftly on my feet, jumping over the mess of arms and blood that clawed my way. Fire now grinded across my body and I grabbed one of Envy’s bloodied arms so my fire could spread. Envy gurgled as my fire climbed across its arm, burning its pale skin. And when my fire had captured the whole limb, I twisted my hand and my fire turned to ice, enrapturing the arm in a cold prison of frost and flame. And with a turn of my free hand, the ice splintered and the arm exploded into a thousand pieces. Meanwhile, Maxwell got back up again, and pulled another knife from his armour and ran over to slash Envy’s face. But the demon, who now had only two and a half arms left, turned to Maxwell quickly, opening its mangled mouth and bit through Maxwell’s arm with its molars. Maxwell screamed as I heard the teeth puncturing flesh and bone. I cried out angrily and raised my hands to Envy’s face, but suddenly, an arrow flung right into Envy’s mouth, cutting through its palate and skull. The demon gurgled up its black blood and let go of Maxwell’s arm.

‘Eat that ‘ya pissin’ pile of shite!’ A young elven woman jumped from a balcony at the upper market. She smiled with her slightly crooked teeth and spun another arrow on her bow, firing it towards Envy again. The demon waved its arms in confusion, trying to stop the rain of arrows coming for its face.

Cassandra’s sword found the demon again, cutting through any limb that stood in her way to get to Maxwell, who laid on the ground holding his bloodied arm, or what was left of it. Solas raised his staff again, now not to protect anymore, but to hurt. I saw the confidence in his eyes as he looked to Maxwell to the demon and back. His staff creaked as bolts of energy exploded from its core one by one, surging to the demon and detonating into a green fire that cut through its skin like a thousand arrows.

This was the last straw for Envy, as it finally fell down to the cold marble floor. The demon still screamed and roared, until a familiar brown skinned Templar climbed its mangled, bloodied body, raised his sword and cried out: ‘Blessed are they who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter. Blessed are the peacekeepers, the champions of the just. Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadow. In their blood the Maker's will is written.’ The Templar let his sword fall down into Envy’s chest. The demon screeched one last time, its face turning to Maxwell in despair, its face
so expressionless, but still so full of envy. ‘I… want…’

Dead.

An arrow was suddenly shot into Envy’s corpse, and then two, and then another. ‘Bits up, face down!’ the young elven woman who had aided during battle jumped closer to the dead demon, dropping her bow as she made sure the thing was dead. I glanced at her quickly before running towards Maxwell, ignoring how she poked Envy’s body with her arrow while making vomiting noises.

‘You are alright, breathe!’ Cassandra knelt next to Maxwell, who cradled his arm while rocking back and forth, his face pale. Cassandra turned her head my way, calling out to me in urgency, ‘Saeris!’

‘I’m here! I’m here.’ I hushed as I ran to Maxwell’s side and fell onto my knees next to Cassandra, who kept whispering soft words to Maxwell. I hadn’t seen her this concerned before, this… soft and caring. I figured that underneath that hard exterior, Cassandra was a kind woman. She looked at me with concern in her eyes, and I answered her with an assuring nod.

‘Hey, you’re real now, right?’ Maxwell tried to smile, but failed because moving hurt.

‘I’m always real.’ I winked. ‘Let me look at you now.’ Maxwell nodded slightly, his eyes big and almost teary, but he tried to keep himself strong. I slowly raised my hands to his ruined arm, and I cursed myself for being reassured it wasn’t his marked arm. It looked like it hurt horribly, but it wasn’t something I couldn’t heal. ‘Cassandra, hold Maxwell’, I demanded and she nodded. I ripped a piece of cloth from my bloodied armour and held it out to the Herald. ‘Bite on this, it will hurt at first, don’t want to ruin your teeth.’ Maxwell nodded again, this time not so confident, and opened his mouth so I could put the cloth in.

I then turned my head a bit, my eyes looking for Solas, who already appeared beside me. ‘Solas, I need you to hold his arm straight. I’m going to heal his bones first, and they need to be regrown straight, not crooked.’ Solas nodded, his eyes focussed solely on me. ‘After the bones, I will heal the nerves and veins, then the flesh. The bones will hurt, Maxwell, try not to struggle too much.’ I looked at Cassandra, and she nodded like she understood. Hold him even if he screams. She knew. ‘Ready?’ I stared at Maxwell and he nodded slowly, huffing against the cloth.

Varric appeared on the other side of Maxwell, his hand firmly in Maxwell’s marked hand, ‘Just don’t break my hand, Herald.’

Solas then straightened Maxwell’s arm with one clear snap, pulling it into the right position ruthlessy. Maxwell screamed against the cloths, his eyes bulging out of their sockets. Varric groaned as Maxwell pinched his hand, and Cassandra huffed as she tried keeping him down. I didn’t hesitate and rested my hand on his arm, and Maxwell cried out again. Ignoring his pain, I focussed, my magic surging out of my tired body. Deeper and deeper, my magic twisted and crawled through the Herald’s open wound to find the sharp pieces that were once his lower arm bones. The splintered shards punctured his flesh, his veins, which made him bleed harder and harder. If I didn’t heal him fast, he’d die from blood loss. My magic bound itself around every single piece of bone, pushing it towards the right place. Maxwell squirmed and screamed against his cloth, writhing against the pain as the bones pushed through his arm all over again.

‘I’m sorry, it’ll all be over soon’, I hushed while looking into his eyes quickly. But Maxwell’s eyes were strong, full of pain, but confident to see this through. Come on! I pushed and pushed against my magic, and I felt more and more pieces pushed into place until it formed a whole bone again. And just like a loose puzzle, I glued it back together to form a perfect arm. With a loud snap, the hardest part was completed. I heard Maxwell breathe sharply as he felt his bone being whole again.
I smiled, feeling the sweat dripping from my face. ‘Solas, you can let go of him now’, I grinned and looked up to Maxwell again, ‘I’m just going to heal your flesh. It won’t hurt that bad, you’ll know the feeling.’ The Herald nodded again, sweat also dripping from his face, but now the colour was returning to his cheeks. I focussed back on the arm, and as I called my magic back to my fingers, they left a trail of healing, knitting first the nerves and veins back together, and then the flesh. Slowly, but still trying to calm the tissue with a soothing warmth. And when my magic had fully returned back to me, Maxwell’s arm was clean and whole like it had never been hurt before.

‘Incredible’, Solas mumbled and looked back to me. ‘You did not even leave a scar.’ He had admiration in his voice, and I didn’t know if I liked that or not. I smiled weakly, feeling my body being too tired to use any more magic.

Cassandra helped Maxwell sit upright, her face gleaming with reassurance. Maxwell held out his arm before him, flexing his muscles and turning it sideways carefully. He then stared at me, smiling, ‘Thank you, Saeris.’

I smiled back faintly.

‘You can let go of my hand now, Herald.’ Varric grinned.

‘I’m sorry, my friend. I didn’t break it, right?’ Maxwell laughed loudly and let go of the Dwarf’s hand.

‘I’m made out of stronger material than that!’ Varric huffed, and I heard Cassandra making her usual disgusted noise while she helped Maxwell get back on his feet. We all straightened our backs now, and I dared to look back at the marketplace. Some statues were broken, some tiles were smashed, but the marketplace looked like it had before. Only Envy’s carcass was out of place, surrounded by a couple of Templar corpses. A sadness took over me. The loss of life, no matter what race or religion or occupation, was always unfortunate. But this wasn’t the first time I’d seen death, and I knew these men and women would be rewarded for their bravery in the next life, even if they had been Templars.

‘The demon is dead. Andraste be praised: she shielded you from its touch.’ The brown skinned Templar, the one who had given Envy the final blow, walked up to us. He was visibly wounded, all of the Templars were, but I didn’t know if I had the strength to heal them all, or if I even wanted to.

Maxwell ignored the Templar for a while, still confused to what just happened. ‘Saeris, did you see Cole? I heard him? Did anyone see a young man appear beside me? Pale, strangely dressed, creepy voice?’

‘I heard him, but I think it wasn’t meant for others.’ I said as Maxwell stared at me.

‘I saw no one. You and the demon were alone.’ The Templar looked down for a moment, his eyes sad. ‘It used Red Lyrium to corrupt the order. I knew that miserable stuff was risky!’

‘It made you use what now?’ Varric interrupted, his voice high and panicky.

‘They often give us new kinds of Lyrium. Our commanders… some used the red stuff first, to prove it was harmless. Most Knights at Therinfal are already using it. That demon turned our leaders so we couldn’t question when this started! I fear most of our comrades have already fallen to it as we speak.’

‘Can they still be saved?’ Maxwell frowned.

‘As soon as they took that stuff, they became… different. Their minds more violent, without reason.
And it got worse by the day…”

‘Well, shit.’ Varric sighed and scratched the back of his neck in thought.

‘We’ve numbers across Thedas, but we let this happen. The Templar order is in disarray. Only a small army of us is left near the border of Orlais… We are ready to hear what… or if the Inquisition needs us. It is our only cause left now.’

Maxwell sighed deeply and rested his marked hand on his forehead, his face twisted into a thoughtful grimace. He then looked at me, his eyes sad and apologetic. Please, no. Not this. Not them. He then looked behind me, peering towards the far horizon above the upper market balconies, above the fancy apartments with bright primary colours, towards the dooming Breach in the sky. ‘If that thing hanging over our heads doesn’t terrify you, you’re braver souls than I. The Inquisition can’t seal the Breach on its own. We need the Templars’ help.’ He looked back to our exhausted party, and Cassandra straightened her shoulders and nodded affirmatively at the Herald. ‘We need everyone’s help.’ Everyone? The mages included?

The Templar stepped forward, ‘You speak truths we should never have ignored. But the Order, or what is left of it, is leaderless, gutted by betrayal. We must rebuild it.’

‘No. There is no time. Serve us. Stop the Breach, and then begin again without stain on your honour. That is our offer.’

‘I, Ser Delrin Barris, will serve. If it is the only way, Templars, will you help the Inquisition to atone for our failure?’ The Templar, Delrin, stepped before his comrades, the ones that were left of the delegation at least. The small group of Templars took off their helmets, and I now saw real faces under the masks I’d always feared. They bent the knee before Maxwell, who seemed to shine brighter and brighter as the now ex-Templars pumped their chests. Delrin turned to us again. ‘The Order will… disband, and take up the Inquisition’s banner.’

I didn’t know if I should be happy or sad. I only knew I was incredibly terrified. I knew Templars that could still live… Tibald… Simon… would they join us? Or were they already influenced by the Red Lyrium? And why would they take that stuff? Who needed an army of vicious, mindless Templar monsters? And what kind of army would we get? Would I still be safe in Haven now, or will these “ex”-Templars try to undermine me as a mage again?

‘I will send a raven to the rest of the Templars, those who are willing to join will travel to Haven. We might not be with great numbers, but we’ll need weapons, training grounds, a place to rest… The Inquisition must prepare for our arrival.’

‘I will alert Commander Cullen of your arrival and have him prepare all you require.’ Maxwell took a step closer. ‘But do know, we might still form another alliance with the rebel mages. I will make sure the Inquisition will have all the power it needs to close that Breach. You are Templars no longer, and we will not tolerate any violence against those who are innocent.’ Maxwell turned to me and nodded as if he had seen the fear in my eyes.

Delrin bowed again, not uttering a word. I knew they would make trouble with the mages still, but these men were in need of a new cause. Templars always want to fight something. At least they’d be good if we’re ever being attacked. They just need to stay away from me. Far… far away. The Templars turned their backs to us and walked towards their fallen comrades, cradling them in their arms to carry them away to bury them. But there was no time to grieve, we all knew that.

‘Oi! You smashed that demon’s arse pretty good!’ The young elven woman who had helped during battle walked towards our group, her lips quirked into a dorky smile. I looked her up and down
suspiciously, from her funky chopped bangs to her sprout-like nose and freckles. ‘Glad to see you’re… well you’re kind of plain really? All that talk and you’re just… a person.’ Maxwell stared at her with an open mouth. She really doesn’t mince words, does she? ‘I mean, it’s all good, innit? The important thing is, you glow? You’re the Herald thingy?’

Maxwell smiled, brushed off his armour coat and looked up to the girl like he hadn’t just fought a demon in his mind, almost lost his life fighting it, and made an alliance with the Templars while disbanded them in one go, ‘First of all, thank you for your arrows.’ He said politely, ‘And second, yes, some call me the Herald of Andraste. But who are you, exactly?’

‘Name’s Sera. Heard you were comin’ here, didn’t expect this whole lot to happen.’ Sera looked around her and raised her eyebrows before wiggling them in a faked surprise. ‘But I’m always in for kickin’ some demon’s butt. I’d like to join that Inquisition thingy of yours.’

Maxwell laughed while Cassandra made an angry face and tried to step forward, but he pushed her back slightly. ‘Tell me who you are a little bit more first, before I make this decision.’

‘Well… it’s like this… you heard about the friends of Red Jenny? That’s me. Well, I’m one. So is a fence in Montfort, some woman in Kirkwall. There were three in Starkhaven. Brothers or something. It’s just a name, yeah? It lets little people, “friends”, be part of something while they stick it to nobles they hate. So here in your face, I’m Sera. “The Friends of Red Jenny” are sort of out there. I can use them to help you. Plus arrows.’ The girl kept rambling, and I wondered if she’d ever stop.

‘The Inquisition has spies already. Can you add to these professionals?’

The girl next started to explain how we “important people” were on top, and something about cods and crushing while making kissing noises, and that her little people could help us to information no one else would get. I didn’t get it all though, her rambling made me dizzy. ‘Look’, she finally finished, ‘Do you need people or not? I want to get everything back to normal. Like you?’

‘Herald, I do not think…’ Cassandra started, but Maxwell raised his hand to stop her, turning his face to show he was thinking.

‘We could use every able man and woman, Cassandra.’ He finally said after some minutes. ‘All right, Sera. I could use you and your “friends”.’

‘Yes! Get in good before you’re too big to like. That’ll keep your breeches were they should be.’ What now? ‘Anyway, Haven. See you there, Herald. This will be grand!’ Sera jumped up and down with glee and then ran off with a happy scream and something about selling breeches. I knew we would see her appear at Haven sooner or later.

Maxwell sighed, ‘Good, now can we all please get some rest. I kind of need it.’

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Normally, this would’ve been a one-day visit, but we were too tired to travel more. The people of Val Royeaux were in awe of what had happened that day. A “famous” owner of a highly expensive tavern, or he called it an “auberge royale”, offered us a one night stay for the whole party. He probably did it so he could boast to his friends, but we accepted the offer gladly.

I was happy we got a free stay at a warm tavern, but still hoped we would leave this city, this country, tomorrow. I wanted to go home as soon as possible, before the Templars, just to see Haven safe and Templar-free for as long as I could.

The tavern was just out of town, and as we strolled out of the marketplace, a small figure in the
shadows showed herself before us. A woman, elven, small of stature, and dressed in familiar circle robes, walked slowly towards us. I looked down at her, not another one who wants to join, I just want to sleep.

‘If I might have a moment of your time?’ The woman, who I guessed was in her forties, maybe fifties already, had a soothing voice, but her eyes seemed almost… glazed? Trying not to stand out, I quickly closed my blue eye, but the woman stayed the same. Good. No demon. At least we got that going for us.

Cassandra turned to the elf with big eyes, ‘Grand Enchanter Fiona?’

Solas took a step forward, standing right in front of me, ‘Leader of the mage rebellion. Is it not dangerous for you to be here?’ He looked behind his broad shoulders at me, but I shook my head. Safe.

‘I heard of this gathering. And I wanted to see the fabled Herald of Andraste with my own eyes. That demon you took down there, it was a good fight indeed. You have quite some talented mages on your side.’ The woman tried to look my way, but Solas positioned himself more and more in front of me. Why was he being so protective now?

‘I’m surprised the leader of the mages wasn’t at the Conclave?’ Maxwell interrupted, making Fiona focus on him again.

‘Yes’, Cassandra said with a cautious tone, ‘you were supposed to be, and yet somehow you avoided death.’

‘As did the Lord Seeker, or at least his imposter now it seems. Both of us sent negotiators in our stead, in case it was a trap.’ Smart, would’ve done the same. ‘I won’t pretend I’m not glad to live. I lost many dear friends that day. It disgusts me to think the Templars will get away with it, yet, you allied with them?’

‘I did, but that does not mean I cannot ally with you. I am not choosing sides in this war of yours, I just want this world not to be destroyed. We need to seal the Breach, we all have a responsibility to close it.’ Maxwell stared at the Enchanter seriously, but I knew he was dead tired inside, done with all those negotiations. But this had to be done, we needed them as much as they needed us.

‘Good’, Fiona smiled, ‘Then consider this an invitation to Redcliffe: come meet with the mages. An alliance can help us both, after all. And we will find a way to work together, all of us.’ She tried to look at me again, but Solas didn’t let her. ‘I hope to see you there. Au revoir, my Lord Herald.’ The leader of the rebellion smiled coyly, curtsied and turned away.

Great, now we have to travel to the Hinterlands again. I hoped we’d stop at Haven first.

Varric patted Maxwell’s back, ‘Never thought you were such a good negotiator. I should let you deal with my publisher!’ The Dwarf laughed, but I could see the exhaustion in his eyes.

‘Come’, Cassandra said, her eyes not leaving Fiona’s figure as she disappeared in the shadows again, ‘Let us return to that tavern.’

Chapter End Notes
Hope you liked it! Opinions? Comments and kudos are always welcome!
'You seem tired.'

'That's because I am.'

'They are working you too hard over there. You really shouldn’t overexert yourself…'

'I’m… not. I just need to rest a bit. You mind me staying here?’

'You know I don’t… I love it when you’re here. I’m just worried, you know.'

'I know.'

Daniel took a step closer to the bed and sat right next to me. I folded my tired arms behind my head like a pillow of muscles and bones. The clan did train me, hard, every single day I was there. This place was where I would come to relax, to be myself. I could be myself with the Dalish, especially with Nenhara, but with Daniel it was different. With him, I felt like a normal girl again. With him I could be… human. Like I was.

The Dalish on the other hand, underlined the fact that I was Elven, different from before. They focussed on it, on the history I never had a connection with, on the ears I never felt, on the magic I never had nor wished to have. The clan was my family, my new family, but they unintentionally reminded me of what I wasn’t, never could be. I would never be one of them, always the outsider. I would never be Thedosian, Elven, Dalish… but I could also never be human, an earthling, normal. I was nothing, yet I was all and everything in between. Daniel didn’t look at me for what I had been or what I was supposed to be. I was nothing, yet I was all and everything in between. Daniel didn’t look at me for what I had been or what I was supposed to be.

To him, I was just Saeris.

Just me.

Daniel wiped away a stray hair from my face and folded it behind my ears, which twitched by his touch. I smiled as I stared at his young face, at his perfect kind eyes, his bright long red hair, and the thousands of freckles on his nose and cheeks. I could grow old with this man…

That thought frightened me.

Growing old, here, having a life with him… it meant leaving behind everything I was, all the questions left unanswered. Would he even be willing to live with me?

And like he had seen the questions in my eyes, he smiled tenderly, ‘I wish you could stay with me here, forever.’

I stared at him, feeling how my skin started to glow with warmth. Happiness. A rare feeling. I smiled a little, my ears focussing on the murmuring of the woods outside, on the fire crackling in delight, on Daniel’s soft but trembled breathing. He lowered his head closer and closer to mine. And I closed my eyes, raising my head to meet his.

No sound now but my own heart, beating together with the drum of happiness.
Our lips met, for the first time ever, and I couldn’t feel anything beyond him. His rough hands caressing my cheekbones with infinite care, his warm breath engulfing my mouth, my body and every single inch of my mind. And I leaned in. More and more. And our kiss became deeper, filled with a passion we had cherished for the past couple of years, years that had gone by so quickly, almost feeling like seconds.

But this moment felt like forever. An eternity of blissfulness. And I wished we could become immortal this way.

Daniel let go of my lips, brushing his tongue quickly against mine before he departed, savouring all I was, and all he was. I opened my eyes to stare into his. He smiled, squinting, and then kissed me again softly. And then again. And again. Like he was making up for all the time we didn’t kiss the last couple of years, for the time we hadn’t spent together, for the months we had looked at the sky wishing the clan would let me come here.

The clan, my new family, had asked me before I came here, to think. Learn how to fight, to defend, and stay with them forever, travelling this strange new world. Or refuse, and live with Daniel.

I made my choice. I would tell them tomorrow. I knew they’d understand, and that I would still be able to visit them, even if they moved further away.

And then, I would come back here, to Daniel.

And we would live together, grow old in this eternal happiness we shared.

How little I knew back then, how stupid I was. And that tender moment of happiness would ghost my mind for the rest of my lonely immortal life. A life without my family. Without him.

‘My flower’, he sighed, the corners of his lips curling into a smile.

Without love.

***

The sun crawled between the velvet curtains of my room, glowing warm rays onto my skin, urging me to open my eyes. The bed creaked underneath me as I stretched my limbs. I turned around in the soft blankets, my face buried into the sea of pillows.

A deep sleep had captured me last night, unwilling to let go of me. My muscles protested as I lifted my arms above my head. A grin appeared on my lips, I hadn’t slept this well in weeks. Yesterday so many things had happened. Blood had been spilled, hope had been lost, and regained… and I had been so tired, so… empty? I knew now even my body could become exhausted by using too much magic. This body might be immortal, but it wasn’t made out of steel. What would happen if I push myself too far, I wondered?

I got out of bed, twisted my hair up in a high ponytail and put on my travelling gear, ready to head out.

But first. Breakfast.

The tavern, or “auberge royale” according to the owner, was indeed grand and luxurious. Every member of our party got a separate room with en suite bathroom. Maxwell even got a room with a view and balcony. Must remind him of home. The tavern was located just outside Val Royeaux’ centre, and was actually just a huge mansion filled with servants. Elven servants to be precise. They looked at Solas and I with disgust on their faces, like we had betrayed them in some way. I felt
horrible around them, and didn’t call them for anything. I heard Val Royeaux’ Elves had it even worse than in Kirkwall…

I walked down the long spiralling marble staircase towards the “salle à manger”, or canteen, where I expected the rest of our party to be. But when I entered the large restaurant, no one I recognized seemed to be seated anywhere. Only some nobles and rich merchants, probably on business trips, looked up from their tables. Some even stopped sipping from their freshly pressed juice as I entered. Awkwardly, I skimmed the hall, but no familiar faces were seated anywhere.

‘They are not here.’ Solas said as he appeared next to me.

I almost screamed, but clutched my heart instead. ‘Fenedhis, Solas, you scared me.’

‘Ir abelas’, he chuckled, ‘The Herald has been invited to a salon.’

‘A salon?’

‘Yes, but let’s speak somewhere else…’ he said as he leant closer to me, nodding towards the staring nobles, who didn’t even look away.

We walked outside of the canteen and into the lounge, where nobody seemed to be at this hour. I bet a lot of schemes were planned in this room.

‘Madame de Fer, the Imperial Enchantress of the Orlesian Court, has invited the Herald to her salon at the chateau of Duke Bastien de Ghislain. She is an important figure in Orlesian politics, and we could not refuse this offer.’

I stared at Solas for a second before I said, ‘And they went already… without us?’

‘The Herald did not want to wake you up since you overexerted yourself yesterday. Therewithal, two elven apostates might not be the right company to a salon.’

‘But…’

‘He did leave you a note’, Solas rumbled in his pockets, ‘here.’

I opened the scrap of paper with a frown on my forehead.

Saeris dear,

Don’t be angry. Cass and Varric are with me.
Will be back by tonight. You can kick my ass later.
Solas will stay with you.

Your favourite Herald,
Maxwell Trevelyan

I sighed and folded the paper again before fumbling it inside my pocket. ‘He could’ve just woke me up. I’m fine, really.’

‘I am sure he meant well.’ Solas smiled.

‘Didn’t you want to go?’
‘I did. I adore the heavy blend of power, intrigue and danger that permeates those events. But there will be other occasions to do so.’

‘Yes.. now you have to babysit me, that’s way better.’

‘I do think it is… more interesting.’ Solas chuckled.

‘Humpf’, I sighed and placed my hands on my hips. Was Solas making fun of me too? This day keeps getting better.

‘The Herald has given me this message. I need to send it to Leliana by raven. Come, there is a post outside by the stables.’ Solas nodded and walked past me. I followed him outside. Before the mansion was a botanic garden, large and full of trees and plants I had only seen before in the remotest places of Thedas. Quite a collection indeed. We followed a path that led towards the stables, where a raven post was located and letters could be sent. With the Inquisition’s vigil, we didn’t even have to pay.

‘What’s the letter about?’ I asked hoping Solas would know.

‘Details about what has happened yesterday. The Herald wrote it last night. It contains information about what he has seen in Envy’s dream. It must be sent to Leliana with the utmost urgency.’

I nodded. Even I did not know what Maxwell had seen after I left his mind. What more did we know now? I had to speak with him when he got back.

We posted the letter, the postboy guaranteeing he’d use the fastest and most trustworthy raven to carry it.
I stared at the pitch black bird that spread its wings, the letter attached to its collar, and flew away towards home. I wanted to go too. If only I could fly. ‘What do we do now?’

Solas looked down at me, a calculating look in his eyes. I swallowed deeply, feeling the nauseating ache rumbling in my stomach again. Good that I haven’t had breakfast yet, because it would’ve come back out again. ‘We could visit the city…’

‘No!’ I almost yelled, but then scraped my throat, ‘Better we’d not… I don’t think we, being Elves, will be quite welcome in the shops and such. Besides, I don’t really like… their kind.’

‘Humans?’ He quirked an eyebrow.

‘No…’ I leant somewhat closer to him, whispering, ‘I mean Orlesians. That kind.’

‘I understand.’ Solas nodded politely, ‘then, walk with me?’

I nodded. Let’s skip breakfast then, or I’ll leave a trail of puke in this garden. Solas bound his hands behind his back and strode towards the path that led inwards the botanic garden. I wiped away a stray hair and followed him. We quietly strolled through the hedges, the labyrinth of plants and gazebos.

‘Why do you detest the people of Orlais?’ He said after some minutes of walking, when we were completely alone and away from the servants and nobles.

What do I answer? I can’t say I fought them during the Fereldan Rebellion, can I? ‘I uhm… have a bad history with them.’ They killed the man I loved, my family, my sister. They hunted us until we got mad. They took away everything I’d cared for. I looked up to Solas, my eyes betraying the choking feelings that were bursting in my throat, and he knew not to ask any further.
‘You fought greatly yesterday.’ I coughed to change the subject.

‘As did you.’

‘Thanks, but… I still wasn’t… strong enough. I couldn’t help Maxwell fight Envy in his mind. It… pushed me out.’

Solas hummed, his eyes skimming the path before us. ‘Dreams are a complicated matter. When you enter someone else’s dream, out of familiar boundaries, you lose some power you might’ve had over the Fade. Dreams of dreamers and demons are dangerous. If strong enough, they can find you and imprison you there forever.’

I remained silent.

‘Never lose sight of the way out. It can close behind you anytime.’

‘Teach me.’ I finally looked up again. ‘Teach me to get into dreams and not be pushed out… Can you?’

Solas smiled ever so softly, ‘I can try.’

We walked for a while longer, talking and discussing what had happened in the Fade with Envy. I left out the bit about Maxwell seeing a fake me and a fake Cassandra being wooed by Envy dressed in the Herald’s face. It was too personal, and I knew Maxwell wouldn’t like it. When the sun had risen high into the sky, I retired back to my quarters to rest and eat. I couldn’t wait until Maxwell got back from the salon. On one hand, I was glad I didn’t have to go. A ball full of Orlesians? No thank you. But on the other hand, I was here to protect Maxwell. I could’ve swallowed my pride and stayed by his side, even in an Orlesian salon. I didn’t need to rest. I can rest when I get back home.

When the skies had started to turn from blue to a soft orange, Maxwell arrived back at the tavern with Varric and Cassandra. I ran outside towards them, Solas on my heel.

‘Saeris!’ Maxwell smiled and opened his arms for a hug, but I stopped right in front of him. No intention of hugging. My eyes scanned his body, my eye twirling to see if anything was off. But he was alright. ‘I’m fine, I’m fine!’ he laughed.

‘Why wouldn’t you be, darling?’ A gorgeous woman stepped from behind the party, her ebony skin gleaming against the stark white fashionable Orlesian enchanter robes she wore. A steel, embellished and horned helmet was placed on top of her head, elongating her slender neck. I stared at her, from the gold encrusted boots to the snobby sneer on her full lips. Who was this?

I ignored her and looked at Maxwell again, questions troubling my eyes. ‘I would’ve come with you.’ I whispered.

‘I know.’ Maxwell hushed. ‘Saeris, Solas, let me introduce you.’ He straightened his back and raised his eyebrows as I frowned. ‘This is Vivienne de Fer, Enchanter to the Imperial Court of Orlais.’ The woman, Vivienne, raised her chin, a small smile curling on her lips, but her eyes remained cold. My brows knitted together. Was she coming with us? I don’t like her. ‘Madame’, Maxwell turned to Vivienne, ‘this is Solas, our Fade expert.’

Solas stepped forward and gave a small but polite curtsy, ‘Good evening.’

Vivienne nodded, her sneer deepening as Maxwell turned to me, ‘And this is Saeris, Healer of the Inquisition.’ And the Herald’s bodyguard. So watch it, girl. I raised my chin in response. Yes, I have a title too.
‘I’m *honoured* to make your acquaintance’, I smiled sheepishly. I hoped she understood sarcasm.

Vivienne smiled like she hadn’t heard me, ‘I have heard so much about you. We should absolutely speak sometime, my dear.’

‘Madame de Fer has joined our Inquisition, and will be travelling with us back to Haven.’ Cassandra said, her voice neutral.

Fuck. ‘That is great. The more souls, the merrier.’ Not. I looked back to Maxwell, my eyes pleading, ‘When will we resume our journey?’

‘We’ll be leaving shortly now’, Maxwell grinned as he eyed me, ‘And thanks to Madame, we’ll be travelling in style.’

***

In style he said. It’ll be fun he said.

Fun isn’t what I think about when travelling the Waking Sea by luxurious private yacht. Raiders, that’s what I think about. Blood-thirsty, prisoner-taking pirates. I *hated* travelling by boat ever since I was taken by Cecilia’s Raider ship together with Sybil. Yes, I survived, but it was pure luck. I also had to stay in a cell below deck for what felt like weeks while drunk pirates tried to get it on with me. It wasn’t the best experience I’d had in Thedas.

Vivienne de Fer “leased” her luxury cruise ship to the Inquisition. It was a nice gesture if it wasn’t so obviously superficial. A show of money, of status. Look what I have! Typically Orlesian. There were advantages though, like arriving at Haven much sooner, and being able to sleep in a good bed a while longer. While it took us more than a month to return to Haven by foot, it was only two weeks by boat. Maybe a week and a half if we didn’t have to make a detour. Just before we boarded the yacht, a raven had scorch through the skies down to Maxwell, a letter from the advisors around its neck. The letter didn’t mention anything that had happened at Val Royeaux, it was too early for that news to arrive there, but it did mention something else. While we had been away from Haven, a mercenary group had contacted the Inquisition, springing Leliana’s interest. The group was at the Storm Coast and had asked to negotiate with the Herald personally. Could be a trap. Or, could be just a group of merry men trying to make a deal. It was worth checking out, since the mercenary group, according to the letter, had an infamous reputation. It was a small detour of just some days, but every day that passed by, was a day less of a Templar-free Haven.

I knew I wouldn’t make it on time now.

Home would never be the same.

 Funny how an immortal hates change, no?

I leant over the balustrade, staring into the deep blue abyss that was the Waking Sea. Only two hours of sailing, and I already started to feel sick.

‘Don’t like sailing, do you?’ Varric walked up to me and leant against the balustrade.

I looked down to him, a grimace curling over my face, ‘Not really, no. Bad experience.’

‘You sailed before?’

‘Yes… when I moved from Ferelden to the Free Marches during my travels…’ How do I skip the part about it being more than a hundred years ago?
‘Took the ferry to Kirkwall, didn’t you? Lots of Fereldan folks did that.’

‘Yes… until we got raided by the Felicisima Armada. Wasn’t the best experience.’

‘Was the Captain named Isabela by any chance?’

‘No.’

‘Too bad, could’ve been a fun trip.’ Varric chuckled. ‘But hey, you survived.’

‘Apparently’, I winked at him, ‘by pure luck.’

‘Do I hear an epic story coming up?’

I laughed, ‘No, no there wasn’t anything special about it.’

‘It doesn’t sound like that.’ Varric lifted a brow at me, curiosity curling behind his eyes.

‘Maybe another time,’ I grinned, ‘Don’t want to think about it as long as I’m on this boat.’

‘Bet that isn’t good for morale.’ Varric nodded and pushed himself from the balustrade, walking towards Maxwell who was standing near the rudder of the ship. I sighed and looked up to Maxwell, following his gaze that stared towards the horizon. He had been quite quiet lately. He looked so tired too. I knew this wasn’t the time to speak about Envy and what had happened. I bet he had too much on his mind to bother explaining it all to me.

The waves crashed against the wooden ship, and I heard it creak against the power. I closed my eyes again as I followed the rocking of the deck, and my mind wandered to memories from long before the Dragon Age. I remembered Sybil’s crying face, distraught from the loss of her mother. I remembered how Cecilia had looked at me, that grin on her lips as I made her that deal. I remembered Aarón, and the muted sounds of his fiddle strumming sailor’s songs. I remembered being locked up below deck, counting the days by his melodies. I remembered that new sense of adventure…

‘You came from the Circle of Ostwick, did you not?’ Vivienne’s voice brought me out of my trance, and I straightened my back, trying not to grimace as I looked to her. She was a tall woman, just as tall as me. She had seemed young at first, but if I looked somewhat closer, I noticed small wrinkles appearing next to her sneering eyes. ‘Senior Enchanter Lydia was a dear friend of mine. Where you at all acquainted?’

I stared at her. This is such a small world. I recalled Lydia, she was the only one I could’ve considered my “friend” at the Circle. But she had been blinded by love, and that’s what killed her, I think. ‘Yes, she was one of my instructors.’ I said coldly, swallowing my sentiments.

‘You are lucky to have studied with her. Lydia had a wealth of knowledge. I understand she was killed by one of her own students when the Ostwick Circle rebelled…’

‘We don’t know who killed her.’ Could’ve been that snobby Ruth, or her ex-lover, Tibald. I hadn’t been there, I was… with Simon when it happened. Doesn’t matter now, don’t think about it. It’s over.

Vivienne hummed. ‘The Ostwick Circle had many loyalists. Where you one of them?’ I understood what she was saying right now. As Orlais’ Imperial Enchanter, she was pro Circle. She wanted to know if I was on her team. An ally, or… an enemy. I was neither.
I scoffed. ‘No. I was the one who made the door explode and walked out of there first.’

I saw Vivienne’s stare falter a little and then her eyes turned colder. ‘So you are with the rebels?’

‘No. I am with no one. I want nothing to do with anything that deals with the Circle. Not the rebels or the loyalists.’ This is not my war. I am not a Circle mage. My magic is different and they didn’t teach me anything beyond fear.

‘Unfortunately, we are all part of this war. The outcome of it will affect every single one of us.’ Vivienne turned to me, staring into my eyes with a serious look. ‘One day, you might not have a choice but to choose a side.’

I raised an eyebrow. ‘Maybe. I have been an apostate all my life, being in the Circle never changed that. The rebels aren’t my kind. They never knew what life I had, they only knew the life in the Circle. I will never be able to choose a side if my side does not exist, Madame, as far as I know.’

Vivienne clicked her tongue. ‘In my own experience, nothing is more deadly to a young mage than a lack of knowledge. Never forget, my dear. Magic is dangerous, just as fire is dangerous. Anyone who forgets this truth gets burned.’ She turned around to walk away with a snazzy pace, but she almost yelped as Solas appeared next to me. Why does he do that? ‘Ah’, she sneered, ‘Another apostate?’

Solas smiled politely, his hands clasped behind his back. ‘That is correct, Enchanter. I too did not train in your Circle.’

Vivienne regained her posture. ‘Well, dear, I hope you can take care of yourself, should we encounter anything outside your experience.’

‘I will try, in my own fumbling way, to learn from how you helped seal the rifts at Haven.’ Solas didn’t betray any emotion before he said, ‘Ah, wait. My memory misleads me. You were not there.’ Ow damn. Good to know Solas doesn’t need magic to burn someone.

Vivienne scoffed and raised her chin and then walked away to her sheltered bedroom below deck. Bet that was quite a hit, being out-played by an Elven apostate. I looked at Solas and smiled, ‘You just made my day!’

Solas chuckled, his eyes boring into mine. I looked away quickly, fearing my sea sickness would combine with that familiar ache and I’d throw up… again. I raised my arms above my head to stretch my limbs and vaguely smiled at Solas, who leant against the balustrade with one arm. ‘You do not seem comfortable.’ He said.

‘I’m not. Don’t like sailing.’

‘Did you not sail often, during you travels?’ He said with a neutral tone, but I saw his curiosity.

‘Very rarely. I mostly did everything by foot.’

Solas turned his head to me, and I focussed on the drop of sweat that fell down from his eyebrow to his cheekbone to his neck. ‘That must have taken up quite a lot of time.’

‘Y… yes.’ I smiled nervously. What was his game? ‘I’m going to get something to eat, maybe that’ll make me feel better.’

Solas nodded and stared at me as I walked off.
When the sun had gone down, our party assembled near the centre of the deck. Torches were hanging down from the mast of the ship, casting warm lights on our group. We sat down in a circle on the floor, except for Vivienne of course, who had a chair brought up from her room. Varric began telling stories, which started to become a tradition during our travels. Maxwell was dozing off after the first fifteen minutes, his head leaning against Cassandra’s shoulder. She didn’t seem to mind as her cheeks glowed a soft red. As Varric told his story, Vivienne interrupted him countless times. ‘Is that true, my dear?’, ‘I have heard otherwise’, ‘That seems unlikely, dear.’ And I saw Varric getting more annoyed by the minute.

‘Hey, Twinkle, tell me about that time with the Raiders.’ Varric winked tiredly. Solas, who was leaning against a pole, in the dark, looked up to me.

‘Another time, perhaps.’ I smiled politely.

‘Pretty please?’

I stared at the torches’ curling flames and smiled. ‘I can’t give you a story, but I can give you a song?’

‘Even better!’ Varric turned to look at Vivienne, and she huffed.

Closing my eyes, I let my voice carry the familiar tones. No fiddle was needed, just my memory. A song I first heard from the Raiders, and the first song I had sung with my fiddle in The Hanged Man.

I've been a wild rover for many a year
And I've spent all my money on whiskey and beer
And now I'm returning with gold in great store
And I never will play the wild rover no more

And it's no, nay, never
No, nay, never, no more
And I'll play the wild rover
No never, no more

...

***

‘You should sing more often, Twinkle.’ Varric yawned.

‘Maybe…’ I smiled, my eyes getting tired too. ‘But for now, I’m returning to bed.’ Maxwell had already stumbled to bed, and so had Vivienne and Cassandra. Varric nodded one too many times, indicating he too would go to bed soon. I stood up from our little circle, and strolled back to my cabin. As I stopped before the door, a voice suddenly whispered in my ear and I yelped.

‘JESUS’, I cried, and then composed myself to whisper, ‘Solas, damn it, stop being so sneaky.’

Solas leant against the wall next to my door, his grey eyes almost enlightening his face. ‘Jesus?’

‘Never mind that’, I sighed.

Even in the dark I could feel Solas smirk. ‘Come meet with me.’

A blush creeped over my cheeks, and I swallowed hard to keep the nauseating ache away, ‘Excuse me?’
'In the Fade. Find me.’ A challenge.

I nodded and grinned back. Solas hummed and pushed himself off the wall to go back to his own cabin. I stayed until I saw his figure completely disappear in the dark. Then, I entered my room and wouldn’t come out until noon.

***

The Fade surrounded me, lulling me. I was in The Hanged Man, in Kirkwall. Through the small windows, I could see it was by nightfall. The smell of ale and sweat filled my nostrils. A soft murmuring danced through the tavern air, and I saw shadows of would-be customers, but I didn’t feel like giving all of them a face.

No, I wasn’t here to stay. I had to find Solas. But how do I do that?

I walked towards the door of the tavern that led to Lowtown and placed my hand on the rusty door knob. But before I twisted it to open, I thought of Solas.

Not the ache I had with him, not that warning feeling, but who he was as a person.


I twisted the door knob, and it opened silently. But not to Lowtown, Kirkwall, but to a place somewhere else. I gazed upon a large open field encircled by huge, strange trees that I hadn’t seen before. Rocks floated like clouds in the skies, waterfalls of not water, but magic pouring down from them to a place beyond the horizon. I blinked my eyes, not once, but twice as I saw spirits jumping from tree to tree, drifting through this place with no worries. Here were no boundaries that kept them away, they were welcome here. Like friends.

I stepped through the door, but didn’t close it behind me. I left it open by a crack. Always keep sight of the way out. I had listened.

I strolled towards that meadow, and with every step, my eyes adverted to the door. Still there. Still there.

‘Good. You found me.’ Solas appeared from behind the trees. This time I saw him coming.

I smiled, ‘Wasn’t that difficult, actually.’ I looked him up and down, my green eye twirling and spitting. Not a reflection. Just him, dressed in his everyday clothes. A simple cotton tunic, no green woollen overcoat this time, his tattered pants and foot wraps, and his favourite jawline necklace.

I glanced at the door again. Still there.

Solas stepped around me, his eyes almost… checking me out? ‘Hey!’ I mumbled and stepped away from him before realizing I wasn’t wearing my normal gear anymore, but a simple white dress. ‘What the…’

‘You stopped focussing.’ He smiled innocently.

I hummed and willed my other clothes back, and with a snap, I was again wearing my travel outfit, just like before. ‘You got me.’ I smiled sheepishly. ‘So, how will this training go?’

Solas held his head to the side never looking away from my eyes, ‘I will test you, see if you can learn to remain focussed.’
'I am.'

‘You are now’, he corrected. ‘Walk with me.’ We strolled through the meadow and towards the forest. As we entered the treeline, I could still see my door, and I willed it silently to follow me through the woods so I could keep an eye on it.

‘Where are we?’

‘A place I found during my travels. Many spirits venture to this place in the Fade.’

‘Like a gathering?’

‘Something like that.’

‘You told me’, glance at the door, still there, glance at the outfit, luckily still there as well, ‘you made friendships with spirits. Can I meet them?’

Solas raised his brows a little, ‘You would?’

‘I met spirits before. A spirit of Learning once helped to guide me. But I haven’t seen it ever since.’

‘The existence of spirits is not of a fleeting nature. That spirit will find you again when you have need of it.’

‘I don’t really need a spirit of Learning now, I have you, no?’ I smiled playfully. Solas nodded, his face remaining neutral. ‘But, tell me, how do you know you aren’t conversing with a demon?’

Solas hummed approvingly, ‘I learned how to defend myself against more aggressive spirits and how to interact safely with the rest.’

‘Aggressive spirits… meaning demons?’

Solas gave me an encouraging look as he said, ‘The Fade, as you know, reflects the mind of the living. If you expect a spirit of wisdom, for example, to be a pride demon, it will adapt. And if your mind is free from corrupting influences? If you understand the nature of the spirit? They can be fast friends.’

‘I never knew that… Maybe next time I encounter a demon, or spirit, I’ll think about what you said.’ I smiled.

Solas smiled back and raised his hand. I followed his gestures, seeing how his fingers painted invisible patterns in the air, and suddenly the trees turned aside, giving way to another open meadow. ‘Come’, he smiled.

And I followed, asking more and more questions about his spirit friends. And he answered them softly, telling me about spirits of Wisdom and Purpose, and in turn, I told him about Learning, and how it had been bound to Tsura, the Rivaini seer I’d met. And he listened to me with intrigue in his eyes. The more we talked, the more I seemed to forget. The more my focus seemed to wade away like foam.

The door! I stopped talking and looked back, my eyes full of panic. It was gone. I turned to Solas and he smiled innocently.

Shit!

I took a step back, willing the door with my mind. Return. Return? Return!
'Focus, Saeris.' Solas walked around me, his voice strumming through my mind. Focus. Focus. Focus. I opened my eyes again, and saw the door again standing near the back of the meadow.

'Good.' Solas chuckled.

How did he do all of this with such ease? I’m around two hundred years old and even I can’t control the Fade like that. How much time did he spend sleeping?

I sighed, wiping the sweat from my forehead. ‘You really know how to challenge someone.’

‘As a teacher should.’ Solas hummed. ‘But in its entirety, Saeris, you are doing remarkably well.’

‘I had practice’, I cursed.

‘You had.’ Solas hummed as he stepped closer to me again. ‘You have your way out in eyesight, and know how to find it when lost. Yet, never lose your focus.’

‘I’m trying.’ I laughed tiredly and looked up to him again. He came closer now, maybe too close. If we hadn’t been in the Fade, my stomach would’ve emptied itself already. But now, silence overtook us, and I felt my eye twist and twirl in its orbit.

‘You are truly fascinating’, Solas whispered, and I wondered if I was supposed to hear that.

I swallowed hard. Control that heartbeat of yours, I’m sure he can hear it. Don’t act all nervous now. Why would I even be nervous?

Solas stepped closer again, until his face was right up to mine. And deep in my mind, a lost memory of Daniel ghosted me. A memory of his eyes, of his smile… a memory of happiness.

And it scared me.

Solas suddenly raised his hands and rested them on my shoulders. I looked up to him with a confused stare. ‘What are you…’

But Solas chuckled and whispered, his lips almost touching my ears, ‘You lost your focus.’

And then he pushed me out of his dream.

***

I pushed myself up, my elbows deep in the fluffy mattress of the bed. The boat was still rocking solemnly on the waves, the drum of the wind against the sails trembling through my cabin.

That bastard pushed me out. Damn it! ‘Fenedhis lasa, Solas!’ I threw my arms against my pillows as a silent curse.

I resumed sleep again not much later, but the Fade couldn’t find me anymore that night.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! So, I have a favour to ask. I’m not entirely satisfied with the synopsis I currently have for this fic, and I was wondering if one of you would want to help me out? If you have any ideas, comment them down below! Of course I’ll mention your
name if your synopsis is used!

If you liked this chapter, you can always leave me a kudo or a comment!
'You’d know what I’d do for Flissa’s venison stew?’ Maxwell crossed his arms over his body, cursing under his hood while rain seeped through his clothes. ‘And dry land?’

‘I hope it’s not to keep whining like that, Herald.’ Varric sighed.

We had been travelling by boat for almost two weeks now, and the closer we got to the Storm Coast, the worse the weather became. Well, they didn’t call it the Storm coast for nothing. But even though it was cold and wet and grey, it meant that we were almost arriving to shore. What would I give to be on solid ground again? This back and forth rocking drove me mad.

I really hated sailing.

I crossed my arms under my cape, feeling my hood gliding more and more over my face until I could only see the fur brim covering my eyes. Maxwell walked to where I stood, close to the snout of the ship. I heard his footsteps stop before me and his smile greeted me as he pulled the cape from my head.

I cursed, pulling it over me again.

‘Don’t want to get your hair wet?’ he grinned.

‘Asshole’ I laughed and gave him a small push.

Maxwell crossed his arms, leaning against the same barrel I was leaning against, his eyes staring to the horizon. ‘How’s it hanging?’

I scoffed, ‘Uhm, fine?’

‘Have you been to the Storm Coast before?’ Maxwell lifted his eyebrow.

Yes. When I left Nenhara. When I left Daniel. When I fought with the rebellion. When Sybil died. The Storm Coast was a place of only melancholy. Highever, West Hill, all of the Coastlands… I had spent a lot of time here… The memories were coming back the closer we got. ‘Some time ago, very quickly, when I left home for the Free Marches.’

‘Home…’ Maxwell mused, the word humming between his lips, ‘Would you ever go back?’

‘There’s nothing to go back to.’ I swallowed, ‘My home is here now. With the Inquisition.’

Maxwell turned to me then and smiled faintly, ‘I miss home… Is that weird?’

I turned to him, my brows knitting together, ‘No, of course not. But your home is still there, Maxwell, and it will still be there after all of this is done. You will go back, someday. I’m sure of it.’

Maxwell smiled a little, ‘You know, my sister would’ve liked you. She has your… spunk.’

‘Spunk?’ I grinned, ‘And you have a sister?’

‘I do.’ He smiled faintly, a sad tone to it, and looked to his shoes. ‘But I haven’t seen or heard
Evelyn in years. I wonder if she’s alright.’

‘If she has your stubbornness, I don’t think you have to worry.’, I smiled, not knowing what else to say… or feel. ‘I had a sister too, you know.’

Maxwell lifted his head to me, his eyes finding mine. I continued, ‘She died a long time ago. You remind me of her very much.’

‘Was she uncontrollably handsome too?’ The Herald smiled, his shoulders slumping, but I appreciated the try to get me laughing.

‘Yep. Exactly like her.’ I laughed and shuddered, straightening my back.

‘Your sister, how did she…’ he started

‘She was killed.’ My voice thundered through the rain, the thought of Sybil making my voice hoarse. I bit my lip and swallowed, trying very hard not to cry. Sybil wouldn’t want me to cry. ‘Well, I’m going back to my cabin for a bit, nothing to do out here anyway.’

Maxwell smiled faintly and patted me on my shoulder. ‘I’m staying here for a bit. The quiet does me good.’ He looked at his hands, which were blue because of the ink. A letter from the advisors had been sent to us a week and a half ago. And by the sound of it, the Inquisition was in disarray and in urgent need of their Herald. Ex-Templars had already started showing up and Cullen had been busy retaining them all, making space for them to sleep and to train in. And Josephine had gone mad with administrative work. But it was Leliana’s part that had been the most urgent.

The Elder One. That was the name Maxwell had heard in Envy’s dream. He’d told me, at least. We didn’t know who this guy was, what he was, or what he wanted. We only knew he was the one who probably opened the Breach. But why?

And there were other things, things they weren’t telling me.

Leliana was in charge of tracking this Elder guy, and everything she found, she sent to Maxwell in hope he’d recognize something. But he never did. And so the coming and going of letters went on.

I threw my cape over the chair that stood against the wall of my cabin, right under the little window that was clouded by the rain. I sighed, kicking my feet in the air as I laid flatly on my bed. I had seen the others’ rooms. Cassandra’s, Maxwell’s, even Varric’s room was grand and luxurious. Cassandra even got a dressing. That Vivienne gave Solas and I the worst rooms. And I wondered if they were guest rooms or servant’s rooms? Not that I minded, I was happy to have a bed, and that’s all I needed, but I just felt like Vivienne was “punishing” us because we were apostates. Or Elves.

All in all, the only thing I had to do in my room was sleep, and I slept enough, because sleeping was the only productive thing I could do right now. In my dreams, I could train. And I had done so every single night we’d been on this boat. Sometimes, Solas would come to me and we’d practice Fade shaping, Fade localizing (like finding things and so on), and other times, I would go to Solas and he would train me to stay focused, to change the dreams of others, not just my own. He taught me how to not get pushed out. Most of the time though, he managed to trick me some way or another, and I’d lose my focus, only to stumble out of his dream.

Solas was really good at playing tricks. Who would’ve known?

The training did me good, and I was growing, getting better and better. Solas saw it too, and it became more difficult to push me out with each dream. Tonight, I will not be pushed out. Tonight, it’s his turn.
Lately, Solas was the person I saw most, talked to most, because of the trainings. In my dreams, he felt different. I didn’t feel sick around him, I felt… at ease. Solas seemed to be more at ease too. He laughed more, challenged me, he looked more comfortable there than he was in the waking world. Maybe he was a little bit like me.

***

The glass refilled itself with real but not real ale, and I licked my lips to savour the taste just a little bit more. And then I drank again, and felt the liquid glide through my throat, the taste prickling my tongue, but my stomach remained empty, my mind clear. Real ale was more effective.

‘A bar?’ Solas stepped around me, taking a seat at the counter.

‘Yep.’ I said without looking at him and swigged from my cup again. ‘You don’t like bars, Solas?’

Solas hummed, his face neutral, ‘That depends on the occasion.’ I wondered which occasion he meant.

‘You are here early, by the way.’ I smiled faintly, licking my lips again.

‘So are you.’

‘Dreaming is better than being awake. I’m sick of seeing the sea.’

‘Then, we think alike.’ Solas looked at me, his eyes focussed on my face, my tongue gliding over my lips. And I felt awkward.

‘Would you like something to drink?’ I finally looked up to Solas. His eyes pierced through me like a blade, and it made me nervous. He felt different today, or maybe I was different today… I knew we would be arriving to shore by tomorrow. Being so close to… everything made me feel anxious.

Being so close to Sybil’s grave made me anxious.

I missed her every time I looked at the horizon and thought of the land and the rain and the green forests that betrayed nothing of their bloody past. It made me melancholic.

‘No, thank you.’ Solas said without looking away.

‘Alrighty’, I sighed and gulped my cup of ale in one way down, ‘Let’s get to training then.’

Solas nodded and stood from his seat, his eyes urging me to follow. I did, but left a little door open in the crack of my mind. I didn’t need to visualize that door anymore, I knew it was there, just had to make sure to not let someone else close it. We stepped through the barrier that was my dream, and I felt the energy switch to Solas. We were in his territory now.

Solas rolled back his shoulders, and I saw the soft creaks in his cotton grey shirt. He rolled up his sleeves and turned to me, his steps backwards. I stared at his arms and they seemed stronger than I would’ve thought. ‘Where are we now, Saeris?’

‘Your dream.’ I answered. His dreams were… of a different kind than mine. His dreams were honed, almost real, and spectacularly detailed. Most of his dreams were dreams of magical forests that had long been burned, or cities that had been destroyed. They were memories, not of his own, but those he had seen while wandering the Fade. Now, we were standing in an open field again. Our training ground.
‘Shape it.’ He ordered, his voice low and his eyes focussed solely on me. ‘Make it your own.’

‘I can do that...’ I sighed somewhat doubtful.

Solas nodded scholarly, like a teacher looked at his student. Though his stare was maybe a bit more... profound. A pool of intrigue and shadows of emotions dwelled within his eyes. If only I could unravel this man.

I closed my eyes and focussed. If this was my own dream, a thought would’ve been enough. A single word in my mind, and that whole world of mine would change. But this wasn’t my dream. I was the intruder here. Here, I didn’t think with a softness, with my memories at hand. Here, I couldn’t just imagine something because I wanted it to exist. Here, I had to will it.

I formed a vision in my mind, a vision that had been dwelling there for the last couple of days. A vision I maybe didn’t want to see, but I had to, just so I could see it, put my mind at ease.


The vision was there, I had shaped it before when I first tried to shape the Fade. But when I wanted my vision to become real, an adamant wall of marble and rock and magic pushed me back. Solas. This was his barrier, his ward. I lifted my hand and caressed the wall with my finger slowly, searching for cracks. Solas shuddered, I hadn’t seen him shiver ever before, and I noticed goosebumps appearing over his exposed arm. A smile lingered on my lips, and I looked at him with an open challenge.

Solas squinted his eyes, the icy grey pupils piercing through mine.

A thick pressure suddenly pushed me down. ‘Shit!’ I yelped and fell to the ground. A single drop of blood fell down to the grass from my nose. I brought my hand to my face and wiped the blood away. The pressure still pushed me down, keeping me from touching that barrier of his.

This is what Envy’d done. This is how it had pushed me out. By force.

‘Focus, Saeris.’ Solas crossed his arms behind his back and walked around me. I stared at the ground and the droplet of blood sticking to the sweet green grass. The pressure invaded my head, my mind, until I could only hear my heartbeat drumming through my body, through the field. My eyes looked up to Solas’ footsteps, and I traced his path, focussing on it. Solas stopped before me. ‘Break through me.’ He demanded. A sick feeling clawed in my stomach, a feeling I knew all too well. This ache, this was him. This was Solas as he tried to enter my mind, trying to push me out. And I expected him to win, almost giving up.

Suddenly, his prodding made way for invasion, and I felt him reach for that little open door in my mind, my way back. And as he looked for it, thinking I was giving up while on my knees on the ground, I did the same to him. Silently, gently, a small part of me looked up to his marble barrier. And there, ever so small, was a little crack I could look through. And I felt it like a little breeze on my skin.

Solas was almost at my way out. But when he tried to reach out, a wall of stone erected itself before him. But this wall, this barrier, was mine. ‘That’s not yours, Solas.’ I smiled and pushed myself up. My legs trembled as I met Solas’ eyes. He was standing right in front of me, his breath gliding over my cheeks. His eyes were slightly enlarged, but there was intrigue within them. An open look of
approval. He smirked back at me.

My vision seeped through that little crack I’d found in Solas’ wall. He closed his eyes as I invaded him, pushing his pressure away.

‘Onharos’, he chuckled as the meadow transformed. ‘You have done well.’

I smiled a little as my vision took over from Solas’. I even felt a little energy, a little power that was once solely his, now shift to me. This wasn’t just his dream anymore. It was ours. ‘That wasn’t really nice of you.’

‘If nice would help you push yourself, I would not need to pressure you so.’ He chuckled and then stepped away from me. When there was space between us again, I noticed I had been holding my breath. I sighed deeply, my stomach stopped hurting and my heartbeat slowed down.

We were now back at the Rebellion’s tower in the forests of West Hill. Last time I had been here, in the beginning of my training in the Fade, this place’d just felt fake. The tower was no ruin, the stables were quiet, the sun glowed across the courtyard and it felt almost serene. And… There wasn’t a grave to be seen. That’s why it had felt unreal. Sybil’s grave should be right here, among the graves of her fellow fallen soldiers.

But now, being so close to the real tower, to her real grave, I was happy for this fake version. This place was a memory of before it had all happened, of before Sybil had died. I didn’t understand it last time, but this was supposed to be a happy memory. Sybil was still alive here. Maybe my mind needed to see this one more time, just to stop thinking of that abandoned grave in a dark and forgotten ruin. This was better.

‘You have shown me this before.’ Solas stated as he walked through the courtyard, looking up at the proud stone tower.

‘I have’, I whispered while I stared at the gate, the gate where Sybil’s dead body had been carried through, a gate I had wished I had destroyed, so no corpses could pass through it again. But this gate wasn’t crumbling or surrounded by wounded soldiers and corpses. This gate was just normal, like before, covered in green curling vines. ‘A lot of things happened here. This place has been spooking through my mind as of late… It’s close to the Storm Coast.’

Solas looked at me, noticing the sadness clouding my face. ‘Would you like to return, now we are close?’

‘No. Maybe someday, but I’m not ready for it. Not now.’ I knew this proud fortress was a ruin now, and the sight of Sybil’s forgotten crumbling grave would haunt me forever. I didn’t want to see that. I couldn’t. Not yet.

‘You had told me last time nothing of importance had happened here.’

‘I lied.’ I turned to Solas. ‘Sorry.’ He walked closer to me and I looked up to him and smiled a little. ‘Your dream feels different now, is that normal?’

Solas nodded slowly and rested his hand on my shoulder. I slumped a little, feeling how his touch burned my skin. My heart thumped. It shouldn’t. ‘You truly are a natural at this. With pushing through my barrier, you changed the nature of this dream. It is not mine anymore, neither fully yours.’ His eyes bored through mine, and I noticed small specks of green in them, very small, between the icy blue and grey.

‘You have taught me well.’
Solas chuckled, and for a moment, I wondered if he would come closer. Did I want him to come closer? In the Waking World, this man made me sick. Was it a good idea to let him even come closer? And if I would, could I do this to him? He can come closer to me, like Maxwell, like Sybil and Daniel and all of the friends I had once made. But in the end, he will leave me. In the end, I'll always be alone.

The challenge wasn’t over yet, I reminded myself. This dream wasn’t over. This training wasn’t completed. Let’s end this. Let’s win.

I lifted my hand to his face, and Solas looked up to me in surprise. His eyes got serious, and I knew if I pushed him, he’d walk away. I saw doubt behind his eyes though, thousands of questions floating through his mind. And I wondered what kind of questions they were, and if he’d ever find the answers to them. My hand hovered before his face, but then I lowered it. Don’t take it too far Saeris. You can’t play with feelings. Not his, nor your own. Instead, I rested my hand on his shoulder.

There was a warmth glowing through his skin. Strange, I always had thought Solas was a cold man.

‘Solas’, I whispered and he stared into my eyes, ‘You stopped focusing, my friend.’ Solas opened his eyes wide, and then a smug grin curled on his lips.

I smiled back, and with a flicker of my mind, Solas was pushed out of his own dream.

Payback.

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Bells started to ring, once, then twice, and I sat upright from my bed. My ears budded to the sound of the heavy ring, and my mind struggled to comprehend I was awake now. But then the bell rang again, and I knew now what it meant.

We’ve come to shore.

I brought my hand to my face and rubbed my eyes. As I brought them back down, I saw grains of dried-up blood on my fingertips. Ah, the blood was always real. I shook my head and jolted out of bed, walking to the foggy, small mirror that hung against the cabin wall. I took a cloth and made it wet by summoning ice to my hands, and then fire, and dabbed the damp cloth against my nose until it was clean. After that, I sighed deeply and dressed myself. Warm clothes, enchanted leather foot straps, a waterproof armour jacket, and my favourite cape. The clothes felt warm, dry, and I knew I would be needing them.

We had arrived at the Storm Coast. We were almost home.

I pulled my hood over my head and left my cabin. As I closed my door, my stuff already packed in a bag, I heard heavy footsteps above me. Sailors were up and about, preparing to anchor the ship.

‘We have arrived to shore, I presume.’ Solas was leaning against the wall next to my door. He looked me up and down, his face neutral, but a hint of a smile still lingered on his lips.

I yelped and cursed under my breath. ‘Good morning to you too, Solas.’ I pulled my hood slightly from my head so I could look up to him, defiance in my eyes, ‘Sleep well?’

Solas remained silent, his face still neutral, but his eyes sparkled with something I couldn’t place. He ignored my joke and lifted his chin, nodding towards the stairs that lead to the deck. ‘Shall we see?’

We walked upstairs, a heavy rainstorm greeting us. How very typical for this area.
Maxwell was standing near the balustrade of the ship, his shoulders straightened, shifting from one leg to the other in excitement. Cassandra was standing next to him, her hand on her hips as she peered at the incoming land.

‘Twinkle, there you are!’ Varric walked to were Solas and I were standing, a big grin on his face. ‘And you brought Chuckles.’ Varric lifted one brow to Solas, who decided to ignore the Dwarf. ‘Well, seems like the both of you had a rough night, eh?’

‘No, on the contrary, I slept very, very well.’ I grinned and gave Solas the side-eye.

‘Do you mind, dear?’ Vivienne said from behind me. I looked over my shoulder, staring up at the Enchanter. Madame de Fer looked to me with a sneer as I inspected her outfit, a white ensemble with pale blue accents, a silver-lined umbrella in her hands, keeping her horned headpiece dry. With a smooth motion, Vivienne walked past me, almost pushing me out of the way, and strolled with a sway of her hips to Maxwell, standing right next to his other side. Vivienne said something to him, and I heard Cassandra’s disgusted noise all the way to where I was standing.

‘Come on’, Varric patted my lower back, ‘Let’s go have a look too.’

We walked to the balustrade to stand next to the others. All except for Solas, who remained near the centre of the deck, leaning against an empty barrel. I kept looking at the horizon, through the heavy rain and the thick fog, and there I saw the Coast, its shores grey and rocky.

The boat wouldn’t anchor to this shore, as it had become too dangerous since the Mage-Templar War. Instead, the captain would sail somewhat further away to a port town, which was too far out of path for us, and our time was scarce. For now, the boat anchored not far from land, and our party would go by pinnace, rowing to shore.

A small Inquisition camp was already awaiting us. I lifted my eyebrows to Maxwell, who looked over his shoulder as he was rowing. He smiled back at me, sweat and rain dripping from his face. As we stepped out of the pinnace, a familiar woman walked towards us, backed by two Inquisition scouts. Maxwell walked towards the red-haired Dwarf and nodded at her.

‘Your Worship!’ Scout Harding sounded relieved, and she eyed us all separately with a polite nod. She looked at Vivienne for a moment longer, before she turned to Maxwell again. ‘For what it’s worth, welcome to the Storm Coast.’ She sighed as the rain poured down on us.

Maxwell and Harding walked together to the camp in conversation. I heard something about bandits, and that he would look into it, but that he’d first had to go back to Haven for business. Harding nodded, answering seriously and handing over maps and locations.

‘It smells a bit of dead fish here, don’t you think, my dear?’ Vivienne sighed to Cassandra, who only nodded politely. ‘I do hope we’ll be leaving shortly.’ She then shook her umbrella a bit and all of the water splattered on me. I grumbled under my breath, and thought of maybe burning a hole in that umbrella of hers.

But before I could, Maxwell and Scout Harding walked back to us, and I heard her say, ‘Well, good luck. And enjoy the sea air. I hear it’s good for the soul.’

Maxwell gave her a polite smile, ‘Good work and… thanks.’

Harding turned back to the camp as Maxwell strutted back to us. ‘The mercenary camp is up ahead along the beach. Let’s not waste time, I want to get back to Haven as soon as possible.’

We travelled alongside the sea for what felt like hours, but in reality, it was just forty minutes. We
were soaked, and the sand was getting into... places. Dry sand tickles and itches, but wet sand weighs you down. Vivienne didn’t nag as much as I thought she would, or she had kept herself strong to impress the Herald. I just enjoyed the silence and the sound of the waves crashing against the rocks, slowly taking back the shore.

Suddenly, we heard fighting. Cassandra pulled her sword from its sheath, standing defensively before Maxwell. ‘Bandits?’ She asked, her voice stern, but clearly distraught.

‘Those aren’t bandits.’ Maxwell cursed and narrowed his eyes.

I looked from behind them and saw fighting in the distance. And as I focused, I saw Tevinter robes and vigils sprayed across the fighting men. Why were Tevinters here? Were they slave traders? ‘That’s the mercenary group we’re looking for. Come on, let’s go help.’ Maxwell ordered, his face deadly calm.

‘Maxwell and I will go for the assault, Varric, reach higher grounds to hit them from above. Solas, Saeris, Madame, cover us.’ Cassandra eyed us, and we nodded.

We did as we were told. As Cassandra and Maxwell mixed in the fight, Solas and I started to cast barriers while Vivienne took out men from afar. Varric had crawled atop a formation of rocks, almost slipping, and shot his arrows to weaken the attackers. I eyed the other party, and if I hadn’t known better, they would’ve looked like the bandits. The mercenaries cheered though as soon as they noticed our help, and in no time, we had defeated all of the attackers, leaving none alive.

‘Chargers, stand down!’ A huge man yelled as the last Tevinter reached the ground lifelessly. I ran up to Maxwell and Cassandra, hoping they hadn’t been injured, but stopped midway. Qunari. It was a Qunari. I stared up at the huge man, two enormous straight horns protruding from his forehead. ‘Krem, how’d we do?’

The Qunari man walked towards another mercenary, a young man covered in sweat and rocky wet sand. ‘Five or six wounded, Chief. No dead.’

‘That’s what I like to hear. Let the throatcutters finish up, then break out the casks.’ The Qunari ordered. A group of men, slightly wounded, stood up, knives at hand, and walked around the beach, checking each corpse for signs of life. And if someone still breathed, he wouldn’t anymore soon.

Maxwell walked towards the Qunari, Cassandra at his side. I eyed him and sighed with relief. Not wounded. The rest of the party had already walked up to me, and we all stared at the Qunari mercenary from afar.

‘So, you’re with the Inquisition, huh? Glad you could make it. Come on, have a seat. Drinks are coming.’ The Qunari man grinned, looking at us to say we could relax too. But none of us did.

‘Iron Bull, I presume?’ Maxwell said, clearly not with the intention to go sit down and drink.

‘Yeah, the horns usually give it away.’ The Qunari smiled and turned his back to us, walking off with Maxwell. I stared after them, inspecting this Iron Bull. A large, grey creature. His bare chest, gleaming in the rain, was covered in scars. His face had scars too, a small stubble on his chin, and a leather eyepatch crossed over his left eye. I had an eyepatch like that too once.

Iron Bull, or whatever he was called, sat down on a big rock, Maxwell standing in front of him. Cassandra stood not so far behind them, suspicion still lingering on her face. I knew she would stay there until she’d be 100% sure of Maxwell’s safety.

‘Hey, you guys want something to drink?’ One of the throatcutters walked past us, wiping his
bloodied hands on his pants.

‘What’ve you got?’ Varric sighed and poked my hip.

‘I’m going to stand with Cassandra.’ I mumbled and walked past the throatcutter, ignoring him completely. I didn’t trust these Chargers yet. As I walked over to Cassandra, leaving Varric, Vivienne and Solas behind me, I crossed another Charger, the one the Qunari had called “Krem”. We looked at each other for a moment, but then I focussed back on Maxwell as I reached Cassandra.

‘So… You’ve seen us fight. We’re expensive, but we’re worth it… and I’m sure the Inquisition can afford us.’ Iron Bull laughed.

‘How much is this going to cost me exactly?’ Maxwell scoffed, clearly pretending not to be impressed by the giant.

‘It wouldn’t cost you anything personally, unless you wanna buy drinks later.’ Iron Bull winked, and Cassandra shifted on her feet. ‘Your Ambassador, what’s her name, Josephine? We’d go through her and get the payments set up. Gold will take care of itself. Don’t worry about that. All that matters is we’re worth it.’

Maxwell sighed and looked at the Bull in deep thought. He then looked over his shoulder to meet Cassandra’s gaze, and she nodded very slowly. Accept them… for now. ‘The Chargers seem like a decent group, we might have use of them.’

‘They are.’ Iron Bull grinned, ‘But you’re not just getting the boys. You’re getting me. You need a frontline bodyguard, I’m your man. Whatever it is, demons, dragons? The bigger the better.’ The giant did look like a good shield… The mercenary Chief and Maxwell walked to the sea in conversation, standing somewhat further away from our prying ears.

Cassandra huffed, as did I, but we couldn’t hear what was said. We only saw Maxwell nod seriously, asking questions with his eyebrows raised. And I was sure that if it was important, he’d tell us later. But for now, the two men shook hands, and I saw the Qunari smile as he roared with a loud voice, ‘Excellent! Krem, tell the men to finish drinking on the road. The Chargers just got hired!’

‘What about the casks, Chief?’ Krem, who was standing close to us with the rest of the Chargers, whined disappointedly. ‘We just opened them up… With axes.’

‘Find some way to seal them. You’re Tevinter, right? Use Blood Magic.’ Boom. Critical hit. Iron Bull grinned at me as he walked past me, and I just got the cold nervous chills down my spine.

‘The more the merrier, remember?’ Maxwell poked my waist and I growled at him, annoyed.

‘Are you sure we can trust these… Chargers? They look…’

‘Dangerous? I know, that’s why we need them. The Iron Bull seems to be quite honest too.’ He raised his eyebrows at me. ‘I’ll explain later.’

‘I do hope you know what you’re doing, Herald.’ Cassandra interrupted, her tone serious and hushed.

‘Don’t I always?’ Maxwell winked at her and that seemed to shut her up for now. That woman really becomes soft when it comes to our Herald.

‘Are we taking these… Mercenaries with us?’ Vivienne stopped next to me, her voice drooping with disdain.
‘Yes, we are.’ Maxwell lifted a brow and crossed his arms. With none of the other advisors here, it was solely Max’ decision. ‘Why wouldn’t we? They seem like a good band of merry men?’

At that moment, we heard the Chargers cry out enthusiastically as they drummed ‘Chug! Chug! Chug!’, while The Iron Bull gulped down two casks of ale in one go.

We stared at the group with an open mouth as Varric laughed loudly and smacked his knee, ‘Oh, they’ll be great company on the road!’

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Our Inner Circle is almost complete! + Next chapter will contain *surprise* dramaaa!

And if you liked it, you can always leave me a kudo or a comment!
Mourned

A woman fled in the darkness across the forest, a child hiding in her embrace, her arms like castle walls. Her voice was hushed, her eyes wet and red, distraught and pain clouding her sharp face. From between her chestnut hair, her pointed ears twitched with every sound. Her eyes, a mixture of blue and brown, darted from bush to bush, as if expecting there was someone following her, watching.

The woman whimpered and pulled the child closer to her chest. The little baby girl, maybe no older than five, raised her big hazel eyes to her mother, her fuzzy brown hair sticking to her wet chubby cheeks. ‘Mamae?’ She cried.

‘Durlahn, da’len’ The mother hushed, her voice in panic. ‘It’s okay, be still now.’

But the little girl hiccupped, unable to keep her silence as she saw her mother’s horror as voices thundered through the woods.

‘Find the apostate!’ They called, and armour rumbled. ‘Search the woods!’

The mother pushed herself behind a tree, her chest heaving heavily against her daughter. ‘Fenedhis lasa!’ The woman cursed as tears escaped from her terrified eyes.

The little girl cried now, the loud shriek of her high tuned voice echoing through the darkness. The mother swallowed, her voice low, but warm. ‘Shhh, shhh, don’t cry, da’len.’ She said and lulled her child back and forth while the roaring voices became louder and louder, closer and closer. The mother hummed a song to quiet her child, a song she had heard from her own parents that had forsaken her, from the clan that never wanted her. The song was lost to the trees, and only a forgotten memory remained, the last words trembling to the heavens. A prayer for hope, for life, not hers, but for her daughter.

The mother sang quietly, but the child had heard her song, and stopped crying.

... 

Tel'enfenim, da'len
Irassal ma ghilas
Ma garas mir renan
Ara ma'athlan vhenas
Ara ma'athlan vhenas

... 

The last words floated through the air like a spell. The little Elven girl knew that she would see her mother again one day. If only she followed her voice, she would call her home.

‘There she is!’ Armoured men, their steel gleaming righteous in the mourning moon, peered across the unpaved path that lead through the forest.

The mother swallowed loudly, but placed her child on the ground before her, a finger hovering above her lips. ‘Run, da’len, go! Quickly!’
The child didn’t move, her eyes teary, but her voice failing to come out.

‘GO!’ The mother cried as the men caught sight of them.

They screamed. She screamed. Her child screamed.
But, as if magic had taken over the shivering girl’s weak body, the child’s feet finally started to move. She ran and ran, and never looked back to where her mother stood. ‘Mamae’, she kept whispering. She would never forget her praying words.

The mother straightened her back as the Templars slowly stalked towards her, their eyes peering at her through their helmets. They wouldn’t let her live.
The woman snatched the dagger from the side of her belt. She lifted it, scraping the sharp edges across her palm, and she felt her magic flow through her veins, mixing with her pulsing blood. The Templars screamed in terror as she raised her hands, and her blood clawed out of her body in madness, the magic bursting from her pores.

As the woman realised she would not survive, she whispered one last time, ‘Ar lath ma, Sybil.’

And darkness took her home.

***

‘Are you sure we’re going the right way?’ Varric sighed deeply while the rain poured down on us.

Maxwell unfolded his map. ‘The map Leliana sent doesn’t make any sense!’

‘You’re holding it upside-down, Herald.’ Cassandra said dryly.

‘Err… Right’, Maxwell hummed and turned over the map. Varric snickered, but stopped when Cassandra threw him one of her deadly “Stop that” stares. I tried peering over Maxwell’s shoulder, but he closed the map before I could see anything. ‘We’re fine.’ He smiled.

Vivienne huffed, her umbrella hovering above her head, ‘Could you make them… less loud, my dear?’ She lifted her flawless eyebrow towards Maxwell, and then raised her chin to the large group of mercenaries behind us.

“No one can beat the Chargers ’cause we'll hit you where it hurts. Unless you know a tavern with loose cards and looser skirts! For every bloody battlefield, we'll gladly raise a cup. No matter what tomorrow holds, our horns be pointing up!” The whole group roared, their voices echoing through the rain. I smelled the sharp smell of watery ale, and I saw them pass along a big brown bottle. Vivienne rolled her eyes dramatically and sighed again.

I suppressed a grin, and scraped my throat as I lead my horse to the front of the party. Never had I travelled with such a big group before. Travelling with four or five is alright, you move fast and remain fairly undetected. But a large party stands out, catches people’s eyes. We’re louder, leave more traces, and move up to three times slower. Therewithal, The Chargers weren’t exactly a quiet little group, as you might’ve noticed.

We had been travelling ever since we met up with the Chargers, making no stops or breaks whatsoever. We were already going slow, and the Chargers weren’t even complete. Maxwell told me on the road they were with over fifty, but a large portion was completing another job near the Hinterlands, and they would join us at Haven. I couldn’t imagine their group being any louder, so imagine travelling with fifty of them? No thank you. It seemed that this group was more like Iron Bull’s own inner circle, his best members, or the ones he found most loyal… or decent to make a good first impression? I liked the fun atmosphere they were creating. It made me not think of what
had happened long ago in this area. It made me forget. I listened to their roaring and singing and laughing, and closed my eyes remembering the times I had laughed like that. Long, long ago.

It had crossed my mind to join them, let these strangers distract me, and maybe get to know these people. But the Qunari, The Iron Bull, made me somewhat nervous. He looked scary, with his enormous dark horns and his scarred grey skin, but he seemed to see everything too, like he was taking notes in his head. Calculating. And he looked suspiciously at me, like he wanted me to tell him all of my secrets. It made me quite uncomfortable. So I remained at the front of our group, surrounded by Maxwell and Varric and Cassandra, and I just listened quietly. I was listening so thoroughly, I didn’t even notice the sun was starting to go down until Maxwell halted his horse.

‘Let’s set up camp, we’ve travelled long enough for today.’

I blinked my eyes rapidly as I woke up from my trance.

‘Great! My ass was starting to hurt.’ Iron Bull snickered from behind the pack.

We dismounted at a clearing in the woods, a small creak running nearby. I was happy we had traded the windy, sandy shore for the muddy, but slightly warmer forest a couple of hours ago. Somewhere, I vaguely recognized this place, but I had seen so many forests around the Coastlands, so I couldn’t really know for sure where we were. Just that I’d been here before… I think. Maybe I should take a look at that map? I shook my head. No. Just forget, don’t think about where you are and how far it is from that tower. It doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is that we’re going back to Haven. Focus on something else.

‘Saeris?’

You know, there are tons of forests down here. And if this is really West Hill, there is a fairly small chance we’d come across the tower. Maybe it doesn’t even exist anymore? Not even a rubble of stones? That’s probably the case.

‘Saeris.’ Solas pressed his hand on my shoulder.

I yelped, my heart almost stopping. ‘Fuck. Yeah. Shit. What?’ I turned around confused and looked up to the Elf. My stomach turned immediately. Ugh, why can’t he be like he is in the Fade? Like, non-nauseating?

Solas chuckled slightly, his face gleaming from the rain. ‘Are you alright?’

‘Yeah… Just thinking about something…’ I mumbled and tied my horse to a tree.

‘Is it something I can assist you with, perhaps?’ Solas cocked his head to the side, a warm glow in his eyes.

‘No, but thank you. It was a long day, maybe I just need to sit down for a bit. On the ground, not the horse, of course. Been sitting on that all day.’ I rambled.

‘Do not overexert yourself.’ He dipped his head and walked off.

The rest of the party was already getting the fire started. I went to help Maxwell and Cassandra with the tents. The Chargers’d only brought one big tent, and I wondered how all of them would fit in there. They were at least with ten or twelve, and The Iron Bull wasn’t particularly small. I did think that sleeping close together was a smart move, it was warm, and if something happened, everybody was already together and up. But I wasn’t keen on trying it out myself. I’d heard Varric’s snoring and Maxwell thrashing, and Cassandra was a really loud breather… she also drools a little. Vivienne probably compliments herself in her sleep. Wouldn’t be surprised about that. Maybe the only one
who’s completely silent at night is Solas. And no, I’m not going to sleep with him… No.

After we set up the tents, we all gathered around the fire as we always did. The Chargers joined us, half of the casks they had opened this morning already empty. But there was still enough to get all of us drunk. I wasn’t going to drink… What if we were attacked? And our shifts, we had to concentrate. We also had to get up early in the morning and travel all day and…

‘Hey, Twinkle! Want some?’ Varric was distributing the bottles from the casks the Chargers had brought.

‘… Well. One won’t hurt…’ I mumbled as Varric threw me one. I drank from it, the heat of the alcohol glowing in my throat. It tasted good. Drinking wasn’t my favourite pastime. But now, in the cold woods, so close to all of the bad memories that have been ghosting my mind, the alcohol soothed me. Its warmth like a hug to my body and soul. Make me forget where I am.

The Chargers mixed with us around the campfire, but they mostly stayed together. As did we. And our camp looked somewhat divided. The Iron Bull’s laugh thundered through the meadow, and he turned to Maxwell, who took a bite from the mystery stew the Chargers had brought with them. It didn’t taste horribly, but I didn’t want to know what was in it. The Herald took another sip from his bottle of ale he’d gotten from Varric, probably to wash down the stew. ‘Good, we’re not drinking alone!’ the Qunari giant grinned, and he even winked at me as I turned my own bottle around in my hands nervously.

I tried not to gawk back at Bull, and instead peered at the rest of his company. Humans, Elves, Dwarves, males and females. They all looked rugged and brawny, but the smile on their faces as they talked and drank made them look nicer than you’d think at first glance.

‘How you doin’, Krem de la Crème?’ Iron Bull smirked at the young man next to him. I lowered my head, but peered through my lashes at the company.

The young man, Krem, rolled his eyes and turned to Maxwell who sat across the fire. ‘Hey Herald, I’m so glad he has someone new to hit with that joke from now on. Better be prepared for it.’

Maxwell almost choked on his stew, but returned a polite smile. ‘Will he always be like this?’

‘I’m afraid so’, Krem snickered, ‘The Chief loves his nicknames.’

‘Hey, I like to think that’s one of my specialties too. One of the many.’ Varric grinned.

Iron Bull nodded at him and then dipped his stubbled chin towards Krem. ‘When I was growing up, my name was just this series of numbers. We all give each other nicknames under the Qun.’

Solas, who sat next to me, scoffed ever so slightly. I turned my head to him, but the Elf was fully focussed on the conversation that was happening before us. I raised my shoulders and took another sip from my drink.

‘Do they ever wear shirts under the Qun, Chief? Or do they just run around binding their breasts like that?’ Krem answered sarcastically.

‘It’s a harness, Krem.’ Iron Bull grumbled.

‘Yes, for your pillowy man-bosoms.’ Krem giggled, and I almost did the same. But instead, I focussed on the fire and drank again. ‘Let me know if you need help binding. You could really chisel something out of that overstuffed look.’
The bottle in my hand was empty, and I planted it between my feet on the ground. I stared at it from above, and saw how the fire reflected in the glass. It looked like the flames were crackling in the bottle, burning from within. I straightened my back as I felt something cold touch my arm. I looked to my side and raised a brow to the Charger holding up another bottle to me. A human man, broad but with an obscured face and muddy blond hair, stared at me plainly, no emotion in his eyes. He grunted and dangled the bottle in his hands and then looked at me again.

‘Thank you…’ I mumbled and took the ale from the silent man’s hand.

‘… and Grim’, Iron Bull chuckled and I was drawn back to the conversation as the silent Charger nodded at his chief.

Maxwell, a smile on his face and a glow on his cheeks, leaned forward, and I saw Cassandra smile a little at him as she ate. ‘Rocky? Was it? Were you born on the surface, or are you from Orzammar?’ Maxwell asked the hooded Dwarf that sat next to The Iron Bull.

‘Orzammar’, Rocky grunted, ‘I got exiled. Stupid noble crap. Also, I accidentally blew up a bit of the Shaperate.’

‘Rocky’s one of our sappers.’ Bull grinned. ‘he can take down enemy fortifications faster than a golem.’

‘I’m also working on my own version of the Qunari blackpowder. I’ve almost got it!’

‘Yeah… you really don’t.’ Bull shook his head in jest.


I chugged from my ale again, and the alcohol buzzed in my head. And although it was warming my body, I still felt as cold as ice. With a swift motion, I pulled my hood over my head and drank again, listening to the voices around the campfire. Dalish, definitely an apostate, but she says she’s just an archer. She urged her bow just looks like a staff for aiming. And I definitely heard Solas scoff this time for sure as she mentioned it being an “old elven trick”. Well, I’m old and Elven, and I’ve never heard of it. Skinner, the other elf, was from a city. I saw the pain in her eyes and recognized many. She reminded me of Kirkwall. Stitches, their healer and surgeon seemed pretty decent. Maxwell laughed when Stiches told Bull he wasn’t supposed to drink his poultices though. And then you had Grim, the silent one who had given me a drink. Turns out the man can’t or doesn’t want to speak. Only grunts. There were others that were with them, but I didn’t listen that well and forgot most of their names. You had Diamond, an innocent-looking blonde girl with pale blue eyes that had a knack for stealing valuables, especially gems. Butcher, the name speaks for itself, no? Rouge, a red-headed Dwarf that could shoot someone from miles away. And then there was Smiles, Bugs, and I think someone called Chip…

‘So, you met my team, Boss’ Iron Bull leaned his torso forwards, his one eye squinting, ‘Maybe introduce yours, eh?’

Maxwell nodded and rested his shoulders, leaning backwards. ‘This beauty here is Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast. Hero of Orlais, Right Hand of the Divine and…’

‘Thank you, Herald. I think they get it.’ Cassandra sighed with a small blush colouring her cheeks.

‘Of course’, Maxwell winked, ‘And this is Varric Tethras, renowned author and storyteller. And on his back, that’s Bianca, don’t mess with her, though.’
Varric grinned and winked mockingly.

Maxwell turned to Vivienne and smiled politely, ‘Madame Vivienne de Fer, Enchanter to the Imperial Court of Orlais…’

Vivienne’s lips curled with an approving smile, her chin raised, the fire dancing in her ebony eyes.

‘This here is Solas, our Fade expert.’ Maxwell nodded at Solas and he nodded back sternly, no emotion on his face. I could see it in Solas’ eyes though, he didn’t like The Iron Bull. I wondered why? I drank from my ale again. Another bottle empty. My eyes found the emptiness within, and the fire dancing inside of it. I was so preoccupied by the shadows in my empty bottle, that I didn’t notice the group looking at me.

‘And this is Saeris, our Healer.’ Maxwell raised his brows at me as I looked up, a mix of surprise, confusion and alcohol clouding my face.

‘Hey.’ I tried to smile, but it didn’t reach my eyes.

‘Ah, I’ve been curious about you…’ Iron Bull smirked, ‘What happened to your eye?’

‘What happened to yours?’ I smiled, but I bet it looked more like a sneer. Maybe it was meant to be that too.

‘Ooh, I like her’, Krem laughed loudly and smacked his knee.

‘Saeris has a special gift.’ Cassandra started and looked at me, I nodded. Continue, so I don’t have to. ‘Like the Herald’s mark, her eye is connect to the Fade. Am I explaining this correctly, Solas?’

‘It is a complicated matter, but in short, yes.’ He said scholarly.

‘So… meaning?’ Iron Bull frowned deeply and stared at me without blinking.

I hiccupped, my eyes scanning the camp for another bottle. ‘I can see through Rifts, shape the Fade, and spot demons.’ I mumbled as I stood up from my seat, walked up to the open cask behind Bull and snatched another drink. With a flick of my fingers, the cork popped from the bottle and I took a big chug from it. ‘That’s it.’

The Iron Bull turned towards me, his eye big. ‘Nice!’ He roared. ‘Interesting group you’ve collected!’ Bull looked at Maxwell again, but I felt his lingering stare on my back as I strolled back to my seat. I sat down again, and drank until my mind became fogged with alcohol and fire and stupid conversations I wasn’t fully listening to.

The Chargers were actually a nice bunch of people, and Maxwell gleamed as he could finally joke around with others. And Varric began telling stories again, but I think I’ve heard them all already. I still listened, but my mind wasn’t really there… it was beyond the camp, behind the bushes and over the trees… it was with Sybil, and the tower, and the Resistance. I wish… I wish I could just forget, just let the current bring me wherever it wanted to and I didn’t have to think about the dead and the memories they had left. The alcohol buzzed though my body, and when it cleared away, I drank another bottle.

And another.

Until my mind swayed to nowhere, floating in a thick mist of silly conversations and crackling fire in bottles.
Questions were thrown my way. ‘Where are you from?’ ‘Tell me! You see any demons here?’ And I just hummed and looked away, crawling further and further into the dark shadows cast by my cape. When they joked, I laughed, and maybe they just thought I was drunk. I was drunk, but not drunk to make fun, but to forget.

If only forgetting was simple.

‘Saeris?’ Solas’ hand found my shoulder and I shrugged, the alcohol protesting in my stomach. ‘Are you alright.’

‘Y… Yeah I’m great…’ I tried to control the tremble in my voice. My eyes searched camp, but those who were still up, Maxwell, Varric, Bull and some of the Chargers, were deep in conversation.

‘I noticed earlier on the map that there is a ruin nearby that might be of some interest to us. If you would like to, we can go there.’ His voice had this warm timbre, and it slithered through my mind, the words he had said unheard, but his tone warm. And I yearned for warmth.

What did he want to do? Something interesting? ‘Sure, good. Now?’ I lisped. Maybe the fresh air would do me good or maybe if I focussed on something else, I wouldn’t feel so bad? If dreaming could bring me to other places, see other memories, maybe I can forget my own?

Solas said something to the group I didn’t hear, and stood up, the look in his eyes urging me to follow. I planted the nearly empty, lukewarm bottle of ale next to my seat at the fire, and stood up. The world seemed to roll upside down as I straightened my back. My legs felt like jelly, and cold as well as hot air seemed to surge around my body. I blinked my eyes rapidly, until the world stopped tolling. Maxwell squinted his eyes at me, and he almost walked up to me before I raised and swayed my hands, saying, ‘I’m fine! I’m okay, I’m just going to get some fresh air with Solas…’

Maxwell lifted his brows, his mouth opening to say something, but I hushed.

‘Going to the Fade to dream, you know. I’ll be back by morning.’ I smiled faintly, and my eyes squinted this time too. I think that’s what made him relax.

‘Be safe, Saeris’, Maxwell said, his eyes stern.

I nodded and waved my arm at him again before stumbling away from the campfire. I strolled to the edge of the forest, and felt Maxwell’s eyes still on my back. I rolled my shoulders and tried to walk as straight as I could.

‘Shall we?’ Solas was leaning against a tree in the shadows of the woods.

I didn’t yelp this time, the alcohol had made me numb. ‘Okay’, I hummed. Let’s try to forget.

***

We strolled through the dark woods, the contours of the trees hanging over us like arches. The alcohol buzzed in my body, erasing anything that made me weary. There was no path that led through these parts of the forest, and we had to wade through the branches. Solas walked up front, his staff firmly in his hand, and he used it for balance. The white-blue gemstone that adorned the top of his weapon, shined brightly with his mana, and it casted pale shadows onto the trees. It made them come alive, seemingly moving with us.

And my heart was screaming against my body, beating so hard it made me sick. But my mind and body refused to listen. Just keep on going.
Yet, deep inside, I knew this place. But when I tried to think about it, my memories refused to resurface. Every time I recognized something, the alcohol pushed it away until everything was strange and new. Or until I didn’t care anymore, only about placing one foot before the other.

Solas walked straight, his posture composed and neutral. His eyes skimmed the overgrown path before us, and he focussed as his magic pulsed around us. Searching, protecting, but we were alone. Every once in a while, he turned his face to me, peering from behind the shadows cast by his staff.

‘Are you truly alright, Saeris?’ His voice was soft, a warmth trickling within it like a seeping waterfall. How many times had he asked me this today already?

‘I think so yes’, I mumbled while lifting my feet higher than usual. But I was drunker than usual too. ‘Where are we going exactly?’

‘We are… Watch out!’ Solas raised his hands to me in caution as I stumbled over a raised root. He caught my arm just in time before my face would hit the muddy ground. I groaned against his strength as he pulled me up to meet his stare. The world turned on me, and I felt the alcohol making me spin around and around. ‘You have consumed too much, we should return.’ He sighed, his auburn brows knitting together, and I felt a sting of disappointment in his voice.

‘No, I’m fine. I need this…’ I sighed and snatched my arm away to pull my hair from my face. The moon was barely visible through the thick leaves from the trees, and I yearned for its guiding light. I closed my eyes for a moment, and guided my breath through my nose. Breathe in, breathe out. I shouldn’t have drunk alcohol. It wasn’t like me. ‘I’m sorry, Solas… But can we please just… continue? I need to take my mind off things.’

Solas’ stare was slightly obscured by darkness, but I felt him sighing. ‘Very well.’ He said, his tone neutral and controlled. ‘But perhaps you should hold on to something for balance? I do not wish for you to fall and hurt yourself. These woods can be tricky at night.’

‘I don’t have a staff…’ I hummed as I rubbed my eyes. Maybe it was the alcohol, or maybe because I needed it, but in the spur of the moment, I grabbed Solas’ free hand. I swallowed deeply to get the nauseating feeling away that now surged through my body. ‘So you should do for now.’

Solas tensed under my grip, and I already regretted my action. Yet, his warm hands pinched mine ever so slightly, as if by saying it was okay. ‘Come.’ He said, and I heard a chuckle in his deep hum.

We walked the rest of the way holding hands, Solas guiding me with a steady pace. And though his back was straightened and his stance was cold, I still felt warmth radiating from his palms that embraced mine. My heart bellowed against my chest, as if I was in danger… like a wolf was going to devour me in the night. And my stomach answered with growls and turns, and I knew I would be throwing up soon. Yet, I closed my eyes and kept his hand in mine. I didn’t care what it meant, for him or for me. It just… soothed me, like the alcohol had done, and it made me think of nothing but beyond his long fingers grasping mine, entangling in his heat. I liked it. I shouldn’t.

But remorse always comes too late.

And I felt it thunder in my heart as we arrived at the ruin.

‘We are here.’ Solas hummed contently as we passed under the broken gate. The once strong stone arches had fallen down to rubble, green vines, brightened by the appearing moon’s light, were devouring the damned walls where so many had passed through. In life and death.

I choked, my body turning to stone as cold as ice, and I yanked my hand from Solas’ violently. The screams my heart had made finally reached the rest of my body as I understood where I was. The
gate gave way to a broken courtyard. The cobblestones were cracked like a thousand men had
walked over it too harshly. My eyes darted around, tears flowing down my cheeks. There were the
stables, the wooden beams splintered and rotting onto the cold ground. Ivory bones laid scattered
behind the walls together with rusted metal blades and helmets and shields left behind by people I
had once known and cared for. And I heard their whispers call for me in the distance as I stood there,
overtaken by the sadness I had hidden away for decades… a century… The proud tower I had once
lived in, worked in, studied in, was gone. Half of it had collapsed over the many years, and nature
was already claiming it, taking it back slowly but surely. The door was bashed in, and an eerie
emptiness lurked in the darkness behind the walls. Everything was gone, taken, stolen, or had rotted
away.

Every sign of life, of there being life, was erased. It was like everything I knew, had never existed.
All of the people that fought here, searched for answers here, were removed from history. The vigil
of the Queen’s Guards had been taken down, the flag of the Resistance ripped to mere pieces that
laid scattered in the devouring woods. Erik, Moira, the Guards, their presence was empty, like they
never had existed in this world I had cherished. Only one remained, a ghost in my nightmares, and I
felt her heart flutter through these broken stones.

Sybil.

More tears found their way out, and they broke me, every single one of them. I couldn’t move,
couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see but darkness and the memory of crimson blood covering the
cobblestones. And then I heard the screams from deep within my memory. My screams.

‘NO!’ My voice screeched over the ruins, and the stones remembered it from long, long ago.

‘Saeris!’ Solas was standing next to me, shaking me, touching my face, his magic pushing around
my body, but I couldn’t say anything but “no”. I cried, my body shaking, my legs giving way until
they banged against the cold stones.

And then, like my eyes were my worst enemies, I found her.

A small, grey grave yet lingered near the outskirts of the courtyard, little but bright pastel flowers
growing next to it. There had once been many buried here, but only she had remained. Stubborn, like
in life. My body lifted itself up, and I ran and ran, sprinting towards where she laid. Solas was right
behind me, calling my name, distress in his voice. I had never heard it before. But now, I didn’t care.
My body slammed to the ground before the little grave, my hands clawing at the stones while my
tears buried themselves in the shallow ground.

‘Sybil?’ I whimpered like a little child. But the grave was silent, just like my nightmares had
predicted. You can search for the dead, but they’ll never answer.

What is gone, will remain silent.

Even magic cannot bring her back to me. Nothing can.

But I was here now. She had been alone for too long. But I was here. I am here. ‘I’m sorry’, I
hiccupped, the words barely there. ‘I’m so sorry… my sister…’

Solas’ warm hands rested on my back, like he was prepared to lift me up and hold me. But he didn’t.
Instead, I heard his hushed voice speaking to me with soft words. Words I didn’t understand, but I
knew they were Elven, spoken like it was the most natural thing in the world. Caressing me like the
wind.
'She was my sister' I whispered to him as I looked up to the grave, the stone visibly old and cracked, but the memory still fresh and young. The memory of her, one I would never forget. One that wasn’t meant to be forgotten. I had tried so hard to forget, but I knew, I know, that it was a memory to be cherished. I would cherish her, like I cherished my past on earth, like I cherished Daniel. I would always cherish her. I will always keep her in me, and I will never forget.

Forever. If I was immortal, then so was her memory. Then so was she. And together, we will be eternal. That doesn’t sound so bad.

I knelt beside Sybil’s grave, straightening my back, and I looked at it with open eyes, seeing all she was, and more.

‘She is my sister.’

Solas knelt next to me on one knee, his eyes boring into mine. They shined so brightly, so tenderly, and it made me cry even more. He smiled faintly, and my stomach didn’t turn this time. Only my heart did.

I turned back to my Sybil, and laid my hands flat onto her shallow grave. My magic twirled inside the ground, growing like the roots of life. And although her body had long been gone, she, her lingering presence, her shining memory, was still there. And like she had waited for me, her presence burst as my magic touched it. She, all she was, all she is, grew to the surface into a brilliant golden flower, the core of its leaves a hazel brown. Like her eyes.

My Sybil was never gone. She was still here.

A soft smile appeared on my lips, and I tasted the salt of my tears. ‘Hello there, sister.’ I said, not whispering anymore, my voice loud and clear.

*Hello, Saeris.*

A young whisper filled my ears, and the flower swelled, until it faded with the wind towards the heavens. Like a last goodbye, her presence filled my body, and I wasn’t cold anymore. When Sybil was still alive, I used to sing her a song. It would help her sleep, and I knew it reminded her of her mother. Now, the song reminded her of me too.

I didn’t sing the song this time. The wind did. Her memory did. Sybil did. And it filled my ears, filled the forsaken ruin, until it wasn’t forsaken anymore.

*Elgara vallas, da:len*
*Melava somniar*
*Mala taren aravas*
*Ara ma'desen melar*

*Iras ma ghilas, da:len*
*Ara ma'nedan ashir*
*Dirthara lothlenan'as*
*Bal emma mala dir*

*Tel'enfenim, da:len*
*Irassal ma ghilas*
*Ma garas mir renan*
*Ara ma'athlan vhenas*
*Ara ma'athlan vhenas*
Wherever you shall go. Follow my voice.

I will call you home.

***

I think I sat beside Sybil’s grave for a long time. But it was still night when I stood up and wiped my tears from my face. Solas kept standing behind me, his hands on my shoulders.

When I turned around though, I knew what tonight had done. It had set my mind free, my heart, my Sybil. I mourned for her, I hadn’t done it properly before. Now that I had, I felt lighter than ever before. I knew I wouldn’t leave Sybil behind ever again. Instead, I would carry her everywhere. In my heart.

We didn’t dream at the ruin, but returned back to camp. I was happy, calm, soothed. Not because of the alcohol, but because of my heart. Because of Sybil. Vhenan.

Solas held my hand as he guided me back, but he was silent as well. At the time, I thought it was because he might’ve been overwhelmed too, or maybe there wasn’t much to be said.

I should’ve know it was because he knew what he had suspected before.

This place was a ruin, but in the Fade, I had shown him the tower as proud, still standing, young almost.

And I was way, way older.

Solas knew.

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Travelling back to Haven took us over a week. And it couldn’t have gone fast enough. The Chargers made the journey interesting though, and at night I loved their bickering and laughing. It cheered us all up.

I think Maxwell needed it the most. The stress about the decisions he’d made, the Templars that were waiting, and the threat that was The Elder One, weighed him down. It made him quiet, and that wasn’t very like him. But the Chargers did take his mind of things. And I think Cassandra did too. They grew closer together, and I saw the looks the Seeker casted towards him. I wondered how long it would take for them to finally come together, and if Maxwell was ready or prepared for it.

Solas had become quite quiet lately too. In the Fade, he remained absent from my dreams, and when I looked for him, his wards were too guarded for me to pass through. At day, we talked though, and he didn’t seem angry. Not at all. On the contrary, I caught him glance at me during the whole trip, his eyes searching for mine. He looked… almost hungry? Like he had waited for something and now he got it. And I don’t know if I should get excited, or afraid? He didn’t ask about what had happened that night, and he seemed to be figuring things out for himself. I didn’t mind that much, didn’t even think much of it. It was more like I was on autopilot myself too. Seeing Sybil’s grave again, coming to terms with her death once more, it had taken its toll. I just wanted to be alone and think, reflect. I needed the time. I needed to mourn.

And there were worse things waiting for me at Haven.

‘Do you require any help?’ Solas drove his mount next to mine. We were climbing the last miles to
Haven, and snow was already greeting us. It wouldn’t take long now.

I struggled as I tried to hold the reins and grab the hood of my cape to cover my head against the cold. ‘Could you…’ I started.

Solas raised his arm and I felt the caress of the back of his hand against my spine. I shivered, and he swiftly pulled the hood over my head.

‘T… thank you…’ I stuttered and looked up to him.

Solas was leaning forward and slowly retreated his hand from my cape. His eyes stayed connected with mine though. His stare was deep, and I wondered what he was looking for.

Something had changed about him.

My heart sank to my feet, my stomach turning on its head, and I tried to swallow to keep my vomit down. His eyes bored into mine, and then he chuckled ever so slightly, and straightened back into his seat.

‘The Herald!’

People ran towards our party as Haven’s gate doomed up before us.

‘Here we go again. Smile, people.’ Maxwell mumbled as he dismounted, handing the reins over to the Inquisition soldier that had greeted us.

‘Your advisors require you at the Chantry… immediately.’ The guard looked nervous from Maxwell to Cassandra. The latter nodded casually.

‘We shall go now.’ She started and then glanced my way. ‘Make sure the rest can arrive quietly. Escort Madame de Fer to her cabin…’

Vivienne clicked with her tongue approvingly. ‘Thank you, darling.’ She crooned.

‘Find a place for the Chargers to settle.’ The Seeker continued, ‘Maybe… outside of town, close to the gate.’

The Chargers mumbled amongst themselves and laughed as The Iron Bull grinned, ‘We’ll try to keep it decent.’

The soldier pumped his chest with his fist and gave us all a polite nod. And so it was done. As Vivienne was escorted away, and the Chargers moved close to the stables with their giant Chief, Varric stretched his limbs and sighed loudly, ‘Singing Maiden here I come!’ and disappeared behind Haven’s walls.

Nervously, I took the reins of my horse and guided it to the stables. Templars were skittering about, and they stared at us, especially at Solas and I, with suspicion locked in their eyes. I felt extremely uncomfortable, and each Templar that looked at me, I looked back at with at least the same level of suspicion.

They were ex-Templars… they distanced themselves from their Order for the Inquisition. They won’t hurt me. They can’t hurt me. It’s okay. I reminded myself over and over again that everything was fine. Yet, the thought of my cabin, my little remote cottage, made me walk faster, and I heard Solas calling my name in the distance as I jogged to the stables.
I gave the reins of my mount to the stable boy, who shrunk like three inches when he made eye contact with me. I must’ve looked scary, with my dark cape and flaming green eye, my face a mixture of exhaustion, suspicion, anger and stress.

Someone appeared behind me, his shadow obscuring mine. First I thought it was Solas, but the piercing smell of Lyrium made me realise otherwise. I straightened my shoulders and swallowed loudly. I’m safe, I’m safe, I’m safe.

‘Saeris? Is that you?’

And once again, the world seemed to fade away, the air pushing down on me. I turned around very slowly, the tears already gliding over my cheeks. Chills as cold as ice crawled over my spine, over my body, stilling my heart with deep fear and hatred.

‘Simon?’

Chapter End Notes

Did I say drama? I meant melodrama... #AngstAllTheWay
And do you remember Simon (Ch. 14-16) ? I know Saeris does... The drama continues next chapter!

If you liked it (or maybe cried like my darling beta Nerdsaretotallyawesome), you can always leave me a comment or a kudo!
Confronted

Chapter Notes

Yay new chapter! Due to personal reasons, I wasn't able to update when I wanted to, so sorry for the delay!

9:35 Dragon

‘When first I summoned her, she was a rose, unwithering, unchanging, and unthorned. A spirit of the purest love one knows, who never hated, coveted, or scorned.’ My hands trembled and the little scrap of paper almost fell from my hands. A soft smile curled on my lips. I had read most of the books here already, and all of them said the same thing. I knew this little torn page I had found in a book about spirits would still be Chantry propaganda, but the new words drummed through my body. I was excited. For five years, I hadn’t been excited.

‘A second time I drew her ‘cross the Veil, and shared a walk, a dance, a stolen kiss; With such a perfect beauty, pure and pale, no woman could compare, no man resist.’ The whisper of my voice got lost in the turning of pages, the whispering of the Enchanters, and the ticking of the Templars’ steel boots on the marble floor. I pushed against the bookcase with my back so the shadows would claim me whole, like I was invisible. Nobody would notice me standing here, in the darkest corner of the library, my voice too soft to hear as I sang the next verse.

‘Then in my weakness I essayed a third, tho’ magisters their warnings did impart.’ Magisters! There were almost no books about Tevinter Magisters! Their ways of magic was too different from the Chantry’s ideology, and though I couldn’t really parallel myself to the Tevinter mages, I still felt more connected to them than any of the mages here. Don’t get me wrong, most Magisters were corrupt, snobbish, and they tended to use magic I rather stayed away from. The few Magisters I had met during my travels had tried to enslave me, so they weren’t my friends either. But when you only read about Enchanters and Chantry scholars, a text from a Magister is like a gift from Mythal herself.

The last verse I read very slowly, to savour all of the words that wouldn’t be new anymore once I read them. ‘She broke my binding with a single word, and said this smiling as she clutched my heart: “Though love I was, your passion's changing fire, has forged this spirit into cruel Desire.”’ A cautionary tale, like all of the tales about spirits here. My smile faded as my eyes followed the last line of the text. ‘Sonnet 126, "The Lover and His Spirit", from A Chant for Dreamers by Magister Oratius.’ I cocked my head to the side, a Chant for Dreamers… what’s a Dreamer?

‘You there!’ A Templar pointed his steel gloved finger at me. I choked, the shadows dancing across my face, and fumbled the scrap of paper back between the stack of books where I had found it, hoping that one day, maybe another mage that yearned for something different might find joy in it too. The words of the chant were already etched into my mind anyway. I don’t forget things easily.

‘What were you reading!’ The Templar paced towards me, his stern eyes peering at me through his helmet. I recognized his voice, but didn’t know his name. Names weren’t important here. We’re all numbers.

‘In Pursuit of Knowledge: The Travels of a Chantry Scholar by acclaimed Brother Genitivi, Ser.’ I smiled and twisted the random book in my hand. There must’ve been more than a hundred copies of
this one in this very library. I’ve read it ten times already. It was fairly new, but this scholar was particularly loved by the Chantry due to his connections to the Hero of Ferelden and Andraste’s Ashes… The Templar yanked the book from my hands and studied the copy. He twisted it around in his hands like he had never held a book before. ‘If you open it, there are words you can read, you know.’ I grinned.

The man clicked his tongue and gave the book back to me like it was something dirty because I had touched it. ‘Back to your quarters, mage.’ He grumbled.

‘But the library will only be closing over an hour…’ I started.

‘Now.’ The Templar ordered me again, and I heard the whispers of the other mages that were researching here, intensifying.

I sighed and then dipped my head obediently. I’m not going to start a fight here. It’s pointless anyway. ‘Alright, alright.’ I huffed and placed the book back into the bookcase. As I passed the Templar, I heard him gnarl ‘Stupid apostate’ at me, but I ignored him and slipped back to the Enchanters’ Quarters. I wasn’t allowed to get dinner that day. I was punished for “talking back to a Templar Knight”. I felt like a little kid being punished. I shared a room with a couple of other mages, two Enchanters and one apprentice that had really rich parents so she didn’t had to sleep with the rest of the “newbies” at the Apprentices’ Dormitory. I didn’t know their names, they didn’t know mine. At night, when they slept, I would practise my own magic in bed, it made me calm. Three pale blue butterflies twirled along my hands, and I smiled at them as their lights flashed and then faded again.

‘She was arrogant. We need to show her who’s in charge.’

Angry voices hushed from behind my door, and I choked. The butterflies dimmed and then dissolved into nothing. Darkness claimed the room again, and my heart had seemed to stop. I didn’t dare to make any noise at all, even breathing felt dangerous.

‘That demon thinks she can trick us, best us, let’s…’

‘Stop this!’ Someone said, and it was a voice I recognized. Simon. I gritted my teeth in anger, just to hear him breathe made my blood boil. What’s he doing here? I thought he was on another mission.

‘We know you have the hots for that… thing… Simon, but she disrespected Dereck and…’

‘And what? She. Is. Mine. If someone punishes her, it’ll be me. We decided…’ Simon bit, and I stopped myself from screaming in anger and ripping out that door to blast his head from his body. I quieted myself, curling my toes to keep the rest of my body still.

‘You won’t do anything! You never do. She needs to know her place, she’ll get more and more cocky if we just let her be!’

‘I’ll punish her! I will!’ Simon almost yelled, but lowered his voice in time.

‘How will you, then?’ the Templar’s tone didn’t bode well, and an alarming fear crawled over my spine. I could hear the Templars smirk, their smugness creeping from their shadows through the crack of the door. Scenarios played in my head, and I knew my nightmares could become very real.

‘I’ll teach her to respect us.’ Simon grinned, and my heart definitely stopped now.

‘Good.’ The other Templars nodded and smiled at each other. ‘We’ll stay here… take your time.’

The door creaked open very slowly, and the dim lights cast by the flickering torches entered the
room. I covered myself with my blankets, and felt my body turn to ice cold stone. The door closed again, and I heard laughter trickling from the walls. The darkness that often soothed me now made me shiver in cold fear. Heavy footsteps paced across the room, coming closer and closer to my bed. Then they stopped, and I felt Simon's presence hover above my head. Silence overtook the shadows, and the rhythmic breaths of the sleeping mages were overridden by Simon's heavy heaves. His hand hovered above my blankets, and as he grabbed them, I felt the coldness from his steel gloves slide across my now bare shoulder. My eyes stared right into his, my green pupil lighting up and spitting and twisting. Simon stared back at me, and his desire sent more shivers down my spine. If he touched me, I would kill him. I will kill him.

Simon bent over me, and I felt his hot breaths gliding over my cheeks. I clenched my fists and thought of all the people that would die if I lashed out, all of the children that would be punished for my mistake. Because I couldn’t hold myself, because he couldn’t hold himself. His eyes pierced into mine, and then I heard him whisper in my ear, ‘Can’t you see how kind I am to you? I can do anything I want, but I don’t. Because I care for you. I’m protecting you.’ He came closer and I almost felt his lips move against the brim of my earlobe. ‘I hope that one day you will see how I’ve helped you…’ He breathed in harshly, and I heard him scrunch his noise as he took in my scent. I will kill him. I will kill him. I will kill him. ‘Goodnight, my Saeris.’ He huffed, broke contact with my eyes and stepped back into the darkness.

After he closed the door behind him, I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. Tears escaped my eyes and my fists relaxed. I am weak, useless, powerless. I can’t do anything. I’m at his mercy. One day, when I get out of here, I will kill him.

I should’ve killed him.

***

His eyes were always on me. From the second I had been locked into that Circle by him, his gaze followed me everywhere I went. At first, I thought it might’ve been guilt. He was staring at me because he felt sorry for what he had done to me, for taking away my freedom while I had rescued him, saving his life. And I think maybe that’s how his infatuation had started. He kept think about it, about me, worrying for me, and that guilt turned into love.

Or at least he thought it was love.

It wasn’t.

He looked at me, and convinced himself it was to protect me, to make up for his mistake. But he didn’t look at me for my sake at all, it was for his. He never loved me, he hardly knew me, but looking at me spawned something in him. His loneliness, the loneliness most Templars consumed, mixed with lust and desire. He wanted me, but he knew I would never want him. And all of those emotions, those thoughts, piled up for years and years, until he couldn’t take it anymore. It drove him insane.

But it drove me insane as well.

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9:41 Dragon

‘Simon?’ A small hint of fear lingered in my voice as I turned around. But as I looked at him, his big eyes gazing over my figure, I felt the hatred clawing its way up my throat. I took a step backwards, and heard the horses whinnying behind me nervously as a deep growl grumbled in my throat.
‘Maker, Saeris, it is you!’ Simon smiled brightly, flashing his white but slightly crooked teeth. My eyes skimed over him, from his happy face to his steel armour, this time without the Templar Order vigil on it, but the Inquisition’s eye. He was standing way too close to me, his shadow stealing every light away from mine.

I whimpered and bumped my back against the stable walls. In panic, I grabbed the edging stones until my knuckles turned white. I thought the stones would break under my grip.

‘Saeris?’ Simon cocked his head, his brown hair was hanging down from his shoulders. It had become quite thin and stringy, and I saw small wrinkles craning near his eyes. Time hadn’t done him well. He took another step forward until he was right in front of me. I couldn’t see past him, and for a second, it felt like we were all alone, and no one was seeing my frightened face. I was choking, my breaths gone with the wind. The skin on my fingers bruised as I grabbed the stones harder, trying to compose myself. Breathe. Don’t be scared. You’re not alone.

The sounds of our surroundings came back like my breaths, slowly, fading in and out. Soldiers were running about, training near Haven’s gate. The smith’s hammer was clashing down on the iron anchor, and the ringing mixed with the crackling fire of the forge. People were chatting to each other, bantering and laughing. The Chargers were preparing their giant tent, and I heard their laughter. Behind me, horses huffed through their nostrils and tapped their hooves on the muddy ground, their tails swatting away the buzzing flies. I straightened my back against the wall, and finally dared to lift my eyes to stare into his defiantly. I wasn’t like before. I was free now. I wasn’t Saeris, the weak Circle Mage. I am Saeris, Healer of the Inquisition, proud apostate and Shaper of the Fade. ‘Get away from me.’ I said, my voice too soft, too meek. I said it again, louder this time. Confidently. ‘Get away from me.’

Simon cocked his head and seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then took a small step back. I swallowed hard, but I could breathe again. I concentrated on my breaths, on my heartbeat, and on the sound of everything but his own. Stay calm. Don’t get a panic attack. ‘You haven’t changed a bit…’ Simon smiled tenderly, and I felt like vomiting.

‘I would like it if you go, Simon.’ My voice sounded icy, distant, and I looked away from his eyes, back to the ground.

Simon stubbornly shook his head, ‘No… I… Maker, I’ve missed you… It’s been a while, but there hasn’t been a day without me thinking of you…” I swallowed hard to keep the magic down that curled around my tongue. I swear I could spit fire if I wanted to. But I composed myself, trying to stay as still as possible, like a snake ready to attack. ‘I’m… What happened that day, between us…’ Simon glanced at me sheepishly, ‘I’ve been thinking of us and…” His hand rested on my shoulder, and a fire of anger burned deep in my stomach, clawing it’s way to my throat, until it reached my eyes, and I could only see red.

‘I thought I’d been very clear that day.’ I yanked my shoulder back to get his hand off, and his touch felt like a 3rd degree burn. ‘There’s no “us”. There never will be. I don’t want to see you. Not now, not ever.’ I lifted my chin, and finally stared into his eyes again. The coldest stare I’ve ever given.

Expecting to see sadness, I instead saw raw anger reflected into his eyes. It shook me. In memory, Simon was a weak man, always crying for attention and forgiveness. I knew now he had only pretended to be innocent, to care, to have guilt. This man had none. I realized he had never felt guilty for bringing me to that tower. Everything was calculated. I’ve never been his greatest mistake like he had told me the day he forced a kiss on me, I was his greatest accomplishment, his trophy. I saw it all now. ‘You!’ I cried out, the anger finally overtaking the fear, ‘You’ve been planning this? What did
you think, Simon? That I would be grateful you spared me from Kirkwall’s Gallows? That I would swoon over you protecting me against myself? What? You really thought that I would fall in love with a man that doesn’t force himself on me even though he can? You cannot be that stupid?’ I spat on him, and I saw my spit dripping down from his cheek, which he clenched in anger. The muscles under his armour tensed, and in his eyes, I saw that I had been completely right. He really thought, for all those years, that I would fall in love with him because he was in love with me.

Simon grunted as he looked at his feet and then back to me, trying to uphold his innocent façade. ‘Saeris… Andraste has guided me back here. I felt like I needed to come, she helped me return to you, to right my mistakes!’

‘I don’t care who guided you, just let them guide you back out.’ I spat again, but I saw only determination in Simon’s hateful gaze. ‘Stop playing this game. Stop playing the Good Knight. I know what you are now, you cannot fool me nor anyone here at Haven. Go away, go and try to fool someone else.’

‘You don’t mean that, I know you don’t. Destiny brought us together Saeris. Why can’t you see that? Andraste guided me to you that day in the forest, because She knew you would save me. She brought us together… I thought we weren’t meant to be after the fall of the Circle in Ostwick, but can’t you see? We are together again! Finally on the same side! And out of all places! So near Her own Herald! It’s all a sign!’

‘Bullshit! Simon, listen carefully for once dammit! You were but an obstacle! We will never be on the same side, Simon. We’re never going to be together.’ I rolled my shoulders back, my stare as cold as the depths of the Frostback Mountains. ‘I do not want you here.’ I slipped from the wall to walk past him. I was done talking. You can’t reason with a madman. I will get Maxwell to send him away.

Suddenly, Simon lashed out at me, his roar echoing through the military camp, stilling everyone near us. His hands grabbed my upper arms, squeezing me black and blue. With brute force he pushed me against the wall again. I cried out in pain as the stones behind me pulverized against my raw muscles. I wiggled against his grip, my magic now openly curling over my body. I will blast him away, like last time. But as hundreds of purple sparks glittered over my arms, none seemed to harm Simon. Enchanted armour. Simon laughed loudly, almost maniacally, and he hissed, ‘A fennec is not caught twice in the same snare.’ He grinned and I felt his breaths glide against my face. ‘For eleven years, I’ve waited for you. I’ve done everything for you. Now, you’ll return the favour… You owe me that much.’

‘I owe you nothing!’ I spat again, but Simon only sneered.

‘I’ll make you remember how you longed for me.’ He licked his lips and moved his head towards me. No. No! I won’t let him this time!

Simon howled as someone yanked him away, and he smacked onto the ground. Tentacles of green smoke curled around his armour, trying to get in.

‘Stop!’ Soldiers started to panic as they stared up at us, and I saw other (ex-)Templars that had gathered near the military camp, taking up their arms immediately.

I looked up in surprise, and saw Solas’ grey eyes staring down on Simon coldly. ‘Saeris, are you alright?’ He looked at me, concern mixed with confusion lingering on his face. His chest heaved up and down, and I saw sweat gleaming on his head. He must’ve had used quite a lot of strength to push Simon away like that. I was kind of jealous it hadn’t been me. Solas turned to me and started to walk, his hand reaching out.
‘Watch out!’ I cried, but Simon was quicker than I’d thought and grabbed Solas from behind.

‘Fenedhis!’ Solas cursed and wriggled his lean body against Simon’s grip. Solas pushed his magic out again, like a wind from behind, and Simon bawled against the strength, but stayed put.

‘Don’t interfere, knife-ear.’ Simon yelled and threw Solas a few feet away. Solas yelped and huffed as he hit the ground.

That’s it. I’m going to kill Simon.

Solas yelled something towards me, his words hissing, but I ignored him. Instead I took a step forward, and another, and a smug grin crawled across Simon’s face. I will wipe that smile off of his damned face. My hands exploded with electricity, the sparks curling across my arms as I walked up to him. Simon’s smile faded, and this time, he was the one to be scared. My magic lashed out, spitting from my palms. Simon cried out as the sparks twisted across his armour, their strength ten times stronger than his stupid enchantment, and blasted him away. He can hurt me. He can taunt and haunt me. But he can’t touch my friends.

‘Abomination! Hold it! Call the Commander!’ Soldiers and Templars ran my way, storming to the stables.

‘Stay out of this.’ I gnarled and a blast of energy exploded from my body, pushing them back with a frightening ease. Simon was back on his feet, his sword unsheathed and he hurled at me. With a swift move, I jumped out of the way, rolling over the iced ground. Simon lashed out again, his voice thundering ‘Saeris stop this!’ But I wouldn’t let him get away with it for any longer. There was only a flaming red in my eyes, no place left for pity. Only anger remained. An anger I’ve been harbouring for ten years. I screamed and the hatred finally left my throat, a fire blasting from my hands, hitting Simon in the face. He screamed in agony and buried himself into the snow, and I saw how blood drenched the ice beneath him. Yet, his whining only made me angrier.

‘Maker’s breath, what is going on here!’ Commander Cullen ran to us from behind the ramparts, his eyes big as he looked at what I already had done, and was planning to still do. Ignoring his presence, I leaped across the open space to Simon, my knee pushing his spine down and he huffed as the snow suffocated him. I cried out as my arms formed to icy spikes, which I pointed downwards to crash down on him.

But just before I could impale him, two arms pulled me away. I cried out as my magic pushed, but the arms held me tight. ‘Ane atisha, da’len’, Solas’ smooth, deep voice filled my ears. The drum echoing through my head.

‘Let go of me! Fenedhis lasa, Solas!’ I cried out, and tears finally escaped my eyes, dripping down over my cheeks. I struggled against Solas’ hold, and my magic spun and twisted and lashed out, but it did nothing but glide over his woollen coat like water off a duck’s back. I smelted his barrier, heard it buzzing around me, trying to calm me down. ‘Varas, Solas! Let me go!’

‘Vaslasas, da’len, ane atisha.’ Solas said again, his arms tight around me, and he took a step back, guiding me away from Simon as he pushed himself up. I struggled again. I need to finish this! Simon won’t stop, he’ll always keep on trying. But Solas’ arms were bound around me. I never would’ve thought he was so strong. Not physically. But I felt his muscles tense under my strain, and his heart beat against my back.

‘Stop this immediately!’ Cullen pushed the crowd that had gathered around us aside and stepped between us. He stared at me, disappointment piercing through his gaze as he looked me up and down. I wriggled against Solas’ arms like a wildling, but he didn’t let go. ‘What is the meaning of
this!’ Cullen stared at me with his golden brown eyes, and his voice, so like Daniel, made me still myself at a loss for words.

‘Get that man away from here.’ I spat again, but then lowered my head in submission. Solas’ arms didn’t leave me, but I felt his grip loosen. ‘I cannot stay here… not if he stays.’ My voice broke in the middle of the sentence as I accepted my defeat whilst hanging there in Solas’ arms, his voice still trying to soothe me with the calming Elven tongue.

Cullen combed his hand though his golden locks, and shook his head. ‘Solas, please take Lady Saeris back to her cabin to calm down.’ Cullen sighed and rested his hands in his hips. ‘I will take it from here.’ Cullen looked me in the eyes, a heavy tone to his voice, like he was scolding a child.

Simon had gotten back on his feet, and wiped the dripping blood from the corner of his mouth. I gritted my teeth as I stared up at him, the left side of his face scarred with the bloody burns made by my magic. I couldn’t suppress a grin. Simon spat some blood on the ground and looked me in the eyes again, anger clouding his sneer. His left eye was closed because of the wounds. That will make a nasty scar. Simon grunted and limped forward to where Solas was restraining me. Cullen stepped before him, his arm stretched forward to keep the Templar in place, so he could go no further.

‘Fen’Harel ma halam’ I spat, the spit landing before Simon’s feet. Solas tightened his arms around me again. I cried out in irritation. Cullen squinted his eyes, his gaze piercing, urging me to stop.

Simon raised his chin and I heard him sneer very clear and well, ‘You… when we kissed that day…’ He almost smiled, but his face was so bloodied I couldn’t really tell, ‘You wanted it. And… I know you liked it.’

Solas pushed me against the ground as Cullen roared suddenly, turning around and crushing his steel gloved fists on Simon, who cried out in surprise. I heard the cracking of bones thrumming through my ears, and the crowd became unnaturally quiet. Solas lifted his weight off of me and I turned around on my side, feeling how the snow seeped through my clothes. Cullen towered above Simon, who had smacked onto the ground. K.O.

The Commander turned to me, his eyes big, but strong and confident. He lowered his gaze to me and held me there for a couple of moments, his eyes searching for something. I never felt so small before. Cullen commanded something and the crowd dispersed, some ex-Templars lingered and stared at us angrily for a second, but then they too returned to their posts. Two Inquisition soldiers lifted Simon up to carry him away.

‘Careful’, Solas hushed as he helped me back on my feet.

‘Cullen… I’ I started, but the Commander broke our eye contact and looked past me.

‘Take this man away and get Leliana for me.’ He said to the soldiers, and they pumped their chests immediately. ‘I think we need to investigate this man.’ Cullen nodded at me, and I saw concern and pain in his eyes. I knew then that he understood what had happened, or could’ve happened, between Simon and I in the Circle. My gut twisted, and I felt… sick… dirty… The Commander turned on his heel, marching away with the soldiers towards the gate.

I stared at the bloodied snow beneath our feet and cried softly. Solas threw his coat over my shoulders and covered me from the peering eyes of the people standing near us. I didn’t care what they just had seen me do. I only cared about what I didn’t do.

I should’ve killed him.
The wood hissed as my magic spiralled around it, blue flames crackling out of thin air. I stared at the fireplace and wiped away a lost tear with the back of my hand. I squatted and held my wet hands before the fire, feeling the warmth trying to warm me up. My muscles tensed under the strains of my wet clothes drying and shrinking under the heat.

‘Can I do something? Help you in any way?’ Solas lingered near the entrance of my cabin, the door already closed behind him to not let the warmth out. He cocked his head, and I saw a sheen of a purple bruise on his cheek. All because of me. Solas’ eyes seemed to pierce through me, stinging my shoulders with questions he didn’t really want an answer for.

‘No…’ I mumbled, my voice coarse because of the screaming and yelling and fighting. What were they doing right now, with Simon? Was Leliana interrogating him already? Or was he still unconscious in the cells below? Would they judge him? Punish him? Or just let him go like nothing ever happened.

Will they kill him?

Do I want them to kill him?

It should be me. I should be the one to give him the final blow. I should’ve killed him when I had the chance just now and…

‘It is not wise to brood on what’s already over, Saeris.’ Solas’ voice breached my flow of thoughts, and I lifted my head in response.

‘You shouldn’t have stopped me.’ If only I’d been fast enough.

‘I did not want you to do things that you’d regret later.’ Solas furrowed his eyebrows as I sighed and rolled my eyes dramatically. I wouldn’t have regretted killing Simon. ‘And have you thought of the consequences?’ Solas sounded agitated, and the tone in his voice made me turn around in surprise. ‘A mage killing a Templar without any visible provocation. You, out of all people, should know…’

I hissed and straightened myself, but I was too exhausted to be mad, so I just stared at Solas in silence. Why was he so angry with me? He attacked Simon as well. ‘They would’ve listened to my explanation, they would’ve understood…”

‘Would they? When have humans ever understood Our People? You are at a disadvantage, Elven and apostate mage. I do not want…”

‘Maxwell would’ve listened!’ I almost yelled but composed myself. ‘They would listen because they are my friends.’ I panted and shrugged as I walked over to my bed to sit on it. ‘But you’re right… I shouldn’t act without thinking… not like that… I shouldn’t let my emotions get the better of me.’ I rested my face in my cupped hands and sighed deeply, my shoulders shivering. ’It’s over now. I will face it again tomorrow.’

Solas crossed his arms before his torso and paced back and forth. ‘Did I hurt you?’ He stopped and stared at me, shadows dancing across his face.
‘No… Not at all, Solas.’ I looked up again and smiled faintly. ‘You helped me. I haven’t yet thanked you for it.’ Solas almost smiled back as I said, ‘Ma melava halani, ma serannas.’

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‘Saeris? Saeris! You there?’ Maxwell’s voice thundered through the door, his knocking thrumming through my ears. I yawned and stretched my body, ignoring the invasive bashing on my door. A nearly restless night had passed and I’d only slept for an hour or two. Maybe three.

I had replayed my fight with Simon over and over in my head, thinking of the words he had spat my way, the intrusive glare in his eyes, the disgusting grin he gave me when he saw me. I imagined impaling him with ice shards and killing him on the spot. At least I had burned half his face, and I wasn’t going to heal him. He’d carry that scar for the rest of his miserable, hopefully short, life.

‘Saeris! Open up!’

‘A moment!’ I huffed and crawled out of bed, my limbs sore and my head pounding. I pulled a clean cotton shirt over my head and put on some pants, wrapping my cape around me and then stumbled to the door to open it. Before I could say anything, Maxwell burst into the room, his eyes big and his cheeks red.

Out of breath, he yelled, ‘What did he do? What did that Templar do to you? I swear to the Maker, I will crush that guy’s skull with a Warhammer. If he even just glances at you, Andraste’s holy tits, I’ll spoon his eyes out!’ Maxwell threw his arms up in the air and stomped around my cabin furiously, steam nearly spewing out of his nose like an angry bull.

‘Maxwell, calm down…’ I laid my hand on his chest, and felt his heart pound underneath my pale fingers.

‘Did he…’ Maxwell heaved, his eyes boring into mine. I saw anger, rage and disgust, but also sadness, deep, deep sorrow.

I knew what he meant. ‘No’, I shook my head and Maxwell immediately relaxed, ‘Simon never got that far…’

‘If Leliana hadn’t stopped me, I had killed that guy already, pulled his damned guts out…’ Maxwell rested his hand on my cheek and I leaned into his touch, his palms cooling me. ‘When I heard, I wanted to come but… Cullen said to leave you be. I couldn’t sleep and I kept thinking of what had happened and… Sorry I woke you up.’

I inhaled, taking in Maxwell’s woody smell that lingered on his hand, and placed my hand right on top of his, squeezing it tightly. ‘It’s okay. I’m fine now, really.’

Maxwell smiled a little, but it seemed forced. ‘I’m sorry, but you still have to face the guy one more time. Leliana requests your presence in the Chantry cells… she needs your side of the story… We have to have a verdict to get rid of that… ass… and get him out of here…’ He suddenly grabbed my face with both of his hands now, urging me to look into his eyes. ‘If it had been up to me… I’d killed that man already… very slowly and painfully…’ Maxwell panted ‘But it’s not solely my decision, I’m not the Inquisitor, no one is. Josephine, Leliana, Cullen and I will decide the Templar’s fate together…’

‘I understand, Max…’ I smiled warmly and swallowed to keep the tears down. Maxwell truly was my friend. I knew he’d stand up for me, no matter the case.

Someone coughed loudly, and Maxwell immediately retreated his hands from my face, taking a step
backwards. Solas was leaning against the doorframe, his eyes cold as he stared at the both of us. And for a moment, an enraged gleam shimmered through his stare as he glanced at Maxwell, but it was gone before the Herald noticed it. ‘Saeris, I came to see if you were alright. I did not feel your presence in the Fade last night.’ He sounded almost irritated.

I cocked my head, ‘I’m fine. Didn’t sleep much, so I couldn’t enter the Fade, sadly.’ I rolled back my shoulders and looked back to Maxwell, who still seemed to tiptoe nervously as he tried to calm himself down. ‘I need to go to the Chantry. It’s time we settle this matter once and for all.’ Maxwell nodded and strutted out of the cabin, I followed, but Solas stopped me in the doorframe with a warm hand on my lower back. His face was close to mine, and I saw that his purple bruise had already faded. I curled my toes as I felt the familiar sickening ache in my empty stomach. It made me uncomfortably dizzy, but I still tried to smile as Solas leaned towards me.

‘Do you want me to accompany you?’ He hushed, his eyes never leaving mine.

‘That’s not necessary Solas, Maxwell’s with me.’ I took a step backwards to gain some space between us. My stomach immediately calmed a little. ‘I’ll see you later, okay?’

Solas nodded calmly, but his stare still made me shiver a little. Maybe he’d had a rough night too?

I left Solas at my cabin and walked with Maxwell towards Haven’s gate. The soldiers immediately dispersed and greeted Maxwell respectfully as we walked through the military camp. The soldiers stared at me, but it weren’t angry stares, not all of them. I think some had already guessed why I had lashed out yesterday, and they knew that if their Herald trusted me, they could do so too. But the other ex-Templars, the ones that had joined after Val Royeaux, couldn’t understand why the Herald allowed me so close to him. Maybe they thought I was an abomination, an apostate ready to kill an enemy Templar, a rebel. I didn’t blame them, I nearly killed one of their brothers yesterday. Yet, they didn’t know Simon as I did, they hadn’t yet seen through his façade. They didn’t know the monster wasn’t the mage, but the Templar. Maxwell noticed their hostile looks, and walked closer to me, his back straightened and his eyes stern but confident. A true Herald of Andraste.

Maxwell guided me to the Chantry and as we walked down the stairs, the warm and spiritual atmosphere turned into coldness and despair. The cells. This is where Maxwell’s story as the Herald had begun. In this damp, dark place below Andraste’s shelter. Most cells were empty, except for a few ones in the back. Two spies were locked up on the right, nameless, and foolish enough to think the Nightingale wouldn’t have caught them. And in the cell on the left, laid Simon. His face had been partially healed, probably by a healing potion, but it was still bloody and inflamed. My left eye twisted and turned as Simon looked up to me, his own pupils enlarging. As he stared at me, I noticed no “love” or lust was left, I only saw hatred. Great, now we were finally on the same level. Simon’s hands were bound behind his back, and he sat hunched because of the heavy protective barrier that was cast on these walls. Now he knew what that felt like.

From a dark corner, away from the torches’ light, stepped a cloaked figure. Two icy, sterling blue eyes appeared from beneath the purple hood. ‘Good, you’re here.’ Leliana’s alluring voice filled the deadly quiet room, and the two spies on the right flinched with fear when hearing her calm Orlesian whispers. The shadows behind her seemed to follow her body like sly dogs would follow their master. ‘Follow me.’ She walked over to me and her deadly eyes almost lit up her face. There was a door just before the entrance of the basement, and behind it, an interrogation room. Secluded, soundproof, and away from prying ears. As we entered the stone embedded chamber, Maxwell closed the heavy door behind us. I immediately felt claustrophobic. The grey, heavy stones reminded me of the cells in the Circle. How appropriate.

‘Please, take a seat.’ Leliana gave me a polite smile and took out a chair for me. We sat across from
each other at a table in the middle of the room, a small candle casting a dim light on our faces. The old wooden table creaked as Leliana rested her elbows on it, and she looked at me with big, but undeniably dangerous eyes. I didn’t think she wanted to threaten me or anything, she just had a “resting-I’ll kill you-spymaster-face”. But I bet that if you were her prisoner, you wouldn’t come out of this room unharmed. 'I would like your part of the story, Saeris, since we cannot trust the Templar… or can we?’ She lifted one of her thin red eyebrows, and I swallowed. She noticed and smiled a little. ‘If the man’s guilty of what I think he is, he has to be punished accordantly, no?’

Maxwell shifted on his feet. He was standing behind me, near the door.

‘Do you want him to leave us?’ Leliana cocked her head, her voice kind, but the tone serious and stern.

‘No, he can stay…’ I said. He was my friend, I knew I could trust him. Maybe having him here will give me strength.

Leliana nodded, and folded her hands, her posture straight and feminine, waiting for me to carry on with my story. My side of it anyway.

‘It all started eleven years ago… I was in the Free Marches, close to Wildervale, and planning on moving back to Ferelden after some years of travelling as a minstrel, when a Templar ran into my camp being chased by a black bear…’

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‘And then he was here… claiming Andraste had brought us back together. I tried to tell him off, but he didn’t take no for an answer. When he pinned me against the wall and Solas threw him off, and Simon then hurt Solas… I… flipped. I was done with the hurting. I was planning to end it. If Solas and Cullen hadn’t stopped me, Simon would be very much dead right now.’

‘Is that what you wanted?’ Leliana leaned back into her chair, a lock of red hair swaying in front of her eyes. She had listened to my story without saying anything up until now.

‘I wanted him dead, and I don’t think I’d feel bad if I had killed him… but I didn’t, so here we are. But… I hope you can understand why I did what I did… and that I can’t stay near that man.’

‘I understand. With your powers, you are a valuable asset to the Inquisition. And a friend of the Herald to boot. We gain more of your presence here than that Templar, yet killing him publicly will anger our new-found ex-Templar companions. I hope you understand that.’ Leliana peered at me through the almost molten candle’s light.

‘I know… Maybe I should’ve killed him when I had the chance.’ I looked at my hands. There was already so much blood on them, but I think I hadn’t minded the extra smudge…

‘Hatred is a very defining, and deep feeling. And just like love can make one kill, hatred can sometimes make one unable to do anything at all. Maybe it was better if you’d killed him, or maybe the Maker stopped you for a reason. Do not fret on it.’ Leliana pushed herself from her chair and Maxwell walked to where I was seated and placed his hand on my shoulder, pinching me kindly.

‘What will happen now?’ I asked.

‘The Herald and I will discuss everything with the Ambassador and the Commander and agree on a correct punishment for the Templar.’ Leliana gave me a small smile, and for once it seemed to reach her eyes too. ‘Next time, do not act as rashly. You are not alone in the Circle anymore. You can trust us.’ With that, the Nightingale soundlessly walked away, and the shadows took her back into the
‘I will do everything in my power to get that man away from here, Saeris.’ Maxwell smiled. ‘Come, I’ll escort you out. No need to stay here for a second longer.’

I took Maxwell’s hand and squeezed it. ‘Thank you, my friend.’

We walked back upstairs to the Chantry. Leliana was already there, Josephine at her side. The Ambassador looked up with a gasp as I entered the hall. She walked my way, the tap of her heels echoing through the Chantry. She clasped my hands, and smiled warmly. ‘Lady Saeris, I have heard what has happened… I truly hope you are alright.’ Josephine whispered with her thick Antivan accent, and nodded kindly. ‘You have the report, Leliana?’ Josephine let go of my hands and turned to the Spymaster. ‘Let us discuss this matter immediately. It should not be delayed. Herald, if you have time?’

‘Of course.’ Maxwell dipped his head. ‘Let’s head into the War Room.’ He straightened his back and then continued. ‘You there, soldier!’

A soldier standing near the Chantry’s entrance, looked up and pumped his chest respectfully. ‘Yes, Herald.’

‘Call on Commander Cullen, tell him to come to the War Room as soon as possible.’ Maxwell ordered, the whole hall quiet to hear his words. Yet, he whispered as he said, ‘He’ll know why.’

As the group retreated back into the War Room, I was left alone outside in the hall. Whispers returned, and I felt the disapproving stares of the Chantry mothers, sisters and priests. Behind the stone pillars, stood Vivienne, and I felt her sneering look on my back. I knew what she would say, and I didn’t care. After a couple of minutes, maybe ten, the Chantry door opened and Commander Cullen strutted towards the War Room with a thundering pace, his face determined. He almost hadn’t seen me, but stopped as I scraped my throat to give him a polite nod. The Commander was in full gear, his armour gleaming, and the fur on his shoulder plates caressing his strong jaws. His blonde hair laid somewhat messed up, and his golden eyes pierced through mine. He was out of breath. ‘Lady Saeris’, he panted and combed his hand through his hair. ‘Are you alright?’

‘Y… Yes, I’m good, I guess.’ I mumbled. I remembered his disappointing stare yesterday. It had gutted me, knowing that for a second, he only saw a defiant mage in me.

‘I must apologize for yesterday… I…’

‘You haven’t done anything wrong, you handled it professionally… as a Commander.’ I answered and looked to the ground

‘No… I didn’t. I didn’t assess the situation correctly… if that Templar hadn’t said… you know… I would’ve assumed you were in the wrong.’ Cullen slumped his shoulders a little.

‘It’s okay… I think I looked pretty crazy yesterday… You’ve stood up for me in the end, Cullen. That’s what matters.’ I rested my hand on his steel plated shoulder, and though he probably couldn’t feel it, I squeezed a little. Cullen smiled at my hand, and then looked down.

‘I will see that this man gets punished, my Lady.’ Cullen scratched the back of his neck… ‘I will tell the other Templars who have joined about this…if that is alright with you?’

‘You may do that. They should know…’

‘Indeed’, Cullen smiled faintly, ‘You are no Circle mage, and they no Templars. We’re all
Inquisition members, and should apply to its rules.’ Cullen placed his hand on mine, patting it almost awkwardly. ‘I will go in now, you should better go and eat something. This might take some time.’

‘Alright.’ I flashed my teeth in a hopeful smile.

‘You will hear from me.’ Cullen took a step back, but before he turned to the door, he smiled at me, ‘Until soon.’ And then left.

Again, I was left alone in the Chantry hall. The eyes of Andraste’s many statues glared down at me, and I was starting to feel uncomfortable. But still, I was happy. Though the Inquisition was based on the Andrastian religion, they still supported me, a nonbeliever apostate mage, over an Andrastian Templar. They had my back, because they were my friends, my companions, partners. I wasn’t alone. Not anymore.

***

‘Twinkle! There you are!’ Varric yelled and raised his short arms in the air to get my attention. He was sitting at the big table near the centre of the tavern. I smiled tiredly and walked his way, wading through half-drunken pilgrims and hungry soldiers waiting for their food to arrive. I sat down next to him and he grinned gleefully at me. ‘Heard you’ve been up to no good, huh?’

‘Probably had it comin’, innit?’ Sera plopped down on the other side of the table as soon as I was seated. She grinned at me with her crooked teeth, and she reminded me of a child whose baby teeth were changing into adult ones. ‘I mean, didn’t see what happened, yeah, heard he was an arse, all high ‘n mighty ‘n shit.’

‘Something like that…’ I smiled again, but it didn’t really reach my eyes. Right now, they were still discussing Simon’s fate, my fate, in the War Room. Though my body was there, my mind was with them.

‘Hey! Flissa! Could you be so nice to bring us a good bowl of your stew, would ‘ya?’ Varric yelled to the bar maiden, who blushed and nodded eagerly.

‘Ahhh! Look who we have here?’ The Iron Bull thundered through the tavern and walked our way, every step he took making the whole room tremble. People looked up when he passed, gawking at the huge grey horned man. ‘You had a good fight yesterday, too bad you couldn’t finish it, though.’ The Qunari man laughed loudly and sat down next to Sera, who was drooling while staring at his horns.

‘You were there?’ I cocked my head and furrowed my brows, ‘You could’ve helped, you know.’

‘Ha! You didn’t seem like you needed any help! Healer my ass!’ He smacked the table, ‘You should join the Chargers when you’re done here.’

‘I’ll think about it.’ I dipped my head. No way in hell.

‘H… Here you go, my Lady’, Flissa stuttered and put down a bowl of venison stew in front of me. I nodded kindly at her, but she didn’t seem to dare to look me in the eyes.

‘Pretty lady!’ The Iron Bull turned to Flissa. I didn’t really know if she was flustered, or really scared. ‘One round of your strongest stuff! It’s on me!’

Varric clapped his hands, ‘That’s what I like to hear!’

‘It’s time I get to know you guys better, hmm?’ The Iron Bull glanced with his one eye my way, and
pursed his lips. I squeezed my eyes together a little. I’ve seen that look in Leliana’s eyes when she was interrogating me before.

I hummed nonchalantly and started digging into my stew. I hadn’t eaten anything at all that day, so I was starving. We drank and talked for some hours, and I kind of appreciated the distraction. Varric was talking all about his life as a merchant and writer, and The Iron Bull enlightened us about some Qunari customs. Sera blabbered on about things and some shitty nobles, I couldn’t really follow her most of the time. She had seemed quite distant towards me at Val Royeaux, and I understood now that she wasn’t too keen on anything about “magical titstruggles” and “Elven gloryshite”. But maybe because of what happened yesterday, she seemed quite nice to me today.

I told some stories about my days, or decades, as a travelling minstrel. I talked about my journey through the cold steppes of the Anderfels and the dank swamps of Antiva and Rivain. I kept everything vague, though, reminding them that I was born in Ferelden, and just travelled out of boredom and sense of adventure. They didn’t need to know the true reasons why. ‘Do you like it here, Sera?’

The Elf sniggered, her droopy eyes ever droopier. Guess she wasn’t good at drinking. ‘It’s fine, yeah? I thought it’d be bigger… Pfft! Hear that? I meant the stronghold, but it sounded like… well, it’s funny, right? Imagine Heraldy being here.’ She giggled and slapped her knee. Varric gave her a fist bump. They kept on talking about Haven and the war and the Breach, but I couldn’t focus anymore. It’d been two hours already, they should be done discussing by now? I stared down into my almost empty chalice, trying to see patterns in the swirls of the alcohol.

‘Saeris, I have been looking for you.’ Solas startled me as he walked from behind my chair. His face was stern, concerned and he laid his hand on my shoulder as if by asking if I was alright.

‘Solas’, I gave him a small smile, but it seemed to only reassure him a little. He pushed his chin out and nodded towards the door. I dipped my head and pushed my chair back.

‘Pffbt!’ Sera rinsed her drink in her mouth, gurgling it and then gulping it down. Sneeringly, she stared at Solas, ‘Hey Solas! Droopy-ears-says-what?’

Solas, completely flabbergasted stopped in his tracks to stare the drunken girl down. ‘… excuse me?’

The Iron Bull giggled in his fist and Varric looked at the ceiling to hold in his laughter. Sera’s mouth twitched, but she lisped, ‘Ugh, you’re no fun!’

Solas sighed overly deeply and looked at me again. I chuckled and lifted my shoulders. When we left the tavern, we heard the group’s laughter roaring loudly inside. We walked silently up the hillock towards his cabin. Solas had clasped his hands behind his back as we strolled, our steps synchronous. For the few moments we were walking, I enjoyed the not that silent silence of the village. It was late in the afternoon, but people were still working vigorously. The crisscrossing of footsteps in the snow, the grunting of the military camp outside the gate, the birds chirping carelessly as they twirled through the sky… it was the kind of silence you could get lost in, your worries could drift away with the breeze. When we neared Solas’ cabin, he started to talk again, not loudly, his words floating through the air like he didn’t want to disturb the silence too. When he spoke like that, I could almost forget the ache in my stomach, the fire in my throat and the cold sweat on my brows that were caused by his presence. ‘Ir abelas, I took you from your friends.’

‘That’s okay, it was starting to get stuffy in there anyway.’ I smiled and laid my hand on the hedge of stone near his door, picking out the powdery snow from between the groves. ‘Have you heard anything? From the War Room?’ I didn’t look at him when I said that, hoping the nervousness in my eyes wouldn’t be noticed. I wanted all of this to be over, so I could get back on track, back to
protecting Maxwell and ensuring that hole in the sky would get closed.

‘I have not heard a thing.’ Solas crossed his arms and lifted a brow at me. ‘They will not leave that man unpunished.’

‘I know…’ I grinned nervously, ‘This could all’ve been prevented if I just…”

‘Maybe it is for the better this way.’ Solas stared at the ground, at the snow melting beneath his bare feet. ‘At least you were not hurt in any way.’

‘Simon threw you quite harshly… Are **you** alright?’

‘I am fine, nothing more but a mere bruise. That will not kill me.’ Solas looked back to my face, his eyes kind and calming, unlike this morning. ‘Were you worried about me, Saeris?’

I scoffed and threw some powdery snow on him. Solas chuckled and took a step back, but the question still lingered on his face. ‘Of course I was! I do care about you. We’re friends.’

‘We are.’ I couldn’t really tell if that was a question or not, but Solas left it open as he smiled faintly at me. It almost seemed like he had been expecting another answer. What was it he wanted?

It became awkward, so I changed the subject. ‘Your words yesterday really calmed me… The Elven language really does that, huh?’

Solas chuckled, ‘Sometimes Our People can feel the meaning of the words just by hearing them. But you speak the language quite well. Where did you learn?’ Solas’ eyes became a little bit colder and sterner.

‘I lived with a Dalish clan for a while, when I was younger… The Keeper was a very intelligent woman, she taught me a lot.’ Solas hummed. That wasn’t quite the answer he seemed to want either. And I knew he detested the Dalish. I pursed my lips, ‘You called me da’len yesterday, though. I’m not a child, really.’

Solas stared into my eyes again, very deeply. I swallowed the bile that had formed in my throat away. ‘No’, he said, his tone serious and his voice deep, echoing through the cracks of my mind, ‘You are not.’

*Solas knows.*

‘Saeris!’ Maxwell ran towards us, the Commander on his heel. I pushed myself away from Solas’ gaze and walked towards them, a nervous look clouding my eyes.

‘And? What’s the verdict?’ I squeaked, the stress seeping from my every breath.

‘Exile.’ Maxwell heaved. He had probably sprinted to me when he left the War Room. I looked down to my feet, a little bit disappointed. What had I expected? The death penalty? Leliana had already told me that wouldn’t happen, but still. Exile was still good, it meant that I wouldn’t ever had to see Simon again, not close to my home anyway. I should be happy.

‘He will be ordered to leave Ferelden, or be hanged if he returns. It may not be what you want, but at least he’ll be gone. He will also be stripped from all his titles and sent far to the north…’ Cullen stepped from behind Maxwell and smiled a little at me, his hand resting on my shoulder. Behind me, I felt Solas’ stare, and the stew in my stomach turned sour.

‘You did your best… thank you…” I sighed. ‘When… when will you send him on his way?’
‘Tonight.’ Maxwell cocked his head a little. ‘You don’t have to be present, if you don’t want to.’

‘No.’ I interrupted and lifted my chin confidently, ‘I’ll be there.’

***

The moon rested high in the starry night sky, its light casting eerie shadows on the unpaved path that lead through the forest, away from Haven. Cassandra stood next to me, close enough for me to feel her warmth. Solas stood behind me, a barrier buzzing around us.

I looked up as soon as I heard the crushing of boots. Maxwell, Leliana and Cullen appeared from behind the trees, Simon in chains bound before them. The man who I hated so, now stared at me with equal disgust. A long scar curled across his face, from his forehead, over his left eye, and down his cheek. The skin near the scar had been charred away, leaving red blemishes and dark groves of flesh. I hoped it hurt, a lot. Simon sneered at me as Cullen pushed him forward, past our party. Simon didn’t say anything, and neither did I. I think there wasn’t much to be said anyway. As the Templar passed us, I felt Cassandra’s hand reach for mine, and she pinched me a little. I looked at her and she at me, her eyes big and kind. Like a big sister.

‘You are hereby banished from Ferelden and all Inquisition strongholds in Thedas. You are stripped of your Templar titles, and will never be able to hold any land in this country for as long as you live. If you are to break these conditions, you will be hanged on sight.’ Cullen’s voice thundered through the forest, his eyes cold and deadly, like he too could lash out at any moment. Simon didn’t even nod, didn’t even look up. ‘These soldiers will escort you out of Ferelden,’ Cullen continued as five Inquisition scouts appeared from behind him. Two I recognized as Leliana’s trusted rogues. ‘You will be given a limited amount of Lyrium. If you struggle, they have been ordered to kill.’

The soldiers took Simon’s chains from Cullen’s hand, and pushed the Templar forward. Simon complied with an angry glare, but then stared back to the ground. They started to walk, but before the group disappeared into the dark woods of the Frostbacks, Simon looked back at me. I didn’t look down, I didn’t scare away. I stood tall, confident and strong.

He could not get me down. He couldn’t belittle me. Not now, not ever.

His eyes bore into mine, full of hatred and spite. It was a glare that said a thousand words, but only a few ringed through my mind. He will return. One day, we will fight again on opposite sides, and one of us will die by the other’s hand. And until that day, I would wait for him and he for me. And when that day comes, I’ll make sure I’m ready.

Simon disappeared back into the darkness, and a heavy burden had seemed to be lifted off of my shoulders. For now. I sighed, the whole group did, as the forest became silent.

For a moment, I felt secure, calm.

And then Flissa’s stew came right back out again.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter wasn’t as action-packed as the last one, but I didn’t want to go lightly over the "Simon-situation" and found it needed another chapter of Saeris dealing with it. So, this villain is still alive, and you haven’t seen the last of him yet, that's all I’m saying!
Soon, our friends will be visiting the city of Redcliffe... excited?!!
‘Mum… Why am I called Saeris?’

‘What do you mean, sweetie?’ Mum dipped a porcelain plate into the foam, roaming it around in the sink. The clinging of the dishes against each other rang through the kitchen. I looked at my brittle nail polish. It’s black, named “Witch”, and it glitters a little.

‘It’s just… I don’t like my name. I want a normal name.’ I whined.

Mom stopped scrubbing the already clean plate and wiped her wet slender hands on her apron. She turned to me, one brow uplifted, her hands resting on her hips. ‘Why would you want that? You want to be called Sarah? There are three Sarahs in your class. Nobody’ll mistake your name!’

‘But… Even my teacher can’t even write it properly.’ I bit my lips. They were chapped.

‘She will, honey.’ Mum walked over to the kitchen table where I was seated, and pushed my seat back a little so she could look into my eyes. ‘You know… Dad really likes your name. It’s special, and means a lot to him.’ Mum combed her fingers through my thick blonde hair, and smiled a little. There were small little creases appearing near the ends of her eyes. Like branches of a tree.

‘It does?’ I looked up into Mum’s clear blue eyes. I had inherited them from her.

‘It does a lot!’ Dad barged into the room and threw his suitcase onto the table with a bang. He grinned at me while he loosened his tie that matched his blue suit.

‘Why?’ I asked again, this time maybe a little bit more annoyed as Dad pecked Mum on the lips. She smiled when he whispered something as he retreated.

‘Because, the day before you were born, like fate itself, I dreamed about it.’ Dad wiggled his eyebrows and squatted near my chair, looking me in the eyes like he was dead serious.

I scoffed, ‘Yeah, right.’

‘No, no it’s true!’ Dad flashed his white teeth. ‘And in my dream, I couldn’t see anything but two beautiful eyes, and they called to me. “Saeris! Saeris!” And when I woke up, your gorgeous Mum here’, he winked at her playfully, again, ‘was huffing and puffing and not that much later you where there. And I couldn’t think of anything but Saeris.’

‘You’re playing with me.’ I stuck out my tongue and pushed myself from my chair, snarling.

I don’t like my name. I never have. And I never will.

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The strings of the fiddle cut through my fingers, but I ignored the stinging as I strummed a slow melody. With each tone that flowed through the wooden instrument, my heart dropped. I wondered if it could stop.

‘Flissa! Another!’ The Iron Bull bashed his empty cup on the wooden table, and I missed a string.
‘You know, Tiny, the table can’t help it that you’re drinking too fast.’ Varric grinned and winked at the Qunari man. I smiled faintly, and then continued the incoherent song I’d been playing for the last two hours.

‘It is a tool, Varric, the louder the bang, the better she hears. A show of strength. Ladies dig it.’ Why does that man even bother? You can see, let alone hear him, from two miles away.

Flissa scurried to our table, her cheeks red from working. She nodded faintly at me, but didn’t meet my eyes. ‘The same?’ She asked meekly. Bull flashed his teeth at her, and she became a little bit paler. She should be scared. Bull literally bites… unless she likes that sort of thing. ‘Would you like some stew, my Lady?’ Flissa turned around before she walked back to get Bull’s drink. She stared at my hands, at my fingers curling around the fiddle.

‘Pbft! Don’t! She’ll throw that up, like when… remember? Well you remember, I don’t, I heard. Did it smell?’ Sera giggled and poked my elbow slightly.

Ignoring Sera, I said, ‘No, thank you, I don’t have a big appetite today.’

‘You gotta eat something, Twinkle.’ Varric stared at me, his tone serious. My father used to use that same tone when I didn’t want to eat my vegetables.

‘I know, I know.’ I waved my hand, pausing my song. ‘Maybe later, okay?’ I smiled at Flissa so she could finally get Bull’s drink before he gets sober. He’s worse when sober.

‘You’ll become sticky, like a stick, like most Elves…’ Sera mumbled.

‘You know, Sera, you’re an Elf yourself.’ I lifted an eyebrow.

‘Pbft!’ She stuck out her tongue at me, slightly annoyed.

‘Saeris, darling, there you are! I have been looking all over for you!’ Vivienne appeared at our table. Her white leather coat in stark contrast with the brown furniture of the tavern. Her face was twisted in a heavy sneer, like there was a stench and she was holding her breath. Well, it did reek of ale and stew in here. And maybe some sweat.

Well, crap. She’s the last person I want to see today. Or ever. ‘Madame, what can I help you with?’

‘I have been looking for the Herald, yet I can’t seem to find the man anywhere. Most of his spare time, he spends with you. Have you seen him, my dear?’ She fluttered her eyelashes innocently, but the tone of her voice was still denigrating.

I crossed my legs and looked up to her defiantly, one brow cocked. ‘I haven’t seen him today. He usually just finds me.’ Because I’m not a nasty person one would want to avoid, unlike… Madame here.

‘Well, if he finds you, darling, I do hope you will let him know I am in need of his opinion.’ About what? Your next outfit?

‘I’ll try.’ I tried to smile, but it didn’t really work out.

‘I bet!’ Sera giggled, but Vivienne ignored her, very much like she ignored everyone else.

The Iron Bull leaned over the table towards us, a smouldering grin on his lips, ‘You know, Viv, you can join us and wait for the Herald to appear?’ Bad idea.
Vivienne straightened her back and lowered her eyes to where Bull was seated. A confident glare in her eyes. ’You will address me as Enchanter Vivienne, Court Mage to the Empire of Orlais, or Madame de Fer. Not, ”Viv.”’

The Iron Bull, completely blown away, stared at her with an open mouth. ’Oh. Right, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.’

Vivienne clicked her tongue. ’Hmm, yes, ma’am works as well.’

She turned back to me. ’My dear, it’d be greatly helpful if you lead the Herald my way.’ She smiled innocently, like a good little girl, but snarly added, ’And I heard you had a problem with one of our new Templar recruits… I advise you not brawl with any other, or we’re without a force.’ She turned around swiftly and took off, her hips swaying left to right.

I cursed under my breath and wished that the smell of ale would creep into her clothes, and she’d be unable to get it out.

’Damn.’ The Iron Bull blinked his eyes at me, and I sighed deeply in response. It had been two days since Simon was exiled, and I wondered how long it’d take before Vivienne would comment on it.

Where would Simon be now? I hope he’s out of the country already.

Stop thinking about it.

He isn’t worth my thoughts.

’Saeris!’ Maxwell plopped in the chair next to me, a giant smile on his face. ’Want to go spar? Or Wicked Grace? I feel like not thinking.’

I looked at him in surprise. ’Did you meet Vivienne on your way here?’

He cocked his head like a little puppy, his curly brown hair hanging to one side. ’No, why? Did she ask for me?’

I smiled. ’Oh, no. I don’t think she needs you. I just saw her pass, that’s all.’

Varric poked my knee under the table and winked at me. Sera giggled again.

’Good. Last time that woman asked for me, she had ordered me a new armour from Val Royeaux’ “best tailor”. It was a leather shirt. Saeris. It. Was. Cropped.’

’Blegh! Belly buttons!’ Sera made fake vomit sounds.

’Yes, Sera. Hairy belly buttons.’ Maxwell grinned as Sera truly shivered now.

’So, Boss. Drinks?’ The Iron Bull winked at me and then at Maxwell.

The Herald smiled back, ’Ugh, yes! I really need… Argh!’ He cried out suddenly, gripping his marked hand. The mark pulsed, a green light splashing violently out of his palm.

I dropped the fiddle onto the table, shoved back my seat and was next to him in a second. ’Max! Are you okay?’ I hushed and pushed my hands on his mark.

Maxwell sighed as my fingers seemed to cool the scar down. ’You really have the hands of a Healer.’ He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.
The Healer has the bloodiest hands.

‘Do you want me to look at it?’ I caressed his palm slowly, hoping it would calm the magic down.

‘Can you?’ He locked eyes with mine, and I only saw warmth.

‘Of course’, I smiled, ‘And maybe… I can learn something out of it too.’

***

‘Do you see anything?’ Maxwell raised his brows as I focussed on the mark on his hand.

‘Shhh, I’m concentrating!’ I hissed and slapped his wrist playfully. The mark hummed, radiating a green light that faded in and out with the drum of Maxwell’s heartbeat. I couldn’t heal his scar, but since we were together now, I had proposed to look at it specifically with my green eye. Maybe we could unlock something together. The Herald had found it a good idea, and now, we were sitting at the War Table together, the map of Ferelden and Orlais in front of us.

‘What did you do last time?’ Maxwell sighed, flexing his fingers. I had been staring at his hand for an hour now, and his muscles were starting to get sour.

‘I don’t know… it just happened… like looking through a random, green mirror.’ I huffed.

Solas was standing behind my chair. He had seen us walking to the Chantry together, and joined us. I knew he was curious about the mark, almost as curious as he was about me. And he was my trainer, of course. He should be allowed to see if I had learned anything useful yet. For the whole hour, he had been observing, quietly looking at the two of us. Like a marble statue. Now, I felt him get closer, his face hovering over my shoulder to look at the mark. It was incredibly weird, the man smelled like elfroot and Earl Grey tea, but he still made me want to vomit.

‘Are you alright, Saeris? You’re turning red.’ Maxwell lifted his brows at me. I scoffed and kicked my foot against his leg under the table.

‘Perhaps you should not look at it like a mirror.’ Solas’ voice thrummed through my head, and my sensitive ears twitched as his breath caressed them. ‘Think of a place where you have already been, perchance that is easier. Like we did in our training.’

‘You could’ve proposed that an hour ago.’ I grumbled and turned my head to the side. I swallowed deeply as Solas’ face was right next to mine, his eyelashes so close I could count them. Quickly, I looked back to Maxwell, who smirked as I turned slightly red again.

Solas chuckled, a warm sound. ‘It was interesting to see you try.’ Asshole.

‘You’re so kind.’ I said sarcastically.

‘Please focus on the task at hand, Saeris, the Herald has other things to do.’ Cassandra crossed her arms and glared at me a little. She was standing in front of the War Table, waiting for me to spot Rifths through Maxwell’s mark and write them down. Or at least she hoped that that’s what I would see. I think she’s actually just here to support Max. She’s kind like that, in her own brutal way.

‘Don’t worry, Cass, I’ll still have some free time to spend with you today.’ Maxwell winked again, and Cassandra sighed while making a disgusted noise. But the little blush on her face told me she approved anyway.

‘Alright, let me focus again.’ I laughed and then focussed my left eye on the mark again. As soon as
I made contact with the mark, my eye started to twist and turn in its orbit, spitting the same light as the mark, fading in and out. The magic of the Fade spiralled in the magical mark, and in my eye. We felt connected, or at least, the magic felt connected. It felt like a bouquet of feathers was tickling my spine, my cheeks, even the soles of my feet. It wasn’t an annoying feeling, but a warm, funny one. It felt more like how anticipation feels like, a good kind of stress.

Okay, somewhere I’ve been.

The Hinterlands.

Good.

Focus.


***

A click rang through my mind, stilling my whole body, turning it to stone. But not cold stone. A hot, sizzling stone. The click sounded like when you connect two magnets from a distance. Two opposites drawn to each other, never wanting to let go. Familiar magic filled my body, tasting like sweet metal on my tongue. And all I saw was green. An emerald, twisting green. Not even, but spinning like oil in water. Liquid. Maybe more like molten lava? Green lava. Burning but soothing. And I wasn’t just seeing it, I was feeling it. The Fade. That’s where I was, that’s where the mark had lead me to. I knew this place to the core, like a home away from home. There’s no way I’d mistake it for something else. The green around me moved, pushing me somewhere, to a certain place. My mind soared through the vast emerald space around me, like a spaceship going into hyperspace, and little crystals of light formed a tunnel before my eyes. But I couldn’t see an end. It went on and on and on.

Destination reached.

I was now somewhere new. This was still the Fade, I was still connected to the mark, but the vast green space around me, the twisting tunnel of crystals full of light, were gone. The place before me was like a long corridor. The walls, which were not really walls because you couldn’t touch them, were painted the same green as I had just been travelling through. And instead of doors, there were windows. Not normal, framed ones, but strange, emerald coated windows that seemed to be made almost out of some ice instead of glass.

I looked through the first one.

I recognized this place immediately. Witchwood. We had travelled through it on our way to Horsemaster Dennet. We had closed a Rift near his farm, but it seems we had forgotten this one. I looked around and saw the thick trees with the spikey ice shards that remained from the rebel mages’ camp. But it was empty now.

Okay. The next one.

I looked through all of the windows I could look through. The more Rifts I could locate, the more we could close, the more people we could save. I saw some more Rifts near the Forest Camp, I saw one on the Outskirts and there was still a lingering Rift at Dwarfson’s Pass. And every time I looked through a window, I became more and more aware that these weren’t windows at all. I was looking
through each and every Rift.

And I felt them.

Demons.

They lingered behind me, next to me, above me and beneath me, waiting for a moment to get out. They couldn’t see me, and I couldn’t see them, because I wasn’t physically in the Fade like they were. But I could sense them. So they could probably sense me too.

I turned to the last window.

Yet, this Rift was weird.

I mean, all of them were weird, but this one was really weird. When I looked through it, everything around it seemed to move in slow motion. Before me, there was a gate, a steel gate, with two strong towers holding it upright. And there, behind it, I saw the shadows of cowering soldiers, looking straight at me with terrified eyes. Something growled, and I felt the window shudder as something stepped through its boundaries.

‘Another one!’ A soldier screamed, but his voice sounded far away. Like he was yelling at me through water.

My heart pumped through my body, cold sweat clinging to my face.

I need to go.

I need to open my eyes.

I woke up, but not before I heard someone scream.

***

‘Saeris!’ Solas’ hands burned on my shoulders, shaking me nervously.

I blinked, and I felt like something left me. The connection between me and Maxwell’s mark was gone, and it had taken away all of my energy with it. I felt empty now. Maybe even somewhat sad.

‘Saeris? Do you hear me?’ Maxwell pinched my hand, and I felt the mark’s warmth echo through my body one last time.

I looked up to him, ‘I do… For how long was I…’

‘Only a few minutes.’ Cassandra was standing next to me, squatting to look me in the eye.

‘It felt longer than that…’ I murmured.

‘What did you see?’ Solas turned around to stand next to my chair, his eyes big and encouraging.

‘Solas…’ I spoke his name very slowly, my voice still stuck in my throat, ‘I was… in the Fade. There were windows… no… Rifts… I could look through them like windows…’

‘I felt your mind slip for a moment, like you were almost to enter it physically…’ Solas whispered seriously, but Cassandra interrupted.

‘Rifts? You saw them? Could you tell me where?’ She straightened herself and pointed to the map,
her eyes hopeful.

‘I… I can…’ I answered, and looked down to the map. ‘The Forest Camp… Witchwood… Dwarfson’s Pass… and…’

‘And…?’ Cassandra was already hunching over the map, pinning down every area I just mentioned.

I pressed my hand against my forehead, my icy palms cooling down the burning sweat that had formed near my temples. The memory of the green corridor faded quickly, like I wasn’t supposed to have been there, and I should forget. But the thought of that last window, that last Rift, clung to me. The eyes of the soldiers, so full of terror as they stared at me, or whatever was before me. And then that strange mixture of reality and slow motion, like everything that I saw was happening in the future, the past and now. All mixed together. Before that last memory faded, I recalled the soldiers one more time, and the scorched heraldry that hung on the steel gate before them. I finally looked up to Maxwell, my eyes locking with his. I heard him swallow as I said, ‘Redcliffe.’

***

I stared at the jagged, dark brown jawbone that dangled on a thick threaded rope around Solas’ neck. There was a pattern of scars and cracks on it, and I wondered how old it was. Had it been passed down from father to son? Or did he find it somewhere during his travels?

Solas was focussing on the drawing I had made of the green corridor, and murmured inaudible things to himself. I was sitting on the side of his bed. It was hard, and had a thick fur blanket laying on top of the shitty mattress. Everything was covered in his smell, and I felt like a dog sniffing about. Strange how everything here screamed his name. The smell of elfroot and tea, the neatly piled books and papers, the black ink on his desk, his long staff leaning against the wall… Everything here shouldn’t make me scared or sick, or at least not nervous, but still… everything did.

‘And everything was green?’ Solas’ voice buzzed through the cottage.

‘Yes… I think.’

‘Do you not remember?’ He looked up from my drawing. His scholarly gaze, the one that seemed to want to dissect me, flowed through his eyes again. It made me sick, sick and angry. He could look at me sometimes like he truly cared, like he saw something in me that most people didn’t dare to see. But now, he only saw a mystery to unravel, a creature to dissect, a book to read in a language he was just starting to learn. It made me feel like an object. And I didn’t like it.

Why do I even care how he looks at me?

I looked away from his stare, and my stomach calmed down a little, ‘The memory of what I saw has faded extremely fast… Like something is preventing me from remembering for a long time.’

‘Perhaps you are preventing yourself?’ He cocked his head, and I heard him put my drawing between the stack of papers on his desk.

‘And why would I do that?’ I sounded slightly annoyed. Now I’m the problem?

‘Perchance, what you saw was too much to bear… or your mind is not trained enough to keep the knowledge within reach.’ He took a step towards me, and I cursed my decision to sit on his bed. I should’ve kept on standing… near the door. Why does this man make me feel so uncomfortable at one time, but so calm at another? I couldn’t decide what to feel around him. ‘Or maybe you are not telling me things deliberately?’

‘Excuse me?’ Is he accusing me? ‘I proposed to sit down together immediately to discuss what I
saw… I could’ve been taking a nap right now, but I’m here. Why would I keep something from you? Where would that take me?’ I scoffed and pushed myself from the bed.

‘Ir abelas, I was only considering all possibilities. I did not mean to insult you.’ He was standing right in front of me. I looked up, wanting to scold him in some way, but when I stared in his eyes, I saw he regretted it somewhere.

‘It’s fine… I…” I bit my lip, and I saw Solas squint his eyes as he stared at me whole. Always searching for something more. Always a question clouding his sight. ‘Solas, is there something you want to ask me?’

My question was brutally honest, and I hadn’t expected asking it, but it came out naturally. Solas hadn’t seen it coming either, it seems, as he took a step back in confusion. ‘Why do you…”

‘Never mind,’ I smiled and waved my hand, ‘I’m just… tired. Sorry. Maybe if I rest a bit, the memories of what I saw might come back to me… and if they don’t, I guess we have to train harder…” I stared down at our feet and the dust between the cracks of the wooden floor.

‘Wait…” He called after me, but I passed him too quickly as I moved to the door. I closed my eyes and walked outside.

I had to contain myself, or I would’ve sprinted to my bed. Instead, I walked a steady pace through the village, ignoring people’s stares. I heard someone call after me, Varric, maybe Cassandra, but I ignored them. And they stopped calling after seeing my face.

I looked drained. Paler than normal. Tired. And maybe still slightly agitated.

Solas and I. What are we? Are we even friends? I thought we could be, not in the beginning, but after a while,… and the way he talked to me during training… he had felt like a friend. But then at other times, I don’t know, we just clashed. Maybe we weren’t meant to be close. Maybe that ache in my stomach was really a sign to stay away.

Yet, why couldn’t I?

Why was I drawn to him? And he to me?

Because we were Elves? I don’t feel close to any other Elf in that way… Even with Elgadira, Nenhara and Sybil, it had felt different.

I slammed the door behind me and fell face first into bed.

What are we to each other?

***

The next morning, Maxwell knocked on my door, waking me up. I looked up in confusion and crawled out of bed.

‘Max?” I mumbled as I opened to door to let him in.

‘Good morning!’ He smiled and entered my cabin. I squinted against the light he had allowed to seep through the opened door, and looked him up and down. He was in full armour, his swords in their sheaths bound against his hip. The Inquisition vigil was painted over his steel and leather chest plate, with white and gold paint. It was rich, and very visible.
An armour meant to show strength. A strong Inquisition with a strong Herald.

He wasn’t planning on going on a mere scouting mission.

‘Get packed, suit up, we’re going back to the Hinterlands.’ He said loudly. Too loud for the morning.

‘What? Why? Now?’ Was he going to close the Rifts now? Why in such an armour, though?

‘We’re going to Redcliffe. Remember in Val Royeaux? Grand Enchanter Fiona invited us.’ He smiled and pulled my armour coat from my wardrobe.

‘Really? I thought we weren’t going because we have the Templars already.’ I took my coat from his hands, stopping him from going through the drawers. They contained my underwear.

‘Well, we considered it, and then not, and then again… But yesterday, you saw them. Redcliffe soldiers. They need our help.’ He looked at me seriously. ‘Do you not want to?’

I know I’m going to meet other familiar faces there. And I bet the rebels will fight with the Templars here at Haven. It will be hard to get them to work together.

‘Of course.’ I smiled.

To Redcliffe.

Chapter End Notes

New chapter! Sorry it took a while! I wasn't happy with what I had written, and had to rewrite some parts. I'm just happy I can go to Redcliffe now and start with some adventure!
9:41 Dragon, About two or three months ago

We had just returned from Horse Master Dennet, and were on our way back to Haven. After all of the fighting we had seen, all of the homeless at the Crossroads, I’d become sick of this place. We had closed many Rifts, and I saw Maxwell getting paler and paler by the exhaustion caused by activating his mark. We were travelling alongside the East Road. Our horses whinnied as we heard a frightened scream far from behind the treeline. Maxwell immediately made eye contact with Cassandra, before turning to me. I nodded at his silent request to aide. We had helped people many times. Villagers being attacked by Templars, merchants on the run from demons, and so on. This time, it was no different. We ran towards the glade from where we heard the scream. The sun was casting flickering shadows on the ground, and I first couldn’t see what was going on.

Until we heard the gurgling screech.

A Shade brought down its black claws onto the woman before it, but she jumped aside just in time. Her staff twisted around in her hand, her magic spiralling out of it. She didn’t seem incompetent, but the terrified look in her eyes showed her weakness. And the demon saw it too. With its mangled body, the Shade leaped to the woman again. Just in time, she cast a barrier around her, but it wasn’t strong enough as the demon managed to push the woman out of her ward and onto the ground again. Cassandra was there first, her sword cutting through the Shade like butter. The demon screeched again, turning to its assailant. But before it could attack one last time, a steel bolt from Varric’s crossbow already hit it in the head. The demon roared and turned to a puddle of black bile on the shining green grass.

We were getting better and better at this.

‘Peace!’ The woman, Elven, with soft curling grey hair, held up her hands. She didn’t tremble anymore. The rest of us caught up with Cassandra and Varric, and I looked the strange woman up and down. She had a purple, blackish, Vallaslin of June spread across her face, curling from her chin to her cheeks all the way up to her forehead. The Dalish woman soothingly continued, ‘I am no danger to you. My name is Mihris.’ Was she trying to calm us, who rescued her, or calm herself? ‘By your weapons, I see you come ready for battle. Perhaps we face a common enemy in these demons?’ The woman smiled politely, still holding up her hands. I saw her eyes flicker disdainfully towards me and Solas for a second, and then back to Maxwell.

The Herald sighed at the woman, but calmly stored his daggers back into their sheaths. ‘Are you battling these demons on your own?’ Maxwell rested his hands on his hips, his thoughts very loud and clear. What in the Maker’s name were you thinking, woman?

Mihris smiled a little, like she understood Max’ sarcasm. ‘Fighting the demons is pointless. There’ll always be more. And I have no means closing the Rifts, but I have heard of Elven artefacts that measure the Veil…’ Solas shifted on his feet a little, the look in his eyes ever so familiar. He knew what she was talking about. I stared at him, and he glanced at me from the corner of his eyes. ‘They may tell us where new Rifts will appear. I was not expecting so many demons, however.’

‘Yeah, they do like to come here, lately.’ Varric grinned a little.
‘I believe one of the artefacts is nearby.’ Mihris’ eyes darted from Maxwell to Cassandra, who stared at her suspiciously.

‘Well, we have an Elven expert here. Solas, have you ever heard of these… artefacts?’

Solas hummed, and retreated into his favourite, scholarly pose. Hands bound behind his back, chin high, a smugness in his eyes, and a serious but passionate tone in his voice. ‘I have heard about these artefacts while researching the Fade. The Ancient Elves could have hidden them close by. If we can find those artefacts they used, it may help strengthen this area against tears.’

‘Well, the less Rifts the better.’ Maxwell lifted up his shoulders and sighed deeply. He clearly just wanted to keep on riding to reach the next camp. From there onward, it would only take a couple of days to get back to Haven.

‘You are right,’ Cassandra said seriously, still eying the Dalish woman, ‘but we should not linger for too long.’

‘Thank you!’ I saw Mihris take a deep breath, ‘It should be there further ahead.’

We walked with a quickened pace towards a fallen-in cave. It didn’t seem anything special, and I couldn’t feel the magic Solas mentioned. Maxwell calmly asked Mihris some questions, and the woman answered freely and eagerly, not fully knowing the Herald was full-on interrogating her.

The entrance of the cave was blocked by rocks. I had to contain myself from cursing as Mihris gnarled at Solas and I, ‘You there, flat-ears, can one of you manage it?’

Solas remained calm and stepped up, saying ‘Ma nuvenin, da’len.’ I heard the bite in his words though. Mihris scoffed at Solas calling her a child, but that only made his point. I knew Solas couldn’t stand the Dalish. There were some clans who were as racist to City Elves as humans were. I think Mihris came from one of them. But well, Elgadira and the clan called me flat-ear too when I first joined them… Green tentacles spiralled from Solas’ hands, and my stomach turned with the smell of them. But it went by quickly as his magic lifted the stones away.

We walked into the dark cavern, and were greeted by what seemed like an ancient tomb or temple. It was fairly small, but the old carvings in the walls could tell more stories than any cliff outside. There was a Veilfire brazier barely hanging on the wall. I took it and immediately, the strange green fire, that was neither hot nor cold, summoned itself at the torch. Cassandra stared at it strangely. I think she hasn’t ventured much into Ancient Elven tombs. I had encountered some during my travels, and besides, Elgadira had taught me everything there was to know, or what she still knew, about Elven culture. There were also books about Veilfire and its properties, but they were banned by the Chantry. Because of this, the art became extinct.

‘What manner of fire is that?’ Cassandra stared intensely into the green crackling fire, almost hypnotised.

It looked a damn lot like the green in my eye. It danced like it.

Solas looked at me like he had been thinking the same. ‘I have heard of it but never seen it before,’ he said as he turned back to the Seeker, ‘It is called Veilfire. It is a form of sympathetic magic, a memory of flame that burns in this world where the Veil is thin.’

‘You seem to know it quite well, Saeris?’ Cassandra lifted a brow at me, her voice sounded calm, but I knew the undertone well. Maxwell had used it a few minutes ago with Mihris.

‘When I was travelling as a minstrel, long ago, I once stumbled upon it… I wanted to hide from the
rain and hoped it would keep me warm… That was a bummer, really.’ I smiled and rolled my shoulders. I felt Solas’ eyes behind me pinning me down, like he was seeing right through my lie. It made me uncomfortable. How could he know I was lying? Solas and I weren’t really friends. I found him suspicious, and I think he thought the same about me as well. But, he did promise to train me in shaping the Fade, and we had done so a few times already. I have almost mastered shaping the Fade to my own memories, and wondered what the next step would be. Will I ever be able to use my eye for good?

Solas, Mihris and I made some more magical torches and distributed them to the rest of the party. Then, we continued our way deeper into the tomb. As we went down the old, marble stone stairs, we entered an open hall. Solas immediately quirked his head, almost like a dog hearing a skittering squirrel. ‘There. I sense one of the artefacts.’

We closed the back of the temple, where the marble stopped and the natural rock took over. Who knows how deep this place used to go? What made it collapse? Before us, on the ground, stood a strange object. It looked almost like a globe, but made out of a hard, cold metal and topped with strange machinations. It smelled like magic.

Solas touched it, his fingers gliding over the cold orb, his magic pushing in. With a small “snap”, the globe started to twist, vibrate even, and began to give off a dim green glow. Like Veilfire, like a Rift, like the Fade, like my eye.

Solas’ shoulders tightened, but he raised his head and smiled faintly at Maxwell. It didn’t reach his eyes. ‘The wards are helping to strengthen the Veil. This area should be safer for travellers now.’

I squeezed my eyes together. The air felt… prickly… and I could taste the magic, feel it shifting over my shoulders. My eye sputtered, twisted and turned. It hurt. The artefact should strengthen the Veil, but why did I have this eerie, blinding feeling? I just wanted to go outside, because the magic from the artefact reminded me too much of Solas’ magic, and my stomach protested.

Mihris broke my flow of thought as she sprinted to a chest in the corner of the hall. ‘And it seems the ancestors have left something for me as well!’ She grinned.

I huffed. She was just a tomb wrecker. So far goes her “Dalish pride”, huh?

‘Interesting,’ she smiled again, ‘I believe our alliance is concluded. Go in peace, stranger.’ Mihris nodded at Maxwell, who clearly wasn’t happy.

‘Ma halani. Ma glandival. Vir enasalin.’ Solas’ voice sounded very deep, and I saw Mihris’ ears twitch as they picked up his fluent Elven tongue. Not many spoke the dead language that well. Even I couldn’t, and I had a whole lot of time to practise.

Mihris looked at the few necklaces in the chest, and sighed. Her grey, curling hair danced over her doubtful eyes. But then she nodded. ‘… perhaps you are right. Here, take it.’ She threw the necklaces to Maxwell, who caught them with ease. We could study those.

Mihris twisted the staff on her back to get it back in its sheath correctly. ‘Go with Mythal’s Blessing.’ The Dalish woman mumbled and turned back.

My gut twisted. Maybe we should’ve given her something she could sell. Dalish or not. Cranky or not. It’s hard for any Elf out there. I knew that better than anyone.

We left the artefact running, turning our backs to the old tomb. The sun was shining, warming us up little by little. We took our horses which we had bound to the trees outside, and resumed our ride
back to Haven. To home.

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9:41 Dragon, Present day

Familiar stones, known paths, silent trees and whispering meadows. The Hinterlands were calm, too calm. Like nature knew there was a storm coming, and it was enjoying its last peaceful days. The birds got quieter the closer we came to the city of Redcliffe. Maxwell walked out front. We had left our horses at the nearby camp, because the paths in these hills were too tricky. And maybe we all knew something was waiting for us, and we didn’t want our mounts to be killed by Maker-knows-what. I hadn’t been to Redcliffe before. Maybe because it was close, or used to be, to the Ferelden Circle Kinloch Hold. Just as the Circle, the city of Redcliffe bordered Lake Calenhad, named after Ferelden’s first King, Calenhad Theirin. Seems like the Theirin family followed me everywhere I went. Or maybe I was drawn to their history. Redcliffe castle used to house the now King Alistair. I wondered if he’d look like his grandmother, Moira.

Maxwell stopped to look at the red, pointy Drakestone protruding from a cliff. The stone wasn’t much used in armour, because it could be quite brittle, but lots of people used it to tint their coats and boots, since it had a rich, deep red colour.

‘Admiring your own reflection, Herald?’ Varric grinned, popping up from behind the rock.

‘I was thinking of growing a beard… What do you think?’ Maxwell winked at the smiling Dwarf, and turned away from the stone.

‘Don’t.’ Cassandra scoffed coldly. Maxwell laughed and cocked an eyebrow at her.

‘It would make you more menacing, boss.’ The Iron Bull walked up towards the Herald, crossing his huge, muscular grey arms in front of his bare chest. At first I wondered if Bull wanted to be shot by an arrow. But then again, it would probably deflect right off of his sculpted chest. He had a harness protecting his heart, though.

‘Aren’t I already?’ Maxwell furrowed his eyebrows and jokingly straightened his shoulders. Cassandra made a disgusted noise at that. I bet she found him manly enough already. Sera gleefully jumped down from a cliff, rolling over the soft, young grass to strike a heroic pose. And then she giggled. Who knows what she was re-enacting? Nobody minded her, though, we were getting used to her shenanigans already.

Vivienne had refused to come to the base of the rebel mages. I also think taking her to Redcliffe would be a bad idea. We were actually thinking of going with a small group anyway, otherwise we could look too… dangerous maybe? The Iron Bull didn’t help our image, but at least bandits would think twice before attacking us. And I think I didn’t mind not having Madame de Fer with us. She would only scare the mages away, make them angrier for having a Loyalist come to bargain with them.

We travelled further along the road, Redcliffe Road to be exact. The closer we got to the city, the better the paths became paved. The road to the city was long, and bordered by steep cliffs and edges, and it could make one quite claustrophobic. But I’d rather be cornered between rocks than between demons. An old lamppost was impaled into the ground next to the road. Only two directions could still be legible: The Crossroads village behind us, and Redcliffe Village in front of us. No turning back. After walking between the cliffs, the road gave way into larger fields. Abandoned farms laid scattered along the meadows, the fields unkempt and the fences unminded. Rams, fennecs and some druffalo roamed free, grazing the springy grass from between the path’s stones. They skittered away
when we came too close.

‘The farmer’s must’ve left because of the rebel mages.’ Cassandra mumbled as she looked around.

‘They could have fled… maybe to the Crossroads.’ I nodded at her, hoping quietly that these people had made it out on time. But by the burned cottages and the open doors of the farms, I feared otherwise. A war always hurts the vulnerable first.

We started to walk a little bit slower, feeling the danger coming our way. I bit my lip as I raised my head, my feet buried into the ground. Stuck. Like stone. On either sides of the road stood a post, a flag attached to it, swaying with the wind. The flags were tattered, dirtied and burned at the edges. But the symbols I had seen before. The colours, white and an orangy-red, had dimmed because of the fire that had almost burned the vigil away: A stone tower built upon a fiery red hill, or cliff. Redcliffe.

‘We are close!’ I yelled.

The atmosphere got tenser. I saw Maxwell’s shoulders heaved upwards, his head straight, and his chest forward. But I almost couldn’t see him breathe. Nor blink. The mark on his hand started to glow, fading in and out, almost warning us for the impending Rift. I saw veins pop up on Maxwell’s neck, Goosebumps on his wrists. He felt it, vibrating through his body, clawing at his mind.

Rift. Rift. Rift.


Theirs?

‘There!’ Varric’s alarming voice ringed through our silent party. ‘Out front!’

A large stone wall, with two stronghold towers and a closed steel gate in between, appeared at the horizon. Behind it, I saw faces I faintly recognized. Like I had looked into those eyes in a distant dream. Yet, it hadn’t been a dream at all. Everything was as real as the ground we shifted on.

I heard one of the generals behind the steel bars calling, not to us, but to her men. ‘I want a constant watch on that damned thing!’ She commanded, her voice strong, but definitely distressed, ‘Sound the alarm at the first sign of demons!’

Maxwell walked first, the rest of us beside him. Not behind. We must die before him, if we have to. The general behind the gate saw us, her eyes focussed on Maxwell and the burning eye painted on his chest. I could see her furrow her eyes. ‘Watch out traveller! The Veil’s ripped open, and Maker-knows-what could come out!’

But Maxwell, all of us, had already seen it. Drifting in the air, dooming above us. My heart stopped. Have I watched through this? Was I in there? The Rift was big, we could see that, but it didn’t seem abnormal. We had come across such big Rifts before. But why did my heart pound like this? That alarming feeling… maybe it wasn’t because of the Rift, but what had caused it? Maxwell grunted as his mark flayed, a bright green light erupting from it.

And the Rift above us answered to it like a long lost friend. Almost knowing who we were, and why we had come. And I felt it eerily speaking to us, to me. It recognized me. Emerald crystals started to grow out of the green fading hole at an accelerated pace. Moving, dancing with the drum of the Herald’s mark.
It felt like it was challenging us.

Come and close me if you can.

And then we heard the sound of Redcliffe’s alarm ring through the fields, bouncing off the cliffs, pulsing through our bodies. The soldiers stopped breathing.

And the first demons started to jump out of the Rift.

You have seen me. And I have seen you.

First came the Wraiths, screaming and burning in agony. Finally free.

‘Demons! Prepare yourselves!’ Cassandra screamed, her eyes big. The steel sword in her hand didn’t tremble though, her shield didn’t lower. Cassandra didn’t cower in the face of danger. And nor did Varric, who raised Bianca at the first Wraiths that looked at him. And The Iron Bull laughed, taking his greataxe from his back. The swoosh of his weapon cut straight through the air, and straight through demons. Sera became quiet, and maybe a little bit pale too, but she took her bow out without thought, stretched her arrows on the string, and fired them one by one, hitting every target.

‘Snuffed it!’ She chittered as a Wraith screeched while hit by one of her arrows. While fading, its faceless figure growled, and then disappeared into nothing.

Solas placed his feet wide onto the ground, his composure stable and calm. Yet, the swishing and turning of the staff in his hands had a quickening pace, his magic twisting and turning and splattering around the battlefield. He casted barriers around Cassandra as she lashed out, pushed back a demon that came for Sera away with his mind blasts, and covering Maxwell as he jumped out of nowhere, clashing down on any demon, killing it with ease.

It seemed like this was going to be a normal battle, a normal Rift.

Until it started to warp time.

I only noticed it after the Shades and the Terrors clawed their way out of the Rift. It happened so quickly, and yet so teasingly slow. I stared at what happened right before my eyes. On one side, Maxwell held out his daggers like fangs, leaping into the air. But he was stuck there, coming down very slowly, and beneath him stood a Shade, also stuck in that very same time-slowing limbo, its blackened claws reaching above its head towards the hovering Maxwell. Their eyes were linked, unblinking, and they came closer ever so damned slowly. Imagine those Hollywood films where a hero jumps away from a fiery blast behind him in the final epic sequence of the movie? It looked almost exactly like that. And on the other side of me, I saw The Iron Bull and Sera twirling, flashing from one demon to the other. A Terror Fade-jumped at them, but The Iron Bull was prepared and slashed it down before it could surprise him. I couldn’t see his greataxe move. That was how fast he was. And Sera’s arrows were invisible, coming so fast, you couldn’t even see her arms move. And Varric was there too, running from one hill to another to get the higher ground. He flashed like lightening. But the demons were quick as well, dodging attacks like Neo dodged bullets in The Matrix.

And I was stuck in between, not believing what clearly was happening. And I saw Cassandra move from one side to the other, moving over the battlefield like she always would, but then sometimes in slow-motion, and other times in fast-forward.

I was so preoccupied by watching the time struggle before me, I hadn’t seen the Terror leaping my way. Its long arms stretched before me, its spiked tail swishing my way. I fell down onto the grass,
the air escaping my lungs. The Terror crawled over me, its long legs unending. Its many, empty eye sockets bored into my eyes, or rather, my eye, and I saw it cock its head slightly. Almost wondering if it should kill me or not. But then it decided it would. With its wide opened mouth and pointed, jagged teeth, it came closer and closer.

Until I remembered that I'm not defenseless.

I turned my palms towards the sky, summoning fire to it. As the Terror’s body closed on me, it shrieked as it met my flaming hands. The demon burned. First its arms, then its chest, until the flames reached its head. It stopped screaming after that. I melted its skin with my touch, until nothing but black ichor remained onto the ground.

‘Fenedhis Searis! Are you alright!’ Solas was beside me as the fire extinguished from my body.

‘Yes, I’m fine!’ I said quickly, but then continued, ‘Are you seeing what I’m seeing?’

Solas looked around and nodded. His eyes big and almost fearful. He too hadn’t seen anything like this before.

But I had.

When I had been looking through Maxwell’s mark, and I had felt that sense of being stuck in the past, present and future, that was this Rift’s magic. That was what we were seeing.

‘We need to get the Herald out of that slowing side! Or it’ll take years for us to close that Rift!’ I screamed.

Solas wanted to say something, but got pushed aside by a Shade. He turned his legs forward, back flipping onto his feet. His staff twirled into the air, and his magic burst outwards, a blizzard of ice and spirit magic erupting from its core, freezing the demon in place. With another mind blast, the frozen demon cracked into a thousand little pieces. Solas then turned back to me, not even out of breath.

Let’s say I was impressed.

‘We have to get The Herald’s attention!’ Solas yelled.

We leaped towards the border of past and present, slow and normal. We could see it, though it was invisible. The grass on one side didn’t move, while the grass on our side did, because it was quite windy that day. With only one shared look, both Solas and I knew what to do. We couldn’t go inside the barrier, because that would make us stuck too. We had to get his attention from outside. Solas gripped his staff tighter, and lifted it upwards. I did the same with my hands. And I focussed.

I think each mage’s magic has their own colour, their own vibrancy, their own smell and taste. Magic is connected to the mage, and the mage makes it their own. When a mage casts fire, or ice, or sparks, the magic colours to what it makes out to be. But if a mage casts magic that is entirely their own, like creation magic or spirit magic, I believe you can see a glimpse of that person’s colour. Solas is green. Like healing, like Elfroot and tea, and ever connected to the Fade, to dreams. And mine is blue. Like those blue pastel flowers on Daniel’s grave, on Sybil’s grave, the blue flowers that rest on Mythal’s statue, the colour of the sky, of my past when I still had those two identical, blue eyes.

Magic like that is strong, and takes up a whole lot of energy. It’s not used to fight, or to protect, or anything. It’s just there. And it’s fiercely bright. Solas and my magic combined like a beam into the sky, burning and cooling, and shining ever so bright.

Maxwell’s daggers were finally cutting through the demon. He slowly landed with his feet back on
the ground, and the demon slowly turned, painfully melting, into that familiar black bile. Sluggishly, a shadow created by the light of our beam climbed the grass towards Maxwell. And when the shadow finally started to cover his foot, his arm, and the right side of his face, I saw his head turn to our side slowly. I could even see the brown curls of his hair swaying with the movement of his face, the black pupils of his hazel eyes enlarging as he saw us. Finally. Every movement he made was in slow-motion, but I saw the realization that something was wrong dawn in his eyes.

He turned to us, running with his arm stretched out to me, leaving his daggers to fall onto the ground. Now he really looked like a hero in an epic film. Maybe he really was. I let go of my magic, the beam of light fading as soon as I stopped focusing. My muscles turned sour, but I still stretched my arm over the border, into the slowing area, to grab my hero. It was very strange to see your fingers not move immediately when you order them to. Very slowly, my hand reached to Maxwell’s, and he came closer and closer.

I felt a new presence behind the Rift then.

Turning my head to it, I saw a shadow lurking behind the dancing emerald crystals.

We had to be quick, or that thing will come out. And I felt the air already trembling by its raw power. I didn’t have the strength anymore to battle what felt and seemed like a Pride demon.

I feared the worst, until I felt Max’s rough fingertips caressing mine. I turned my face to him, and saw a confident smile curling on his lips. And then I pulled, drawing all of the strength I still had left in my body, and hauled Maxwell over the border, and into the present back again.

‘I got this!’ He screamed and immediately lifted his left hand into the sky. In a second, it connected to the Rift like a key to the right lock. With a flick of his wrist, the Rift finally cracked and closed, leaving a small trace of black ichor that rotted the grass away.

_You saw me._

The energy of the Rift buzzed through my mind, leaving me to feel like I again lost something, like a power, like a sight. Now I understood that feeling I had every time we closed a Rift, that feeling like something was blinding me. Because every time Maxwell closed a Rift, he closed another window for me to look through. But I’d rather be blind.

‘Not anymore.’ I mumbled. Maybe to myself, or to the Rift that was gone now.

‘What… was that?’ Solas said to Maxwell, who cracked his neck, loosening his muscles.

‘I don’t know… I feel like I’ve been battling for hours!’ The Herald whined.

Cassandra, Sera, The Iron Bull and Varric came running to where we stood, unbelievably out of breath.

‘Was it me, or did we just fight for only a minute or two?’ Varric rested his hands on his knee, heaving.

‘We don’t know what these Rifts can do.’ Cassandra said, more at ease than Varric, but I still saw sweat dripping from her forehead. ‘That one appeared to alter time around it.’

‘No… Something is definitely wrong here.’ Maxwell sighed and glanced at me.

‘Maker have mercy!’ The general behind the closed gate yelled, gawking at Maxwell. ‘It’s… over? Open the gates!’ The gates clashed and creaked as they were hauled open, the terrified faces of the
soldiers turning tired but relieved.

One of the soldiers ran to us, kneeling before Maxwell. The Inquisition vigil hung on his overcoat. A scout, one of ours. ‘We’ve spread word the Inquisition was coming,’ he said, his eyes darting over Cassandra and the rest of us, maybe a little bit longer on The Iron Bull, ‘but you should know that no one here was expecting you.’

Maxwell quirked his head. ‘No one? Not even Grand Enchanter Fiona?’

The scout straightened himself, shaking his shoulders, ‘if she was, she hasn’t told anyone.’ The scout stared at the confused soldiers, but indeed, none of them knew who we were. ‘We’ve arranged use of the tavern for the negotiations…’ The scout continued, but suddenly got interrupted by someone.

A lanky, young Elven man, not Dalish, came running to us. The armour he wore was too big, and his ears were abnormally long. ‘Agents of the Inquisition!’ He squeaked, ‘My apologies! Master Alexius is in charge now, but hasn’t yet arrived. He’s expected shortly.’ The young Elf stared at Maxwell with big eyes, but kept his composure polite and distant. ‘You can speak with the former Grand Enchanter in the meantime.’ He smiled a little, like he was hopeful.

Maxwell furrowed his eyebrows and stared at Cassandra, who for once looked as dumbfounded as the rest of us.

‘What the heck?’ Sera mumbled, clearly on guard.

We followed the Elf into the city, none of us at rest. Something here was terribly wrong, and it wasn’t the Rift. It was something… bigger than that.

This was certainly not what we’d expected.

Chapter End Notes

Tadaaa! Okay, so not that much story progression, but we're going there! Next up: meeting one Venatori ass, and a Tevinter stud muffin!! #DorianTime
Have you ever walked down the street and hear someone call out your name? Shivers crawl down your spine as you wonder who is behind you that knows your name. But when you turn around, no one’s there. Maybe a woman walking her dog, or a man on a bicycle, but they ignore you, standing there like an idiot. Yet, if they don’t know who you are, who called your name then?

It happened to me before.

Not once. Not twice. But more times than I can count.

Sometimes, I heard a whisper floating through the wind, carrying my name to unknown places. Other times, it was like someone was happy to see me strolling down the street, like they hadn’t seen me in years. Once, I’d felt someone brush against my shoulder, my name curling from their lips like they were reciting a soliloquy about my very being. Yet, no one was ever there. When those things happened, I imagined someone calling to me from the beyond, someone long dead, or maybe a creature from another dimension watching me. An angel. Or a ghost. Or a fairy.

Sometimes I hoped there was someone, anyone, screaming to get me to turn around. Someone who had been waiting for me.

It was lonely to see there wasn’t a single soul. Like I was losing my mind, becoming a paranoid lunatic.

Maybe it was death warning me it was coming for me. Or maybe it was something, or someone else.

After I died as a human, though, the voices stopped and never whispered my name again.

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The moment we had stepped through that steel gate, I had felt it. Familiar shivers curling over my shoulders.

It was Sera, surprisingly, who mentioned it first while we were walking down the path that lead to the centre of the village. ‘The Veil is… veil-y here. Or somethin’.’ She grumbled, pushing away a stray blonde hair from her freckled face.

Solas looked at her surprised. ‘You are correct, Sera. The Veil is weaker here than in Haven. And not merely weak but altered in a way I have not seen.’ He glanced at me, and I nodded.

‘Maybe it’s because of that strange time Rift?’ I questioned.

‘Well, whatever it is, it ain’t good.’ Varric clenched his jaws, looking at Maxwell seriously.

‘Be on your guard.’ Maxwell answered, his voice hushed.

Before us, the lanky elf that had told us about that Alexius guy being in charge, was leading us towards the tavern, where “former” Grand Enchanter Fiona was willing to speak with us. At least she was expecting us. Right?

What was left of Redcliffe, was a distant castle on top of a misty hill and merely a fairly small city
centre. The path towards it was bordered with steep cliffs and ruins of stone hedges guiding our way. Flagpoles were imbedded on either sides of the muddy road, the fabric burned, and the Redcliffe heraldry barely visible. I knew this village suffered a lot during the Fifth Blight. Seemed like they weren’t given a chance to rebuild much of it because of that damned Mage-Templar War.

We stayed close together as a group. Maxwell in the middle, protected by us all. People where gathering at the side of the road, gawking at us. Most of them were mages, rebel mages. You could recognize them by their tattered Circle robes. None were wearing a staff though. Maybe because they were safe here.

‘Have you heard? The Inquisition has dealt with the rebel Templars. They’ve been driven away or killed!’ a man enlightened his friend as he peeped at the Herald. I bit my lip. Did they know now half of the Templars were at Haven as independent soldiers? Would they still accept an alliance with us now? I think I would understand if they wouldn’t. As we walked deeper into the village, farms turned into cottages and marketplaces. The village was buzzing, the chattering of people becoming louder as we walked by. Eyes following our every step. Some villagers who weren’t mages, smiled at us, hoping we would finally take those mages from their lands. But the rebel mages stared after us suspiciously.

And among the crowd, I saw a fairly familiar face.

‘Saeris?’ She called after me, waving her bright long blonde hair over her shoulders, blinking innocently with her too blue eyes. Ruth. I had met her in the Circle of Ostwick. She was a snobbish little girl, not that nice. When I had first met her, she was but sixteen years old. Now, almost twenty-eight, she had grown into a pretty woman. But that sneer on her face ruined the whole thing. She would like Vivienne, if they weren’t on opposite sides of the mage rebellion. When the Circle fell almost two years ago, she had rallied more than half of the mages to follow her to Redcliffe. I had figured they had perished along the way.

‘Ah, hello.’ Our group stopped as I answered, curious stares thrown my way. The lanky elf in front us was tiptoeing nervously. Guess he just wanted to get rid of us as quickly as possible.

‘How have you been?’ She giggled girlishly while leaning against a stone statue of Andraste, ‘You seem good! You’re with the Inquisition now? How ambitious!’

‘Yeah… I am.’ I smiled sheepishly. I don’t have time for this. ‘I’m sorry, Ruth. We are expected somewhere.’ I forced a polite nod. I remember how she had called Lydia a “Templar-fucker”. How could I forget? I had respected Lydia, she had been one of the few people at the Circle who were nice to me.

‘Oh, of course!’ Ruth clasped her hands. ‘If you’re done, I’d love to catch up! It’s been so dreadfully long!’ Not long enough.

‘Of course.’ I dipped my head, my tone neutral. We resumed walking then, and in my head I counted to ten. How long would it last before he…

‘You knew that Circle mage, Saeris?’ Solas strolled to my side, that quintessential curious look in his stern eyes.

I grinned. I knew he’d ask. ‘Her name’s Ruth, Ruth Cumbridge. I met her during my time in the Circle of Ostwick.’

‘Looks like a bitch, yeah?’ Sera almost yelled.
'She is.' I winked at her.

'She did not look too bad. Well, feisty, filled with frustrations. I can help with those things.' The Iron Bull flashed his teeth, his unsavoury thoughts clearly written across his face. Ew.

'There are enough frustrated girls around at Haven.' Maxwell interrupted.

'That’s right… Hey, Cassandra!’ The Iron Bull winked at the Seeker.

‘No.’ She hissed.

‘Here we are. Please, former Grand Enchanter Fiona awaits you inside.’ The lanky Elf finally stopped, interrupting our conversation that clearly wasn’t going anywhere. The Elf folded his hands, and I saw the sweat drip from his eyebrow to his hooked nose.

‘Yes. Thank you.’ Maxwell resumed his “political figure” posture, and gave the skinny man a couple of coins. The Elf took the money, and then took off. Poof! Gone as quickly as he had appeared.

Before us stood the tavern, a stone building with wooden boards hammered over the windows. I bet inside it was really dark, since only a few beams of light could enter. “The Gull and Lantern” was written with curly letters on the signboard before the entrance. Maxwell opened the door slowly and we were greeted by the smell of ale and stew and maybe a little bit of puke. But the difference with any other tavern was the silence within. No music, no rattling of plates and tankards, no bickering and laughing. As we entered, the whole stone room was painted with an orange hue due to the flickering fire place and the lit torches on the walls. There were benches and tables, empty cups and some lost cards used for Diamondback cluttered all over the floor. Two sturdy mages, whom I didn’t recognize, were standing at a table. They shifted as we came closer, clearly on guard. And behind them stood an Elven woman from her chair, a small smile on her thin lips.

‘Welcome, agents of the Inquisition.’ Fiona said warmly, her sharp eyes piercing through Maxwell. Last time we saw her, at Val Royeaux, I remembered her eyes looking glazed instead of sharp.

‘What has brought you to Redcliffe?’

What?

Maxwell curved his back, breathing in sharply, slightly annoyed. ‘We’re here because of your invitation back in Val Royeaux.’

Fiona cocked her head to one side, a strand of her raven black hair escaping from behind her long pointed ear. ‘You must be mistaken.’ She furrowed her brows. ‘I haven’t been in Val Royeaux since before the Conclave.’

Maxwell looked at Cassandra for a moment, who answered with a roll of her shoulders. ‘If it wasn’t you who invited me here, who was it?’

The two guarding mages were staring at us equally confused when Fiona blinked and said, ‘I… I don’t know. Now that you say it, I feel strange.’ She looked down to the ground. There was a sadness in her eyes, something broken. Strange to see such a proud woman look so utterly defeated. ‘Whoever… or whatever brought you here, the situation has now changed. The free mages have already… pledged themselves to the service of the Tevinter Imperium.’

‘Shite.’ Sera whispered as she looked up at Bull, who shook his head in surprise.

‘An alliance with Tevinter?’ Cassandra interrupted, ‘Do you not fear all of Thedas turning against you?’
‘Andraste’s ass… I’m trying to think of a single worse thing you could have done. And I’ve got nothing.’ Varric shook his head towards Fiona, who seemed more and more ashamed.

Solas took key, and his voice soothed through the room, ‘I understand you are afraid, but you deserve better than slavery to Tevinter.’

Then, I also stepped up to say something, but couldn’t as Fiona finally lifted up her hand. ‘As one indentured to a magister, I no longer have the authority to negotiate with you.’ Her voice turned stern as she stared up at me, her eyes turning sharper. I looked back equally sharp, thinking clearly, you can’t do this. This isn’t right.

Maxwell tutted and folded his arms over his chest. ‘What about the giant hole in the Veil that’s spewing demons everywhere? You’re just going to pretend it isn’t there?’ I saw the look in his eyes. In all of our eyes. We hadn’t expected this. We came to these people’s rescue with an offer of safety and alliance. And now… this.

‘I’m not forgetting the Breach. But we can only fight one war at a time.’ Yeah, because the Inquisition hasn’t been dealing with your war and the Breach at the same time. Utterly impossible. ‘The Templar threat was immediate. If we live, we can worry about the torn Veil.’

‘If there’s still a world to worry about then?’ I clenched my fists, my voice deep. Fiona took a step back.

Suddenly, we heard the tavern door close behind us. We looked up, and saw two men approaching our group.

‘Welcome, my friends! I apologize for not greeting you earlier.’ An older man slowly walked towards us, dressed in a red armour and a red hood with pointed fabrics sewed on. A Tevinter magister.

‘Agents of the Inquisition, allow me to introduce Magister Gereon Alexius.’ Fiona sighed, looking at the man with a slightly angered face.

‘The southern mages are under my command.’ Alexius said kindly, but there was a warning tone to it, like he was telling us to back off. ‘And you are the survivor, yes? The one from the Fade? Interesting.’ I snorted, which made the man glance up at me. Yes, I was taller, and ready to kick his ass. He had those mean droopy eyes with curling wrinkles bordering them. With his little grey goatee, he surely looked like an evil wizard.

Maxwell had gotten the sneer, but ignored it like a champion. Instead, he nodded neutrally, ‘If you’re leading the mages now, then let’s talk. I’m sure we can come to an arrangement.’ Cassandra straightened her back proudly. Good one, Max. Straight to the point. We need the mages to help fight against the Breach. Even if we have to negotiate with Tevinter magisters.

Alexius grinned, ‘It is always a pleasure to meet a reasonable man.’ Alexius gave me a side-eye. We don’t like each other, I get it. The magister then waved his hand to our Herald, signalling him to come and sit at a table, which they did. The rest of us remained standing, never losing our cool. Fiona stared at the table where the magister and the Herald were seated at. She should be sitting there. ‘Felix, would you send for a scribe, please? Pardon my manners. My son Felix, friends.’

The young man that had been standing near the entrance, came closer. He was about Maxwell’s age. Felix surely had his father’s eyes, but his looked kinder. His olive skin looked a little bit paler than most of his countrymen. And not in the good way. The big dark circles under his dark brown eyes were stark against his skin, and almost matched his black, shaved, hair. His face looked deadly tired,
his cheeks hollow and sunken. Felix walked over to Maxwell’s table and curtsied politely. His eyes didn’t meet Maxwell’s, though.

‘I’m not surprised you’re here.’ Alexius continued, but I kept my eyes on Felix, who stared back at me with equal curiosity. No, that man wasn’t like his father. ‘Containing the Breach is not a feat that many could even attempt. There’s no telling how many mages would be needed for such an endeavour. Ambitious, indeed.’ His tone reminded me of Ruth a few moments ago. That tone… like they think they’re better than us.

Maxwell leaned forward, ‘Does that mean you’ll lend your mages to our cause?’

Right then, I saw Felix look up at me determined, and then his posture changed as he started to wobble to the negotiation table.

‘There will have to be…’ Alexius started, but stopped immediately as he laid eyes on his son. Maxwell pushed himself up from his chair and was next to Felix in a second, catching the young man right on time. ‘Felix!’ Alexius whined.

‘My Lord, I’m so sorry!’ Felix coughed, ‘Please forgive me.’

Maxwell helped the man straighten himself, and they shared a strange, long look with each other.

‘Are you alright?’ Alexius rested his hand on his son’s shoulder, clearly, and overly, concerned.

‘I’m fine, father.’ Felix smiled faintly.

‘Come, I’ll get your powders.’ Alexius dipped his head at the two guarding mages who were still standing next to the confused Fiona. The two mages walked up to Felix and helped him stand.

‘Please excuse me, friends.’ Alexius scraped his throat, his eyes not leaving his son. ‘We will have to continue this another time.’

The mages guided Felix outside. As he passed me, he looked up, his eyes pleading. ‘I don’t mean to trouble anyone.’

‘Fiona, I require your assistance back at the castle.’ Alexius ordered. Fiona nodded silently and followed Felix outside.

Alexius turned around one last time before walking out the door. ‘I shall send word to the Inquisition. We will conclude this business at a later date.’ Fine, so we came here for nothing?

But as soon as we were alone, Maxwell sighed and turned to us, opening his hand. I hadn’t seen he was clenching it. There was a little note tucked in his palm, and Maxwell read it aloud. ‘Come to the Chantry. You are in danger.’

‘That’s a trap for sure.’ Varric hummed.

‘We’ll be careful, but we need to figure out what’s going on here.’ Maxwell folded the note and hid it in his pocket.

‘Sure, let’s go to where the danger is, yeah?’ Sera grumbled.

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The Chantry of Redcliffe wasn’t too far from the tavern. We went there immediately under the guise of Maxwell, being the Herald of Andraste, wanting to go and pray for our safe journey home. But
we were going to do anything but pray.

The Chantry was a fairly large, stone building, looking quite like the one in Haven, but maybe a little bit bigger and a little bit more tattered. We walked up to the big wooden door, and immediately as we neared it, the little hairs on my arms spiked up. Maxwell shivered, and twisted his marked hand around as if in pain. The scar flared a green light, going brighter and brighter the closer we got to the Chantry.

A Rift.

Maxwell turned to us and we all knew that look in his eyes. ‘Prepare yourselves.’ He whispered.

Inside the Chantry was indeed a Rift drifting in the air, right above the altar of Andraste. Books laid scattered around, and most of the holy candles had been extinguished. A Wraith immediately went for Maxwell as soon as we entered. The Herald took his daggers from their sheaths to counter, but the demon screeched before even being able to haul at us.

Purple bolts of electricity surged across the room, hitting the demon in the back and crawling across its whole body like a virus, obliterating it into ashes.

‘Good! You’re finally here!’ A man with olive skin, dark brown hair that was shaven at the side of his head, and a glorious, curling moustache, twisted his staff around, smiling at us and nodding at the Rift. ‘Now help me close this, would you?’

Another rush of demons splurged from the Rift. And we went to arms once more. Again, this Rift was big, and had the capacity to warp time. Small barriers spawned across the Chantry hall, but this time, we were prepared. Looking at the flickering of the candles’ flames, we could tell which barrier was time-slowing, and which ones were time-quickening. We used it to our advantage. Maxwell, Cassandra and The Iron Bull lead the demons towards the time-slowing barriers, making them unable to attack at a normal speed. Varric, Sera, Solas and I hurried to the time-quickening barriers, and fired from a distance. Shot after shot at an incredible pace. Arrows, bolts, and flares of ice and fire were leaping at the demons as fast as light. The damned creatures didn’t stand a chance. As soon as the demons were killed, Maxwell lifted his hand to the buzzing Rift. They connected with a click, and Maxwell willed it to seal, until nothing but black ichor was left of it.

I hated that blinding feeling, though. Another peephole gone.

The young man who, by the looks of him, was Tevinter, stared at Maxwell. And then he grinned, flashing his perfect white teeth. ‘Fascinating! How does that work, exactly?’ He laughed.

Maxwell cocked his head.

‘You don’t even know, do you? You just wiggle your fingers, and boom! Rift closes.’ The man grinned, and twisted his perfectly groomed moustache with the tips of his fingers.

‘Yeah… Something like that.’ Maxwell mumbled. ‘I’m sorry, but who are you?’

‘Ah, getting ahead of myself again, I see.’ The man rested his hands on his hips and curtsied. ‘Dorian of House Pavus, most recently of Minrathous. How do you do?’ His green eyes sparkled a little.

Cassandra, unimpressed as always, bit, ‘Another Tevinter. Be cautious with this one. Saeris, could you check, please.’

I nodded and stepped forward, covering my blue eye. Dorian furrowed his brows as he stared into my emerald, buzzing pupil. ‘He’s just human.’
‘Pfbt, boring.’ Said Sera, obviously.

‘Suspicious friends you have here.’ Dorian remained all politeness and smiles, but looked me over with a snazzy stare. ‘Magister Alexius was once my mentor, so my assistance would be invaluable… As I’m sure you could imagine.’

Maxwell left his mouth hanging open, and his eyebrows uplifted. He then looked over his shoulder to us, thinking clearly, this man has some nerve. ‘You’re… betraying your mentor because…’

‘Alexius was my mentor. Meaning he’s not any longer, not for some time.’ Dorian continued, every single word perfectly pronounced. ‘Look, you must know there’s danger. That should be obvious even without the note. Let’s start with Alexius claiming the allegiance of the mage rebels out from under you. As if by magic, yes? Which is exactly right. To reach Redcliffe before the Inquisition, Alexius distorted time itself.’

‘… Please tell me it is less dangerous than it sounds.’ Maxwell sighed, knowing the answer already.

‘More.’ Dorian said anyway. At least he’s honest.

‘That is fascinating, if true… and almost certainly dangerous.’ Solas took a step forward, eyeing the Tevinter guy suspiciously. He stood before me, as if he wanted me out of sight. I don’t need protection, though. And I think this Dorian doesn’t mean any harm, or he would’ve attacked us already.

‘The Rift you closed here? You saw how it twisted time around itself, sped some things up and slowed others down.’ Dorian continued. ‘Soon there will be more like it, and they’ll appear further and further away from Redcliffe.’ That thought frightened me. These Rifts were powerful, I felt as much as I only looked through them, let alone fight against them. And more of them? Commoners won’t stand a chance. They’ll be slaughtered. ‘The magic Alexius is using is wildly unstable, and it’s unravelling the world.’ I think it’s already quite unravelled.

‘And how do you know all of this? It’s a lot to take.’ Maxwell squeezed his eyes.

‘Well, I helped develop this magic.’ Dorian visibly swallowed. ‘When I was still his apprentice, it was pure theory. Alexius could never get it to work. What I don’t understand is why he’s doing it.’ Dorian held his hand under his chin in thought, and then touched his moustache again pensively. ‘Ripping time to shreds just to gain a few hundred lackeys?’

‘He didn’t do it for them.’ Felix had entered the room terribly quietly and I almost yelped as he appeared behind me. For a sickly guy like him, he sure is skilled.

‘Took you long enough!’ Dorian smiled. ‘Is he getting suspicious?’

‘No’, Felix shook his head, ‘But I shouldn’t have played the illness card. I thought he’d be fussing over me all day.’ His voice sounded coarse, almost out of breath. ‘My father’s joined a cult. Tevinter supremacists. They call themselves “Venatori”. And I can tell you one thing: whatever he’s done for them, he’s done it to get to you.’

Maxwell snorted and then almost laughed out loud, ‘Oh, I’m flattered, but why would he rearrange time and indenture the mage rebellion just to get to me?’

‘They’re obsessed with you,’ Felix answered, ‘but I don’t know why. Perhaps because you survived the Temple of Sacred Ashes?’

‘You can close Rifts. Maybe there’s a connection. Or they see you as a threat?’ Dorian said, but
Maxwell looked to me for a second, his eyes cautious. What would these Venatori do if they find out I can spot their Rifts? Would they come for me too?

‘If the Venatori are behind those Rifts, or the Breach in the sky, they’re even worse than I thought.’ Felix mumbled, concerned.

‘I should’ve gotten him something, all this… for me?’ Maxwell smiled, and I heard Varric laugh quietly.

‘Send him a fruit basket. Everyone loves those.’ Dorian grinned and then sighed, back to business. ‘You know you’re his target. Expecting the trap is the first step in turning it to our advantage.’ Dorian nodded at Maxwell. ‘I can’t stay in Redcliffe. Alexius doesn’t know I’m here, and I want to keep it that way for now. But whenever you’re ready to deal with him, I want to be there. I’ll be in touch.’ Maxwell and Dorian shook hands, and then the spruce man turned away, walking casually to the back door of the Chantry hall. ‘Oh, and Felix!’ Dorian turned around and waved at the young man. ‘Try not to get yourself killed!’ He then wiggled his fingers and winked at us, and disappeared.

Felix sighed, and stared after him. ‘There are worse things than dying, Dorian.’ After that, Felix bid us farewell and went back to his evil magister father. What kind of illness does Felix have? Could I cure it? I can try when his father has stopped trying to murder us. Let’s get a hold on that first.

‘Well, boss, we hadn’t expected that, did we? I think I am ready for a drink.’ The Iron Bull lifted his greataxe over his shoulder, a twinkle in his eyes. I had seen the Qunari checking out that Dorian, and I wondered what could happen there.

‘Yeah, you’re not the only one.’ Varric sighed.

‘Me too, guys, but before we leave, we have to go and meet someone else back at the Crossroads main camp.’ Maxwell rolled back his shoulders tiredly. ‘Let’s hope for no surprises this time.’

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‘Remember how to carry your shields! You’re not hiding, you’re holding. Otherwise, it’s useless!’ A man was walking up and down in front of three armed human men, farmers as far as I could see. Maxwell had told us along the way he had gotten the order from Leliana to go check out a guy who was hanging around the Hinterlands. Rumours were this… heavily bearded man… was a Grey Warden. And we could always use one of those. The man was wearing the typical Grey Warden armour and a chest plate with a fabled and fierce griffon displayed on it.

‘Blackwall? Warden Blackwall?’ Maxwell walked towards the Warden and smiled warmly. The armoured farmers behind them shivered visibly. Why were these people here? They didn’t look like they would even be able to lift their swords, let alone wield them.

‘You’re not... How do yeh know my name?’ Blackwall stomped to the Herald. As a precaution, I was by Max’s side in a second, shielding him if this Blackwall, Warden or not, would attempt anything. But the man ignored me. ‘Who sent…’

I yelped as I heard the arrow bash into Blackwall’s shield which he was holding next to my face. I stared at him, mouth wide open. Bandits then appeared from behind the dense trees of the woods, charging for us.

‘That’s it.’ Blackwall ordered. ‘Help or get out. We’re dealing with these idiots first!’ Blackwall unsheathed his sword and turned to the famers behind us, who turned from pale and shivering to green and almost crying. ‘Conscripts! Here they come!’
There were only a few bandits, nothing we hadn’t handled before. We took them out just as easily. Sera and Varric fired their arrows from a distance, while The Iron Bull, Cassandra and Maxwell charged at the bandits together with Blackwall and his scared conscripts. Solas and I remained at the side of the battle, casting barriers and glyphs and sometimes a fireball or two if they came too close. When a bandit tried to stab The Iron Bull from behind, I reacted with casting veins that crawled from underneath the ground, bursting to the surface and trapping the sneaky bandit in a prison of roots. I let the veins squeeze their culprit until he collapsed, but I didn’t kill him. I don’t kill unless absolutely necessary. Solas looked at me from over his shoulder, giving me an approving look. I like it when he does that.

Blackwall sliced his sword into the last bandit’s guts and watched the man fall onto the bloodied ground. He sighed, shaking his head while he impaled his sword into the ground next to the dead bandit, splitting the grass beneath it. He then squatted next to his attacker, grief clouding his stern, sun-kissed face. ‘Sorry bastards.’ He mumbled. The conscripts were waiting next to their trainer unharmed. They had fought quite bravely, and even took out a bandit or two. Seems like Blackwall had trained them surprisingly well, even though they still looked like scared farmers to me. ‘Good work, conscripts,’ Blackwall roared, ‘even if this shouldn’t have happened. They could’ve… well, thieves are made, not born.’ Solas nodded at that, and so did I. You’re not born evil. Being evil is a choice. ‘Take back what they stole. Go back to your families. Ye saved yourselves.’

The conscripts clearly relaxed and took off immediately, back to their villages. Meanwhile, Maxwell strolled to the Warden, storing his daggers back in their sheaths.

‘You’re no farmer. Why do yeh know my name? Who are you?’ Blackwall rumbled. He had a deep, towering voice. The voice of a general.

Maxwell rested his arms on his back, stealing Solas’ favourite posture. ‘I’m here investigating Grey Wardens for the Inquisition.’ He smiled innocently, the way only Maxwell could. ‘We’re seeing if their disappearance has anything to do with the murder of the Divine.’

‘Maker’s balls. The Wardens and the Divine? That can’t… no, you’re asking, so yeh don’t really know.’ And so doesn’t he then. Blackwall spat onto the ground. ‘First off, I didn’t know they disappeared. But we do that, right? No more Blight, job done, Wardens are the first thing forgotten. But one thing I’ll tell yeh: no Warden killed the Divine. Our purpose isn’t political.’

‘So… where are the rest of you?’ Varric said and cocked his head, looking up at Blackwall, who also wasn’t as tall as you’d first think. And that widow-peaked beard? Is that a thing?

‘I haven’t seen any Wardens for months. I travel alone, recruiting.’ Blackwall looked down at Varric, rolling back his shoulders. ‘Not much interest since the Archdemon is a decade dead, and no need to conscript because there’s no Blight comin’. Treaties give Wardens the right to take what we need. Who we need. These idiots forced this fight, so I “conscripted” their victims. They had to do what I said, so I told them to stand. Next time they won’t need me.’ Blackwall looked at the dead bandit on the ground as he said. ‘Grey Wardens can inspire, make yeh better than yeh think you are.’

Maxwell pursed his lips and sighed. ‘It’s been a pleasure, Warden Blackwall, but this didn’t help at all’. He then turned around and started to walk.

I ran after him, grabbing his arm while whispering through my teeth, ‘Hey, what are you doing? Didn’t you say we need this man?’

‘Shh! Wait for it… And…’ Maxwell grinned.

‘Inquisition… agent, did yeh say? Hold a moment.’ Blackwall called after us. Maxwell turned
around slowly, barely hiding his cheeky smile. ‘The Divine is dead and the sky is torn. Events like these, thinking we’re absent is almost as bad as thinking we’re involved. If you’re trying to put things right, maybe you need a Warden. Maybe you need me.’

‘Bingo.’ Maxwell whispered towards me and then stepped forward to Blackwall, holding out his hand. ‘Warden Blackwall, the Inquisition accepts your offer.’

Our party smiled at that, Cassandra looking at Maxwell proudly. He’s becoming more and more able.

‘Good to hear. We both need to know what’s going on, and perhaps I’ve been keeping to myself for too long. This Warden walks with the Inquisition.’

And so our group got bigger and bigger. More colourful, more diverse, stronger and braver. And we would need it, because what was coming next was not for the faint of heart.

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‘We will not cower! We will stand and fight! For our freedom! The freedom of our brethren! And the freedom for the next generation forth! We won’t let them take us back and we will certainly not give them the pleasure to hunt us down! We are done with the persecution and the prejudice! We are no monsters! STAND WITH ME, MY FRIENDS, ANDRASTE WILL SEE OUR CAUSE AND FORGIVE OUR SINS!’ The spirit formed like a sturdy woman, a Circle mage, shrieked. Its voice echoing through the Apostate Camp. Not the one we had closed down, but another one, when the War had just begun and the fights had just entered the Hinterlands.

These people would never make it to Redcliffe.

The apostate group roared, lifting their staffs in the air, the cores buzzing and lighting up with pure magic. ‘FREEDOM!’ They screamed again. Together they sliced up their wrists, their arms, their palms, until crimson red blood flowed through the camp. I felt the magic in the air, tasting it together with the blood. Iron and fear, passion and hope. Blood and magic.

The first batch of Templars didn’t stand a chance.

But the second group did. And the desperate rebel mages were cut down mercilessly.

Solas and I were sitting high up on a hill, overlooking the battle that replayed itself multiple times. Then we saw the Templars thinking they were ridding the world of abominations, and then, a scared young apprentice who just wanted to reach Redcliffe in safety, but he got caught up in the fighting, and died. There were spirits who clung to the brave group leader who screamed about bravery. And there were spirits clinging to that one older Templar who just wanted to go home and live out his life at his farm near the Crossroads. One final battle, he had said. It was his final battle indeed.

‘So much death.’ I sighed. But I hadn’t shed a tear. I had seen too much death to know to keep my tears for when they mattered. These people were long gone, but there were still innocents out there to save.

‘A tragic waste.’ Solas whispered to himself. I was leaning against his shoulder, and I felt him inhale and exhale slowly. The Fade made everything easier for us both. Easier to talk, easier to relax, easier to not feel nauseous with his presence. Here, he was a friend.

‘I am so sick of seeing so many wasteful deaths, so many people losing their lives… but for what?’ I bit my lip as another scene unfolded beneath us. This time, it was about a Templar who was involved with one of the rebel mages in this camp. He kills her.
‘You speak as if you have seen as such, was there a lot of war when you travelled Thedas?’ Solas cocked his head, the question troubling his eyes again. That man was always seeking more knowledge, more mysteries to make his own. I knew he was doubting my story about me being a travelling minstrel. He knew or at least suspected something. It wouldn’t surprise me if he knew I was older than I told everyone I was. Especially Solas would find out such things, he too has seen much in the Fade. Yet, why wasn’t he asking me about it? He asked me about everything, but not that. What was he waiting for?

‘There’s always war, and there always will be.’ I answered.

Solas looked into my eyes and chuckled. ‘That is true, yet do not always linger at the thought of death, this world is also full of wonders for those who seek them.’

And there, another scene unfolded. Another mage and another Templar that knew each other. But only this time, the two men reached out, their fingers entangling. There was no hate in their eyes, no murder, no prejudice. They held each other, heart to heart, and then… turned away. Leaving death behind them, and choosing life. Life with each other.

They survived.

I smiled. ‘Most of the times we go and see history unfolding in the Fade, the spirits cling to death… I hadn’t expected this.’

‘Neither did I…’ Solas hushed, not looking below, but at me.

I swallowed, and for a moment, I looked back at him. At his icy, but deep eyes, and his galaxy-like freckles, at those smiling lips and… ‘Where did you get that?’ I mumbled and reached out for the little scar next to his eyebrow.

Solas closed his eyes as my fingers slowly stroked it. A little cut, not that deep, but deep enough.

I retreated my hand quickly as soon as I noticed what I was doing. The Fade also made it easier to forget reality. I can’t do this. Not here. Not now. And certainly not with him. I shouldn’t be giving him the wrong signs. It’s better to keep him at bay. I can’t handle anything more than friendship. ‘Now, don’t tell me you got it in the Fade.’ I smiled faintly.

‘No, I got this when I was younger.’ He kept looking at me, his eyes hinting at things I didn’t understand. We were all younger once? Well, what’s younger for me? When I was a child I was definitely younger. Was I younger thirty years ago? But I don’t change?

‘A young Solas…’ I mumbled and pursed my lips. ‘Let me guess, you were a loner?’

Solas chuckled loudly, ‘On the contrary, I was hot-blooded and cocky, always ready to fight.’

‘So… nothing much has changed, huh?’ I poked him in a friendly way, creating more and more distance.

‘And you, Saeris?’

I grinned. ‘Me too.’ I sighed, and then maybe I said too much. ‘I never really changed.’

Solas opened his mouth, and then closed it again. What was he waiting for? Ask me. Ask me my age. Accuse me of immortality. Say it. But Solas only smiled sadly, and closed his mouth again.

Was he afraid of asking?
‘Well, I’m waking up. We’ve got some travelling to do. I bet Cullen and Leliana aren’t going to be happy when they hear the rebel mages are meddling with time.’ I straightened myself, and looked down at the scene below us once more. But there was nothing there. No corpses, no mages or Templars, not even a battlefield. It was just an empty cliff side now, overgrown by ivy and mist. The spirits were done telling stories. There were none left.

‘I will await you at breakfast.’ Solas said behind me.

I didn’t turn around to look at his face. ‘Goodbye.’

Chapter End Notes

Yaaaayyy our Inner Circle is almost complete, still missing Cole though! So, we're starting In Hushed Whispers soon. Excited?
‘We don’t have the manpower to take the castle! Either we find another way in, or give up this nonsense. We already have a reasonable large group of ex-Templar soldiers! They have trained enough, we could be closing the Breach as we speak.’ Cullen’s voice roared through the heavy wooden door that locked me out of the War Room. I shifted on my feet, and looked around nervously. Apart from some scouts and a couple of Chantry sisters, the Chantry hall was empty. I leaned against the wall, my body turned towards the flickering shadows cast by the many candles burning near Andraste’s statue. Planting my pointed ear against the door, I could hear them speak loud and clear. These big ears were at least good for something.

‘Redcliffe is in the hands of a magister. This cannot be allowed to stand. Besides, the Templars we have aren’t nearly enough, we cannot take the chance of not being able to close the Breach and losing the mages at the same time.’ Cassandra’s stern voice overthrew Cullen’s with ease.

They had been meeting for a while now. Maxwell had told them about what had happened at Redcliffe, about the time Rifts, Fiona not remembering inviting us, Alexius claiming power, meeting Dorian and the rumours of the Venatori cult. I’d been standing here for most of it, wanting to learn what they were planning to do. I only wanted to make sure that whatever decision they made, I’d still be able to protect Maxwell so we could close the Breach. That’s, what I think, I promised to do.

‘The letter from Alexius asked for the Herald of Andraste by name. It’s an obvious trap.’ The sharp and sultry voice of Ambassador Josephine filled my ears, a nice change from the brute yelling.

‘We can’t waste time fighting among ourselves.’ Maxwell interrupted. I grinned while hearing his voice, and the empty Chantry hall didn’t feel as eerie anymore. ‘And although I won’t say no to a luncheon with an evil magister, we have to come to an agreement.’

‘A Tevinter magister controls Redcliffe, invites us to the castle to talk, and some of us want to do nothing.’ Leliana’s presence made the whole building cold again, remembering me of her interrogation about Simon in the cells underneath my very feet. Although her Orlesian accent sounded warm to others, for me, it left a bitter taste in my mouth. I knew Leliana wasn’t a bad person, on the contrary. She just scared me a little bit. You don’t come across such deadly women often.

‘Not this again,’ I heard Josephine mumble.

‘Redcliffe Castle is one of the most defensible fortresses in Ferelden. It has repelled thousands of assaults.’ Cullen’s voice made me flinch because it was so loud. I never heard Daniel yell, but I
imagined he would’ve sounded like our Commander. ‘If you go in there, you’ll die. And we’ll lose
the only means we have of closing these Rifts. I won’t allow it.’ He suddenly turned to whisper,
concern masked in his voice. Cullen meant well. He didn’t trust the mages, didn’t find them worth
the risk. I couldn’t say the man was wrong, mages were fickle. I am fickle. But we could use them.
The more power, the higher our chance to close the Breach. To help Maxwell.

‘And if we don’t even try to meet Alexius, we lose the mages and leave a hostile foreign power on
our doorstep!’ I heard the Spymaster walk up and down the War Table and imagined the deadly
confidence in her eyes.

‘Even if we could assault the keep, it would be for naught.’ Josephine countered again, ‘An
“Orlesian” Inquisition’s army marching into Ferelden would provoke a war.’ Yes, and we don’t
want that again. ‘Our hands are tied.’

Cassandra sighed. ‘The magister…’

‘… has outplayed us.’ Cullen completed the Seeker’s sentence, his voice low again.

Maxwell was tapping his foot on the stone floor. He did that when he was thinking too hard. ‘We
can’t just give up. There has to be something we can do.’

‘We cannot accept defeat now.’ Cassandra joined him, of course, ‘There must be a solution.’

The tapping of Maxwell’s foot stopped. ‘Other than the main gate, there’s got to be another way into
the castle. A sewer? A water course? Something?’

‘There’s nothing I know of that could work.’ Cullen heaved another sigh.

‘Wait.’ Leliana hushed, and I liked the tone of her voice now. She had an idea. ‘There is a secret
passage into the castle, an escape route for the family. It’s too narrow for our groups, but we could
send agents through.’

‘Too risky.’ Cullen again. ‘Those agents will be discovered well before they reach the magister.’

‘That’s why we need a distraction. Perhaps the envoy Alexius wants so badly?’ Leliana was a
genius. A scary, deadly, genius. I wasn’t too keen on using Maxwell as a distraction, but I could go
with the envoy, make sure he’s safe… It could work.

I was ripped from my thoughts as I heard the Chantry doors haul open. A man strutted towards the
War Room with a quickened pace. It was too dark to see his face.

‘You cannot go in there! It is for advisors and the Herald of Andraste only! You need clearance… an
invitation… but you can’t just barge in! Ser!’ A scout with a sweaty and troubled face ran after the
man, yelling and trying to stop him from going inside.

‘Maker! You southerners can be so jumpy! I can stand wherever I please. It’s just a bloody room.
Besides, I have information about the magister that is invaluable to the Inquisition.’ That voice…
 isn’t that the other Tevinter mage we met at Redcliffe… Dorian? The man walked by me and
stopped, a look of recognition in his eyes. He then smiled dazzlingly, his dark moustache in perfect,
twisty shape. ‘Eavesdropping, are we?’

Another voice boomed from the War Room again. ‘Keep attention on our Herald, while we disable
the magister’s defences. It’s a gamble, but it might work.’ Seemed like the Commander was finally,
somewhat, on board.
On this cue, Dorian barged into the War Room. The wooden door creaked as it bumped against the stone wall on the inside of the room, where a group of shocked faces stared our way.

‘Fortunately, you’ll have help!’ Dorian opened his arms, almost expecting an applause and he casually walked inside.

I was standing openly, and clearly caught in the act of eavesdropping, in the doorway. I smiled faintly while scratching the back of my neck. Oops, I got found out. Maxwell leaned to the side to stare at me with a surprised smile. But I caught Cassandra’s disapproving look.

The scout that had been running after Dorian, straightened his back. But when the man started to speak, you could hear him squeaking from exhaustion, terribly out of breath. ‘This man says he has information about the magister and his methods, Commander.’ The poor scout trembled.

Stares were thrown Dorian’s way, and I was lucky to not be in the attention of the deadly group of humans. But since I was discovered anyway, I leaned against the doorway, next to the trembling scout, who was doing his very best not to look my way. I could smell his sweat. The shadows partly claimed my face as I resumed staring at the powerful group.

Cullen glared at Dorian with great suspicion, but remained silent.

Dorian continued. ‘Your spies will never get past Alexius’s magic without my help. So if you’re going after him, I’m coming along.’

I saw Maxwell smile at that. ‘Ah, Dorian, was it? I was wondering where you were at.’

‘It takes time to travel in style, Herald.’ Dorian winked playfully.

Cullen coughed, ‘The plan puts you in the most danger. We can’t, in good conscience, order you to do this.’ The Commander sighed and rested his hands on his hips, looking up at Maxwell one last time, concern still troubling his golden eyes. ‘We can still focus on the Templars we have if you’d rather not play the bait. It’s up to you.’

Maxwell looked to Cassandra, who smiled tenderly at him, her eyes calm but neutral. He then looked over his shoulder, peering through his wavy chestnut hair, towards me. I lifted my chin so my face would appear from out of the shadows, and I looked at him in the most confident way I could.

‘We need the mages to close the Breach, and we will do everything that is in our power to do so. If everyone agrees, then let’s go visit Alexius at that little castle he’s renting.’ Maxwell flashed a smile as the group nodded. Dorian clasped his hands in unbridled excitement. Only Cullen looked down, the concern wouldn’t leave his face.

‘We will start to plan this right away, we need to leave as soon as possible.’ Leliana dipped her head, but I still saw that approving grin on her rosy lips. She walked past me without looking, and went to work.

I stepped aside as the rest of the advisors passed me too. Josephine winked playfully and I smiled back, then she disappeared back into her office. She had an invitation to reply to. Next, Cassandra left, her eyes scolding me in a motherly way. Maxwell and Dorian left together, deep in conversation. The two men seemed to be friends already.

Cullen remained standing in the War Room, bending over the table while staring down the map before him. Something was off. Maybe he was concerned about this new mission, or maybe the idea of having rebel mages walk around Haven made him nervous.
‘Cullen? Will you let me know if there’s anything I can do to help with this mission?’

Cullen sighed and looked up, but he smiled as he saw me standing quietly before the table. ‘Of course, my Lady. I will let you know if something comes up.’

I shifted on my feet as he stared at me, his golden eyes boring into mine. My heart stopped beating for a moment. I looked around to see no one was near, and then took a step towards him. ‘Have you… have you been sleeping well? Does the… you know… I gave you help?’

Cullen straightened his back and brushed his hand through his blonde hair. ‘I… yes. It helps.’

I bit my lip, and noticed him looking at it. ‘If you’re ever in need of anything, you can call on me.’ That sounds wrong. ‘For suggestions, of course.’ That’s sounds ever worse. ‘And… don’t worry about Maxwell, I will go with him and I will make sure he’s safe.’

‘He is not the only one I’m worried about.’ The corner of his lips turned to a quick and faint smile. He looked less sad now, and that made me feel a little bit more at ease too.

‘Everything will be alright. I promise.’ I smiled again awkwardly and then turned around to go after Maxwell. The Commander stared after me for a while, but then focussed on the reports spread out before him.

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Hurrying outside, I felt the cold wind barge against me like a whip. My breath got stuck in my chest because of the cold, so I stopped in my tracks, looking at my bare toes buried in the snow. If I wasn’t wearing enchanted foot wraps, I wouldn’t have any toes left.

It was getting colder.

Strange how at Haven, it wouldn’t get warmer. There were but two temperatures, cold and freezing.

I waited until my lungs found my warm breath once more, and then continued down the slope towards the tavern. I had promised Varric some details from the meeting I had spied on. I was taking the shortcut around Adan’s Apothecary when I heard two familiar voices chattering away.

‘Saeris, my friend!’ Maxwell waved his hand as he saw me peeking from behind the wooden cabin. I really suck at spying, obviously.

‘Ah… Maxwell!’ I grinned and walked his way. Standing next to the Herald was Dorian, the Tevinter mage, or magister, or whatever he was. I wasn’t accustomed to anything Tevinter, since I had avoided that country during my terribly long life. I had met some, fought some, but never befriended someone from Tevinter. ‘I’m sorry I spied on your meeting…’ I said to Maxwell and nodded politely at Dorian.

‘I think no one was surprised at that.’ He chuckled warmly, ‘Besides, they’re calling you my bodyguard already so you should know what I’m up to.’

‘Who’s calling me that?’ I pouted.

‘Everyone.’ He lifted a brow at me and smiled again. ‘So, Saeris, you’ve met Dorian Pavus, right?’

I glanced at the Tevinter man, who was leaning against Adan’s cabin, and looked him up and down. ‘Of course, though we haven’t had the chance to talk personally.’
‘We met in the hall earlier, no?’ Dorian flashed his teeth, I wondered how he got them so white, most humans here had bad teeth. Probably magic. ‘I have heard a lot about you already. Let us say I did not expect you to be…’

Elven? I thought as I furrowed my brows.

‘As beautiful as you are.’ Dorian continued, a sassy grin curling on his lips.

‘Oh… yes… thank you.’ I hummed.

Maxwell laughed loudly, ‘She’s a good friend. Saved my life more times than I can count.’ He said and smacked my shoulder in a brotherly fashion. ‘We were talking about Dorian’s charming homeland, weren’t we?’

‘I sincerely hope she understands your sarcasm.’ Dorian chuckled warmly. ‘But yes, Tevinter is lavishly charming in its lies, scheming and oh, those wonderful illusions about supremacy. Those are the top tourist attractions.’

I smiled a little at that. ‘Sounds like fun.’

Maxwell crossed his arms, ‘Will you go back after we dealt with Alexius?’ Good question.

Dorian looked at his feet, chuckled, and then looked back up again, ‘I’m not exactly welcome back home. Not that it matters, I’m accustomed to being a pariah, it adds to my charm.’ Maybe Dorian and I weren’t so different. I’m a pariah in some way as well. Probably all.

‘Have you been to Tevinter, Saeris? During your travels?’ I felt the eyes of both men on me.

I scraped my throat as I spoke, ‘No, I avoided it for… obvious reasons.’ Be it my crazy eye, my immortality, or my race. Probably all.

‘Ah yes, I was wondering what… that is.’ Dorian stared at me the way Solas did sometimes. But it was gone as just as quick.

I swallowed. My eye? Nothing special, just an ancient curse.

Maxwell saw me sweat and intervened. ‘Saeris is a mage like you, but her gifts are… rare. Her eye makes her see things others don’t. You know, like demons.’ Thank you, Maxwell.

I smiled awkwardly.

‘The Imperium would have a blast with you. So yes, don’t you ever go there.’ Dorian winked at me, a kindness in his eyes. ‘So, you are a mage as well. You don’t occur to me as an apostate, unlike that other… Elven mage I’ve seen walking around.’ Does he mean Solas? ‘Were you part of a Circle of Magi?’

My smile faltered, my heart sunk. ‘I used to be, for some time.’ I liked this conversation when it wasn’t about me.

‘Meaning you were locked away like a criminal, at least until you rebelled. It’s such a bizarre notion, to me.’ Dorian continued either way.

I hummed and stared at the ground. Dorian was wearing boots made out of good and sturdy material, and they looked nice as well. When I looked up, I saw Maxwell shaking his head towards Dorian, and Dorian looked back to me in an apologetic way, like he knew what had happened there. It made
me more uncomfortable.

‘I have to go.’ I smiled politely at Dorian and Maxwell. ‘Promised Varric some gossip.’

‘Alright’, Maxwell sighed. ‘I will let you know of our mission as soon as possible.’

I smiled and dipped my head as goodbye. ‘Herald, Dorian.’

‘Until another time.’ Dorian dipped his head politely back at me.

I smiled and then turned away, leaving the two men to resume their conversation. I liked meeting new people, but I hated those first conversations where they asked questions. I didn’t like questions. I already had too many of those myself.

As I resumed walking down to the tavern, I heard familiar footsteps walking my way. Silent, light on his feet, but confident. If I hadn’t heard him, the nasty twisting in my stomach would betray Solas anyway. I turned around towards him, and saw that little chuckle on his lips before it disappeared.

‘Searis.’ Solas said.

‘Good day, Solas.’ I hummed back. ‘Something’s up?’

‘No, not at all.’ He smiled faintly. ‘Well, perhaps… I saw you talking with that… Tevinter mage.’ He almost spat out the word Tevinter. I wondered if there was something more to that.

‘Ah yes, Dorian.’ I lifted an eyebrow to the tall Elf. ‘He’s actually quite nice. Heard he’s a good mage too, he might be able to teach me a thing or two.’ I joked.

‘If there is something you wish to learn, I can be of service to you any time, Searis.’ I saw Solas furrow his eyebrows.

‘Don’t get jealous, Solas.’ I winked and rested my hand on his shoulder, giving it a small squeeze.

Solas chuckled, and the strange look in his eyes was gone. The twisting in my stomach intensified though.

‘Well, I’m meeting up with Varric. You coming?’

‘Perchance another time. I have some research still left undone.’ He said.

We stared at each other for just a second, but then I broke our contact again. ‘Okay, I’m at the tavern if you need me.’ I waved my hand and turned my back to Solas, walking down towards the tavern without stopping.

Immediately when I opened the tavern’s door, I heard Varric’s loud laughter. ‘You didn’t!’ He cried.

‘Uh, yeah I did.’ Sera snickered.

Varric, Sera and The Iron Bull were sitting at their favourite table near the centre of the tavern, close to Flissa’s bar. A new face had joined them, I saw. It was that Grey Warden we had conscripted along the way back home. What was his name again? Greybeard… Blackhouse…

‘Twinkle! There you are! Took your time!’ Varric waved his short arm, barely sticking out of the crowd, towards me.

I waved back and strolled to my seat.
‘Well, I heard you should have some gossip for us.’ The Iron Bull winked.

‘How did the spying go?’ Varric leaned forward, and I noticed a red glow on his face. Almost as red as Sera’s.

‘Well…’ I bit my lip and took a jug from the cup Flissa has just placed before me, a polite smile on her lips.

‘You got found out, huh?’ Sera giggled again.

‘Yes… But that Dorian barged in and…’

‘Dorian?’ Varric lifted a brow. ‘That Tevinter guy?’

‘Yes, him.’ I nodded. ‘But he’s actually quite nice.’

‘You should watch yourself.’ The Iron Bull jugged his drink. ‘The pretty ones are always the worst.’

‘Nahh, I saw him standin’ with Heraldy.’ Sera lisped. ‘He seems fun.’ She laughed. ‘Could lose a bit Tevinter though.’

‘Maybe it’s the Tevinter in him that makes him look arrogant. He doesn’t even hide it.’ The Grey Warden, whose name I still had somewhat forgotten, slurped from his ale. I noticed the brown liquid dripping into his black pointed beard, soaking it up. I always thought that you could smell the Blight’s taint. Feel its presence. But I couldn’t smell or feel or see anything special about this man. So guess I was wrong.

‘You remember Warden Blackwall, don’t you?’ Varric laughed.

Blackwall. That's it. I was so close. ‘Of course. How’s Haven for you?’

‘It’s accommodating. Better than my tent in the Hinterlands.’ Blackwall laughed. He had a thick Ferelden accent, and didn’t pronounce some syllables. But he seemed like a decent man. Sturdy. One who doesn’t ask questions. ‘But that Breach, Maker.’ He sighed and put down his cup on the table. ‘So much easier to ignore when it’s far away.’

‘It’s strange, innit? Once shot an arrow up there. Didn’t come back…’ Sera mumbled while drinking. ‘You’ll get used to it…’ I answered the man, who stared at me with a distrusting look. Most humans did that. ‘Of course, when we go after the mages, we’ll be able to close that thing soon.’

‘Oh? We’re going back to Redcliffe then?’ Varric leaned forward while I heard Sera moan with discontentment.

‘It seems so.’ I started and leaned forward towards the centre of the table so no one around could hear. ‘Listen up, this is what they concluded…’

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‘Did you bring your supply of Health potions?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you have your third dagger with you?’
‘Got it.’

‘You surely did not forget your invitation?’

‘Cassandra, I have everything. Don’t worry.’ Maxwell sighed as the Seeker checked his horse. The woman was getting more and more obvious.

I smiled at them while strapping my saddle to my mount. The tall brown horse whinnied as I stroked its back.

Three days. That’s all they had needed to plan this mission. Leliana really doesn’t waste any time. Her spies had left a day before us, so no Venatori spies would notice us riding together. Maxwell was dressed in his “political” armour, meaning he was wearing robes that made him look like a Herald too. But Cassandra still made sure he was able to move swiftly in them. If the mission should fail and our spies get caught, we’d have to fight our way out.

Most of the Inquisition’s Inner Circle was present. Not all, because that would catch too much attention. Sera didn’t come, she would get too nervous around the mages. Blackwall would also stay at Haven. He had just joined the Inquisition, and he was to train with Cullen and arrange some things with Leliana before he would be able to join us on any missions. Dorian was an exception, of course. We needed him to get past Alexius’ spies. He already left a day earlier together with Leliana’s scouts. We don’t want to be seen with him, or our cover might get blown. Varric, The Iron Bull and Solas were present as well. And even Vivienne wanted to join us this time, saying “I want to make sure the Herald makes the right decisions when it comes to enlisting those rebels.” I wished she would’ve stayed home. I’d rather have Sera.

‘Be careful.’ I yelped as the Commander appeared next to my horse. His large hands followed the mount’s back gently, and he stroked some stray hairs flat.

‘Don’t worry, Commander. I will make sure Maxwell’s safe.’ I said when seeing his worrisome eyes.

‘I know.’ He whispered almost. ‘But be sure to protect yourself too, my Lady.’

‘I’m a tough cookie to crack.’ I laughed.

‘So it seems.’ He squinted his eyes as he smiled.

‘Is everyone ready?’ Cassandra yelled.

I looked away from Cullen to hoist myself over my horse. Cullen stretched his arms in response, but retracted them as I lifted myself into the saddle easily. ‘Ready!’ I called.

Others did the same, and Maxwell looked over his group in a protective way. ‘Okay, guys. We’ll make this trip short, go to Redcliffe, kick out Alexius, and return. Let’s try to keep ourselves low, don’t attract too much attention. We can’t afford any diversions.’

I looked down to where the Commander had stood, but he had already gone back to his place next to Leliana and Josephine.

‘Alexius does not expect us to come without a fight. So be careful of any irregularities.’ Josephine called out to us.

‘My spies should be arriving before you, they know their way in. When it’s time, they’ll take out Alexius’ guards. Make sure to go inside with the pretence of a diplomatic meeting. Don’t ruin that
cover.’ Leliana ordered, and I bet no one would forget her words. I think everyone but Cassandra was scared of her.


And then off we were.

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Redcliffe Castle was a large, medieval-like stronghold. It was huge, with courtyards and towers and more rooms than necessary. The gate to the castle was a huge, steel door with heavy ornaments and before it stretched a long stone bridge. A little bit like the one in Val Royeaux, but this bridge was shorter and more robust. The stones of the castle were grey and old and sombre. It screamed “get away”. Not really a welcoming home.

My heart started to roar. We hadn’t seen Dorian or any Inquisition spies. And that’s good. You’re not supposed to see them. I wondered if they were already inside the palace, waiting to strike at the right moment.

We dismounted at the beginning of the bridge leading towards the gate to the castle. A young squire took our horses, his eyes always respectfully towards the ground. We then walked over to the gate, and the guards let us in.

Strange, we didn’t had to show the Inquisition’s vigil, or Maxwell’s invitation.

They all knew exactly who we were.

My stomach turned, and I felt my fingertips trembling. Something’s off. As we walked through the front courtyard towards the main door, I glanced at Maxwell. Sweat was clearly forming near his temples. His shoulders were heaved up tight. Even Cassandra seemed uncomfortable. She kept looking around suspiciously, sticking to Maxwell like she was glued to him. We walked further along the stone path in a tight formation. Even Vivienne, who had been giving snarky remarks about the rebels all day, had gotten eerily quiet.

I peered at Solas and he answered my look with careful eyes. We all felt there was something off. Not like in Val Royeaux… but… in another, even more threatening way. I couldn’t guess what feeling I was having. Last time, I clearly felt there was a demon around. But this time… it was something else. The strange smell of foreign magic clung to my nose, making me have a metallic taste in my mouth.

As we walked inside, a long stone corridor was greeted before us, Tevinter tapestry hanging from the walls. Before us, two guards appeared, dressed in strange robes.

Venatori.

The Venatori guards wore white and grey armour, with that familiar strange hood with spiked pieces of fabric, like the one Alexius had been wearing, and a steel mask with heavy, rectangular horns protruding straight from their forehead.

Maxwell walked first. There was a confident look on his face. Gone was the sweat and the uncomfortable posture. This was the Herald of Andraste.

The two guards looked at us strangely, remaining silent.
Maxwell straightened his shoulders as he snarled, ‘Announce us.’

I remained behind Maxwell, close, like the rest of us. Ready to attack if they did.

Another young man appeared from behind the Venatori guards. He looked Ferelden, and was wearing a simple linen shirt and pants. The young man smiled politely, ‘The Magister’s invitation was for Master Trevelyan only.’ He had a high voice. ‘These others will have to remain here.’

I grunted and Cassandra took a defensive step forward, her eyes furious. But Maxwell remained calm, resting his hand in front of Cassandra to cool her down. ‘Where I go, they go.’ He ordered.

The servant stared at Maxwell and then at The Iron Bull, who doomed up menacingly behind me. I noticed the guy get nervous. Eventually, he nodded and escorted us to the throne room. The Venatori guards behind us lingered, but then followed us in. I almost felt their breaths against the back of my neck.

The throne room was a large ballroom, lit with flickering torches that casted dancing shadows on the grim stone walls. But the room was fairly sober, very Ferelden-like. Tevinter tapestries alternated with Ferelden tapestries, and some statues of Andraste were cut into the walls.

‘My lord Magister’, the servant began to speak as we walked towards the throne. ‘The agents of the Inquisition have arrived.’

Before us stood the throne of the Earl of Redcliffe, now occupied by someone else. The throne was a large, wooden and steel carved chair, bordered by two giant dragonesque statues hanging from the walls. And on it sat Gereon Alexius, a grin on his thin lips and his legs crossed like he owned the place. Next to him stood his son, Felix, paler and thinner than before. Alexius stood up as we came closer, strolling a step or two towards us, his arms open.

I had to fight the urge to kill the man where he stood.

‘My friend! It’s so good to see you again.’ He smiled. The sound of his voice made me want to gag. Alexius’ dark brown eyes glanced over the rest of the party, and I saw a hint of surprise there. ‘And your associates, of course.’ I locked eyes with the evil magister for a second, but the man turned back to Maxwell, the big grin curling over his face again. ‘I’m sure we can work out some arrangement that is equitable to all parties.’

From behind the marble pillars near the back of the room, another familiar figure appeared. Fiona walked towards us, stopping right next to Cassandra, her eyes filled with a fiery anger. I heard Vivienne hiss at the sight of the Elven enchanter. ‘Are we mages to have no choice in deciding our fate?’

Alexius scoffed, ‘Fiona, you would not have turned your followers over to my care if you did not trust me with their lives.’

Maxwell took a step forward, still confident. He looked down to Fiona and nodded politely. ‘If the Grand Enchanter wants to be part of these talks, then I welcome her as a guest of the Inquisition.’ Vivienne rolled her eyes, I could almost hear her.

But Fiona gave Maxwell a relieved smile. ‘Thank you.’ She dipped her head respectfully.

Alexius sighed, scraping his throat in deep thought. He turned back to his seat. His footsteps resounded throughout the throne room, mixing together with the smouldering sound of the fireplace behind the throne. Felix stared at his father as he sat down. I saw an emotion there I couldn’t place immediately. Maybe a mix of… anger… concern… and fear?
I shifted on my feet, stepping closer to Maxwell.

‘The Inquisition needs mages to close the Breach, and I have them. So, what shall you offer in exchange?’ Alexius cooed.

Maxwell smiled and rolled back his shoulders, cocking his brows arrogantly, ‘Nothing at all.’ He laughed, and then turned dead serious, ‘I don’t owe you anything, and neither will I give you the chance to gain more than you’ve already stolen. I’m just going to take the mages and leave.’

Alexius furrowed his brows, leaning closer from his seat, ‘And how do you imagine you’ll accomplish such a feat?’

‘He knows everything, father.’ Felix finally spoke up, his voice stronger and louder than I would’ve thought. He looked so sick.

Alexius stared at his son, his pupils enlarging, and his nervousness now clearly visible on his face. ‘Felix, what have you done?’

Maxwell stood his ground, his own voice louder than before, but there was still kindness there. Not rage, but a calm confidence. ‘Your son is concerned that you’re involved in something terrible.’

Alexius hissed, anger dripping from his words like venom. ‘So speaks the thief. So you think you can turn my own son against me? You walk into my stronghold with your stolen mark – a gift you don’t even understand – and think you’re in control?’ The evil magister pushed himself from his chair and walked towards Maxwell slowly. Cassandra and I stepped next to the Herald defensively. But Maxwell didn’t bat an eye. ‘You’re nothing but a mistake!’

‘If you know so much, enlighten me.’ Maxwell crossed his arms in front of his chest, unmoving. ‘Tell me what this mark on my hand is for.’

‘It belongs to your betters. You wouldn’t even begin to understand its purpose.’ Alexius spat.

‘Father, listen to yourself! Do you know what you sound like?’ Felix stared at his father, and now I understood the emotions on his face. It was loss.

‘He sounds exactly like the sort of villainous cliché everyone expects us to be.’ Dorian casually stepped from behind another pillar, into the crackling light of the torches’ flames.

I heard Alexius’ surprised, choked breath from where I stood. ‘Dorian.’ He said his name like it was a curse. ‘I gave you a chance to be a part of this. You turned me down. The Elder One has power you would not believe. He will raise the Imperium from its own ashes!’

My heart stopped for a moment as Alexius’ words sunk into my mind.

The Elder One.

A name that made me shiver from within my very core.

Maxwell raised his chin, the many questions prickling his tongue. ‘The Elder One, again.’ He hummed as he remembered the name Envy had gurgled in its twisted nightmare. ‘The one who killed the Divine? Is he a mage?’

‘Soon, he will become a god.’ Alexius sung proudly. ‘He will make the world bow to mages once more. We will rule from the Boeric Ocean to the Frozen Seas.’
'You can’t involve my people in this!' Fiona cried out. Vivienne stared at them with a pale face and I heard Varric mumble a ‘shit’ under his breath.

‘Alexius, this is exactly what you and I talked about never wanting to happen! Why would you support this?’ Dorian sounded desperate as he saw his own mentor falling deeper and deeper into his madness.

I felt the swishing wind of an arrow behind me, my ears twitching with the sound. A guard behind me moaned and quietly fell to his knees. No one had noticed yet, and I didn’t dare to move or make a sound to betray it.

‘Father,’ Felix continued, ‘Stop it. Give up the Venatori. Let the southern mages fight the Breach. And let’s go home.’

‘No! It’s the only way, Felix. He can save you!’ The pleading sadness in Alexius’ disgusting voice, almost made me pity him.

He was doing this… for his son?

‘Save me?’ Felix cocked his head.

‘There is a way. The Elder One promised. If I undo the mistake at the temple…’ Alexius spat again, and looked at Maxwell in a menacing way. He was the mistake.

My blood started to boil in my veins, and I felt my eye twisting and turning. No, keep quiet, don’t make a sound or the spies might be found out. I bit the inside of my lip until I could taste my own blood.

‘I’m going to die. You need to accept that.’ Felix sighed.

But Alexius refused to listen, it only angered him more and more, until he couldn’t see anything but red. ‘Seize them, Venatori! The Elder One demands this man’s life!’ Alexius ordered and pointed his nasty finger to our Herald.

But when the other Venatori guards who had been hiding in the dark, appeared from out of the shadows, so did our spies, cutting the guards’ throats in a swift and silent movement.

‘Your men are dead, Alexius.’ Maxwell raised his chin in victory.

Yes! Good! All is according to plan! My heart calmed down a little, but I still stuck to Maxwell, my hand reaching for his sleeve.

‘You… you are a mistake! You should never have existed!’ Alexius opened his hand.

I screamed and fell to the ground, unable to grab Maxwell’s hand as I reached for my eye in agony as it twisted and turned at the sight of the foreign but powerful magic.

‘No!’ Dorian screamed and lashed out a blast of his magic at Alexius, who almost dropped the strange, emerald fading amulet from his hand.

But it was already too late.

The presence of the Rift was the first thing I felt, and I saw something I had never seen before as I stared into the abyss of green and red. There was another side. Not the Fade, but another place entirely.
‘MAXWELL!’ I don’t think I’ve ever cried as loudly, but my voice failed to reach him. The Rift swallowed him and Dorian, and I saw Maxwell’s fearful expression as he locked eyes with me once more.

And then he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be my very first Maxwell POV! Exciting!

I'm trying to get my chapters up as soon as I finish them, but I'm currently in the middle of my finals so sorry if it takes a while!
Long chapter coming right up! Double the word count, double the drama ;-) Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Those who had been cast down,
The demons who would be gods,
Began to whisper to men from their tombs within the earth.
And the men of Tevinter heard and raised altars
To the pretender-gods once more,
And in return were given, in hushed whispers,
The secrets of darkest magic.

- Chant of Light, Threnodies 5:11

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- Maxwell -

‘You… you are a mistake! You should never have existed!’

‘No!’

‘MAXWELL!’

Cold, empty and broken. That’s what I felt like. As if someone had thrown me into the air and I had fallen from a thousand miles down, crashing onto a wet and hard floor. And there was nothing but darkness.

First, I thought I was dead.

But your ass doesn’t hurt if you’re dead.

And my feet were getting wet. Dead people don’t get wet feet. Or at least don’t feel them get wet. The water smelled like a sewer. Maybe a little bit like Haven after everybody got food poisoning. Something like that.

I blinked my eyes once, twice, until most of the room I had fallen into cleared up. It looked like I was in some sort of waterway, or a dim-lit cell. Sounds of heavy splashing, the water waving from one side to the other like the Waking Sea itself.

Two strangely-dressed guards ran, or splashed, into the room. After staring at them for a second, I recognized them as Venatori. Those sorry bastards Alexius hung around with. I thought our agents had killed them all?

‘Blood of the Elder One! Where’d they come from?’ One guard spat to the other.

Next to me, I heard Dorian groan tiredly. Good, he’s here too. Maybe he knows where we were. But
before I could ask, the guards attacked.

Dorian and I glanced at each other quickly before jumping forwards together. I had hidden my daggers in my armour coat in case I’d need them, and Cassandra had made sure I was able to fight in these robes.

Maker I love that woman.

She’ll kill me if she hears that.

With a swift movement, I sliced up the first guard’s arm, and he roared while dropping his sword. I leaped over the man, twisting my body into the air and landed behind him, hauling open his back. The guard screamed loudly before passing out and drowning in the water below us.

Dorian laughed, ‘Good one!’ and lashed out with a burst of his magic. An unnatural fire climbed across the second guard. The stupid moron almost burned to death until he realized we were standing in water. The guard threw off his helmet and quickly dove into the smelly sewer to extinguish himself. I took advantage of that and leaped towards the guard, pushing my hands down to grab his head, tilting it so I could slice his throat.

After we had dealt with the Venatori, Dorian dusted off his coat and tutted while looking around the room. ‘Displacement?’ he hummed, ‘Interesting!’

‘Huh’ I cocked my head.

Dorian continued, his fingers twisting his moustache, ‘It’s probably not what Alexius intended. The Rift must have moved us… to what? The closest confluence of arcane energy?’ The mage squatted down and peered into the black water.

I wiped a smear of blood from my cheek. ‘The last thing I remember, we were in the castle hall.’ And then… Saeris screamed… and I was here. ‘I feel like I’m having a bad hangover…’

‘Let’s see.’ Dorian straightened his back, his face pulled into a thoughtful grimace. ‘If we’re still in the castle, it isn’t… oh! Of course! It’s not simply where, it’s when!’

‘Uuhh…’ Does it make me stupid that I don’t understand what he’s implying?

Maybe I don’t want to understand.

‘Alexius moved the amulet as a focus. It moved us through time!’ Dorian clasped his hands.

‘Ah, crap.’ I do understand him. ‘That’s not good… Did we go forward or back?’ I rubbed my thumping temples. ‘And how far?’

‘Those are excellent questions… We’ll have to find out, won’t we?’ Dorian smiled. He didn’t seem worried at all. Or perhaps he was good at hiding it.

If we went back… then maybe it’s not that bad. I can prevent a lot of bad things from happening. But if we… if we went forward. The Breach…

‘Let’s look around,’ Dorian rested his hands on his hips, ‘see where the Rift took us. Then we can figure out how to get back… if we can.’

‘You have a plan to get us back, right, Dorian? Please have a plan.’ I sighed.

Dorian flashed his teeth, ‘I have some thoughts on that. They’re lovely thoughts… like little jewels.’
‘We’re doomed.’ I whispered to myself.

Fuck. This.

We waded through the water, and opened our cell door with the prison key we looted from one of the Venatori guards’ corpses. As we pushed through the heavy sewer, we came across another room, which was lit in a red fading hue. It could be cozy, if the light wasn’t coming from that giant pillar of Red Lyrium that grew out of the wall like a damn tree.

‘That… doesn’t seem right.’ I asked Dorian while staring at the bloody glowing rock. I could almost hear it… whisper… perhaps. Not words. Not entirely. But more like a buzzing, a million voices hushing at me. Ever so softly.

‘No, it doesn’t.’ Dorian glanced at it quickly. ‘And I do not think it’s just a choice of shoddy interior design… These seem to be growing all over the place.’

‘Yeah… Let’s move. It’s unsettling.’

‘That’s an understatement,’ Dorian said under his breath.

‘So, Dorian,’ I continued to chatter while we were entering room after room. The water was heavy and cold, and the hairs on my arm were standing up, like someone was watching me from behind. The humming of the Red Lyrium made it worse. And I’d rather hear the sound of my own voice. ‘What was Alexius trying to do?’

Dorian was using his staff as support to push through the sewer. He sounded out of breath as he answered, ‘I believe his original plan was to remove you from time completely. If that happened, you would’ve never been at the Temple of Sacred Ashes or mangled his Elder One’s plan.’

‘What a boring world would that be.’ I chuckled. Think about anything but what could’ve happened.

‘Indeed.’ Dorian smiled back faintly. ‘I think your surprise in the castle hall made him reckless… He tossed us into the Rift before he was ready. I countered it, the magic went wild and here we are.’ Dorian looked around disdainfully, ‘Makes sense?’

‘No… maybe…’ I chittered.

‘I don’t even want to think about what this will do to the fabric of the world… We didn’t travel through time so much as punch a hole through it and toss it into the privy.’

‘It sure smells like one.’ I winked, and Dorian laughed quietly. Laughing keeps you warm, that’s what my sister, Evelyn, once told me… before I went to the Temple at Haven.

We finally reached some stairs, climbing up, we left the smelly water behind us.

But it didn’t get better.

‘Andraste blessed me. Andraste blessed me.’ An Elven man behind a cage was singing a prayer. Dorian and I glanced at each other, and came closer. ‘My tears are my sins. My sins. My sins.’ The man spoke almost in two voices, like the humming of the Red Lyrium. ‘Andraste guide me. Andraste guide me.’

‘What did they do to you?’ I whispered to the man. He looked so weak, so sad. His eyes were glowing a red hue, fading in and out.
The man didn’t look at us, but stared beyond us, his gaze blank. ‘Andraste blessed me. Andraste blessed me.’

‘Come, Herald. There’s nothing we can do for him now.’ Dorian touched my shoulder, nudging me to move on.

I stared back at the poor prisoner, and my thoughts raced on about my friends.

If this was the future, please let them not be here. Here is worse than death.

After some walking, we came across an open room carved into rock, a cavern of sorts. Two Venatori zealots were blocking the way north and south. There was also a large metal drawbridge to the west, but that one was raised. We had to fight our way through.

Dorian electrocuted one of the zealots with his staff from afar. The man almost leaped into the air, shivering and quivering, his eyes popping from their sockets. Dead. I took on the other zealot. I threw one dagger forward, and it hit him right into his chest, piercing though his armour. The man gagged for a second but kept on running towards me, his sword in the air. When he tried crashing it down on me, I ducked and rolled to my right before jumping back up again. Dorian twisted his staff from behind us, catching the Venatori into a giant icicle. With the back of my dagger, I smashed the icicle into a thousand pieces.

‘Thank you!’ I smiled at Dorian.

‘You’re welcome.’ Dorian grinned and curtsied.

We continued towards the northern door, which gave way into a staircase that went down into the dungeons again. With a heavy heart, I headed towards the dark hallways below.

I heard humming, deep within the cells.

My heart started to race, faster and faster. Both Dorian and I had gotten silent. We didn’t know what or who we were looking for.

Yet, we both did.

We were searching for survivors.

My friends.

I hoped I wouldn’t find them, that they were safe and sound outside.

‘The light shall lead her safely through the paths of this world and into the next.’ My heart broke into a thousand pieces, just like that zealot had done upstairs. I wanted to sink onto my knees and bury myself between the cold and wet rocks on the floor. And cry. My father had told me that men don’t cry, so I kept myself strong remembering that. I looked at Cassandra wailing in her dark cell, Red Lyrium growing behind her. ‘For she who trusts in the Maker, fire is her water.’ Her voice sounded like the Elven man had upstairs. Double, like the Lyrium was humming with her.

‘No.’ I whispered and reached for the steel bars that separated me from her. She sat on the ground, pale and skinny. Skinny to the bone. Cassandra was a beautiful woman, and I would know, I stared at her day in, day out. But now, her full cheeks were sunken, her scar more prominent. Her tanned glow had turned grey, with black circles underneath her once strong eyes. Her hair laid flat on her head, hints of grey appearing between her dark braids. Her eyes, that used to be a soft brown, had turned a maroon red, fading in and out, like the Red Lyrium itself. When she looked up to me, there
was a spark of recognition. But it still felt like she wasn’t looking at me clearly, like she was dreaming.

‘You’ve returned to us… can it be?’ Her voice broke. ‘Has Andraste given us another chance?’

‘Cassandra…’ I started.

But she looked back down, biting her chapped lips. ‘Maker forgive me. I failed you. I failed everyone. The end must truly be upon us if the dead return to life.’

I opened the door with the same prison key we’d looted, and knelt down beside her. Taking her hand, it felt so cold it broke my heart again, I said, ‘I’m not back from the dead, Cassandra, I just got… Well, it’s hard to explain.’

Cassandra stared at my hand holding hers, blinking her eyes. ‘I was there.’ She said, coarsely. ‘The magister obliterated you with a gesture.’

‘Alexius sent us forward in time. If we find him, we may be able to return to the present.’ Dorian said, his voice soft and filled with concern.

Cassandra jerked up. That fire in her eyes was still there. I could still see it. ‘Go back in time? Then…’ I helped her get up, I could feel her muscles strain. ‘Can you make it so that none of this ever took place?’

‘And I’ll make sure Alexius will suffer for his crimes.’ I spat. I will slice that blighted ball-less welp up into a hundred different pieces and turn him into Tevinter stew.

‘Alexius’ master… After you died, we could not stop the Elder One from rising. Empress Celene was murdered, just like the Envy demon at Val Royeaux had shown you. The army that swept in afterwards… It was a horde of demons.’ Cassandra swallowed painfully. ‘Nothing stopped them. Nothing.’

‘I should’ve been there to help you.’ I caressed the back of her hand I was still holding. She didn’t fail me. I failed her.

I’ve failed everyone.

‘You’re here now.’ She smiled faintly at me. She was so broken. To break Cassandra… she must’ve gone through so much.

I have to get back. I have to.

‘Some of the others were locked up together with me. They must be here somewhere.’ Cassandra mentioned as we continued to walk through the maze of cells. She stood strong, and didn’t tip over. It was as if she had found some strength back, maybe the last she had, to help us find our way out.

The next one we found, was Varric.

‘Andraste’s sacred knickers!’ He cursed. ‘You’re alive?’

‘Apparently.’ I winked.

‘Where were you? How did you escape?’ He coughed. He looked worse than Cassandra.

‘We didn’t escape, Alexius sent us into the future.’ Dorian answered, leaning on his staff.
'Everything that happens to you is weird.' The Dwarf joked. He’ll never change. I’m glad about that.

‘You might be right about that, my friend.’ I smiled and patted his shoulder as he walked over to us.

‘I’m always right.’ He winked. Though his red eyes made it more unsettling than amusing. ‘And when I’m not, I lie about it.’ Of course. ‘So, what are you doing here?’

We tried to explain what had happened exactly, and that we were planning to get to Alexius to return to our time.

Varric laughed and smacked his knee. He does that often. ‘You want to take on Alexius? I’m in. Let’s go.’

We found Vivienne in the next cell. She was as she always had been. Fiery, proud, and sceptic. I could understand why most disliked her. I disliked her style of clothing. Did I ever mention she once wanted to put me in a cropped leather shirt? It took some time to convince her Dorian and I weren’t demons. She believed us after I told her about Alexius’ time dabbling.

After Vivienne, we got to The Iron Bull. He was singing the “Bottles of beer on the wall” song when we stopped in front of his cell. The Qunari man looked like a true demon, his muscles tattered but still there, yet with a hell of a lot more scars. And the glowing red of his eyes casted dark shadows on his horns. Bull was surprisingly critical about us too, at first. But after we explained everything, he joined the rest of us. I think the only thing he remembered from our explanation was that we were going after Alexius, and he was totally into that.

Solas was awaiting us in one of the cells at the end of the dungeon. His back was turned to us, his eyes towards the ground, deep in thought. The glowing red of the Red Lyrium seemed to be clinging onto him harder than the others. The Elf’s whole body practically glowed in the dark. Fading in and out, like a heartbeat. He too had gone skinny, I could see the bones on his shoulder pop out. He had bruises all over his bald head, and his skin seemed paper thin as I saw his veins popping through it. Varric coughed, and made Solas turn around. He backed away, eyes enlarging, staring at us with an open mouth. ‘You’re alive?’ His voice sounded coarse, his throat was bruised as well. ‘We saw you die!’

‘Well, I can feel my ass hurting from falling, so guess I’m not dead.’ I grinned and opened his cell door.

Dorian started his explanation again. ‘The spell Alexius cast displaced us in time. We just got here, so to speak.’

Solas walked outside, staring at me. His eyes were glowing red, and they bore into my soul. I also noticed cuts across his pointed ears, as if someone had threatened to cut them off. And almost had. ‘Can you reverse the process?’ Solas, the ever scholar, asked us. ‘You could return and obviate the events of the last year. It may not be too late.’ There was hope in his voice.

‘Sorry but you really don’t look so good…’ I asked the man. It hurt to see him so… so lost. He was but a ghost of the strong and knowledgeable Elven apostate I’d met at Haven. The man that had helped me so to understand my mark.

‘I am dying but no matter.’ He smiled ever so faintly, as if dying wasn’t so bad anymore. ‘If you can undo this they could all be saved… She could…’ I noticed him look up to Cassandra behind me, and I saw her shake her head in the corner of my eye. ‘This world is an abomination.’ He continued, skipping whatever he had been implying. ‘It must never come to pass.’
‘Alexius locked himself up in the throne room. That’s where we’ll find him.’ Cassandra leaned in to me, and I felt comfortable to feel her so close.

‘No… we still have to find the others? We’re not complete yet.’ I looked around the room, but all cells were empty now.

I saw The Iron Bull look at Varric, who stared at his feet. The Dwarf shook his head, and my stomach twisted. ‘Sera and Blackwall… They were still at Haven when you died. They came for our rescue with the others of the Inquisition.’

‘They are dead, my dear. I’m sorry.’ Vivienne continued. Her voice soft.

‘No’ I whispered. Sera, that happy-go-lucky kid… she had meant so well… And Blackwall had just joined us… we should’ve left him alone.

But perhaps death was better than… this.

‘And… And Saeris?’ I asked again. My heart pumped inside my chest. Please, let her be okay. Please, Maker, Andraste, let my Saeris be alright. I can’t take her being… dead. Or worse. I can’t see her like that. She’s like a little sister to me. If I can’t protect her…

Cassandra stared at Solas, who shook his head very slowly. When he spoke, I had never heard his voice so quiet, so full of sadness. ‘They took her after you died… I have not seen her return.’

Solas seemed like he wanted to say something else, but Cassandra laid her hand on his shoulder, shutting him up. ‘We have not heard of her since.’ Cassandra was good at almost anything, except at lying. I could see it in her eyes. But I didn’t ask any further. I couldn’t lose that spark of hope that Saeris was still somewhere in this castle, and that I could still hold her and tell her everything would be alright.

We left the dungeons to head back upstairs for the cavern. On our left, though, there was a room I hadn’t noticed before.

‘Wait!’ I said, ‘What if someone’s still in there?’

‘Be quick! We have to find Alexius!’ Dorian cursed.

When I went inside, the room showed another row of empty cellblocks. But wait… I saw movement in the one at the back on the left… Maybe it’s…

‘You’re… alive? How?’ Grand Enchanter Fiona huffed, out of breath or voice. I’d hoped for someone else… and felt bad for not being able to mask the disappointment on my face. Saeris isn’t here. ‘I saw… you disappear… into the Rift.’ I almost couldn’t hear her voice over the humming of the Red Lyrium inside of her. The Elven woman looked like if she was to dissolve into nothing anytime now. Her whole cell was filled with Red Lyrium, she barely had any place to stand anymore.

‘The Red Lyrium… it’s happening to you too.’ I asked, coming closer to the steel bars of her cells.

‘Yes… Red Lyrium, it’s a disease.’ She coughed, making her whole, tiny body tremble. ‘The longer you’re near it… eventually… you become this. Then they mine your corpse for more.’

I heard Vivienne say something under her breath. An Orlesian curse I didn’t understand.

‘Can you tell us the date? It’s very important.’ Dorian cocked his head.
‘Harvestmere.’ She had a fit of coughing, before saying something else. ‘9:42 Dragon.’

‘Nine forty-two?’ Dorian stuttered in surprise. ‘Then we’ve missed an entire year.’

I have missed everything! ‘We have to get out of here. Go back in time!’

‘Please!’ Fiona cried, ‘Stop this from happening! Alexius... serves the Elder One. More powerful... than the Maker... no one... challenges him and lives.’

I put my face against the bar, so she could see the determination in my eyes. So I could give her strength. ‘I promise. I will do everything in my power to set things right!’

‘Our only hope is to find the amulet that Alexius used to send us here.’ Dorian added. ‘If it still exists, I can use it to reopen the Rift at the exact same spot we left. Maybe.’

‘Good.’ Fiona heaved.

‘I said maybe. It might also turn us into paste.’ Dorian cheekily said, and I heard Varric grunt a laugh. I didn’t think it was so funny. I’d rather not be paste... Maybe pudding...

‘You must try!’ Fiona coughed, and I saw blood dripping from her pale thin lips. ‘Your Spymaster, Leliana... she is here. Find her. Quickly... Before the Elder One... learns you’re here.’

‘Let me help you get out. Join us!’ I fumbled with the lock on her cell, but the key didn’t fit.

‘No, leave me. I am... of no more use to you. I don’t think I can... even walk. Just go!’ Fiona heaved again, her breath barely escaping her painful lungs.

‘Here...’ I took one of the few Healing potions from my belt. ‘To soften the pain.’

‘Keep them.’ I saw Fiona’s grateful little smile as she looked up. ‘You and your companions... need them... more than I do.’

We left the Enchanter behind. I didn’t like to, but we had to move quick now. And Leliana was here. Of course that deadly woman is still alive and kicking, I wouldn’t expect anything less from her. And if Leliana could still be alive... so could Saeris.

When we entered the cavern again, the drawbridge was down, and a large group of Venatori were awaiting us, their swords drawn. We took care of them swiftly. I really started to get sick and tired of these obnoxious zealots. Really. After I kick Alexius’ evil Tevinter ass, I’ll make sure to root that scum out. When the Venatori were taken care of, we crossed the drawbridge towards the Guard Barracks.

‘Take a look around,’ Varric noted as he walked over to the large table, taking a sip of leftover wine. ‘See if there’s anything we can use.’

‘Like that wine, huh Varric?’ I winked at him.

‘You know how long it’s been for me? I haven’t had wine since I left Haven a year ago.’ Varric jugged the rest of the bottle empty.

There were some weapons laying around, and everyone took what they needed. Vivienne and Solas even found a staff, though they seemed to have had better days.

‘It will do.’ Vivienne huffed while staring at the dusty old stick.
And, surprisingly, Varric managed to find his Bianca. He held the crossbow in his arms tenderly, looking it up and down with teary eyes. ‘Ah, that’s where you’ve been hiding…’

Among the empty bottles of wine and the moulding bread on the table, there also laid a tattered piece of paper. While the others rummaged the chests and racks for weapons, I read the fading words scribbled with black ink.

Praise His name, who has risen from the darkness.
Praise His name, who has striven for the light.
Praise His name, who has walked the Golden City.
Praise His name.

The Old Gods are no more.
The Maker never was.
The New God is among us.
Praise His name.

‘The Elder One is their Maker now.’ Cassandra hissed as she appeared beside me, staring at the prayer I’d been reading.

‘This is insane… Is this what The Elder One wants? To be a god?’ I mumbled.

‘He wants to be far more than just a god.’ Vivienne dusted off her new staff and glared at me from underneath her thick lashes. ‘Whatever happens, my dear, do not let this creature rise to power… He will bring forth the end of Thedas as we know it.’

We left the Guard Barracks to head up another flight of stairs. This one lead us into another maze of chambers. This castle truly was a labyrinth. And not the fun kind with a jolly present at its centre. Every door we opened, my heart pounded. Who would I find? And how will I find them? We had clearly entered the torture area, since most chambers contained strange tools and metal chairs covered in blood and gore. Every corpse I turned over, I imagined being Saeris. Stripped from her clothes and removed of her skin. Eyes staring at the dark stone ceiling, cold sweat making her icy purple cheeks sticky. Her hair, cut with a dull blade, stuck to her face with a mixture of dried blood and tears.

But I didn’t find her.

And every corpse I saw, I thought of worse things that could’ve happened to her.

‘There is no Maker! The Elder One has taken all that is His and will soon rule from His city.’ A heavy voice roared from one of the rooms, together with the rattling of chains.

‘That still doesn’t make him a god.’ A feeble voice of a woman answered. She cried out as a whip flogged against her.

‘There is no god but the Elder One! The Maker is dead! Say it!’ The torturer yelled as he whipped her again.

I entered the room in pure rage, but I was too late. He cut the woman’s throat in front of me. A Chantry sister. Young, maybe even my age. But I couldn’t recognize anything of her anymore but the blonde hair that still remained hanging from her sunken and bloody face. Her blood soiled her religious gown, that had been ripped to shreds. But the defiance still sparked in her dead, beady gaze.

‘You bastard!’ I cried and impaled my dagger through the torturer’s guts.
I wanted to let him bleed out. A slow and painful death. He doesn’t deserve anything better. I stared at the torturer gurgling and trembling on the ground. The man only laughed as I sneered at him, spitting his own bile over his chin.

‘The Elder One will take care of my soul!’ He mumbled while spewing blood.

‘You don’t have a soul, you nasty Elder Ass-kisser.’ I spat.

‘Maxwell.’ Cassandra whispered in my ear, and I felt her hand grazing mine.

I turned around to let The Iron Bull finish him off. That monster wasn’t worth my time.

‘Come on.’ Cassandra whispered again tenderly, taking my hand and leading me outside. I was trembling. The Seeker almost never called me by my name, she mostly used my title as Herald. But when she didn’t, and called out to me, it was like the whole world could drift away. And it was just her and me.

We continued on, until we heard another voice calling from behind one of the many doors.

‘How did Trevelyan know of the sacrifice at the Temple!’ A man ordered. ‘Answer!’

‘Never!’ A woman spat. We all glanced at each other as we recognized the voice. Leliana. I heard the torturer slap her, and she moaned.

‘There’s no use to this defiance, little bird!’ The torturer chuckled maniacally, ‘There’s no one left for you to protect!’

‘You’re wasting your breath!’ Leliana almost laughed, but couldn’t as the man slapped her again.

‘Talk!’ He yelled.

We ran, opening each door to find her, but there was so much moaning to be heard, and the Red Lyrium was singing so loudly, I could barely hear my own thoughts.

‘You will break!’ Leliana’s torturer held a rusty knife to her throat.

‘I will die first.’ She spat at the man’s face.

Out of breath, I kicked open the last door. We found the Nightingale hanging with chains from the ceiling. The torturer looked over his shoulder in surprise.

But Leliana only glanced at me, her eyes showing no hint of emotion. ‘Or you will!’ She hissed. Pulling her up by her arms, she lifted her lower body into the air, her legs entangling around the brute’s throat. The man gasped and struggled against her grip, but the Spymaster twisted her ankles and we heard a loud “pop” as his neck snapped the wrong way around.

I ran towards Leliana, pushing the torturer’s corpse aside and grabbing the key that hung on his leather belt. I fumbled to open Leliana’s rusted chains. ‘You’re alive!’ She whispered as I cracked open the locks. She was almost unrecognizable. Her sharp and sunken face was scarred with burned patches crossing over her grey cheeks. Her rosy lips had gone purple, and her eyes were bordered with dark circles that had almost turned as black as coal. But her piercing blue eyes stared at me determined, and her trademark bright red hair still clung to her face.

‘Well, that was impressive.’ I tried to smile. ‘Remind me not to piss you off.’

Leliana rubbed her chafed wrists as the chains fell to the ground. I was surprised she could still stand
on her own. ‘Anger is stronger than any pain.’ She glanced at the rest of our group, and nodded calmly at them. Not a hello, or an “oh, you’re alive”. She just looked at us like it was business as usual. ‘Do you have weapons?’

I dipped my head and Cassandra tapped her sword in response.

‘Good.’ Leliana hummed, ‘The magister’s probably in his chambers.’ She passed me and took her weapons from the chest near the door.

‘You… aren’t curious how we got here?’ Dorian scratched his head flabbergasted.

‘No.’ Leliana sighed and bound a satchel of arrows on her back together with her bow.

‘Alexius sent us into the future. This, his victory, his Elder One… It was never meant to be.’ Dorian began his explanation, like he had with everyone else when we freed them.

I nodded at the mage. ‘If we get back to the present and stop Alexius, then you’ll never have to go through this.’

Leliana glared at Dorian, a deep anger in her eyes. ‘And mages always wonder why people fear them… No one should have this power.’

‘It’s dangerous and unpredictable. Before the Breach, nothing we did…’ Dorian started.

But Leliana interrupted him, ‘Enough!’ She ordered, and it made me shift on my feet. ‘This is all pretend to you, some future you hope will never exist. I suffered, the whole world suffered.’ She raised her chin. ‘It was real.’

She was right. This was real. This could become my reality too. The idea will cause me nightmares for years. This happens if I don’t do my job, or die, or don’t do the right thing, make the wrong choices. I disappeared, and this future is because of me. All that is happening here, to them, is because of me. Why did Andraste choose me? From all those idiots roaming Thedas, She chose the unluckiest dimwit of them all.

‘What happened while we were away?’ Dorian probed while we moved forward in silence, well up until now.

‘Stop talking.’ Leliana hissed at him.

‘I’m just asking for information.’ Dorian rolled back his shoulders. I heard Vivienne tut her lips disdainfully.

‘No, you’re talking to fill silence. Nothing happened that you want to hear.’ She glanced at me quickly.

It didn’t take much longer for us to come across the first Rift. We had left the torture chambers behind us, and crossed the other underground parts of the castle in a quickened pace. It was after we had climbed another flight of stairs and crossed another drawbridge, that my mark started to glow.

I can feel a Rift some minutes before I find it. At first, the tips of my fingers start to tingle, and it begins to hurt after about twenty seconds. Then it feels like someone’s scraping the dirt from under my fingernails with a very sharp knife. Secondly, the pulses start to alternate each other stronger, following my heartbeat. I learned that the calmer I keep myself, the less it hurts. It makes it easier to control. When the Rift is nearby, the mark starts to glow, clawing upwards towards my shoulder. It stings all the way up to my elbow, and the pain keeps climbing. The emerald green pulsing light
starts to become overwhelming and the only thing I see or feel, is its flaring pain. At that point, if I look at the mark, I imagine it’s Saeris’ eye, and it doesn’t feel so menacing anymore. Maybe she’s always with me in that way. The final stage comes when the Rift is right in front of me. The mark is flaring, the pain is climbing, but now my stomach starts to turn. The only thing that I can now think about, is closing that thing.

Close it, and all of the pain and dread goes away.

When my mark connects to the Rift, I feel the link between it and me as a bond, feel the Rift flaring. My mark doesn’t follow my heartbeat anymore, but the drum of the Fade. I can close the Rift just by stretching my fingers, willing the mark to close that connection, to seal the hole. And when it does and I finally close it, I feel as if a weight has lifted from my shoulders.

The mark doesn’t stop fading and hurting immediately, though. It lingers and dims, as does the drifting magic the Rift had caused. The hurting only stops when I stop thinking about it. Maybe, it just never stops. I just get to live with it, ignore it, pretend it isn’t there.

After we killed all the demons and closed the Rift, The Iron Bull turned the rusty gear and hauled open the steel gates that lead us to the docks. There we witnessed two mages sacrificing themselves, turning into vile abominations. They weren’t strong, their sacrifice for naught.

‘This is madness.’ Dorian hissed. ‘Alexius can’t have wanted this!’

‘Apparently, he did.’ I sighed while staring at the mages’ remains on the stone floor.

‘Such a terrible waste.’ Solas said quietly to me as he stared to the black bile as well. He had been eerily silent this whole time. We didn’t talk often, but I remembered he often made comments about history and the Fade as we travelled. Him being so silent, made me more uncomfortable. Like there wasn’t anything to be said anymore.

It was when we entered the courtyard, the one I had passed through just this morning… a year ago… that I realized why the Fade expert had gone so quiet. It was everywhere. He didn’t have to talk about the Fade anymore, because it had consumed everything. There was indeed nothing else to be told about. We could all see and feel it now.

‘The Veil is shattered.’ Solas answered our soundless questions. The Elf looked around, and though I saw a hint of wonder, the sadness and exhaustion took control of his face. He didn’t have the strength to wonder anymore. He was empty. ‘There is no boundary now between the world and the Fade.’

‘The Elder One and the Venatori,’ Cassandra stared at the green sky, ‘They are the ones who opened the Breach.’ Rocks were adrift in the air, and there were no clouds, there was no sun. Everything was cast in an emerald light. And I tasted magic in the air, I had never tasted it before. You’re not supposed to taste it. Right? At least normal humans don’t.

If you stared long enough at the emerald crystals in the sky, you’d notice they start to stare back. Demons. Everywhere. Chasing the floating rocks, roaming the courtyard and its Red Lyrium mountains. A landscape of doom and dread. There were Rifts everywhere. My hand felt like it was being chopped off with a dull blade. I was biting the inside of my cheek to counter the pain. To try to think of anything else but that feeling of having to seal a hundred Rifts, multiplying by the minute.

‘I can’t stay here!’ I muffled a cry as the mark flared. ‘I have to find coverage!’ Maker’s balls I rather be submerged into sewer water that smells like a thousand turds than this. I admit, I’d even rather wear Vivienne’s leather top.
‘Over there!’ Leliana pointed to our far right. ‘Go!’ She ordered.

We ran across the courtyard. I clutched my hand against my chest as I heard the troops of demons gurgling and roaring and screeching towards us. The Iron Bull yanked open the door and almost threw Varric inside with one hand. Cassandra was the last to leap inside, and she yanked the door closed behind her, barricading it with tables and bookcases.

‘That was too damn close.’ I cursed.

‘Really, kid, too damn close.’ Varric groaned as he pushed himself from the ground. ‘Why don’t you just pick me up and put me down gently, Tiny. *Gently.* I’m a small and fragile Dwarf.’

‘Ha! Fragile, sure… Next time, I’ll make sure to kiss your butt when I save you.’ The Iron Bull wiggled his eyebrows.

‘Where are we?’ I interrupted the jokesters as I looked around. We were standing in a narrow hallway. There were paintings hanging from the walls of noble women and men who, probably, died ages ago. Against the walls, who were decorated with tacky wallpaper, stood marble tables with chandeliers on them. Only a few candles were burning. Large pillars of Red Lyrium were breaching the walls, the floor, the ceiling, resembling the teeth of a dragon, covered in glowing blood.

‘The royal wing, I suppose.’ Vivienne tutted and swiped some dust from one of the tables with her finger, stepping around a Red Lyrium rock carefully while staring at it contemptuously.

‘Venatori decorating at its finest.’ Varric mumbled.

‘Alexius has made a dreadful mess of this place, hasn’t he?’ Dorian jeered.

‘You should’ve seen my home.’ I grinned. ‘My mother decorated the place as if it was a shrine to Andraste. She embroidered all of the crochet cushions herself.’

‘I would take crochet embroidery of Andraste’s bosom over this. And that says a lot.’ Dorian grinned back.

‘Stop bickering, we have more urgent things to do.’ Leliana hissed and turned towards the flight of stairs that lead down again.

‘Wait.’ I stopped her. She turned around slowly, her hood partially hiding her restive snare. ‘Why take the stairs down? We’re finally above the ground? Let’s follow that hallway…’ I pointed to the corridors on our left. There were no paintings hanging on the walls there, and almost no candles were enlightening the hall. It looked like it was haunted, but it was definitely a shortcut.

‘They did not tell you?’ Leliana sounded genuinely taken aback this time.

‘Tell me what?’ I cocked my head.

‘He does not need to know. We have to move forward. Let’s go.’ Cassandra pulled my sleeve to lead me down the staircase, but I yanked my arm away.

‘Stop bickering, we have more urgent things to do.’ Leliana hissed and turned towards the flight of stairs that lead down again.

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‘They did not tell you?’ Leliana sounded genuinely taken aback this time.

‘Tell me what?’ I cocked my head.

‘He does not need to know. We have to move forward. Let’s go.’ Cassandra pulled my sleeve to lead me down the staircase, but I yanked my arm away.

‘What is going on here.’ Dorian rested his hands on his hips impatiently.

‘The voices. The voices. The voices! I know I promised, I will, I’m sorry, I know. Please stop. I need my Red. RED! Red to keep the Green away. Please. Give it to me. The voices!’ A high-pitched voice screeched through the hallway.
I stopped in my tracks. My heart had sunken to my feet.

‘Shit!’ Varric cursed.

‘Move!’ Leliana grabbed me.

‘No! No! That’s Saeris! It’s her!’ I yelled and pushed the Spymaster back.

She cursed in Orlesian and hissed at me furiously. ‘We have to go, you fool!’

‘NO! It’s her!’ I stepped forward towards the eerie corridors, and I heard other footsteps, small and almost silent, slowly skulk my way down the hall.

‘Voices! Red to stop the Green!’

The Iron Bull pushed me against the wall behind the corner, away from the crying sound of Saeris’ voice. ‘I’m sorry, Boss.’

‘Hey!’ I struggled.

‘Be quiet! Don’t move or you’ll kill us all!’ Leliana hushed.

Everyone was standing against the wall, no one even dared to breathe. I stared at Solas, who looked forwards with no emotion on his face. Not blinking. Unmoving.

A large shadow appeared on the wooden floor next to me, cast by the flickering light of the candles’ fire. A figure of a woman, tiptoeing from one side to another. ‘Sun sets, little one, time to dream. Your mind journeys, but I will hold you here.’ She sang in a shivering tone, her voice breaking, heaving heavily, as if she was singing to drown out the world.

Holding my breath, I stared with open eyes at the brim of a bloodied white dress that quickly flashed from the other side of the corner, the one leading to the corridors.

‘Where will you go, little one, lost to me in sleep?’ Saeris whined, and it broke me. Not just my heart, it broke everything.

What was wrong with her?

‘Never fear, little one, wherever you shall go. Follow my voice-- I will call you home.’ The sound of her song filled my ears, ringing through my soul. I wanted to step forward, let her see me and I her. Her song almost sang only to me, moved me without me willing to. But my heart told me to stay put, and don’t move. Don’t even breathe.

‘I will call you home… The voices! RED!’ Her voice echoed through the halls as she sauntered back into the darkness.

Bull let go of me, and I pushed myself from the walls to look behind the corner. But only a large puddle of bright red blood, pulsing with Red Lyrium, was left on the floor.

‘That was…’ Dorian mumbled.

‘Saeris?’ I looked around, at Leliana, Cassandra, Varric, Solas… Why didn’t they do anything? ‘What are you standing here for? We have to do something!’ My blood was boiling… Will they leave their friend like this? Because I won’t.

‘Stop this, Maxwell.’ Cassandra took me in her arms. ‘Please.’ Her voice broke at the end.
'That is not Saeris.' Leliana’s voice sounded smoother, calmer. Apologetic. ‘She died long ago.’

‘N… No! That was her! That was definitely her!’ I gasped.

‘That’s not our friend, not anymore.’ Varric patted my back, his eyes down. He couldn’t look at me as he said, ‘She died when you did.’

‘They took her… Experimented on her… Like a damned nug.’ The Iron Bull stared at the puddle of blood and ichor, and the path of bloodied bare feet imprinted on the wooden floor, leading further into the dark hall.

‘They call her the Bride.’ Leliana continued. ‘But she is more like an executioner, a torturer, a ghost to scare his enemies.’

I couldn’t think. If only she had died.

‘They took her and I heard her scream from the cells I was locked in. It kept on going for months… Until the Veil came down, and then they broke her.’ Leliana continued on. ‘She roams the abandoned side of the castle. No one goes there. Not even the Venatori soldiers.’

‘The guards put her in a white dress, and when they take prisoners, she sends them to their cells…’ Varric continued, voice low and careful. ‘They think the Maker’s Bride has come to rescue them, Andraste herself… Until she opens her eyes.’

‘She killed Sera… and Blackwall… and Commander Cullen when they laid siege on Redcliffe to get us out.’ Cassandra shook her head. ‘She tore them to shreds… only to get to her next dose of Red.’

‘No! No, you’re lying… Saeris would never…’ I tore myself from Cassandra’s arms, shaking my head wildly. That wasn’t her. That couldn’t be her.

‘I’m so sorry, Maxwell… She’s with the Maker now. What you see is but an empty vessel pumped with foreign magic and Red Lyrium… She does not know what she’s doing anymore.’ Cassandra lifted her chin. ‘But you can prevent this. It’ll all be alright.’

This isn’t happening… not her. I love her… she’s like family, like a sister, my friend… She was the one who believed in me, who helped me get up when no one would. She risked her life for me, she’d die for me… How can this have happened? She was so good. So pure.

The Elder One will pay for this.

I’ll kill him. I’ll kill everyone who stands beside him.

He. Will. Pay.

Lingering next to the blood on the floor, stood Solas. He stared at her fading footsteps sombrelly, broken, emptied. He clutched his chest with his large pale hands, almost grabbing something that wasn’t there anymore. His necklace, that jawbone, was gone.

***

The magister had grown paranoid, fearful, mad… Desperate. He had barricaded himself behind a large shard doorway. We had to find all keys to open it. Alexius had given them to his most trusted spellbinders, and they weren’t eager to give them to us.

I even asked nicely.
‘Come on, your boss has gone crazy. Besides, it isn’t even a pretty key. Just tell him you lost it, no?’ I grinned as the spellbinder roared.

‘Elder One curse you!’ He spat.

‘I take that as a no.’ I smiled and impaled my daggers into his chest, cutting it open. The Venatori mage cried out, and then dropped onto the floor like the dumb sack of flour he was. ‘Thank you for your cooperation, kind ser.’ I ripped the last key from the man’s neck and twisted it around. I’m coming for you, Alexius.

Do I have to feel bad killing these men? No.

Do I feel guilty of hauling open their stomachs with my daggers? Surely not.

I’ll kill them all if I have to.

They don’t deserve any better.

‘May Andraste have mercy on your souls.’ Cassandra snarled at the zealots she just killed. ‘No one else will.’

The humming of the Red Lyrium drummed louder through the room, as if the stones were alive and approved of the blood. As if it didn’t care whose blood it was, Venatori or not.

Blood is blood.

And soon, Alexius’ will taste his.

Dorian fitted all of the keys we’d assembled onto the shard door’s lock. The keys flashed, magic spiralling around it, and the lock popped open.

I glanced over my shoulder. To Varric, who had stopped his jokes. To The Iron Bull, grinning with the thought of slaughtering his jailor. To Vivienne, whose magic was tensing around her, the staff on her back humming with energy. To Solas, who stared at the door with so much hatred in his eyes… To Cassandra who only glanced back at me, prayers on her lips. And then to Dorian, who nodded at me determined.

Let’s end this and go back.

Alexius was waiting in the throne room, his back turned to us, staring at the sizzling flames of the fireplace in front of him. He didn’t turn around in surprise, didn’t attack us at first sight. He just stood there, shoulders sagged, face low.

‘It’s over, Alexius.’ I called, my voice echoing through the bare, cold room. Not even the fireplace could give it warmth.

‘So it is.’ The magister answered, barely loud enough for me to hear. ‘I knew you would appear again. Not that it would be now. But I knew I hadn’t destroyed you… My final failure.’

‘Was it worth it?’ Dorian stepped up, enraged, disappointed, ‘Everything you did to the world? To yourself?’

‘It doesn’t matter now. All we can do is wait for the end.’ Alexius sighed uninterested. He didn’t even turn around to face us.

‘What do you mean? What’s ending?’ There was a hint of panic to my voice. The only thing that
was ending, was his life.

Alexius scoffed and chuckled mockingly. ‘The irony that you should appear now, of all the possibilities.’ He shook his head, still facing the flames. ‘All that I fought for, all that I betrayed, and what have I wrought?’ He straightened his back. ‘Ruin and death. There is nothing else.’

‘Regret always comes too late.’ I spat at his feet.

But Alexius ignored me and continued his senseless rambling. ‘The Elder One comes: for me, for you, for us all.’

Leliana suddenly leaped forward, but not towards the magister. Sitting in the shadows of the fire, out of sight, was a skeleton. Pale flesh clinging to his bones, eyes that were falling from their sockets, blank and empty. The Nightingale grabbed the barely breathing man from his chair, dragging him to his feet, and held a sharp and clear dagger to his throat.

Alexius finally moved, jerking up in surprise. ‘Felix!’ He whined.

‘That’s Felix?’ Dorian swallowed. ‘Maker’s breath, Alexius, what have you done!’

‘He would’ve died, Dorian!’ Alexius cried out desperately, ‘I saved him!’ Felix’ head bobbed back, his eyes moving around erratically. He was a ghost living in a dying body, unable to move, to speak, to scream. ‘Please, don’t hurt my son!’ Alexius begged. It was disgusting, but I pitied him. After all he’d done. ‘I’ll do anything!’

‘Hand over the amulet, and we’ll let him go.’ I ordered.

‘Let him go and I swear you’ll get what you want!’ Alexius reached out for his son, or what was left of him.

‘I want the world back.’ Leliana growled and slit Felix’s throat. I saw the weak man close his eyes calmly when he felt the blade, gasping as it cut through his flesh.

‘No… NO!’ Alexius screamed and crashed his staff onto the floor. A burst of green magic reverberated around the room and lashed towards Leliana, who leaped through the air and smacked against the stone wall.

‘Oh crap!’ Varric jumped aside as Alexius pointed his staff towards the group, a ball of energy firing upon them.

Cassandra held up her shield and braced herself against the impact. Her feet slid a couple of feet over the wooden floor, but she managed to stop the attack. But Alexius repacked himself and fired another attack and another and another.

Mind blasts, bolts, barriers, everything he could salvage. But the fear and anger in him blinded his powers, and made him an easier target. Dorian, Vivienne and Solas emerged from the back of the group, and casted barriers over Cassandra, The Iron Bull and myself as we lunged towards the madman. Cassandra and Bull went straight for his face, bashing down on his barriers, and I sneaked to the back quietly. Varric fired bolt after bolt towards the magister’s wards. And when Leliana got back up from the ground, she crashed into him with such power, such strength, her arrows puncturing holes through his defences, slipping through the barrier and impaling the flesh on his arm.

By then, it didn’t take long for us to breach his final barrier, and I saw the man huff and puff from exhaustion, his magic straining, his mana depleting.
As a last attempt, Alexius raised his staff, summoning all the power its core had stored over the years. ‘For Felix!’ He cursed.

‘No.’ I appeared from behind Alexius, and he turned around very slowly, his mouth agape. ‘You don’t get to say anything anymore.’ And I hauled both my daggers into his back. One punctured his lung. The other… his heart.

Alexius gasped as he let go of his magic, and the core of his staff sizzled out, like a fire being extinguished.

‘This is for Cullen!’ I cried. ‘For Sera and Blackwall!’ I pulled out one dagger and stabbed his chest. ‘This one’s for Saeris.’ I screamed, and pulled my dagger from his heart. ‘And this one’s for the world.’

Alexius stared at me blankly, falling to his knees. His eyes trembled uneven, and he rasped one final time, mouthing the words, but unable to produce any sound, ‘My son…’ And he fell down next to Felix, the person he had cared for most, and hurt most.

I heaved, the breath in my lungs coming out painstakingly slow. But it was over.

Dorian squatted down next to Alexius’ dead body. He sighed sadly. ‘He wanted to die, didn’t he?’ He looked up to me. ‘All those lies he told himself, the justifications…’ He shook his head and stared back to the magister’s bloodied corpse. ‘He lost Felix long ago and didn’t even notice. Oh, Alexius…’

‘I… I know you cared for him.’ I answered. Guilt stung me, but I couldn’t look back now. In this future, here and now, Alexius deserved his fate. More than anyone. Perhaps in the present, he can be brought to some sense. But he will pay for it nonetheless.

‘Once he was a man to whom I compared all others. Sad, isn’t it?’ Dorian laughed to himself and stood back up.

‘No… it’s not.’ I rested my hand on his shoulder. ‘Men aren’t born evil. They’re made. Fake promises, false hope, the wrong choices.’ Gereon Alexius could’ve been a good man. A respectable mage, a knowledgeable scholar… but he trusted the wrong people for the wrong reasons, and killed those he loved. I loved. And I wouldn’t let him do it again. ‘The amulet?’ I nudged Dorian.

‘Ah yes…’ He mumbled and took the ornament from Alexius’ pocket. ‘This is the same he used before.’ He said as he dangled it in front of us. ‘I think it’s the same one we made in Minrathous. That’s a relief.’

‘A big one.’ I sighed.

Dorian caught the amulet back in his fist, clutching it. ‘Give me an hour to work out the spell he used, and I should be able to reopen the Rift.’

‘An hour?’ Leliana hurried to our sides, her bow stored on her back again. She glared at us nervously. ‘That’s impossible! You must go now!’

As if a sign, the whole building started to shake heavily, and a loud, inhuman screech pealed across the room, every room, through the whole damn castle. It scratched its way into my ears, and I covered them in pain. Dirt and stone debris fell from the ceiling, trickling down on us, as if the entire castle was going to collapse because of one cry. We braced ourselves.

‘The Elder One.’ Leliana gasped, panic erupting in her cold blue eyes. And if Leliana was
panicking,… Andraste's dimpled butcheeks we’re going to die.

‘You have to hurry… this is bad.’ Varric whined and looked around nervously.

Large wings rattled the building. Another loud screech followed. A dragon. That’s definitely the sound of a dragon.

The others looked at each other, and it made my heart thunder, my palms sweaty. ‘We’ll hold the other door…’ Solas looked up determined, the others standing behind him. ‘When they get past us, it’ll be your turn.’ He looked at the Nightingale, who dipped her head.

‘N… No!’ I shook my head to Cassandra. I won’t lose her too. ‘I won’t let you commit suicide.’

‘Look at us!’ Leliana stepped in front of me and took down her hood, showing the bald patches appearing on her head, the grey and burned skin showing up beneath it. ‘We’re already dead. The only way we’ll live is if this day never comes.’

‘No!’ The tears flowed down, and I wondered if my father wouldn’t be proud of me now. ‘I… I can’t do this.’

‘You can.’ Cassandra strutted towards me and wiped the tears away with her thumb. ‘Maxwell. You must.’

‘I can’t lose you…’ I put my forehead against her and closed my eyes, feeling her soft breath caress my skin.

‘You won’t. I’ll be there when you return.’ She hushed, her voice trembled ever so slightly.

I took her face between my hands, and I stared into her eyes that glowed brighter and brighter a maroon red. I didn’t care anymore. Just for a second. I leaned in, my lips almost pushing on hers…

But she brought her head back. ‘Not yet,’ she whispered. ‘I want it to be… real… You’ll have to properly court me… I have to be happy… Not like this.’ She smiled faintly and then pushed me back hard. ‘Now go!’

‘I… I won’t disappoint you!’ I yelled, but Cassandra strutted towards the gate already, not looking back.

‘See you on the other side!’ Varric waved his hand.

‘Let’s count who kills the most demons, ma’am.’ The Iron Bull grinned to Vivienne.

‘You will lose dramatically, my dear.’ She sneered back cockily.

Solas lingered for just a moment, and before he joined the others, he quickly came to me and patted my back. ‘Can you do something for me?’ He rasped, the Red Lyrium almost taking over completely. ‘Can you tell my past self, only him…’ I leaned in as he whispered the foreign words into my ears. ‘Ase amin. Ma’las.’

‘I’ll try.’ I mouthed.

‘Thank you.’ He said and then turned back to the others.

‘Cast your spell.’ Leliana raised her chin, walking backwards to the door while taking the bow from her back. ‘You have as much time as I have arrows.’
Vivienne, Varric, Bull, Solas and Cassandra opened the door and disappeared. I kept looking at Cassandra’s back, but she didn’t look at me again before the door closed.

Dorian leaped over the stairs to the throne and immediately began working his magic on the amulet, which floated in the air, giving off strange lights. ‘Kaffas!’ He cursed as the amulet struggled against his focus.

I heard fighting and crying outside. Focussing on the door, I felt my veins buzzing with adrenaline.

‘Though darkness closes,’ Leliana hummed to herself, ‘I am shielded by flame.’

Suddenly, everything turned silent. Too silent. No screams, no demonic roars, no fighting, nothing. And then, the door hauled open.

There were no demons. No army. No dragons.

Only Saeris.

Standing in the opening of that giant door. She opened her arms to us and smiled. I couldn’t cry. I couldn’t do anything but stare. Her bare feet, her arms, her long, flowy white dress, were all covered in blood. Black and dried, fresh and wet. I understood why they called her the Bride. She looked almost unreal, god-like, bright… but not with hope. With fear. Not like the Bride of the Maker. No. She was the Bride of The Elder One, and chanted only of Darkness. There was no spark of Light in her left.

She took a step forward, stepping over Cassandra’s corpse.

No.

In her right hand, she held Solas’ body by his arm. His face turned to his back, agony reflecting in his wide open eyes.

She cocked her head at Leliana and smiled innocently, but her eyes didn’t follow. One had gone completely red, her pupils and her whites, and black tears dripped down from it. Her other eye… her beautiful green eye, twisted and turned in its socket, spewing bright emerald green flares, lighting up even her veins in her pale and perfect face. She dropped Solas on the floor, and flashed her straight, white teeth at me while cocking her head.

‘Andraste guide me.’ Leliana continued and opened fire on my friend.

But Saeris only lifted her hands, and the arrows deflected away from her. She didn’t bat an eye and slowly skulked towards us, eyes solely on me. And they saw everything. My loss, my fear… my hope.

The blood of my friends, her friends, dripped from her arms, drenched all the way up to her elbows. Her long white hair curled softly aside her smiling face, her long ears sliding between it, twitching each time Leliana fired an arrow in vain.

‘Red? Do you have it? It stops the voices.’ She purred, her voice so kind and soft. ‘Cold be hand and heart and bone, and cold be sleep under stone.’ She hummed when Leliana didn’t answer. It was like singing, but not entirely. It was more like praying, to stop herself from talking any more.

‘Maker, take me to your side.’ Leliana pushed Saeris back as she came too close, and kept on firing arrows, aiming for her face.
Yet, Saeris… no… The Bride only shook her head and snatched the bow from Leliana’s hand. ‘You lie… Like the voices! RED!’ Saeris screamed, and with one signal of her hand, pushed Leliana back, the satchel of arrows on her back flying over to Saeris’ side. With a raise of her long and slender, but bloodied fingers, she lifted every individual arrow and fired them to the Spymaster.

Leliana looked at me one last time. Her eyes closing as the arrows struck.

I flinched, but Dorian hissed, not looking up from the amulet. ‘You move and we all die!’ He screamed.

‘Never more to wake on stony bed, never, till the Sun fails and the Moon is dead.’ Saeris’ voice overruled the humming of the Red Lyrium, the sound of my heart and blood pumping inside of me, she overruled everything. She was everywhere.

I peered back to where Saeris had been standing, but she was gone. Instead, she now stood right in front of me, so close I could see the drops of black tears on her face, and the glowing red and green of her wide eyes. The red eye was opaque, glowing with Red Lyrium. And the other… it swirled like liquid, like the Fade outside, and thundered like lightning.

‘In the emerald wind the stars shall die, and still on gold here let them lie, till He lifts his hand over dead sea and withered land.’ She glanced at me, and then suddenly reached for the amulet.

‘NO!’ Dorian screamed, but it was already too late.

Saeris twisted the amulet around in her hand, and the green magical light that Dorian had activated, faded. ‘Red?’ She purred again. ‘Do you have it?’

We lost.

Everything is lost.

Cassandra, I’m so sorry.

‘Saeris…’ The tears stopped streaming as I looked into her celestial face. ‘My… Sister…’

Saeris stopped staring at the amulet, and her dark and menacing eyes turned upwards, to me. ‘S… Sister?’ She mumbled. ‘Sybil?’

‘N… No. It’s Maxwell.’ I answered. Dorian cursed behind me.

And, as if a spell had been broken. She snapped her head up, her eyes wide and scary. ‘Maxwell? Maxwell. No Red?’ She blinked her eyes and shook her head in confusion. ‘Go.’

‘What?’

‘GO!’ Saeris screamed and the amulet in her hands started to flare up again.

‘She activated it!’ Dorian laughed loudly, almost in denial.

‘Go.’ She said again.

‘Quickly now!’ Dorian pulled my sleeve and disappeared through the Rift that flashed open next to us. It lead back home.

I backed slowly, not breaking my eye contact with Saeris, standing there so sadly, so lonely. Before I disappeared, she grabbed my hand.
She felt warm.

‘Never let me fulfil my promise. Kill me a thousand times if you must. Or there’ll be a future worse than this one.’ She sang in a monotone voice, as if it came from very deep within her. ‘Maxwell… RED!’ She started to scream, the castle trembled by it. ‘RED RED RED!’

I stumbled back into the Rift, and stared at her one last time as she tore up her arms, scratching open her venomous skin. And that’s when I noticed the jawbone necklace hanging from her slender neck. Solas’ necklace.

‘I PROMISED!’ She hurled.

And then, the Red and Green, the Darkness, the Bride, faded away. Until it all turned to Light again.

Chapter End Notes

I know the chapter was longer than usual, but if I'd split it in two, the chapter would lose its flow so I just kept it whole like this :3

What did you think of Maxwell? And this dark future? Did you find Saeris creepy too?

A big thanks again to my beta, nerdsaretotallyawesome!
Allied

Chapter Notes

I just got back from a wonderful holiday in Madeira and started writing asap! I was so happy to be writing again, I finished another chapter in but 2 days! Hooray! Sorry I was a bit late with answering comments, but I had bad Internet in my hotel... :-o

I pressed my eyes together, feeling my wet lashes full of mascara imprinting on my cheeks. I didn’t care.

I swept my blonde hair up and drops of sweat trickled down the nape of my neck. And then I moved some more.

“Dance! Dance ’cause this night ain’t over yet!” A robotic voice that resembled that of a woman whispered through the vibrating boxes. People cheered as the beat dropped.

“Hands up! Let me see those hands!” The man behind the turntable shouted, his headphones rattling around his neck. What are the point of those anyway?

The mass moved wilder and wilder. And I joined them. Allying with these demons in their ritual of uncaring passion. It made the man dancing behind me grunt, and I felt his fingers on my hips as I twirled.

I didn’t care.

I turned around to him and smiled sheepishly as I continued my swaying movements. The man grinned. I couldn’t see him through the shadows of people and the colourful lights flashing over our faces.
“Saeris!” Someone in the crowd called out to me, the voice almost as loud as the thrumming music.

Yet, I didn’t care.

He moved closer to me, his lips, wet and salty, grazed mine lustfully. And I answered, pulling my body to his until we moved into a unified dance. His tongue explored mine, his hands caressing my behind, feeling how thin my short sequin dress was. I knew very well what he intended.

But I didn’t care.

I was going to die anyway.

***

Red. Green and red. That’s what I saw in that swirling abyss that swallowed my friend.

He was gone.

Maxwell was gone.

The powerful magic danced across the shaken room. My eye responded, painfully wanting more. But my mind was blank as I stared at the empty space before me.

It took Dorian. And then my Maxwell. My friend. My hope.

I couldn’t feel anything for a moment. My heart stopped beating, my sight darkened, my toes went numb. All was lost. My promise, my hope to die to join my family, my friends, my sister in the afterlife… Thedas was lost. And it would become a hell of an eternity to live in. And these people… Cassandra and Varric and Bull and… and Solas… they were doomed.

We were all doomed.

I was too late.

I lost him. I’ve lost everything.

Nobody was able to utter a word, unable to even gasp. Let alone cry.

And then, just some mere seconds later, my eye started to whirl again, screaming for that power that reopened itself before me.

And in those seconds, staring into that familiar abyss of black and green and red, I heard my voice, screaming and screeching. Two eyes, one completely red and one overtaken by a humming green light, stared into mine.

I finally gasped. And then, the eyes were gone, replaced by two kind hazel ones, looking up confidently at the magister before us.

Maxwell walked out of the Rift covered in black bile, dust and blood, both human and demon. His eyes were opened wide, filled with anger and despair as he stared magister Alexius down. The evil mage backed away, his mouth open. I heard Cassandra breathe assuredly as Maxwell’s eyes skimmed our group, nodding quietly.

‘You’ll have to do better than that.’ Dorian appeared from behind Maxwell, smiling triumphantly. He too was covered in blood and bile. They had seemed to have gone through hell and back.
Alexius, completely drained from whatever magic he had used, fell to his knees, his eyes to the ground.

‘Is that the best you’ve got?!’ Maxwell spat, heaving out of pure fury. I wondered what had happened, what had he seen? His eyes were hollow, full of hatred and exhaustion.

But the magister just huffed, lifting his shoulders up and down. ‘You won. There is no point extending this charade.’ There sat a man, weak, lost, and who had completely given up as the last of his magic faded into thin air. He looked up to his son, who was standing next to him, eyes big and shaken. ‘Felix…’ Alexius mouthed.

Felix shook his head and squatted next to his father, his eyes softening as he realised all was well again. ‘It’s going to be alright, father.’ He assured, voice coarse.

Alexius cried, and I almost felt sorry. Almost. ‘You’ll die.’

But Felix rested his hand on his old man’s shoulder and smiled faintly. ‘Everyone dies.’

Only the lucky ones do.

Leliana’s Inquisition spies took the magister away. The man didn’t struggle or say a foreboding last word like every movie villain does. He just walked away silently, head down. Felix walked behind him, escorting his father to wherever Leliana was planning to lock him up.

‘Well, I’m glad that’s over with!’ Dorian brushed through his hair, that looked incredibly shiny although they had seemed to have gone through a lot.

Maxwell grunted, unable to smile like Dorian did. What had happened? Why isn’t he looking at me?

Suddenly, the giant door was hauled open. I jumped back to my feet as I stared at the delegation of Fereldan soldiers marching loudly into the throne room, coming to a halt in queues on either sides of the room.

‘Or not…’ Dorian mumbled.

Two humans strutted into the room. A woman with an arrogant face and a little bit too much make-up, dressed in a beige gown embroidered with Fereldan flowers and gemstones. Her fair blonde hair was put up in a bun at the back of her head. She stood next to a human man, who was quite tall and had an angry sneer on his face. He too had blonde hair, but his skin was a tad darker, and I noticed his ears being ever so slightly pointed. But that was barely visible. The man wore official noble robes, coordinating with the colours of his wife.

Clearly and obviously, these people were royalty.

I squinted my eyes. I recognize this man… I swear I’ve seen him before… no… That hair and those clear and confident eyes…

‘Grand Enchanter.’ The noble spoke and the room got quiet, although I could almost hear Varric grin. ‘We’d like to discuss your abuse of our hospitality.’

‘Your majesties…’ Grand Enchanter Fiona appeared from behind us, her head down as she tiptoed forward. So… they were indeed royalty.

‘When we offered the mages sanctuary, we did not give them the right to drive our people from their homes.’ The royal woman spat. She had a high voice, and her disdainful eyes reminded me of
Vivienne, who had also gone remarkably quiet.

‘King Alistair, Queen Anora. I assure you, we never intended…’ Fiona began humble.

‘In light of your actions, good intentions are no longer enough.’ Queen Anora spat again bitterly.

But I stared at the King… King Alistair… Alistair Theirin.

I knew I recognized him! Should I say I was friends with his grand… no… great grandmother? Or tell him I had lived together with Yavana, the Beast of the Tellari Swamps, whom he had killed some years ago? I bet he’d be surprised.

‘You and your followers have worn out your welcome.’ Alistair began. I couldn’t help myself but smile faintly. He looks so much like Moira. They had the same tone of righteousness and justice in their voice. She would’ve been proud to see her family on the throne… even in these circumstances. ‘Leave Ferelden, or we’ll be forced to make you leave.’

‘But… we have hundreds who need protection!’ Fiona’s voice flared high, worried. She looked at the king pleadingly and desperate. ‘Where will we go?’

Maxwell sighed and walked down the stairs to stand aside Fiona, who was so short she barely reached his chest. Maxwell dusted off some… I-don’t-want-to-know-what from his armour as he appeared before the King and Queen of Ferelden, who nodded at him politely. ‘I should point out that we did come here for mages to close the Breach.’ Max spoke.

‘And what are the terms of this arrangement?’ Fiona shifted on her feet, unsure if she should be happy or concerned.

So now she was asking about our terms? She should’ve done that with Alexius…

As if Dorian had read my mind, he crossed his arms and took a step forward while mumbling. ‘Hopefully better than what Alexius gave you.’ He glanced at Maxwell. ‘The Inquisition is better than that, yes?’

Cassandra stepped forward, and I saw Maxwell blink his eyes, almost becoming teary. He swallowed hard and closed his eyes as she spoke, taking in her strong voice. ‘I suggest conscripting them. They’ve proven what they’ll do, given too much freedom.’

Varric shook his head and went to stand next to her. ‘I’ve known a lot of mages. They can be loyal friends if you let them. Friends who make bad decisions.’ He laughed quietly. ‘But still. Loyal.’

‘They have lost all possible supporters. The Inquisition is their only remaining chance for freedom.’ Solas was standing next to me, eyeing the Herald curiously.

Maxwell glanced at me for a second, and I nodded quietly. I won’t say anything to change his decisions. It’s his to make, not mine. As a mage myself, I am too biased… and involving myself in this is against my principles of remaining in the background as much as possible. Maxwell looked away then, as if he didn’t want to look at me for too long. Not like he was angry… more like afraid.

‘I don’t think you need to ask about my opinion.’ Vivienne interrupted. Yes, we all know what she wants. She had been practically shouting it for the past few weeks.

Fiona ignored Madame de Fer subtly, ‘It seems we have little choice but to accept whatever you offer.’
Maxwell scraped his throat in thought, shifting on his feet, scrunching his eyebrows as he stared the Grand Enchanter down. ‘What I just saw… It forbade nothing good. Mages can create so much damage… so much death…’ He mumbled under his breath, and stared right at me for five long seconds. He stared at me so intensely as if by saying… I was to be careful… and it made me uncomfortable. When have I ever damaged something? Killed, yes, but those were our enemies. He killed as well. I didn’t understand what he was trying to say, or implying… I furrowed my brows, and saw Maxwell swallow. ‘But… But you can also create so much good… given the proper help.’

‘In the Circles…’ Vivienne started.

Maxwell raised his hand and shut her up with a gesture. ‘We would be honoured to have you fight… as allies… at the Inquisition’s side.’ He stated, and Fiona smiled. ‘But.’ And then she stopped smiling. ‘This proposition is conditionally. As the Templars who have laid down their vows to join us, you will have to stop fighting your cause until the Breach is closed. You will abide by the Inquisition’s rules and transparency. If you cannot do this, then we will conscript you as prisoners of the Inquisition. Is that clear?’ Maxwell’s voice was loud and confident, and it shook the room.

‘It is clear.’ Fiona nodded politely. ‘I’ll pray that the rest of the Inquisition honours your promise, then.’

‘The Breach threatens all of Thedas.’ Maxwell looked at us, at me, at Solas, Cassandra and Varric, Vivienne and Bull. ‘We cannot afford to be divided now.’ I glanced up at Solas who stood still next to me. He brushed with his woollen sleeve against my arm. ‘We can’t fight it without you. Any chance of success requires your full support.’

‘It’s a generous offer.’ King Alistair concluded. ‘I doubt you’re going to get a better one from us.’

Fiona bit her lip, and couldn’t look the king in the eye. Was she ashamed? Or was it personal? ‘We accept.’ She finally said. ‘It would be madness not to.’

Maxwell sighed and I saw his shoulders drop.

‘I will gather my people and ready them for the journey to Haven.’ Fiona continued. ‘The Breach will be closed. You will not regret giving us this chance.’

‘By Andraste’s glorified tits I hope I won’t.’ Maxwell cursed and finally, he laughed a little. The whole room did. ‘My apologies for my words, your majesties.’ He curtsied at King Alistair and Queen Anora.

The Queen didn’t move, but I saw the stern Alistair snicker faintly.

Solas quietly tugged my cape so I’d look up to him, but I ignored it and stared at Maxwell. Something in him had changed.

Something was broken.

***

A dark future. Full of death and demons. Everything had gone wrong.

Empress Celene had been assassinated. Just like Envy had implied in Val Royeaux.

And a demon army lead by the mysterious Elder One was coming for not only Ferelden and Orlais, but the whole world.
That was what would... will happen if we fail to close the Breach. If I fail to protect Maxwell.

And this fact doomed to me, during the day when I helped Adan at the apothecary. And at night, when I was too exhausted to sleep or to visit the Fade. And even there, demons found their way into my mind, stealing my power and feeding on my fears.

But now, more and more mages were arriving at Haven.

The ex-Templars were nervous around the rebels, and vice-versa. And it was too crowded. The tavern was completely full, and outside there were so many tents, I stopped counting them as I passed to go to my cabin... which nobody dared to come close to. I was happy for that.

Dorian had decided to stay with the Inquisition. He had said he found the south so “charming and rustic”, and had starting to like it. He, Solas and Vivienne were in charge of helping the mage recruits settle, and kept an eye on them for security. Vivienne did that more than necessary.

Josephine, Leliana and Cassandra had their hands full working on how to organize the troops and the mage recruits, and they were planning to go seal the Breach as soon as possible. Commander Cullen had it the most difficult. He had started to accept mages, but this was too much for him. I could hear him rummaging as I passed his tent at night, and I left a note at Adan’s to make more sleeping potions for the man, although I doubted the Commander would drink it now...

And Maxwell... he had... changed. The joking brother I had come to love had turned silent, and had thrown himself into his work. Day and night he sat in the War Room to plan out the attack on the Breach. And I couldn’t get close to him... I waited outside the War Room, at his cabin, outside Leliana’s lair and at Cullen’s tent. But he always managed to evade me. I knew he had seen terrible things in that dark future... Dorian had told me as such.

Cullen, Josephine, Sera and Blackwall and even Commander Cullen had died. Cassandra and Solas, Iron Bull, Varric and Vivienne had been corrupted by Red Lyrium... and at the end, before he went back to the present, Maxwell saw them all die...

But Dorian didn’t tell me what killed them.

And I had asked countless of times to just tell me. But Dorian refused. ‘It’s not for me to say...’ or ‘I don’t remember, I have other things on my mind!’ or ‘I’d rather not speak of it.’

And I was getting so sick of it.

What had shaken Maxwell so? Was it Cassandra’s death? I saw how he looked at her... seeing someone you love die... or the death of all of his friends, that was enough to scar one for life.

But something in me told me there was more.

Had it been the demon army who had slaughtered everyone? Or the Elder One?

And... where was I? Had I died? Fled? Was I imprisoned somewhere else?

My feet tiptoed on the ground. I will catch Maxwell, and he will tell me. I can’t sleep because of it, can’t think or can’t eat. All thoughts had crossed my mind.

Where was I in this dark future?

I heard the stomping of feet on the ground and pressed myself against the stone wall while holding my breath. Holy crap it smelled in here. These medieval bathrooms were horrible...
‘Maker!’ Maxwell screamed as he turned around the corner. He was buckling up his trousers, and they almost fell to his knees as he encountered me.

‘You’ve been avoiding me!’ I shouted and raised my hands up in the air.

‘ Couldn’t you have surprised me somewhere else? I just… you didn’t hear, right?’ He cursed.

‘Maybe… But that’s okay…’ I mumbled. Everyone takes a crap sometimes. ‘But you always evaded me…’

Maxwell combed through his hair and looked down while sighing.

‘Max…’ I whined. ‘Look at me… please… I don’t know what I’ve done wrong… I can’t help if you won’t let me…’

Maxwell shook his head. ‘That’s not it… I just…’ He swallowed. ‘Let’s talk somewhere else or I’ll throw up…’ He pulled me aside and we walked towards my cabin, stopping somewhere in between in the forest. We were all alone now.

I crossed my arms and stared at Maxwell impatiently. He has been avoiding me for more than a week, two at most.

‘Okay…’ he breathed. ‘I’m sorry… I… I shouldn’t have left you in the dark… I just couldn’t.’

‘Why? What has happened in that future you won’t tell me?’ Why are you looking at me as if you’re afraid? It breaks my heart. It breaks my everything.

‘You… You were…’ Maxwell stared at the snow melting beneath our feet.

‘Maxwell.’ I touched his cheek, caressing it. He shuddered. I then took his chin and lifted his face towards me. ‘Max. Look at me… whatever happened… it wasn’t real. We’re here. We’re all here.’

‘It was real.’ He shook his head away from my hand. ‘Saeris… What I saw… What you did…’ He scraped his throat. ‘You weren’t you. But you became that way… all because I wasn’t… I couldn’t…’ Men don’t cry. That’s what most men tell me. On Thedas and on Earth, if I remember correctly. But that’s a lie. We all cry.

We all break.

I took Maxwell into my arms as he wept silently, and his tears fell on my shoulders, wetting my clothes. I cradled him like a mother would, and rocked him back and forth. For the Inquisition and its followers, Maxwell was the Herald. He was strong, confident, and brave. He wouldn’t cry.

But for me. Maxwell will always be Maxwell. A friend. And I didn’t care if he was brave or strong. All I cared for, was that he was well.

‘I’m sorry for whatever I’ve done…’ I mumbled in his ear.

‘No.’ Maxwell shook his head. ‘No… It wasn’t your fault… The Red Lyrium, it had corrupted you, made you addicted to it and… and…’

‘It’s okay, you can tell me.’ I hushed.

‘It changed you… You had become a monster, Saeris. You changed so much… your eyes, and… and you had gone completely mad…’ He swallowed but looked at me. Longer than he had since Redcliffe. ‘You killed…’
‘Who did I kill?’ Stay calm, Saeris. For him. Don’t break, don’t cry, not now, stay strong when he can’t.

‘Everyone. You killed everyone.’

I stopped breathing for a moment, and pushed Maxwell away ever so slightly. ‘What?’

‘It was the Red Lyrium… they had tortured you and you were under a spell or whatever, it wasn’t you and…’ Maxwell kept on rambling. Something about a Bride, and red and green… but I couldn’t hear him anymore.

If I don’t fulfil my promise of helping Maxwell… not only will this world collapse… I will be the one to kill everyone?

That can’t be.

This can’t be why I’m here…

‘Saeris?’ Maxwell shook me, his warm hands burning my skin. ‘Saeris!’

I blinked. ‘I’m so sorry…’ I whispered, my voice breaking. ‘I’m so… so sorry.’

‘It’s alright.’ Now it was his turn to hold me. And he held me for what felt like hours. After a while he spoke again. This time, he didn’t stumble or whisper or cry. ‘I will make sure that future will never come to pass. Never. And you will never become like that. I can promise you.’

Making promises is dangerous, out of all people, I knew that best. But this promise, I was willing to accept. To hold onto it. ‘We will make sure of that together.’ I smiled faintly.

‘We will.’ Maxwell smiled back.

***

‘And what are we to do exactly?’

‘What you always do, complain.’ Cassandra was standing near her practise dummies when I neared her. A familiar mage was impatiently tapping her foot in front of the Seeker, clearly annoying her. I would recognize that arrogant, self-centred snare anywhere. Ruth.

‘We’ve already spoken with Commander Cullen.’ Ruth rested her hands on her hips, her polished fingernails digging into the thick fabric of her fur coat. Her blonde hair was stark against the dark fabric. ‘No one listens! We want better quarters… we want the Templars kept at a distance. And some respect for…’

‘This is not the Circle.’ Cassandra snapped back. ‘You mages are our allies, not our wards. Act like it.’

Ruth tutted loudly, swishing back her ponytail. ‘How are we supposed to…’

‘Deal. With. It.’ Cassandra bit and crossed her arms.

Ruth grunted, and I saw her wanting to scratch some eyes out. But I knew who would win that catfight.

‘Ah, Ruth.’ I stepped in between, and saw Cassandra nod at me gratefully.
‘Saeris!’ Ruth gasped. ‘There you are! Gosh I’ve been looking for you! These…’ She eyed Cassandra, who remained standing there with crossed arms and annoyed face. ‘… brutes refuse to listen to me! You understand right? The apprentices and juniors can sleep in tents, but they expect us, the Enchanters, to do that too! I can’t sleep on the ground! My back is killing me! They have no respect for us… and those Templars, how can you even stand them!’ Ruth rambled on and on and on. I stopped listening after “I can’t sleep on the ground”.

‘Listen, Ruth. I know you’re used to more luxurious treatment, but this is not the Circle, as Seeker Penthagast told you.’ I started.

‘But…’

‘We’re all living in such a small space with one another, it’s bound to become uncomfortable. Focus on closing that Breach, then you can complain, okay?’ I smiled sheepishly. Payback time for all those years in the Circle she got whatever she wanted. Not here. This is the real world.

Ruth rolled her eyes dramatically. ‘You really didn’t change, huh? Always the know-it-all.’

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

Ruth clicked her tongue and tapped her fingers against her golden belt. ‘And tell me… Have you seen our Simon here somewhere? I haven’t seen him among the Templars. It’s too bad he isn’t here, isn’t it? We all know how much you two…’

‘Enough.’ Cassandra took a dangerous step forward, and Ruth became smaller and smaller.

Ruth grunted. ‘Whatever.’ And walked away, sticking out her tongue towards me as she hurried back to her tent.

‘She was an annoyance at the Circle too. Guess she’ll never change.’ I shook my shoulders and winked at Cassandra, who smiled back at me.

‘It never ends, evidently.’ The Seeker poked my arm.

‘You don’t need to tell me that…’ I sighed.

‘I just don’t know who told them I’m the one to yell at.’ Cassandra groaned.

‘I’m happy most of them are scared of me.’ I’ve never been happier to have been called a green-eyed demon. At least I don’t get nagging mages at my doorstep. ‘Is it that bad?’

‘The mages are here as equals. They need to get used to what that means.’ Cassandra answered.

‘They’ve been at the Circle all their life. It will take some time… Who knows, if they had captured me sooner, I might be like that.’ I joked.

‘And I’m happy you’re not.’ Cassandra smacked my back. The Seeker had become more and more friendly with me. And I was happy for it. She reminded me of Nenhara, strong and stubborn, but with a hell of a big heart.

‘Have you seen Maxwell by the way, I haven’t seen him since this morning.’ And I wanted to ask him some more things about how he was planning to seal the Breach. I have to be with him when that happens.

‘Ah yes, I have heard you surprised him… at the sanitary this morning…’ Cassandra suppressed a
smile. Of course he told her. What doesn’t he tell her? His feelings, probably. Am I wonderful at reading people, or are these people just blind?
‘I heard he is reporting to Solas. You should find him there, I presume.’

‘Great!’ I smiled. ‘Thanks and… don’t let those mages get into your head.’

‘No, I have enough there already.’ Cassandra joked and walked back to the training ground.

I followed the path to the village, up the slope and past the tavern. I stopped in my tracks as I heard them whispering to one another.

‘Are you sure, Herald, I had not said anything else? Not a word?’ Solas questioned, his hands on his hips and his face pulled into a deep and thoughtful expression.

‘No. That’s it. And it wasn’t like we had much time…’ Maxwell answered and scratched his head. ‘I’m sorry… I wanted to tell you sooner but with everything going on…’

‘No, don’t think of the matter. You have more important things at hand, Herald. I will not hold you from your duties much longer.’ Solas apologized, but his eyes were looking past Maxwell, to nowhere specifically. I saw the thousands of questions troubling his eyes.

I coughed and walked towards them.

And suddenly, those questions in Solas’ eyes seemed to clear up, and he was only staring at me now. My stomach protested as I came closer, and it became worse the more I stared back into Solas’ eyes. I smiled a little uncomfortably.

‘Am I interrupting?’ I started.

‘Never.’ Maxwell grinned. ‘I was just telling Solas something I remembered.’

‘Oh?’ I cocked my head.

‘Ah, but I don’t think it was anything useful, was it, Solas?’ Maxwell stared at the Elf.

‘It is incoherent, something to be researched upon.’ He answered vaguely. Such as he is.

‘Well, I have some questions about your plan to seal the Breach.’ I looked back to Maxwell, and felt Solas’ eyes on my back, burning and burning and my stomach turned upside down.

‘Which reminds me.’ Solas interrupted, clearly talking to Maxwell, but his eyes were still on me. ‘You should proceed in sealing the Breach as soon as you are able.’

Maxwell wiggled his eyebrows and tiptoed in between Solas and I, but the Elf remained staring at me.

‘This Elder One… You have now interfered with his plan thrice. Once at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, then at Val Royeaux and now again at Redcliffe. A being who aspires to godhood is unlikely to ignore such an affront. Closing the Breach will impact it more, perhaps even weaken it before it strikes.’

‘Yes… I know.’ Maxwell winked at me. ‘And don’t worry, my friend.’ Maxwell grinned, and that made Solas finally look away from me.

I had almost vomited. But that look he had in his eyes… it had surprised me. Gone was that dissected stare that wanted to understand me. No, the look in Solas’ eyes had been wonder… maybe
And it didn’t only hurt my stomach. It pained my heart as well. I didn’t know what to think anymore, but that warm feeling I got when he stared at me like that. So deep. So hopeful…

It made me want more.

‘Saeris? You listening?’ Maxwell waved his hand in front of my eyes and I blinked in surprise.

‘Huh? Yes?’

‘As I said… We’re done.’ He grinned.

‘Done with what?’

‘Planning.’ He winked. ‘We will seal it the day after tomorrow.’

‘What?’

‘We’re ready.’

Chapter End Notes

This one's a bit shorter, because last chapter was kind of heavy, and I wanted this chapter to take it slower, nothing much happens, but next chapter will be more... exciting...

Did you like it? I will try to update soon!
“A promise?”

*The unbreakable vow. It is that which led you here, which made you reborn.*

“I never made a vow?”

*Not the current you, yet the other you in the past. The you who came before.*

“Then what do I have to do?”

*When your eye appears in the heavens, go to where the heroes are, and protect he who holds your eye in his hand, for he will lead you towards the vow you promised not to break.*

“What will happen when I fulfil this promise?”

*You will receive that for which you longed for. Death. Eternal rest with those lost to you.*

“And what if I refuse?”

*You will eternally wander these plains alone.*

* Chapter 12, Awakened*


***

A large pale shadow covered my whole body. It grew and grew and grew as she… no… as it skulked closer my way. Close enough for me to see its deep and hollow eyes.

‘Red?’ It purred as it stared at me.

I took a step back.

Fight it! Take back your control! This space is yours! Not theirs!

‘You don’t scare me. I am not you.’ I hissed back.

Focus!

But the tall pale creature walked closer and closer. Locks of perfect white curls dangled from its grinning head, and its pointed ears twitched as I spoke. It flashed its straight white teeth and held out its hands to me.

‘I am you. You are me. We made that promise together. We broke it. Together.’ It hissed, its voice so warm and soft it made me doubt.

‘NO! No. I haven’t broken any promises! I won’t!’

It came closer again as I backed away. Like a mirror doing the opposite. Resembling a me that was
never meant to be.

An abomination.

Its hands were covered in blood. Their blood. The blood of my friends. Specks of bile were splattered on its stark long white dress, its border covered in dirt and soil.

The Bride opened her hands and held out one hazel eye to me in the centre of her palm. Max’ eye.

‘What did you do?’ I screamed.

‘What did “you” do?’ The Bride smiled back.

The eye moved and stared at me, not angry... but afraid. Maxwell was afraid of me.

‘You did this. You will.’ The Bride smiled, and the longer I stared into its deep and whirling eyes, the more I lost myself in them.


‘Let’s be us, together?’ It took another step closer. ‘Let’s be One.’

‘Never.’ I looked back up and stared into my own eyes. ‘Be gone. Demon.’ Behind its mask of the Bride, I saw the smouldering shadow of the terror, it’s eyes as bloody and red as the Bride herself.

I imagined a high and broad wall of adamant and will.

And then I pushed. I pushed out that wall until I could hear the demon scream, see its disguise weaken, fade away until it could no longer hide from my sight.

‘I. Am. Not. You.’ I spat and with a final push, the Fade was mine again.

***

I woke up in sweat and tears, the sheets on my bed ripped and scattered about in my room. Outside, it was still dark, but the sky was turning purple and orange instead of dark black and blue. Morning was on the rise, maybe after an hour...

I tucked my knees into my chest and rested my head on top of them. My long white hair curled beneath me, like a pillow. A sweaty pillow. It was almost fluorescent against my skin as the light of the moon reflected on it. Closing my eyes, I wondered if I should go back to sleep, back to the Fade... but I couldn’t.

I felt the despair and terror in my dreams. It was as if the Fade itself knew its Breach was going to be closed. It was as if the demons knew that their only way to escape was going to be sealed off. Forever. Hopefully. It made the air in the Fade almost nervous. It made me nervous. I kicked myself out of my bed, my shadow dancing behind me, and dressed myself in a thick armour and my cape. As I pulled the hood over my face, I glanced at my reflection in the mirror. And although it was dark in my cabin, I could see myself clearly while my green eye was flaring brightly, almost like a candle. There were dark circles beneath my eyes, and my cheeks were red and puffy, my hair wild. But my eye... my green eye... maybe like the Fade, it knew what today would bring...

Outside, the snow was fresh and thick, and the air so cold it stung my face. The high pine trees loomed above me, grasping towards the star-speckled sky. I pushed forward against the snow and
wind.

If you get lost within these mountains… you’ll freeze to death.

The military camp in front of Haven’s gates was quiet. Soldiers, Templars and mages alike were still fast asleep… resting for what today would bring. They would need all of their strength and power to do what has to be done.

To seal the Breach.

I sat myself on the edge of the wooden embankment at the frozen river, that seemed to be made out of pure glass, spreading out into the mountain range in front of me. And above those high peaks of eternal snow and white light, far up in the sky next to the moon and stars, hovered the Breach.

I felt my eye twist as I stared right into it. The swirling and spitting abyss of green seemed to stare back at me, at my eye, whispering my name. It felt almost like begging. Begging me to stop the Inquisition from sealing it away from the waking world. Asking me to save it. And somewhere within myself, I wanted to save it. I wanted to keep it open.

Why?

Maybe because the Breach felt so powerful to me, so strong and supportive of the strange magic within my eye. Maybe because it was like a giant window to the beyond. And if I could just step right through it, I’d find my friends and family behind its emerald curtain.

Maybe I didn’t want it to be closed, because closing it would mean another end. Another chapter done.

Maybe I didn’t want to close it because… because… I was scared of what would happen.

When I woke up in this world, I didn’t understand why. Why was I here? Why didn’t I age and die like the others? Was I cursed? Had I done something wrong?

Later on, I understood that I am indeed cursed. I cursed myself. Well, I as in a me in the past. My ancestor made a promise. And I was to fulfil it.

My promise.

My curse.

But what was that promise?

*Protect he who holds your eye in his hand, for he will lead you towards the vow you promised not to break.*

That’s what the voices once said to me in a dream long ago.

Protect Maxwell while he has the mark. He will lead me to… to the Breach? Close the Breach and I fulfil my promise? Fulfil my promise… and die?

Will I die immediately? Wither where I stand into ash and air?

Or will I just age normally from today on? Grow old and wrinkly… and die when the time comes? Like any other?

Or… or will nothing happen? What if closing the Breach while helping Max, isn’t what I’ve
promised? What if it’s something else?

These uncertainties… they made me scared, chilled me to the bone. Will I die today? Will I become mortal? Or will nothing happen, and all of this had been for naught. Yes, I will have helped saving the world. But will I save myself? And if I don’t…

‘It is bright, is it not?’ A voice whispered behind me. I almost screamed and fell onto the heavy ice below. Commander Cullen grasped my arm and hoisted me straight. ‘My apologies, did I scare you, Lady Saeris?’ He stumbled, his voice warm but tired.

I looked up to him, his face enlightened by the Breach above us. ‘Just a little bit.’ I chuckled honestly. ‘I was just…’

‘Lost in thought?’ He continued, his golden brown eyes piercing mine. ‘I was doing the same thing.’

I smiled faintly as Cullen sat himself next to me, his face locked towards the sky. He wasn’t wearing his armour, but just a linen shirt, and his blonde hair was messy. ‘How have you been faring?’ I asked and stared at him.

‘Quite well.’ He mumbled and faced me. ‘Thanks to you partly, my Lady.’

‘Just Saeris.’ When will he stop with the “Lady” thing? ‘And I did nothing.’

‘The brewage you have given me. It helps. I haven’t thanked you enough for that.’ He stared at our feet dangling over the embankment.

‘Adan made that for you… but if it helps, that’s all what matters.’ I pursed my lips. ‘But why are you awake now? You should rest before…’

‘I’ve rested enough.’ He sighed deeply. ‘And I have much work to do.’

‘Will you come with us today… when we seal the Breach?’

‘Of course…’ He looked up to me, furrowing his brows. ‘I want to be there when we close it… see our plans come to fruit.’

‘What… what will happen after?’ I didn’t know what I was saying… today was just one of those days when everything seems to stop. Seems to end.

The Commander chuckled. ‘The Inquisition has yet many tasks to complete.’ He said. ‘Will you not remain after?’ He turned quiet as he locked eyes with me.

‘I’m…’ I want to. I really want to stay.

I don’t want to die.

Always. I always wanted to stop living this eternal life. To join my mum and dad and brother and Sybil, Daniel and Elgadira, Nenhara… just everyone in the afterlife. Or if there wasn’t an afterlife… I always just wanted to rest. To sleep. To go to that serene state. Because I was always alone.

But I wasn’t anymore.

I had new friends, new hopes and goals… and for once in more than a hundred years… I wanted to stay alive.

For Maxwell.
And Cassandra and Varric… Cullen… for everyone here.

For Solas…

I wanted to get rid of my curse, of course. But if it meant dying today…

‘If I can… I will.’ I finally answered.

‘Why could you not?’ Cullen looked down for a second, and then up again, scratching the back of his neck. ‘Of course you can. You are…’

I cocked my head.

Cullen stared at me. ‘You are important.’

I am important.

I matter.

‘Thank you…’ I blinked my eyes.

The sun rose behind the high and steep peaks of the Frostback Mountains. Rays of sunlight crawled over the river slowly, until it reached our faces. It made the Commander look golden. His blonde hair, his golden brown eyes… He looked…

‘So beautiful.’ Cullen mumbled. I stared at him and he at me. With an open mouth, Cullen shook his head confusedly and smiled awkwardly. ‘The sunrise…’ He stumbled as his face turned a strawberry red. He scratched the back of his neck again.

‘Oh.’ I smiled. I thought he meant…

‘Saeris!’ Someone behind us called out. I turned around quickly and saw Solas walking in a quickened pace towards me.

‘Yes?’ I furrowed my brows.

‘You were… Are you alright? I heard an uproar in the Fade but could not reach you.’ He seemed out of breath.

‘Everything’s fine. I’m fine.’ I sighed.

Solas rested his hands on his hips and stared at Cullen, his eyes squinting.

‘I should get back to my duties.’ The Commander straightened himself. ‘We will be leaving shortly for the Temple of Sacred Ashes…’ He stared at me for another moment. But then looked away. ‘Make sure to prepare.’

‘We will.’ Solas answered for me. Curtly.

Cullen glanced at me and nodded before walking away to his tent.

‘What’s wrong, Solas?’ I huffed. He didn’t have to be so rude to the Commander.

‘You… I sensed a disturbance but could not see what was wrong. When I came to search for you, I could not find you at your cabin.’ He stared at me sternly.
I stood up and wiped some fresh snow from my back. ‘I had a bad dream… A terror slipped through my wards. I went for a stroll afterwards.’ Was he worried? Do I have to be charmed? Or concerned?

Solas sighed, and I noticed the redness on his nose and cheeks, the sheen of sweat and melted snow on his head and shoulders. And he was shivering… dressed in only his old and patched-up pants and woollen shirt. He hadn’t even bothered to ward his clothes against the cold.

‘Fenedhis, Solas.’ I cursed. ‘You’ll get sick…’ I took my dark and heavy cape from my shoulders and placed it over his own, tying the rope at the nape of his neck.

‘You should not leave yourself vulnerable.’ He scolded and looked down to me.

Look who’s talking… I lifted my face up and hadn’t noticed how close I was standing to him, our faces so close to one another, his nose almost brushed against mine. I swallowed and my body turned to ice, unable to move.

‘You had me concerned.’ He hushed, his voice seemingly stuck in his throat. I felt the gush of his warm breath against my face.

I took a step back and swallowed some bile away that had formed in my mouth. The world started to twist and turn upside down…

‘Are you alright?’ He took another step towards me.

And I stepped back, holding my hands in front of me. ‘Yes… I just haven’t had breakfast yet…’ I lied. I was just getting nauseous by his proximity.

Even though I kind of liked him being so close to me.

I liked his warmth.

I yearned for it.

‘Come. Let us ask Flissa to prepare a meal.’ He said and held out his hand to me. His stare was neutral, calm and patient. But I saw the slight tremble on his long white fingers. Was he that cold? Or…

I walked past his hand, and he lowered it slowly. ‘Oh no, it’s fine… I have some bread in my cabin… I’ll see you at camp in an hour, alright?’ I waved hurriedly and fast-walked back towards the forest. Solas remained staring after me at the frozen river.

Maybe I should’ve taken his hand, eat with him together, but I was afraid, afraid to take that hand.

Afraid I might not want to let it go.

But today… not today. Today will mean the end of something.

The world… The Breach… Myself.

***

‘Recruits!’ Cullen walked back and forth among the lines of soldiers, mages and Templars. His face was stern, his armour shining brightly in the morning sun. Leliana and Josephine were standing next to him. Leliana would join us, Josephine wouldn’t. Leliana wore her dark hooded armour, and I saw her dangerous eyes glance over the recruits anxiously, scanning for any irregularities. I noticed the men and women shrink as she skimmed them. Josephine smiled nervously, her book with presences
clutched in front of her. Her golden frilly pants and tunic matched Cullen’s brightness, and her dark olive skin gleamed in the sun. She looked down to her papers and scribbled something with a long quill. I couldn’t read what.

Maxwell stood at the far right of them, his face somewhat pale, but his eyes confident. His silver armour carved with the Inquisition vigil, shone like the moon itself. He looked holy. Like a true Herald of Andraste. His curly brown hair was combed backwards, and he had shaved off his stubble. The mark on his hand was flaring, just like my eye had been doing all morning, and I noticed him flexing his fingers against the prickling pain. Maxwell and Cullen shared a look, and the Commander nodded at him.

‘The Breach has been above us long enough!’ Maxwell started, and everyone got quiet. ‘Today, we will close it!’ Some people cheered. ‘Although our many differences, we will work together and history will remember all of you. All of us. Because this is our world. And we will do anything to save it.’ Maxwell pumped his chest in front of his soldiers, and they stared at him. Templars and mages, standing next to one another, working together for a common goal. ‘Are you with me!’ He screamed and raised his marked hand into the sky.

‘YES!’ The soldiers screamed. Behind me, Cassandra gleamed with pride.

‘Soldiers!’ Cullen raised his sword. ‘We march!’

Everyone cheered and the large group of soldiers marched forward along the path that lead towards the mountains. Behind them, the inner circle followed. Everyone was present. Sera, Blackwall, Dorian and Vivienne, the Iron Bull, Varric and Cassandra. And Solas. He had gone awfully quiet, but stood next to me nevertheless. We hadn’t talked since this morning.

Maybe that’s for the better.

Cassandra stared beyond the soldiers to Maxwell at the front. She was proud, but worried first. I rested my hand on her shoulder. ‘He’ll be fine.’ I whispered.

‘Of course he will.’ She breathed back to me. ‘He has to.’

We walked up the path that had once been a pilgrimage, but was now overgrown by rocks and plants and snow. The armour of the ex-Templars rattled as they marched. Next to them, the mages were silent in their long but thick robes. Once, I had seen queues of mages and Templars on either side of this very path. Separated. Enemies meeting up at a Conclave to discuss their war with one another. And now, they walked together towards a common goal. Towards the Breach.

The last time I had walked across the crater, where once a beautiful temple must’ve been, I had been uncertain, doubting and nervous. I had seen Max’ mark, and I knew back then I needed to protect him. He had been so weak, so scared… but now he walked assuredly, he knew what he could do. And he didn’t need my protection.

The burned remains of Conclave attendees had withered away with the season. The scarred faces that had been charred into place, were overgrown by snow and soil.

Everything seemed different. But still the same.

The crater where the explosion had been, was still bare and dark. Not even snow could reach it. Templars and mages aligned on the steps of some remaining ruins above us on the edge of the crater. I saw the ex-Templars visibly shiver as the mages took out their staffs, aiming them forward. The Templars had been trained for all of their lives to stop the mages from doing just that. But now, they
were there to support them. It must’ve felt strange.

Looking down on everyone and everything, was the Breach. Dooming and glistering, covering every corner of the crater, the sky and the sun. Its emerald hue hung around us like a foggy curtain. Deadly quiet, yet so loud. Thousands of whispering voices filled my ears, creeping into my head and calling my name. Calling our name. With fear. Hatred. And a deadly confidence.

Commander Cullen stood on the broken railing above me, staring at the Breach. His golden eyes reflected green. Just like they did when he stared into mine. Leliana was standing next to him, her eyes skimming the crater suspiciously. The Spymaster’s clear stare stopped at the giant broken statue of Andraste in the middle of the crater. Her holy face hovered shattered into the air, glowing green like the Breach above Her. Leliana’s glance faltered for a moment, almost in recognition. Yet, after a second, she looked away again.

The rest of our group was standing on the ground with Maxwell. Red Lyrium was growing between the barren rocks under our feet like weed, humming with the drum of the Breach. Dorian was swallowing loudly at the sight of them, and clutched his staff tighter. Varric did the same with Bianca.

‘Please don’t spit demons. Don’t spit demons.’ Sera was mumbling, a deep snare on her face. She almost shot an arrow towards the Breach, but Bull pushed down her bow.

‘Calm down, crazy…’ He cursed.

Once everyone had settled, Maxwell stepped forward. Like a reflex, I looked up to him, taking a step forward.

‘It’s okay.’ Maxwell turned his head towards me and winked. ‘I got this.’

‘I know…’ I tried to smile back.

The mark on Maxwell’s hand started to flare again, spitting and flashing that familiar emerald light. He looked down at it, facing the pain, and smiled faintly. Maybe almost nostalgically, like he was remembering how he had closed his first Rift. Cassandra stood next to him and whispered something I couldn’t hear.

Maxwell didn’t look up from his hand, but whispered something back that made Cassandra smile tenderly.

Then, Maxwell walked forward, closer and closer to the broken statue of Andraste. One of Her shattered eyes seemed to stare right at him. No emotion left on Her face.

I followed his stare, right into the abyss of emerald. And I felt a thousand eyes looking back at me. *You promised…* They seemed to whisper. *Come. Come here.*

‘Templars! Mages!’ Cassandra ordered, her voice so loud it made me break my contact with the Breach. I straightened myself, my magic ready on my fingers.

Solas appeared from behind me and strutted forward, lifting his staff above his head to get the soldiers’ attention. ‘Focus past the Herald! Let his will draw from you!’ He planted his staff firmly on the ground, the crystal on top aimed towards Maxwell, who was still pushing towards the Breach. The mages, Dorian and Vivienne followed Solas’ example, the loud stomp of their staffs on the ground echoing through the crater. Solas stared with squinted eyes forward, neutrally, but there was a hint of hope.
The closer Maxwell was getting to the centre, the harder he was moving forward. As if he was pushing against a stormy wind. Green flares spouted from the Breach, trying to shove Maxwell back, but he didn’t comply.

‘Templars! Now!’ Commander Cullen yelled, his steel sword drawn. On this cue, the Templars took out their swords and with a dazzling swish, they impaled them into the ground, a force of blue energy glittering from their steel armours.

The mages followed suit, and the power crystals on their staffs started to glow deeper and deeper. All of that power, that magic combined as Maxwell raised his hand to the sky.

And then, I felt it. I felt the mark connect with the Breach. I felt them push against each other. My heart started to beat faster, my breath got stuck, and my throat turned dry.

This was the moment. This is my moment.

I lingered for a second. I couldn’t raise my hands.

Time seemed to stop.

I have to do it now. Are you watching, ancestor? Can you see me? You cursed me. Us. And I am going to set us free.

Finally free.

I raised my hands, and a flashing emerald light embodied me. My eye screamed against my body, ordering me to stop, trying to take over to make me do nothing. Like it didn’t want me to help. But I would.

And then, time seemed to flow once more.

My magic flew towards Maxwell, to his mark.

And then the Breach exploded.

Everything exploded.

A surge of green light, a storm of emerald winds, pushed through the crater, roared the earth. Maxwell was shoved back, and he flew across the crater towards the ground. And then, the wind reached the rest of us. I planted my feet into the ground but the storm was too strong.

You promised! The wind seemed to cry, to scream, to screech as it passed me. I felt hands grabbing my chest in rage, in… disappointment, and they shoved me hard.

‘Watch out!’ Someone screamed.

Everyone was yanked to the dirty ground. Some cried out in surprise.

I closed my eyes.

I felt cold.

Two hands grabbed my arms from behind, softly, tenderly, lovingly. They gave me a small squish, and I pressed myself against the warm presence. And it held me there, in its arms, hushing back and forth.
'Saeris?’

I was too afraid to open my eyes. To see that I wasn’t in Thedas anymore.

That everything was over.

‘Saeris.’

It felt like Daniel was holding me like he did long ago, his body against mine, his lips to my ears. Calling my name.

‘Saeris!’ Solas pressed his hands against me harder. And I opened my eyes in surprise.

Looking down, I saw Solas lying beneath me, and I was in his arms. Protected. Held. I stared at him, and his clear grey and blue eyes stared right back at me, his grip tightening. A warm chuckle appeared on his lips.

I was still here.

I am still alive.

‘You did it!’ I heard Cassandra’s voice in the distance. I pushed myself away from Solas’ arms. And he let go of me, maybe somewhat reluctantly it seemed, helping me get up by moving his body upwards.

‘Are you alright?’ He whispered, his arms helping me steady myself as I wobbled forward, my eyes searching the crater frantically, searching and skimming.

And there, he stood upright. Maxwell.

He turned around, and flashed his teeth, smiling brilliantly.

He did it.

He closed the Breach.

The skies were roaring. Scorching. Empty.

All was empty.

Serene.

My heart dropped.

Everything was so… so silent.

Behind me, people roared and cheered. Templars and mages flew into each other’s arms. Maxwell hugged Cassandra tightly. Solas stood behind me, saying something… but his voice couldn’t reach me.

I couldn’t say anything. Couldn’t do anything.

The only thing that I was able to do, was stare.

Stare and feel so lost. So empty.

Just like the sky.
Stars covered the dark blue sky. Soft grey winds danced among them. Freely. Widely. The moon’s light could reach Thedas now, and it rejuvenated the earth.

Gone were the emerald shadows, the thrumming voices, the dooming presence.

Everything was how it should be. How it belonged to be. Changed, but still the same as I remembered. It was the same sky I had seen before… before the Inquisition, before the Circle, before the Dragon Age. It was the sky I had stared at, lying in the grass while dreaming of a future with Sybil or Daniel… remembering the night sky from a previous life, in another world.

And although everything was back to normal.

Everything felt wrong.

It was as if I was looking at a reflection… a mirror of something. The same, but not quite. It was as if the sky had been scarred.

For me, it would never be the same.

And I found myself looking for that familiar emerald gleam between the clouds and sky.

But it was truly gone.

I felt blinded. I felt betrayed.

‘Need another drink, Twinkle?’ Varric poked my arm.

I looked down to the Dwarf, and how the shadows flickered on his smiling face. Behind us, people were dancing with one another, drunk on victory and celebration. Minstrels played happy tunes on their fiddles and lutes, and it combined with laughter and cheering. The grand bonfire that burned in the centre of the village, filled everything and everyone with a warm light. The snow beneath us had turned to dirt and mud, melting by the heat of the fire. An Elven woman twirled in the arms of a human man, and their lips pressed on each other lustfully, lost in song. I noticed Adan sitting on a bench near the tavern, Blackwall lounging next to him. The alchemist hunched over as he snickered loudly at Blackwall’s joke. The Grey Warden laughed with him and spilled some of his drink on his beard. Sera appeared from beneath a table and stared at Blackwall, hiccupping and grinning. Not far from us, I saw Iron Bull and Dorian in a deep conversation, their faces almost pressed against one another, eyes locked and sultry.

My cup was still filled to the top with ale that had turned lukewarm, the foam disappearing underneath the muddy brown liquid. ‘No thanks.’ I mumbled.

Two girls passed me. Giggling and dancing with one another, their feet stomping on the ground. One of them almost dropped her cup as she jumped around.

‘Ah come on, don’t act so soggy… A miracle has happened, kid! Celebrate!’ Varric raised his cup. ‘I bet someone wants to dance with you!’

I looked around and saw soldiers passing along the crowd, or leaning against the cabins in deep conversation with one another. Some glanced my way, their eyes twinkling.

‘I don’t feel like dancing so much.’ I smiled at Varric sheepishly.
‘Tell that to them.’ He winked back at me. The Dwarf then continued his way and wobbled to the tavern to get another drink. He almost stumbled over Sera’s leg that appeared on the other side of the table she was sleeping under. Flissa had opened up half of her stock of ale for this celebration. And everyone was partying the night away.

But I couldn’t rejoice.

Disappointment was all I could feel right now. Nothing had seemed to have changed… I didn’t feel different… am I mortal now? How do I know? How does it feel to age? I don’t remember.

I looked up and on the hill, behind Leliana’s tent, stood Maxwell. He held his cup tightly, a warm look in his eyes. He skimmed Haven, the bonfire, his soldiers and followers dancing around it, and the sky. I saw him sigh as his eyes followed the stars and the clouds. They wavered near the spot the Breach once was, and I noticed him clenching his marked hand. If only that mark had disappeared too. Leliana, Josephine, Cullen and Cassandra were standing in a circle next to him, talking and laughing. Cassandra looked to her side, her eyes on the Herald, her hand brushing his. The others had noticed too, and I saw them retreating to the Chantry behind. Cullen glanced over his shoulder as he walked away. He smiled.

Cassandra asked Maxwell something, and he answered with a sigh. She smiled at him and laid her hand on his shoulder. Maxwell looked over his shoulder to where she stood and he cocked his head, cracking up another joke that made the Seeker laugh, maybe a little too loudly. I saw that spark between them growing, brightening, and I almost felt like I needed to look away, but couldn’t.

That could’ve been Daniel and I long ago. We had that spark too. Once.

Maxwell’s eyes glanced down, and they found mine between the crowd. He smiled at me happily, his dark curls encircling his face like a halo, his hazel eyes so kind and welcoming. Cassandra followed his stare and nodded at me with a motherly gaze.

‘They have grown closer the last few weeks, haven’t they?’ Solas appeared beside me.

Cassandra and Maxwell looked away, and continued their conversation. Just the two of them.

‘They have.’ I answered calmly and smiled faintly, staring back to the bonfire and its engulfing flames.

‘You do not seem to be celebrating like the others.’ Solas continued. I looked back to him. His face was covered in dancing shadows, his eyes reflecting the flickering lights of the fire behind me. ‘What is going through your mind, Saeris?’ Solas said, his voice so deep and calm.

‘Nothing much.’ I lied. ‘Just thinking of the future.’ That wasn’t a lie.

‘Ah yes.’ Solas bound his hand behind his back and chuckled. ‘Without the threat that was the Breach, the future does seem closer at hand than before.’ He said, his eyes kind.

‘Uhuh.’ I answered vacantly.

‘Yet I doubt the future is that which is clogging your mind.’

I closed my eyes and sighed. Deeply. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Is it something I can help you with, ma falon.’ My friend. I had never heard him call me that, or anyone else.
I bit my lip until I could taste my own blood. I liked the taste better than the ale. ‘No…I think I’m just going to go to bed for the night… I used a lot of magic today, it has wearied me.’ I lied again. ‘If you’ll excuse me.’

‘Do you need any assistance.’ Solas grabbed me before I could turn away. His fingers enclosed my whole arm, his palm was warm against my cold skin.

He stared at me. He smiled, his eyes squinting.

For a moment…I just wanted to lose myself. Drown myself in the blue ocean of his pupils, fill myself with his warmth, steal his smile and take his lips away so they could only be mine.

I wanted him to say ma falon again. I wanted him to say my name and lose any worry in the world.

‘I’m okay. I’ll see you tomorrow. Solas.’ His name fell from my lips a little too slowly, a little bit too desperate.

He stared at me for a moment, and let go.

I nodded at him and looked away quickly, following the trail back to Haven’t gates. Solas remained behind me, the bonfire’s light swallowing his figure, his shadow. His arms dangled by his side, and I felt his eyes following me as I disappeared between the dancing mass of people.

Outside, it was quiet. The camp was empty beside some miscellaneous soldiers guarding the walls. They went quiet as I passed, and moved away silently. Almost frightened.

My eye was the only thing resembling the Breach now, that light they had feared so greatly.

Now, I was the scar. I was the oddity. Again.

The path in the forest was lit by the moon’s light. And I tiptoed silently past the elfroot and the flowers. And behind the large rock and the pine trees, under the sky filled with only stars and clouds, stood my steady cabin. Plants and flowers grew alongside its walls, its small windows foggy. I opened the door and threw my cape on the floor, unwrapped my foot wraps and unbuckled my harness. My linen shirt underneath felt clammy.

I twisted my hands and two flames appeared in the centre of my palms, I shot them towards the fireplace, and its light filled my room with a cosy hue. With one hand I untied the ribbon of my ponytail. My hair fell in loose ribbons around my shoulders. As I retreated my hand, I brushed against the brim of my long and pointed ear. It flinched as I followed its shape, from the top to the lobe.

‘Saeris.’

I gasped and turned around, almost tumbling back.

Solas was standing in my doorway. Out of breath.

‘What’s wrong, Solas?’ I breathed, surprised. For how long had he been standing here? ‘Why are you…’

‘I was worried.’ He interrupted and took two steps forward.

‘Why would you be?’ I turned back around and continued uncluttering my bed.

‘I…’ He sighed. ‘I was thinking you might leave.’
I stopped and turned around. ‘Why would I leave? I have nowhere to go anyway.’ I mumbled and stared at the ground. Where can I go? What do I do now? Wait until I see myself age? What are my options anyway?

‘Good.’ He swallowed and closed the door behind him to not let the warmth get away. ‘The Inquisition needs you.’

‘It doesn’t.’ I bit back a little too harshly. ‘All it needs is Maxwell.’

‘And he needs you.’

‘Not anymore.’

‘That is untrue.’ Solas shifted on his feet. ‘You are invaluable.’ To whom?

I rolled my eyes angrily and turned back around again. I was sick of being told I was important when I clearly wasn’t. Yes, I’ve helped. Protected and healed. But Maxwell is strong, and surrounded by even stronger people. Even if I hadn’t been there, he would have still succeeded. He won against Envy, against Alexius, and he will do so again against the Elder One.

I felt Solas’ hand on my shoulder, and his warmth spread across my body.

I closed my eyes. How I yearned for his warmth. For a moment, all of my worries seemed to wash away with his presence. I didn’t feel sick or nauseous… I didn’t feel uncomfortable.

‘You called me your friend.’ I whispered, changing the subject, and shivered as he let go of my shoulder.

‘I did.’ He answered back, his voice equally soft. ‘You are, although I do not know much about you.’

‘There isn’t much to know.’ I turned around to him. He was standing so close to me, I felt like I needed to back away. But I didn’t.

‘Is there?’ He almost purred and cocked his head in interest.

“What do you wish to know, then?” I sighed and turned my head to the side, staring through the small mirror that had cleared up. Outside, the forest was calm, the sound of music shifting through the air. ‘I told you where I’m from, that I’ve travelled, that I’ve been in the Circle and back out again. There isn’t much left to be said.’

‘Indeed.’ He came closer again, one step, then two. Until his face was right in front of me, his nose almost brushing mine, our lashes clashing. ‘Yet there is but one thing I have been wanting to ask, but have not yet.’ His voice sounded so deep, so coarse yet so full.

I lifted my chin, my eyes connecting with his. ‘What is it?’ My heart was bursting through my chest. The Inquisition, the Breach, my curse,… everything cleared up, until only Solas was left. Only him. Ask me.

‘I know your name, your past, but I have yet to catch your age.’ His voice broke a little at the end, as if it was almost unbearable of him to ask. As if he had waited for so long to ask me what he already knew.

I smiled, flashing my teeth. He finally asked. ‘I’m twenty-six.’ I breathed.
Solas’ look faltered for a moment, disbelief and a spark of disappointment flashed underneath his stare.

I took a deep breath. No. The truth. ‘I’ve been twenty-six for a long time. I’ve stopped counting.’

There. I said it.

Solas smiled. He smiled brilliantly.

‘But you knew that already.’ I bit my lip and stared at the wooden floor beneath us. He knew ever since the Storm Coast at Sybil’s grave. Maybe he knew the first days after the Breach had opened.

‘I suspected.’ There was a tremble in his voice. A relief. ‘I never imagined…’

‘I know this is a lot and… and probably very strange…’ I rambled. It’s been so long since someone knew my secret. I felt light now, freed.

‘It is not… not for me…’ Solas chuckled. I shouldn’t be surprised he isn’t blown away. He probably has seen a lot in the Fade… Though I felt like he understood me on a whole different level. Yet, my heart started to fill with hope again. Maybe I became mortal. Maybe not. I don’t know that for certain. Maybe I’ll die tomorrow, or in a week. Or maybe I will be here for a hundred years to come.

At this moment, I didn’t care. Whatever promise, or curse, held me in this world, I still choose where I go with it. And how I’ll live this life.

And right now, I wanted to be standing right here, so close to him.

I knew I shouldn’t. And a couple of weeks ago, I wouldn’t even want to. But now, here, in this moment, everything felt right. And if I die or wither away, I’ll at least not regret anything.

I lifted my chin and my nose bumped against his. And with a small tilt of my head, I kissed him.

It was short. Uncertain. Small. Just a peck. I pressed my eyes together, and stopped thinking. Stopped fearing and doubting and thinking and… I let go.

I quickly moved my face away, taking a step back. Feeling how my blood rushed to my cheeks, I looked down and bit my lip again. It was all chapped-up by now.

What did I do?

And moreover, why don’t I feel sick? I haven’t felt sick around him ever since the Breach closed… Why?

I looked up and saw Solas looking down to me, his pupils enlarged, and a smirk on his lips.

‘You change… everything.’ He breathed coarsely and pulled me by my arm against his chest. He pressed his lips against mine before I could do anything. First very lightly, trembling slightly… almost doubtingly… and he let go and stared into my eyes. He then kissed me a second time, this time more… more. I opened my mouth to his, and let him fill me with his breath, his warmth. I closed my eyes and let him take over, take control, move me, free me. He kissed me like I hadn’t been kissed before.

He filled me with hope. With life.

His hands followed the line of my spine at my back as he kissed me a third time. I clapped my hands behind his neck to pull myself closer.
He moved his head away slightly, and breathed harshly. As did I as I rested my forehead against his, eyes still closed. When I opened them, so did he, and I saw the green lights of my eye reflected in his own.

‘Saeris.’ Solas sighed, unable to say a thing but my name. He said it as if it was a spell. As if it could turn back time.

My heart stopped.

What did I do?

Am I a moron? A brainless teenager?

I wasn’t here to fall in love. I was here to… And what if I didn’t become mortal and… and Solas will die and I will be alone again.

I can’t do this to myself.

Not again.

I shook my head and took a step back, feeling how my lungs emptied as I realized the mistake I’d made. How I had cursed myself.

I can’t lose someone like that again…

‘Solas… I…’ I mouthed.

I yelped and jumped aside as someone barged inside, taking down the door with him.

‘Step back!’ Solas cried out and held out his hand in front of me.

I stared up to the giant hole in my cabin.

And right where my door used to be, stood a figure, dooming up between the debris. A large flaming sword was embedded on his armour plate, and two maroon red eyes stared at us maniacally.

Red Lyrium hummed through his blood-shot face, basking it in an unnatural light.

The Red Templar smiled at me with his blackened teeth and drew his sword, the forest burning behind him.

They’re here.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked it :-)
So this chapter is the start of "In Your Heart Shall Burn". It's gonna be a wild ride folks!
Burned

Chapter Notes

Update!
Okay, sorry my updates take some time at the moment! I have a summer job and I'm also finishing up my thesis.... But I try my best!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Then the Maker said:
"To you, My second-born, I grant this gift:
In your heart shall burn
An unquenchable flame
All-consuming, and never satisfied.
From the Fade I crafted you,
And to the Fade you shall return
Each night in dreams
That you may always remember Me."

- Chant of Light, Threnodies 5:1-5:8

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Dark red flaring eyes bore into mine. Terrifying. Evil. Slaughterous. There was no spark of humanity left within those eyes, only a thirst for blood. More red. Everything red. The veins in his face had turned a charcoal black, almost bursting, thick and enflamed. I saw tufts of withered brown hair hanging down from his balding scalp, and between them, from his ears to the top of his head, grew a pike of red flaring stone. It hummed, danced within its own flames. It grew out of him like a virus. An infection.

‘Step back!’ Solas cried out and held out his hand in front of me.

The Red Templar smirked at us, putting his sharpened, blackened teeth on full display for us. His tongue left a smear of bile as he licked his broken, flaky lips.

I swallowed. The Red Templar noticed. ‘Did I interrupt, rabbits?’ He spat, his voice humming with the Red Lyrium, almost as if it spoke for him, imitating a human voice.

My eyes flashed from his drawn, rusty sword, to the forest behind him. An escape route. But we wouldn’t get far, since all was burning. The pine trees, the path to Haven, the elfroot and the flowers… and the fire climbed across my cabin, and I could already smell the burned wood, the charred paper and melting metal.

Solas cursed under his breath and glanced down to me. My eyes remained on the Red Templar, determined. The gruesome man took a step forward, smiling at my thin linen shirt. ‘Tasty rabbit, aren’t we?’ The monster hummed again.
Solas hissed through his teeth, retracted his hand in one swift movement and blasted the Red Templar away with a surge of his magic.

I yelped and jumped aside, rolling over the ground. As I jumped up, my magic already flared on the top of my fingertips. ‘Fen’Harel ma halam!’ I cursed. Dread Wolf take you. And three giant bolts of electricity fired from my hands. The Red Templar cursed as the bolts struck through his body, electrocuting him.

I saw Solas grin at me for a second, and then he finished the Red Templar off. He was good at magic without his staff, but we definitely needed to go get it before we fight any more.

‘We need to get to Haven.’ I heaved in panic.

‘We must warn them of the attack, if they have not gone to arms yet.’ Solas picked up my cape from the ground and threw it to me. ‘Quickly.’

I cursed and hauled my leather armour over my head, bound my foot wraps and pulled my cape over my shoulders. My hair laid wild over my face, but this wasn’t the time to braid it. As soon as I was ready, we ran outside. Just in time before my cabin collapsed. The roof came smashing down. I jumped aside and landed on the ground, staring up to the place I had come to call my own. Now, it laid shattered, burned, in smoke and ash.

‘We need to move.’ Solas helped me get up. We shared a look, and I saw a slight panic within his eyes.

We ran through the burning forest, forsaking my collapsing cabin. Some trees were falling to the ground, the path was barely visible. All was cloaked in fire and smoke. I took Solas’ hand and lead the way. He followed silently, his palms sweaty. But I knew my way through this part of Haven with my eyes closed. As we finally crossed the treeline, I stopped and stared at the mountain range before us. Thousands of soldiers marched down the valley, torches at hand. My heart stopped. We’re under attack. Red Templars… Who’s leading them?

The few recruits who had been guarding Haven’s gates laid scattered across the military camp. Two Red Templars laid on the ground near them.

Shit.

The other Red Templars were going for the gate while three… wait are those Venatori? Three Venatori soldiers were encircling someone. I couldn’t see who.

‘We have to help!’ I cried out and ran forward. Solas followed suit.

I conjured two giant spikes, impaling two of the three Venatori men. Solas went and took care of the two Red Templars storming the gate. He trapped one into solid ice, and crashed it into a thousand little pieces with a blast. The other Red Templar, this one having a giant pillar of Red Lyrium as an arm, swung towards Solas. But the Elf jumped aside swiftly. With a sharp wind of mind magic and ice, he pushed the monster back, tumbling it to the ground. On this cue, I turned to his aid, and let roots crack through the snow, ensnaring the Red Templar. But I wasn’t done. Giant thorns formed across either side of the green flaring roots, and they impaled the Red Templar’s skin, bursting through his steel armour. With a twist of my hand, the thorns burst into fire, burning the Red Lyrium humanoid from within.

Behind me, the last Venatori soldier was cut down, two narrow daggers slicing into his back like fangs. A young man retreated his daggers from the dead Venatori soldier’s corpse. His big, patched-
up hat masked half of his face. He looked up to us, and I noticed frizzy blonde hair sticking from underneath the giant hat, the bangs too long, they hung over parts of his innocent blue eyes. The lanky kid stared at me. His eyes were large, panicked.

And I felt like I knew him… from somewhere.

‘You know me.’ He whispered, his voice soft.

That voice… ‘Cole?’ I mumbled. The boy who helped us in Envy’s nightmare!

‘Saeris…’ Solas interrupted warningly, and pointed to the dooming army of Red Templars and Venatori storming down the mountains, coming our way.

Cole ran past us, his footsteps so quiet, I couldn’t even hear the snow crunch. He yelled at the door, ‘I can’t come in unless you open!’

The gates were silent.

‘Open up! It’s us!’ I called out, banging with my fist on the door.

With a creaking sound, Maxwell hauled open the gates, Cassandra and Cullen behind him. Their swords were drawn, their faces as white as a sheet.

‘Thank the Maker! Saeris!’ Maxwell cursed and grabbed my shoulders. ‘Where were you! Is Solas with you… who is…’ Maxwell heaved, and his eyes followed mine towards Cole. I saw Max smile a little in recognition.

‘Cole… I wondered when I’d see you again.’ He grinned reassured.

‘I came to warn you. To help. People are coming to hurt you. You probably already know.’ Cole spoke rapidly, eyes focused on Maxwell only.

‘It’s okay, I know him!’ Maxwell hushed behind him to Cassandra, who stared at the blonde boy suspiciously. ‘Cole, do you know what’s going on?’

‘The Templars come to kill you.’ He whispered.

‘Templars?!’ Cullen pushed through Maxwell and Cassandra, his voice loud and angry. Surprised. ‘Is this the Order’s response to our talks with the mages? Attacking blindly?’

Cole hurried a couple of steps back, his eyes big. ‘The Red Templars went to the Elder One.’ The Elder One. Is he here? ‘You know him?’ Cole glanced at me and then to Solas, eyes still big. ‘He knows you. You took some of his Templars, and his mages.’ Cole looked over me, lifted his arm and pointed in the distance. ‘There.’

My heart stopped, unable to breathe, I looked to where Cole pointed. Towards the burning mountains, high up on a cliff. First, a man appeared there. I couldn’t see much, but I saw his white, aging face, and filthy, black hair. Next to him stood a woman, also fair-skinned, but with blonde hair. And… behind them… there appeared something huge, a monstrous being. Incredibly tall, maybe double the height of the people standing before him. I could see from afar that his body was mangled, distorted with Red Lyrium, his arms long and his claw-like fingers black and sharp. There wasn’t much left of the Elder One’s face, for the Red Lyrium infection had almost taken over everything. The black armour he wore was embedded into his grey, leather-like skin. He looked like a huge, Red Lyrium-infested corpse.
That thing sent thousands of little shivers down my spine.

‘That woman is Calpernia…’ Dorian appeared from behind Cassandra, terribly out of breath, and pointed to the blonde-haired mage. Varric and the others ran after him, their eyes following our stares towards the Elder One.

‘Ah, shit.’ Bull spat.

‘She commands the Venatori.’ Dorian continued. Behind him, our troops were already gathering, mages and Templars stood nervously in queues. Some looked to the ground, some dared to stare towards their enemy.

Cullen stepped forward too. ‘And I know that man…’ He mumbled. ‘but this Elder One…’

The Elder One peered at us from afar, and I felt his eyes on us, piercing, full of hatred.

‘He’s very angry that you took all of his mages.’ Cole said deadpan, as if he was just saying the obvious. Well, it was obvious.

Maxwell had gone paler, paler than before. he could almost disappear into the snow. ‘Cullen! Give me a plan! Anything!’ He ordered, panicked, his eyes still on the Elder One on the mountain.

Cullen sighed, deeply. It made me more concerned. ‘Haven is no fortress. If we are to withstand this monster, we must control the battle.’ Cullen pointed to the trebuchets at the far end of the military camp. The large, wooden constructions hadn’t been used for ages. ‘Get out there and hit that force. Use everything you can!’ Cullen glanced at me, a worried look on his face. I dipped my head back to him. The Commander nodded and drew his sword, turning towards his recruits behind him. ‘Soldiers!’ Cullen ordered to his troops. ‘Gather the villagers! Fortify and watch for advance forces!’ He turned towards the mages standing between the lines. ‘Mages! You… You have sanction to engage them! That man there is Samson, he will not make it easy!’ Cullen walked back and forth the lines of soldiers, mages and ex-Templars. The men and women stared back to him bravely. The Commander halted next to Maxwell, who lifted his chin as Cullen continued, ‘Inquisition! With the Herald! For your lives! For all of us!’ He raised his sword into the air, towards the bulk of the mountain, enlightened by the torches of our enemies. Everyone cheered, screamed, cried.

Many would die today.

Too many.

‘Cassandra, Solas, Bull and Varric, you’ll join me at the trebuchets. Cole, you may join me as well.’ Maxwell turned to us, his face confident. ‘Vivienne, you and Dorian go to the Chantry, help the villagers.’ Maxwell finally looked to me. ‘Sera, Blackwall and Saeris, you will have to stay near the gates, make sure no enemies enter!’

‘No! I will go with you!’ I stepped forward. I can’t let him go alone. I won’t.

‘Saeris.’ Maxwell whispered, and grabbed my shoulders. ‘I need you here, you’re strong. Halt any Red Templar or Venatori who passes, help the villagers get out. You understand?’ He shook my shoulders, firmly.

‘But…’

‘Please. Trust me. I’ll be fine.’ Maxwell squinted his eyes at me.

I glanced around. Everyone was staring. Finally, I nodded.
Please don’t let me regret this.

‘Good. Let’s move, everyone!’ Maxwell clasped his hands. He winked at me before he turned away, hurrying to the trebuchet at the end of the camp.

‘Promise me you will be careful.’ Solas said before he left, his hand caressing the back of mine.

I retreated my hand slowly, hiding it behind my back awkwardly. ‘I promise.’ I said as I looked down to the ground.

Solas hesitated for a couple of moments, almost as if he wanted to say something. But he then turned his back to me and ran behind Maxwell.

‘Alright.’ Sera grinned. ‘Let’s kick us some arses.’

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‘Thirty-two!’ Sera took another arrow as a Red Templar plopped down onto the ground, three arrows piercing his chest. She grabbed another arrow and took out yet another enemy that came running towards us. ‘Fifty-three!’

‘Sera.’ Blackwall heaved as he smashed his shield against a Venatori soldier’s head. I could hear his skull crack. ‘Ya’re cheating!’

‘Twenty-five!’ She giggled again as another Venatori mage tumbled backwards, dead. ‘I ain’t! I just can’t count!’ She grunted.

A Venatori spellbinder grinned from under his hood towards me, his lips moving rapidly as he readied to make another attack.

‘Too slow!’ I grinned and took the mage down with a large storm of electricity. I looked to my side and saw another Red Templar storming my way. I readied myself.

Some Red Templars were more advanced than others. There were men who had red eyes and blackened veins, men with Red Lyrium growing from their heads and arms, and then there were the men and women who didn’t resemble anything anymore, and were slowly growing into Red Lyrium corpses, their bodies scarred and grey. These creatures had gone into a full frenzy, berserk. They didn’t scream as you cut them down, they didn’t bat an eye or flinched at anything. They were as good as dead already. The Venatori mages and soldiers were almost as crazy as their Red Lyrium brethren. They casted their spells so quickly, they didn’t even care they were exhausting and depleting themselves of energy. They gulped down normal, magical Lyrium as if it was water. Their eyes glowed blue because of it, and foam appeared near their mouths.

I moved my hands and conjured six phantom arrows, firing them forwards. Two hit the Red Templar in the head, and three hit him in the chest. The Red Templar moaned and fell down face first, a couple of inches away from me.

‘One missed!’ Sera grinned. ‘Minus two points!’

I rolled my eyes and focused on the next enemy trying to breach our defences. Blackwall laughed though, and gave the strange Elf a fist bump.

I was done fighting another Red Templar as the trebuchet fired a huge flaming rock into the air. The ground shuddered, and the sound of the rock crashing down on the mountain in front of us made me lose my balance.
‘Bam!’ Sera cheered.

‘Guys…’ Blackwall cursed. Behind us, five enemies had slipped through, climbing over the wooden stronghold walls.

‘Stay here! I’ll take care of them!’ I heaved and ran inside.

Near the extinguished bonfire, six villagers were encircled by the Red Templars who had slipped past me. Two human men, a human woman and a female Elf, and two young children hiding behind their human mother, were crying and begging for their lives. In front of them, an Inquisition scout and a Templar were cursing and threatening, waving their swords in an attempt to keep the Red Lyrium monsters away.

‘Maker curse you!’ The Templar yelled. I had seen her around. What was her name… Lysette? She never once talked to me. I remembered she didn’t even look me in the eye… certainly not after what happened with Simon. The Templars and ex-Templars at Haven despised me. But right now, I didn’t care for their opinion. I will help them, if Lysette likes it or not.

I laid my hand flat on the ground, willing it to move. Two spikes erupted from the earth, impaling one Red Templar, and hurting another. The creatures roared, their group dispersing.

Lysette and the other scout attacked. Together we took out the rest of them.

‘Go! To the Chantry!’ I heaved to the shivering villagers, who had pressed themselves against a cabin wall for safety. ‘Now!’

The villagers murmured, frightened, and ran up the hill. The Inquisition scout nodded at me gratefully and followed the villagers.

‘Thank you.’ Lysette grunted, finally looking at me.

I dipped my head silently.

Suddenly, the earth thundered again. I turned around and ran back to the gates, just in time to see that another flaming rock had been fired from a trebuchet. It had hit the mountainside, creating a huge avalanche of debris and snow. I watched as the curtain of ice and death buried the enemy troops that were still marching down the valley. They cried out in surprise, buried alive.

Good.

The lights of their torches that had been enlightening the mountains dimmed, extinguishing with the avalanche.

‘That’s friggin’ awesome!’ Sera cheered, and clapped her hands.

‘That’ll teach ’em!’ Blackwall wiped some red flaring blood from his face, sweat dripping down his beard.

I stared at the mass grave before us, the white snow still rummaging through the valley. It was too quiet. Too easy.

Something else is coming.

A huge, loud screech filled the silent air, thundering louder than the avalanche ever did. I held my breath as the screech came closer and closer.
A sound I had heard before.

I ran to Sera and Blackwall, eyes opened wide as I screamed. ‘DRAGON!’ The great beast blasted one of the trebuchets into little pieces, splinters flying through the heavy air.

‘Oh… balls.’ Sera mumbled, her eyes following the dark, winged creature crossing the sky above us.

‘Everyone to the gates!’ Commander Cullen ran towards us, his troops behind him. His golden eyes were big, panicked, scared. His armour had turned black with blood and bile. ‘Pull back, now!’ He screamed as he passed us.

Sera and Blackwall turned around immediately, following the troops inside.

The military camp and its tents, dummies and training pits were burning to the ground. ‘Blasted shoulder!’ Harritt, the blacksmith, cursed. He was barging with his fist on the door of his house near the stables.

‘Saeris!’ Commander Cullen yelled to me.

Fuck! I ran towards the forge, jumping over the frozen bodies of Inquisition soldiers, villagers, and Red Templars and Venatori. They had just died… how are their corpses frozen already? The air was growing darker and cloudier, the wind raging against me as I sprinted towards the blacksmith. A storm was coming.

‘Move! I’ll try to open it!’ I yelled at Harritt.

‘Thank you!’ Harritt wheezed. The cottage was on fire, and debris was blocking its entrance. I tried to push it away first, but failed. I summoned magic on my hands, preparing to blast the whole damn wall away.

‘Incoming!’ The Iron Bull came running towards me. I jumped aside just in time as Bull smashed into the door, horns forward. ‘Here you go!’ He roared. Maxwell, Cassandra, Varric, Solas and Cole were hurrying behind the Qunari man. They were covered in blood and dust and wood. Their faces pale, lips blue because of the cold.

‘Good one!’ Harritt hurried inside his ruined home. I saw him take a small necklace from the table, opening it in a hurry. On the inside, there was a picture of a woman. The fire had not burned it away yet. ‘Just grabbing the essentials.’ Harritt huffed. ‘Won’t die for the forge!’ The smithy then ran back outside, sprinting towards the gates.

‘Thanks, Bull.’ Maxwell smacked the Qunari on his back. Bull straightened himself, and plucked some dust from his horns. ‘Saeris! Are you alright? Have you seen the…’

‘Who didn’t?’ Varric spat some blood on the snow.

‘Yes. I’ve seen it.’ I nodded. ‘But we have to move, now! They are evacuating the village!’

Soldiers and mages were running towards the gates, leaving their posts, their belongings, everything behind as the dragon raged above us.

We ran back towards Cullen. ‘Move it! Move it!’ He yelled. As soon as all of us were inside, the Commander hauled the doors closed. ‘We need everyone back to the Chantry! It’s the only building that might hold against… that beast!’

I stared at the sky, and saw how the stars disappeared behind a dark creature, the span of its wings
double the size of its body. The dragon screeched again.

Cullen sighed as he looked towards the Herald, his voice softer as he whispered. ‘At this point… just make them work for it.’ The Commander didn’t look at me as he turned around and marched towards the Chantry with his men.

This can’t be happening. We can’t lose!

Maxwell put his hand on my shoulders. ‘See? I’m fine. They haven’t killed us yet!’ He winked at me. He hadn’t lost hope. Not yet. We followed Cullen upstairs, but saw that some Red Templars and Venatori had climbed across Haven’s walls like before.

Maxwell raised his hand. ‘We’ll take care of them! Cullen, reform your troops. We’ll meet you at the Chantry!’

The Commander nodded and hurried forward, while we turned right towards the fighting. Some survivors had fled into the tavern. Two Inquisition soldiers were holding back three Red Templars as the monsters tried to get inside.

‘Shitty… arse… red things!’ Sera cursed as she shot down one of the Red Templars with an arrow to the face.

Cole appeared from behind me. I yelped out in surprise as he jumped across the path, hauling his daggers across the enemies.

We killed the other Red Templars, and the people who had been hiding in the tavern hurried back outside.

‘It’s burning!’ They screamed.

Fire was climbing across the tavern’s walls as the villagers stumbled outside, trampling on one another.

‘Shit!’ Bull cursed and helped some people get up.

‘Get to the Chantry!’ Cassandra ordered.

‘I can’t get up! Help me! It hurts!’ Someone was still inside, screaming anxiously.

‘Flissa’s still in there!’ Varric cried out.

‘Maxwell, no!’ I screamed, but Maxwell already jumped inside the burning tavern.

I had almost jumped in after him, but Solas grabbed my arms, pulling me back against his chest. After a couple of seconds, Maxwell hurried back outside again, Flissa hanging on his shoulders. Her face was smeared with dust and smoke, and she coughed badly. But she was alive.

‘Damnit Max!’ I cursed.

Blackwall took Flissa from Maxwell’s shoulders, looking at the weak girl, concerned.

‘Take her to the Chantry… Go!’ Cassandra looked down to Flissa motherly. Blackwall nodded and ran back to where we came from.

‘Don’t worry, Saeris!’ Maxwell smirked. ‘I have Andraste on my side.’ He smiled and lifted his hands to the sky. At that point, the roof of the tavern collapsed. ‘See?’ He winked at us.
‘Help!’ Other people screamed.

We saved Adan near his apothecary. But for Mineave, the Elf who did research for the Inquisition, we were too late. She was barricaded behind the doors of the healer’s hut. The pots filled with herbs exploded before we could get to her.

Adan cursed, and then cried. ‘Our Lady is with you, Herald! Thank you!’ He heaved.

‘She’s not hurting now.’ Cole was standing in front of the burning Healer’s hut.

‘I’m sorry.’ I whispered to the flames. I’m sorry we couldn’t save you.

‘Fenedhis!’ Solas cursed as he blasted the door of his cabin away. ‘I have to retrieve my staff!’ He cursed and went inside.

‘Solas!’ I screamed as his cabin burst into flames.

But the Elf hurried back outside, ice coating his body. ‘I have it.’ He sighed, twisting his staff in his hands, the crystal on top buzzing with familiarity.

We continued for the gates, and came across the body of Threnn, alongside two Venatori. We also couldn’t save Seggrit, the merchant… I heard he died while trying to grab some of his wares.

I wanted to save everyone. I wish I had. But there were so many things going on… so many deaths…

I hope they are at peace. I hope that they find the beyond they deserve. To their Maker’s, or their Creators’, side.

‘Move! Keep going! The Chantry is your shelter!’ Chancellor Roderick was standing inside the Chantry doors, and called out to the villagers who ran inside. His face had turned from cranky to worried, pale. Blood was splattered on his white, Chantry gown. Vivienne was standing next to him. She smiled faintly as she saw us running towards them.

We ran inside, and closed the doors behind us. Inside, the Chantry was full of people and soldiers, wounded and scared. Lost. We were with so many… just some hours ago… I never… I never got the chance to speak to most of them… to look them in the eyes.

I never dared to.

I always thought they wouldn’t look back to me.

But I never gave people a chance to become a part of my life.

And now, I might’ve lost friends I never had.

‘Maker, save us!’ Chancellor Roderick huffed and collapsed onto the floor. Cole was beside him, his face partly obscured by the shadow of his hat. The Chancellor moaned slightly and stared at the young boy under his shoulder.

‘He tried to stop a Templar. The blade went deep. He’s going to die.’ Cole murmured, almost too silent to hear. His face was pulled into a sad, and painful grimace, almost as if he was hurting himself. As if he could feel it.

‘What a charming boy…’ The Chancellor heaved.
‘Here! Quickly!’ Some healers had made it, and had regrouped alongside Andraste’s statue at the back of the Chantry hall. Cole pulled the Chancellor upright, and helped him get to the makeshift beds that were scattered on the ground.

I went and sat down next to some of the human healers. There were one surgeon and two nurses left. Adan was helping too, although he didn’t have any ingredients ready to make health potions. I knelt down next to an Elven man squirming on the ground. My magic slowly left my hands, tracing his body for wounds, and closing them carefully.

‘Herald!’ Commander Cullen pushed through the crowd and stopped in front of Maxwell, who was talking in hushed tones to Cassandra not far from me.

The Seeker nodded, her hand squishing Maxwell’s shoulder tenderly, before she stepped aside.

‘Our position is not good.’ Cullen continued. ‘That dragon stole back any time you might have earned us.’ His fur armour coat was covered in blood, the golden sheen turning copper. His face was pale, bloodied. There was a nasty, deep cut alongside his forehead, and drops of blood were dripping down onto his blonde, thick furrowed eyebrows.

‘I’ve seen an Archdemon.’ Cole mumbled from Chancellor Roderick’s side. His eyes were large, skipping from one corner of the room to another, as if he was hearing everything and everyone at once. ‘I was in the Fade, but it looked like that.’

What? He was in the Fade? He means he was dreaming, right?

‘I don’t care what it looks like!’ Cullen sighed deeply, frustrated. ‘It has cut a path for that army. They’ll kill everyone in Haven!’

‘The Elder One doesn’t care about the village.’ Cole interrupted again, his voice calmly monotone now. ‘He only wants the Herald.’

The man underneath my hand winced as I stood up quickly, my eyes piercing through Maxwell.

Maxwell glanced at me. ‘If it will save these people…’ His eyes crossed the room and found Cassandra. I saw him shiver. ‘He can have me.’

‘Maxwell. No.’ I stepped over the fresh dead bodies on the ground, passing the Chancellor and Cole, and grabbed Maxwell’s arm firmly. ‘No.’ I bit again.

‘It won’t.’ Cole stared at us, his voice shook a little. ‘He wants to kill you. No one else matters, but he’ll crush them, kill them anyway. I don’t like him.’

‘You don’t like…?’ Cullen raised his shoulders in confusion and annoyance. ‘Herald, there are no tactics to make this survivable. The only thing that slowed them was the avalanche. We could turn the remaining trebuchets, cause one last slide.’ The Commander dropped his firm, confident shoulders.

Maxwell shook his head. ‘We’re overrun. To hit the enemy, we’d bury Haven.’ He pulled away his arm so I’d let go. His eyes were strong and determined as he looked down to me. No need to worry. I’ll fix this. I’ll fix everything. That’s what he was thinking.

He was wrong.

Tears started to form between my lashes. I looked down for a moment.
Is this the end?

A hand caressed my lower back, its warmth sipping through my wet and cold clothes. Solas smiled softly at me, his eyes calm.

Everyone started to gather around us. Leliana, Josephine and Varric, Vivienne, Sera, Blackwall, Dorian and Bull… we were all together. Cassandra took Maxwell’s hand in hers. He stared at her long, dirty fingers entangling with his.

‘We’re dying, but we can decide how.’ Cullen glanced at me, his eyes boring into mine apologetically. ‘Many don’t get that choice.’

Many don’t, indeed.

‘Yes, that.’ Cole intervened and looked the Chancellor in the eyes. ‘Chancellor Roderick can help. He wants to say it before he dies.’

The old man stared at our group. As he spoke, blood-coloured spit dripped from his cracked lips. ‘There is a path. You wouldn’t know it unless you’d made the summer pilgrimage. As I have.’

Roderick pushed himself up, and the healers cursed as their bandages slipped from his wounds. ‘The people can escape. She must’ve shown me. Andraste must have shown me so I could… tell you.’

‘What are you on about?’ Maxwell took the man’s shoulders, lifting him upright. His eyes were big, hopeful.

‘It was whim that I walked the path. I did not mean to start, it was overgrown. Now, with so many in the Conclave dead, to be the only one who remembers… I don’t know, Herald.’ Roderick coughed. ‘If this simple memory can save us, this could be more than mere accident. You could be more.’

Maxwell let go of the Chancellor’s shoulders slightly, and looked over his shoulder to the Commander. ‘What about it, Cullen. Will it work?’

‘Possibly.’ Cullen’s lips turned up ever so slightly, his golden brown eyes brightening. ‘If he shows us the path. But what of your escape?’

No.

Maxwell stared into the empty space above the hunched Chancellor, towards the hundreds of flickering candles at Andraste’s marble feet. And I could clearly see what he wanted to do.

Over my dead body.

Hell no.

He will not go out there. I won’t let him.

‘Perhaps you will surprise it, find a way…’ Commander Cullen whispered, his eyes sad.

‘No.’ I stepped forward, my voice so loud it surprised the others standing near us. ‘Maxwell, I will not let you kill yourself. It’s too dangerous.’

Maxwell grinned. ‘Saeris, I’ll be…’

‘No! You won’t be fine! This is suicide!’ My voice cracked at the end. The tears dripped over my swollen and red cheeks.
'There is no other way, Saeris.' Maxwell rested his hand on my shoulder. I shook it off angrily.

'I'll go. You’re too important.'

'No. You can’t. This is… this is my duty. Only I can do this.' Maxwell dangled his hand to his side. 'This is my destiny.'

'Please…' I heaved, panicked. I can’t lose him… not another friend… a brother. ‘I promised I’d protect you.’

‘And you have.’ Maxwell took my hand and kissed my bruised knuckles. ‘Now, it’s my turn.’

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He took a couple of minutes to prepare and to say goodbye to everyone.

I can’t let this happen. In good conscious, I can’t. I won’t.

Maxwell was standing in front of Cassandra, they were holding hands. Their voices were so soft I couldn’t hear them from where I was standing. But I saw how difficult the words were leaving their lips, how slow and… painful. Cassandra laughed half-heartedly at the joke Maxwell cracked, but she couldn’t fully. She knew he was saying goodbye. Forever.

Solas was standing next to me, talking. But I wasn’t listening. My eyes were glued to my friend… my friend who was going to let himself be killed… for us… for me.

'He will not perish.' Solas wanted to put his hand on my shoulder, but I stepped aside stubbornly. 'He is resourceful, he will find a way.' Solas retreated his hand slowly, his eyes searching for mine.

I stared at the ground. Papers were scattered everywhere. Books, notes, letters… floating through the Chantry, burning between the candles. I bit my tongue until my mouth filled itself with blood. And it was hot. Boiling with pure wrath.

I will not let Maxwell die.

'I know, Solas.' My voice was hard, cold. And I was lying. Pretending to be alright with… with letting him go and die for naught.

The Chantry was emptying itself as people hurried through the small door that lead to the path… to safety. Everyone was helping, carrying each other.

'Don’t do stupid things, kid.' Varric smacked Maxwell’s back amicably, but his voice was filled with sadness.

'Kick that Elder Arse’s… arse!' Sera snickered.

'What she said.' The Iron Bull tried to laugh. But it didn’t quite work.

'Herald, ya’re an honourable man. Andraste guide you.' Blackwall lifted his chin respectfully.

'Too bad we haven’t been able to talk much.' Maxwell smiled back at the Grey Warden.

'You must be careful, my dear.' Vivienne’s lips curled slightly, but honestly. She truly cared.

'Oh, you’ll be just fine! With your luck, you must be!' Dorian was standing next to Bull, his fabulous armour dirty and tattered. But his face was bright and hopeful.
‘Good luck, Herald.’ Solas stepped forwards to Maxwell, his hands bound to his back, not letting any doubt or sign of fear slip through.

‘Take care of her.’ Maxwell glanced at me. I couldn’t look up to his stare, and bit my lip more, turning it into mush.

‘I will.’ Solas answered softly.

Almost all people had left for the path below. Now, Varric and the others turned back too. Only Maxwell, Cassandra, Cullen, Solas and I remained.

‘Come.’ Solas grabbed my hand firmly, and stepped back. But I planted my feet on the ground, not moving even an inch.

‘I’ll come… You go already.’ I mumbled, still staring at the ground. We couldn’t take the dead with us, so the corpses will all remain here, with Andraeste, buried underneath Her shelter.

Solas lingered for a moment, and I almost feared he would drag me downstairs. But then, he nodded and turned around, strutting towards the others.

‘Saeris.’ Maxwell took my chin between his fingers, lifting me up so he could look into my eyes. ‘Go.’

‘I’ll go.’ I lied. ‘I just want to see you as long as possible.’ I faked a sad smile, and tried to look away, wrenching my face from his grasp.

‘… I’ll see you soon, alright?’ Maxwell blinked a couple of times too much, and it betrayed the tiny tears that he had been trying to hide.

‘Okay.’ I whispered brokenly.

Some scouts passed us, running outside.

‘They’ll load the trebuchets. Keep the Elder One’s attention until we’re above the tree line.’ Commander Cullen laid his hand on Maxwell’s back. ‘If we are to have a chance, if you are to have a chance, let that thing hear you.’

Maxwell smiled and nodded and walked back to the Chantry door. He stopped next to Cassandra and smiled at her.

She smiled back.

And then, Maxwell opened the door, letting the bright white light seep into the dark room filled with death.

And there, in that heavenly light, he disappeared, the heavy doors closing behind him, casting us into darkness. He hadn’t even looked back.

He was ready to die.

But I wasn’t ready for him to die yet.

Cassandra walked back to me and stopped. ‘We have to go now.’

‘I know.’
'You won’t be coming with us, will you?’ She sighed. Of course she saw right through me.

‘I have to protect him, Cassandra.’

‘I know.’

‘Don’t tell Solas until you’ve left Haven. The Inquisition needs him.’ I stared at the black doors in front of me.

I will follow Maxwell into the light.

If I am mortal now, I’ll die for what is right. For my friend. And that isn’t such a bad death. I’ll welcome it.

‘Maker be with you.’ Cassandra took my shoulder and squeezed it.

‘And with you.’ I smiled and looked up to the Seeker. ‘Good luck.’

Cassandra dipped her head and took off. She didn’t look back either. She and Maxwell really belong together. I’ll make sure that happens.

‘Saeris, what are you… no.’ Cullen stopped in front of me. ‘You will not go out there.’

‘I will, Cullen.’

‘Maker… You will die!’ He sighed.

‘And so will Maxwell if I don’t do something!’ I spat and stepped aside, going for the Chantry doors.

‘I promised…’

Cullen blocked my exit again, his whole body hovering above mine. ‘Saeris.’ He doesn’t call me Lady anymore. Good.

I sighed and took his face between my hands, and he closed his eyes at my touch. Slowly, my magic spiralled from my fingertips, curling over his stubble, his cheeks, towards the deep cut on his forehead. He didn’t back away, but let my magic slowly close the wound, stitching the skin back together carefully.

‘There.’ I smiled, my eyes watery. ‘That’s better.’

‘Be careful.’ Cullen whispered, his eyes still closed.

‘Of course.’ I lied.

Cullen didn’t open his eyes as I stepped around him towards the doors. I grinned as I opened them, light and wind and snow stinging my face. I breathed in the air and closed the doors behind me. The Commander disappeared back into the darkness within, his armour covered with flickering shadows cast by Andraste’s candles. His eyes were open as I glanced at him one more time through the crack of the doors as I closed them.

They were confident.

As was I.

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Outside, it was empty. The only sound was the wind screeching and blazing past the burning houses. I stepped over the corpses on the ground that were almost completely buried underneath the snow. Faces I recognized, and faces I didn’t, all were the same now.

I saw the familiar pattern of Maxwell’s boots imprinted on the ground. They lead down the hill, towards the trebuchets.

It was awfully quiet, a silence before yet another storm.

And what a storm it would be.

But that wouldn’t hold me back. The cold won’t, the wind won’t. No friend or foe. Not the Elder One. Not even destiny.

This is what I have to do.

Mortal or not. Human or Elven. I will do this.

And if I’ll die, so be it. I’ve lived long enough. Maxwell is still young. He deserves a chance, how small it may be. I will give it to him.

I will give it my all to protect him.

I passed Solas’ burning cabin, Adan’s apothecary, the tavern… I ran past the extinguished campfire and Haven’s gates, the military camp, the stables… and I could feel Maxwell’s presence growing. I was close. He’s still alive, I can still help him.

A small smile curled on my lips.

We’ll confront the Elder One together… we’ll fire the trebuchets. I’ll distract the Elder One as Maxwell escapes. That’s the plan. It’ll work. It has to. We can still have the higher ground.

We can still…

I cried out, screamed at the top of my lungs. I roared. But no sound could leave my mouth. I hunched over, my knees digging into the ground. The snow beneath me slowly turned a crimson red. Blood.

My blood.

I winced as the steel sword that pierced my stomach, was slowly retreated from my flesh. It left a gaping hole inside of me, and I felt the wind passing though me like I was a ghost.

It felt unreal.

It hurt… but it didn’t… at first. And then it did. I couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe…

My fingers pushed against my wound instinctively, as if it would stop the blood from pouring out, and stared at my hands covered in deep red, warm blood. I choked, coughed, and felt how my blood dripped from my body, seeping into the ground like the roots of a tree. Deep. Thick.

The snow cracked underneath the heavy footsteps that slowly walked around me, teasingly. The steel boots stopped in front of me, and I could smell the Red Lyrium, hear it buzzing, see it glowing from the hand that lifted up my face.

The Red Templar kneeled in front of me and grinned, his teeth blackened and rotten.
I tried to breathe, but could only heave ever so slightly.

Simon cocked his head and smiled brighter.

‘I’ve been looking for you, Saeris.’

Chapter End Notes

TaTaTaaaaahhh guess who’s back? Back again? It's Simon! Yay?

This was the first part of In Your Heart Shall Burn. Next chapter will contain even more dramatic *gasp* situations! Thank you for reading and have a great day!
Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light

- Dylan Thomas

***

The steel of the sword felt cold against my skin, against the warm blood gushing out of my wound. I’ve been stabbed before. But not like this. Not this deep. The tip of the edged blade pierced through my back and I could see my pale and shocked reflection in the muddied steel that stuck out of my stomach. Gashed. Impaled. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. I could only stare at the blood spreading underneath me, clawing through the snow faster and faster, thicker and thicker. My hands reached for my wound instinctively as the blade was slowly retreated from my flesh.

I felt every inch drag against my intestines.

I heard the scraping of the metal against my skin.

I smelled my own blood, tasted it in my mouth.

I wondered how long that blade had been inside of me, how long it took to retreat it from my body. It felt like hours. I hadn’t breathed, hadn’t blinked, hadn’t cried or winced.

My knees were drenched in ice and blood, cold and warmth.

I couldn’t focus on the Red Templar in front of me. Not until he spoke, lifting my chin upwards.
It was then that my mind started to work again, that I recognized his face.

‘S…’ I gurgled. Spit rolled over my chin, its consistency red and thick. It dripped down my neck and underneath my bloodied leather armour. ‘Simon.’

Simon smiled. His teeth had turned black, his brown hair grey, falling from his head in patchy locks. The veins on his face were on the verge of popping, and glowed a familiar red. Shards of Red Lyrium followed the lines of his face, along his brows to his jawbone. His lips were brown, almost a greyish black. And his eyes… a mix of empty grey and full, glaring red.

‘I’ve been looking for you, Saeris.’ He whispered against my ears, his voice mixing with the buzzing Red Lyrium. He said my name slowly, pronouncing every syllable as if it was a moan. Deep, sultry, and full of hatred.

Not him. Not now.

Maxwell…

‘Not happy to see me?’ Simon grinned and let go of my face, slowly taking a step back to get a better look at me. His eyes followed my trembling figure. There was no humanity left in them.

The blood splattered across my hands. Slowly, I willed my magic. It took everything. But after some seconds, I felt my fingertips glow against my wound. The flesh knitted together teasingly slow. But it was healing silently, tissue by tissue, skin by skin. It felt like a needle was trying to sew my stomach back together with my own blood as its thread.

‘Go to hell.’ I managed to gasp. More blood splattered over my face.

‘Already been there.’ Simon grinned.

I cried out hoarsely as he grabbed my neck, my throat bobbing by the lack of air. He lifted me up, my whole body floating from the ground, and held me before his dooming figure. My healing hands let go of my stomach, and I felt some of the knitted flesh rip against my own weight.

‘Now,’ Simon tutted mockingly, ‘Let’s not undo my work.’ The hand he held across my throat squeezed the remaining air out of me, and I saw his red flaring veins colour a bright blue.

‘Don’t!’ I choked, squirming against his smothering grip. But it was too late. The little Lyrium that was still flowing through his body, reached his fingertips and crossed over to my skin, climbing in between my pores.

He was Smiting me. Like he had done so many years ago after I first rescued him. Like he had done to take me to the Circle. Only this time he wouldn’t take me anywhere. He only wanted to kill me.

Maxwell! I can’t lose my magic now! I can’t help Maxwell like this! No!

But I felt the thousands of little needles pricking my skin, weeding me from my powers. My magic dripped away from me like water, like my own blood was doing from the partly-healed wound in my stomach.

I’m done for.

‘Here we are.’ Simon laughed, almost howling from satisfaction as he dropped me back on the ground, into my own puddle of blood and ice.
I screamed as my wound ripped open again, and I felt how my skin was holding on as if by a thread.

‘You should’ve killed me when you had the chance.’ Simon walked around my quivering figure balled up between the dirt. ‘But I knew you couldn’t hurt me, Saeris.’

He stopped next to my face, his armour squeaking as he squatted down.

‘You bastard.’ I heaved. You damned bastard. I’ll kill him. I’m going to murder him, cut him into a thousand pieces and burn his flesh with my own hands. I swear.

‘What? I can’t hear you?’ Simon cackled sarcastically. He lowered his head to mine, turning his ear in jest to my mouth. But before he could fully turn away, I lifted up my chin and spat. The mixture of spittle and thick, clogging blood splashed across his face, dripping down his hollow cheeks.

‘You little bitch…’ Simon mumbled as he wiped away my bloodied saliva with his thumb and pointer finger. He didn’t have any nails anymore, I noticed. He raised himself slowly, as if it hadn’t bothered him, and walked around my body, stopping in front of my smaller, but still heavily bleeding, gaping wound. ‘I don’t understand I ever wanted a rat like you.’ He growled.

I shrieked as Simon buried his dirty, cold, steel boots into my stomach. The kick was hard, brutal. I felt the push all the way against the inside of my lower back. I rolled a few feet away by his sheer strength, ending up on my back, my eyelids turning heavy as the clouded sky greeted me.

Hiccupping, tears started to roll down my face, my body convulsing with pain I couldn’t feel anymore. I almost fell nothing but the ice cold wind.

‘You’re really something.’ Simon sighed and slowly skulked my way, the snow crunching underneath his towering figure. ‘Normal rabbits would be dead already. But you’re not normal, are you?’

My heart was pumping rapidly, faster and faster the closer he came. He’ll kill me. And there’s nothing I can do. I’m nothing without my magic. Now, I’m just a wounded, little rabbit… If I die…

No. I can’t die now.

If I am mortal, and I let this… monster… kill me… I can’t help Maxwell.

*But the pain will be over? Everything will be over? You’ll be warm, you won’t be alone anymore…*

Death will find me one way or another. But not yet. Not when my friend needs me. He can’t die. Not now, not when this world needs him more than ever.

*But the world doesn’t need you, does it? Does Maxwell even need you? Probably not.*

I don’t care if he needs me. I need him to live. And I can’t rest until I’m sure of that.

*Then why are you laying here? Kill the bastard.*

I stared at the burning sun above me, its light was starting to engulf me, pull me into its blinding warmth. And as if it was a heavenly sign, the sun flashed dark. Not by a cloud, not because I closed my eyes… but because of the dragon screeching along the skies.

Heaven doesn’t want me just yet.

‘I’ll be gentle.’ Simon stopped in front of me. I curled my back against the ground, bracing myself.

I’m going to kill Simon.
I will.

‘You should’ve let me in. You should’ve accepted me. This –this wouldn’t have happened.’ He raised his muddied sword into the air, dangling it above me. It was caked with my own, semi-dried blood. ‘We could’ve been happy.’ It lasted a second. His hesitation. There was a flicker of doubt in his eyes, a sliver of humanity flashing in his enlarged, maroon pupils. For that small, but everlasting second, I pitied him.

I pitied the monster that I’d helped create.

But I didn’t doubt. Not anymore.

The humanity, the light in his eyes was gone as quickly as it had appeared, and the Red Lyrium took over again.

The Templar I had despised had been dead for a while. And maybe once, he had been a good man. Once.

Simon screamed, the Red Lyrium in his body singing his sorrow, as he dragged his sword down towards me.

Now!

I rolled away just in time, screeching at the top of my lungs because of the effort it took. The steel sword impaled itself into the ground.

‘Shit!’ Simon cursed, his neck muscles straining as he tried pulling his sword out of the ground.

I scurried to my feet, but couldn’t straighten myself completely as I felt my wound rip with every little movement. Hunched over, I tiptoed on my feet to get the feeling in my legs back. Spit dripped from my mouth, sweat gleaming on my face. ‘I… I would never have been happy with someone like you.’ The words flowed from my lips easier than I had thought they would. They rolled off of my tongue with so much hatred, so much odium… I almost didn’t recognize my own, scowling voice. Hoarse, soft but so loud, and deep. ‘Never.’

Simon roared, and thrashed his sword from the ground with so much strength, it made the earth shudder. He ran forwards, like a whirlwind, his sword ready to carve my face out.

I’m not so strong. I’m not able with swords or with a bow… Maybe the only thing I’m really good at, is using my magic. Without it, I should be lost.

But I’ve been alive for too damn long to be killed by such a whiny bastard.

And I’ve been alive long enough to know that men driven by rage, are often blinded by it. So much that they can’t even see me coming.

Instead of running away, I ran forward.


Simon drove his weapon forward, but I ducked and lunged across his towering body. The Red Lyrium in his blood sang stronger, feeding Simon more and more of that enraging power. Simon turned on his feet, foam sprouting from his mouth. Again, he raised his sword, swinging it above my head. I cried out as the tip of my left ear was cut off, the warm blood gushing down my earlobe, spreading across my pale white hair.
Simon took another swing, but this time I jumped aside fast enough.

Adrenaline rushed inside of me, taking away the pain of my open stomach, my pulsing ear... until there was nothing but pure focus left. Focus and a burning wrath. I sprinted forwards, too quick for Simon to react. Jumping into the air, I stretched my legs in front of me, pushing with all of my power against his chest. Simon gasped and fell backwards, his sword falling from his hands a few feet away.

I too fell with my back onto the ground, my wound scraping across the snow.

I ground my teeth until I could feel them crack and chip against the inside of my cheek. Blood filled my mouth entirely.

For a moment, Simon and I were both on the ground, the sword an equal distance away from our tired bodies.

I raised myself up, and so did Simon. We shared a look, our eyes connecting so deep, maybe for the first time ever. My green eye started to coil, to burst into emerald flames, dancing within their orbit. I felt power... a power I hadn’t felt before.

There was still some magic left in me.

A little puddle.

It was foreign, maybe a drop of a river I had never been able to reach before.

Simon saw it too, and was almost frozen by looking at it too long, too deeply. Almost. He blinked and cursed, his face pale, his lips parting. The Red Lyrium in his veins danced, urging him to go faster and faster, to strike me down right now. With his bare hands if that’s what was necessary.

He rushed forward.

I looked at my side, to the sword buried underneath the snow and blood, and stretched out my arm, my fingers flexing.

*Please, please, please!*

Simon was right in front of me, his body tumbling down on me, his gloved, spiked fists ready to finish me off once and for all.

And then, faster than a second, faster than I could think or even realise what had happened, the steel sword lunged into the air and into my hand. The jagged point raised into the air, the sword trembled in my hand. Simon screamed out in surprise, but it was too late. As he tumbled down on me, not his fist, but his sword reached its victim first.

The sun reflected on the silver of the sword that stuck out of Simon’s back.

It had cut through his armour like butter, and impaled his heart.

He was hanging over me, his face inches from mine. I could even feel the pulsing heat of the Red Lyrium imbedded in his face, in his veins. He winced and wheezed a jagged breath, drops of too warm, glowing blood dripping on my cold cheeks. Like tears.

‘Saeris.’ He groaned.

I held my breath, unable to move as I held him there hanging on the sword in my trembling hands.
With wide-spread eyes, Simon stared down to me. Tears of bile and blood dripped down his chin.

I bit the inside of my lips and pushed the sword forward, hearing it slicing deeper through Simon’s body. He groaned again as I tilted the sword backwards, retreating it ever so slowly from his body, like he had done to me.

I couldn’t help the wicked smile that danced around my lips, and wondered who the real monster was right now.

With the last inches of the sword pulling back from his body, Simon gasped for air. But it flowed right through him. Right now, we were equal.

I pushed Simon away with my legs, his body flopping down on his back. Staring up at the sky, his eyes shook, the pupils dilating at the sight of the blinding light of the sun radiating on his face.

‘Saeris.’ He whispered again. Not as a curse. Not full of hate. But as a prayer. I raised myself, wincing at my tearing wound, the cold stinging my insides. I limped towards him, stopping next to his face, staring down at the man I hated so.

Simon looked away from the sun, but the light didn’t yet leave his eyes as he stared at me. A crooked grin curled on his lips, tears streaming down his cheeks. One more time, he breathed, clouds dancing from his stilling body.

‘Saeris.’

He exhaled, the sound barely leaving his lips, the lights dying out in his damned eyes. The Red Lyrium kept glowing in his veins for some seconds, and then all turned a pitch black, drying out on the spot.

It’s done.

I’ve killed him.

I stared at the man buried between the snow and contemplated going back inside. I was so cold, in so much pain.

I dangled my hands to my sides, and felt the wind hollowing through my body, cascading against the emptiness inside of me. In the distance, I heard the Elder One’s dragon screeching through the heavens, and for a second I wondered if it was going to come for me, take me to hell.

And as the screeching came closer and closer, I braced myself, back towards the battlefield, eyes still staring at the shallow look in Simon’s pupils.

But the dragon didn’t come. Not for me. I turned around slowly, eyeing the empty military camp.

It’s not coming for me.

Maxwell!

I almost howled as I limped forward, my hands clutching my stomach. My ear had stopped bleeding, and I couldn’t feel the wind gushing against it. Trying not to think too much about how my body was dying, I kept hurrying forward. I tried to find a path between the frozen corpses on the ground, and winced when I felt something crack underneath my feet. It wasn’t snow. Don’t look down.

The echo of the screeching, roaring dragon, high-pitched and clamorous, filled the abandoned
village, filled my body with fear. I have to go faster! Faster!

In the distance, I could already see the trebuchet, ready to fire. The wooden weapon was partly obscured by grey and black scaled wings, crossed with scars and blood and Red Lyrium. I hurried closer, my feet louder than I wanted to.

As I neared the clearing, I stopped behind the partly-destroyed stronghold walls of Haven, and stared at the scene unfolding. The dragon scowled in front of me, its enormous, spiked back turned towards me, its tail swinging against the ground like a dog ready for its meal. And in front of that dragon, stood the Elder One.

He – or it - was even more grotesque from close-by. A mangled, grey corpse. Darkspawn. He looked like darkspawn. Little was left of this monster’s face. Red Lyrium clawed at his frame, almost forming a helmet of sorts. It practically gleamed black instead of red, that’s how deep it went, how old it seemed. His torso resembled mine. Bloodied. Open. Gaping. The raggedy armour he wore was embedded into his rotting flesh, his skin almost resembling the dry scales of his dragon, which didn’t seem as scary anymore compared to its master.

The hands of the Elder One had turned into claws, with scarring long, black nails. And in those hands, dangling in front of that monster’s face, hung Maxwell.

I held my breath, unmoving.

Maxwell.

He’s alive. He’s okay.

He was covered in blood, but it wasn’t his own. I couldn’t see any wounds either, but couldn’t really see his face, for it was inches apart from the Elder One’s head. The mark on Maxwell’s hand buzzed, flaring an emerald light. The light crawled across Max’s arm, as if trying to escape the Elder One’s grasp.

My stomach turned to lead. Well at least what was left of it. In the Elder One’s other hand, gleamed an… an orb? It resembled one I had seen in a dream before, a long, long time ago. Or at least I thought so, I felt so… my eye started to twist and turn, humming against my skull.

Take it! TAKE IT!

‘I once breached the Fade in the name of another, to serve the Old Gods of the Empire in person.’ The Elder One spoke, his voice so deep, it drummed like a bass inside of my chest, filling the eerie silence. The dragon quieted. Maxwell started to thrash in mid-air, wringing against the pain in his hand, his face turning paler and paler. ‘I found only chaos and corruption.’ The Elder One continued. Uncaring. ‘Dead whispers. For a thousand years I was confused. No more. I have gathered the will to return under no name but my own. To champion withered Tevinter and correct this blighted world.’ The Elder One held Maxwell closer to his face, staring into his eyes hatefully. ‘Beg that I succeed, for I have seen the throne of the gods, and it was empty!’

With a gesture, the Elder One threw Maxwell across the clearing. Max smashed into the trebuchet, that groaned against his weight. My friend cried out, his face muddied with pain and desperation. I winced at the sight of it.

Yet, I couldn’t move. I couldn’t help him. I could only stop and stare. If I reveal myself now, I’ll just be killed. I have to move at the right moment…

‘The Anchor is permanent.’ The Elder One took a step towards Maxwell, who laid against the
trebuchet like a sack of flour, holding his breath. ‘You have spoiled it with your stumbling.’

The dragon started to move, its wings spreading across the open space. It bared its rotten, jagged teeth, drool dripping from its slithering tongue. A predator closing in on its victim. The Elder One took a step forward, the dragon following suit, its enormous claws burying into the ground, making it shudder. Maxwell cursed under his breath, and stumbled back on his feet, a sword trembling in his hand.

Max’s hazel eyes darted from his sword, to the trebuchet and back to the Elder One. He blinked rapidly, tears of despair rolling down his face. He was ready to die for us, but still feared it.

I won’t let this happen.

‘So be it. I will begin again, find another way to give this world a nation –and god –it requires.’ The Elder One spat.

Behind me, along the horizon between the valley, I heard the flicker of an arrow reaching for the sky. It burned, like a falling star. A last sign of hope.

I saw Maxwell close his eyes, taking a deep, trembling breath.

‘And you.’ The Elder One hadn’t noticed the flaming arrow, and neared the Herald. ‘I will not suffer even an unknowing enemy. You must die.’

Then, Maxwell opened his eyes, gleaming with the confidence I had feared he’d lost. Bracing himself, he grabbed the rusty sword with both hands, his grip tightening, his eyes focusing on the enemy. Solely. A sly grin appeared on my friend’s blue lips. Cocky, brave, so much like the man I’d come to see as a brother. ‘You expect me to fight, but that’s not why I kept you talking.’ Maxwell scoffed and raised his chin, wiggling his brows in jest. ‘Enjoy your victory. Here’s your prize!’ He quickly turned to his left and kicked the wheel of the trebuchet with his foot.

The trebuchet groaned as it catapulted a boulder of rock and dirt towards the side of the mountain peak behind it. A loud thunder rang through the skies as another avalanche cascaded down the dark hills. It gulped away the pine trees, flowing like a wave towards us.

The Elder One sighed with disinterest and annoyance as Maxwell turned away and made a run for it. He gestured for his dragon, and the beast lifted him up with its bat-like wings. I gaped at the enemy flying away to safety. And then, for just a small moment, I saw the Elder One glare down to me, his eyes piercing through mine.

And I think I saw a hint of surprise.

The avalanche of ice and death raged over the village of Haven, taking down the small cottages, burying the dead with a soft blanket of eternal-resting snow. I burst into a sprint, running forwards, my eyes darting across the clearing.

‘MAXWELL!’ I screamed at the top of my lungs. In the distance, I saw his figure, running as fast as he could.

NO!

I reached forward, like I had with the sword. But instead of pulling, I pushed.

I pushed so hard I felt my fingers crack, the bones twisting by the sheer power. I pushed Maxwell as hard as I could, with all of the hope I had mustered for a hundred years, with all the desperation I had
carried. I pushed and pushed, hoping the snow wouldn’t drown him too.

Let it drown me instead.

_Come on!_

Maxwell was blasted forwards, and his cry echoed through the rumbling air. I saw him disappear underneath the ground. I stopped breathing.

Did he fall?

‘Maxw-‘ I howled, but the snow had already reached me.

It consumed me.

And then all went dark.

***

I opened my eyes, my vision blurry.

It was dark. And deadly silent.

Was I dead?

I winced as I tried to look around, the wound in my stomach protesting my movement.

I’m still alive then. Pain is good.

The stab wound had stopped bleeding. It felt dry, crusty. My skin was clammy with sweat and blood. It felt like I didn’t have any power left in me. I couldn’t feel my legs, couldn’t hear or smell anything. But I could still feel the sting of my injuries. I held onto that.

I laid on my side, my hands still reaching forward. I twitched my fingers and cursed from the pain. My right hand was fractured, my fingers brittle. My wrist twisted in a strange way, dislocated from the rest of my body. I squinted, tried not to cry.

In the distance, I heard someone gasp.

My eyes flared open again, my left eye casting emerald shadows onto the stone walls.

‘A shaft…’ I mumbled. I had landed in some sort of… cavern… perhaps another pilgrimage path, or a mine underneath the mountain?

Another moan echoed through the halls a far distance away.

I quivered as I planted my good hand onto the dusty, rocky floor, and pushed myself up. As I took a step forward, I shrieked in horror. My leg… blood was splattered all over it… and a wooden spike was bursting right through my thigh. Wailing, I limped forwards. My body was broken, utterly broken.

But I still moved forward, along the path, towards the heavy breathing reverberating through the empty halls.

My eye cast a fair light along the walls and ground, like a torch. I tried not to blink. I was afraid that if I did, the darkness would consume me whole. And I wouldn’t open my eyes again. I stopped a
few feet away from where I had fallen, already terribly out of breath. I noticed a small pile of wood, covered in blood that wasn’t mine. Between the splinters and the dust, I noticed a gold flickering sheen. My left eye focused on it, and the gold emblem reflected back. I hunched over, trying not to scream as my wound again ripped a little, and grabbed the golden pin from the ground. The eye of the Inquisition, surrounded by flames. Maxwell’s vigil… the pin he had clipped on his armour…

I stared at the ceiling above me, and noticed the dark hole enclosed by melting snow, dripping down on my face.

It was like a punch.

Reality kicked in.

Maxwell is still alive. He fell down like me… He’s wounded… there was so much blood…

Another moan in the distance.

I started to limp again, faster and faster, until I saw a light at the end of the tunnel.

For a moment, I thought heaven was behind this cavern. I thought the Beyond was welcoming me within its lights.

But then the wind howled against my broken frame.

I sighed a trembling breath.

Before me, meadows of snow and ice and wind spread towards the horizon, towards the mountains. The moon was enlightening the no-man’s-land, the dark sky flickering with a thousand little stars. The air scorched along the empty plains of heavenly white, and in front of me, like the footfalls of a cat, scattered a path of blood. It was stark against the pureness of the ice. The blood was dark, wet…

Fresh.


He’s close.

Again, I hobbled forwards, almost falling over as my feet sagged into the thick, powdery snow, the wind trying to push me down. And yet, I felt the strength returning in me. Maybe it was adrenaline, the last rush before death. Or perhaps my magic was returning… or my remaining hope was urging me to go on in vain?

I didn’t care.

I had to keep moving.

I had been following the trail of blood for what felt like hours, when I saw Maxwell’s hunched figure in the distance. The wind was blasting the powdery snow into the air, and I saw Max holding his arm in front of his face to get a better sight.

The wind whistled into my ear, toying with me.

*I’ll take your friend down… I won’t let him make it.*

But I saw Maxwell’s determination, his fortitude. It made me hopeful.
His frame was but a shadow in the distance, but I could still hear him groaning, see him limping… badly. The path of blood before me had deepened, widened. Perhaps the wind was right, perhaps he won’t make it…

A warm rush blazed inside my body. My magic was slowly returning.

But too slow.

Time to make some very hard decisions.

I can heal myself slowly, and try to help Maxwell… but I won’t be strong enough to heal him too, let alone warm him up.

Or… or I can heal him from a distance, while warming up his body… it will be slow… but maybe I can give him enough strength to get to the others…

But then I’ll…

I will die today.

I have to die today.

Only one of us will survive. One of us has to.

For some, it might’ve been a difficult choice. But not for me. I had been alive long enough… and maybe this was my destiny? This was the promise I had made?

Not to help close the Breach.

But to help Maxwell? He will save this world. Not me.

Perhaps, in a way, Andraste has chosen me too?

I lifted my hands, ignoring my broken fingers, my bruised knuckles that were turning black, and felt some magic twists around my fingernails. Focusing on the trembling figure pushing against the blazing wind, I fired away everything I got. One push felt like a thousand spells. It felt like I was on a battlefield protecting hundreds of soldiers at a time, healing and warding. But in reality, almost nothing burst from my hands. Drops of magic followed my eyes towards Maxwell, creeping over his shivering shoulders almost like a caress.

Maxwell stopped, his back straightening as the magic kissed his bruised knuckles, his fractured ribs, his bare scratches all over his body. He faced me, eyes squinting, in the distance.

But he couldn’t see me.

I was too far away, too deep into the snow.

He turned back, resuming his struggle against the snow.

And for the hours to come, I kept following him, tracing his steps, casting drops of the little magic I had his way. And in every drop flowed my hope, my prayers.

Heal.

Please.
Live.

I don’t know how long it took for us to reach the top of the mountain. I think I’ve forgotten. The only thing that I remember is my magic screaming inside my body, yearning to heal my own skin, to warm my bones. And I remember how hard it was to refuse that pure instinct of survival. Over time, I saw Maxwell taking bigger steps, the trail of blood getting weaker.

And I got further and further away from him.

Blood was drenching my clothes, my body numb from the raging cold.

And as hungry wolves howled in the distance, I wish they’d come and finish me off. I wished for Simon to be raised from the dead, to come for me with his sword again and release me from this agonizing pain and cold.

I flickered my hand upwards, sending down another drop of magic forwards, commanding it to reach my friend. Send him warmth. Release. Take away his pain.

Lead him to safety.

To the Inquisition.

Take me instead.

Take me.

I couldn’t go on anymore. I was empty. Tired. Broken. Slowly, the pain started to ebb away.

No…

I tried going faster, cursing against the wind, against the snow grabbing my ankles and refusing to let me go.

And –and then the wind started to calm, the storm coming to a halt.

Time seemed to stop.

And there some feet away, bordered by dark pine trees, stood Maxwell, his back again to me. And before him were two rocks, a small opening in between them. Like a gate. A crossing to the other side.

For a second I thought we were both dead.

But that wasn’t the gate towards heaven or hell… but to the valley.

‘There!’ A voice echoed through the open plains of ice.

Maxwell fell to his knees.

‘It’s him!’

Another figure came running through the passage.

And then another, followed by a small group of soldiers.

Commander Cullen signalled his men, his orders following loud and swiftly.
'Thank the Maker!' Cassandra cried out, sprinting to Maxwell’s hunching, shivering figure. I heard her curse and pray at the same time, her voice softer with every gasp of his name. Over and over again.

I stopped in my tracks and stared at them.

I couldn’t feel the cold snow anymore. Nor the pain in my stomach and leg, in my fingers or ear. I couldn’t feel anything at all.

Except relief.

He made it.

He will survive.

It’s done.

I too sagged onto my knees, tears gliding across my blue cheeks.

‘O Falon’Din.’ I whispered, my voice softer than the howling wind. I felt hands creeping at my back, caressing my spine with warmth, alluring me to close my eyes. ‘Lethanavir—Friend to the Dead.’

Maybe for a second, I’ll lay down.

The snow felt… warm. I pressed myself against the soft ground, and it felt like a pillow made of feathers and clouds. So warm. So calm.

‘Guide my feet.’ I hushed, my breath drifting away. ‘Calm my soul.’

‘Help! Someone’s over there!’ Someone screamed, footsteps running my way.

I reached forward, towards Maxwell, and saw him being carried away. Cassandra was under his arm, hoisting him straight. She stared at me over her shoulder, eyes big and scared. Her mouth traced my name. It made Maxwell turn around too, and finally he saw me. His eyes turned big, his mouth agape. Tears were gliding over his tanned, blood-splattered cheeks. And then he went rigid, bashing against Cassandra’s strong arms. But she didn’t let him go. Instead, she held his broken body, hushing his name, crying for him to stop. He had to move on. He had to, for me, for all of us.

I smiled faintly and tried to look up, tilting my head. Everything felt so heavy, so tiring. The stars above me glittered across the foreign sky that actually wasn’t so foreign. It’s been the same sky since I came here, a sky I’ve known for the longest time. I don’t think I can remember the sky on Earth. Perhaps it looked like this one.

Maybe I’ll visit it one day.

Maybe tomorrow.

That sounds good.

‘O Falon’Din.’ I whispered again.

‘Maker –no!’ A familiar voice shrieked, warm hands touching my frozen face. ‘Please, no!’ Commander Cullen draped his lion-like mantle over my rolled-up body.

But the snow still felt warmer.
Saeris.

Someone else called out to me.

I traced the patterns of the stars.

‘Saeris –Saeris please! You there! Get more help! QUICKLY!’ Commander Cullen shook my body, lifting me up. I felt the press of his armour against my chest, his hushing words floating past my ears as he rocked me back and forth. ‘Stay with me!’

My mother and father… Sybil and Nenhara… Daniel and my brother… Elgadira and Moira. They all called out to me. Beyond the stars.

‘Lead me to my rest.’ The final words floated from my lips. The last lines of a Dalish prayer.

I think I once told you, that death isn’t like drifting off into a deep slumber. That it doesn’t feel like going away to where it’s warm and cosy. I told you that death feels cold. Quick. Silent. Death was like switching off the lights in your room, or blinking your eyes when you go to sleep at night and the next moment it’s morning.

And I told you, that in the end, we are all alone.

But I wasn’t alone.

Many were smiling at me behind the curtain of silence and pain and cold, behind the stars and the clouds. They called out to me, calling me home.

I closed my eyes.

Have I fulfilled my promise? Am I free now?

The stars didn’t answer.

I didn’t care.

I followed the voices.

Buried in blood and snow, I died.

Chapter End Notes

Enjoyed it? ;-)

Next chapter: POVs! Yay!
First of all! The reason it took a month for me to update; Originally, this chapter was supposed to be a Maxwell POV and a Solas POV. I really love Solas and how his character is written, he is complex and I wanted to do him justice. When I started writing his part, I wasn't happy with it, I couldn't get his voice right and I wanted it to be perfect but kept struggling with it. So, I decided to erase Solas' POV from this chapter, because I was in the middle of a writer's block, and I wanted to continue with my story. I know many of you really want a Solas POV, but don't worry! I will be writing a Solas POV inbetween the other chapters, where our favourite bald elf will be reflecting on important moments from the story... This way I can continue with the chapters, and I can take my time perfecting my Solas POV until I'm truly happy with it.

Now, enjoy this chapter! University has started again, so I'm sliding back into my routine and I'll try to update way more regularly! Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

- Maxwell -

Her fingers curled into mine. Rough. Bruised. Calloused. And yet they were the softest hands, the warmest.

‘You know… that Elder One won’t be able to handle my holy handsomeness.’ I joked, a crooked smile on my lips. ‘Who can, eh?’

Cassandra smiled softly while scoffing. Though I didn’t think it was a disgusted scoff. Maybe a sad one. ‘You are insufferable. And a fool.’

‘Isn’t that why you like me so?’ I flashed my teeth.

Cassandra pinched my hands ever so softly. An answer.

Maybe if I had been sooner – met her sooner… we could’ve… But it’s too late now. It’s time to fulfill my duty.

Everyone whispered to me words of courage. “You’ll be fine” and “Kick the Elder One’s ass”. Varric smacked my shoulder, the Iron Bull gave me a cheeky grin, and even Vivienne told me to be careful.

And then there was Solas… That Elf could look at me so strangely, and I couldn’t truly comprehend if he was really worried or not… but now, the way he kept staring at the woman next to him, I knew I could trust him. I knew he would protect her.

‘Saeris.’ I took her icy, pale chin between my fingers and stared into her bright eyes. Her blue eye trembled as the green eye spat all too familiar colours. A green I hated. A green I loved. And although her eyes were open wide like a doe, she more resembled a wolf. Rigid, powerful and protective. But I hoped she’d understand that this was something I had to do on my own. ‘Go.’

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‘I’ll go.’ She hummed sadly, trying to look away as she wrenched her face from my grasp. I could hear the thick lie in her smooth voice. I knew they would have to drag her away.

‘… I’ll see you soon, alright?’ I swallowed, and couldn’t stop the tears from forming. I swallowed again.

Will I die today?

‘Okay.’ Her voice broke.

‘They’ll load the trebuchets. Keep the Elder One’s attention until we’re above the tree line.’ Commander Cullen laid his hand on my back. It shook me from my trance, back to focus. Don’t think about your death. Think about all who have died for you. I will avenge them. Now, I will die for them. ‘If we are to have a chance, if you are to have a chance, let that thing hear you.’

I nodded slowly and looked one more time towards Saeris. My eyes traced the silky white curls of her hair, the old and tattered fabric of her cape, and to her hands clenched in fists and trembling.

I will die for her.

I turned around, the door of Haven’s Chantry looming before me like the end of the tunnel, the gates to the Maker’s side.

‘Andraste guide you.’ Cassandra whispered as I passed her.

I stopped and turned towards her, smiling. ‘I love you.’ I whispered, almost soundlessly.

Cassandra flinched.

I will die for her too.

I didn’t wait for her response. If I die, at least she’ll know how I felt… how I cared for her. As I moved forwards, my feet felt heavier the closer I got to that door. I felt the eyes of the Inquisition burning in my back.

I will die for their cause.

I opened the door, letting the bright light from outside creep into the sober hall. I breathed, letting the cold air fill my lungs, lift my heavy heart. And as I stepped outside, I told myself not to look back again.

I will die for Thedas.

***

‘Elder One curse you, fool!’ The Venatori mage spat at my feet.

‘Sure, and he can kiss my hairy buttocks while doing so.’ I cackled and slid my dagger along the mage’s throat.

The woman gasped, her fingers flexing at her neck, her body convulsing. Another one dead. I didn’t flinch anymore at the people dying before me. I didn’t care anymore whose blood was dripping from my hands. As long as it’s the enemy’s blood, I will taint myself with it.

I stepped over the partly frozen corpse, and saw how the snow already started to bury it.
This damned storm. Why do they attack at winter? Why not spring? What’s wrong with the sun and flowers? Stupid snow… stupid mountains. If I die, I hope at least it’ll be summer in the afterlife.

I ran further down the hill.

Haven had turned into a mass grave. A pilgrimage for the dead. How ironic it all must seem. There were almost no Venatori or Red Templars to be seen. I doubted they had all been buried with the avalanche… perhaps they knew all too well who I was and who I was planning to meet.

I bet the Elder One is waiting for me.

Though, he won’t really know what’s coming for him.

I turned around the corner, passing the burned tavern. And there, to the right! The last trebuchet standing! It was like seeing the sun. My heart swelled with hope. I was alone, no one around.

Perhaps…

I grabbed the wooden wheels of the trebuchet and started to turn them. Of course they were heavy, because nothing can be simple today. Everything has to be hard and cold and painful. Luckily, I am a muscular man, not to brag, and slowly, but steadily, the trebuchet started to turn, creaking underneath its own weight. As before, I aimed it towards the mountainside in front of Haven.

We’ll have to bury this place once and for all. Just like the Temple of Sacred Ashes once was. Perhaps it was meant to be this way.

A loud screech filled the skies. My heart sunk to my frozen feet.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I started to turn the wheels faster, my muscles protesting, cold sweat dripping from my forehead.

I’m not afraid. I’m not afraid.

The screeching became louder and louder. I didn’t dare look behind me.

And then, the trebuchet’s aim clicked into place. Letting go of the wheels, I followed to where the catapult was raised. And as I traced its path, calculating the damage it would do, I couldn’t do anything but stop and stare at the grey sky bordering the mountains, see how empty they were with the Breach gone. The heavens were in disarray. And as the sun started to appear behind the clouds like a sign of the Maker… a sign of hope… a black shadow covered it again.

I swallowed. Maybe even peed a little.

That –that shadow is coming towards me.

Oh crap. I let go of the wheels, taking not one but two steps back, arms trembling.

The dragon roared towards me. It made the earth shudder. I turned around and made a run for it, jumping away just in time before the dragon spat its fiery breath towards me.

‘Fuck!’ I cursed as I tumbled over the ground, my knees scraping in the dust.

Another blast and I flew across the clearing, landing on my back. I’m going to feel this if I live tomorrow…
I groaned as I pushed myself straight, my eyes searching for the trebuchet. Fire was crawling along the clearing, but luckily the trebuchet had been spared…

Trying to get back to my feet, the world started to dance around, twisting before my eyes. I scratched my head, taking another step forwards.

And then… I stopped.

Behind the curtain of blighted flame, stepped a large figure. Its torso was long and twisted, its arms ending in long, sharp claws. Its head was infected with Red Lyrium, it grew from its grey, dead skin like a virus.

Ah. Finally. The Elder One.

Uglier from close-by, it seems.

The Elder One stopped, his eyes squinting at me hatefully.

I took a step back, but cursed as the earth shuddered again. Behind me, the dragon had come to land, charging towards me. I almost screamed like a little baby as the beast revealed its rows upon rows of vile teeth to me, ready to devour me whole.

My feet refused to move, my body too rigid to react. I felt like a statue entombed in fear.

‘Enough!’ The Elder One’s voice echoed through the silent clearing, and I saw the dragon flinch and back away. Far enough so it wouldn’t eat me, but close enough to let me know it could.

I looked over my shoulder, back to the gnarling enemy. ‘Pretender.’ He had a deep voice, and too loud. ‘You toy with forces beyond your ken. No more.’

‘Whatever you are, ugly, I’m not afraid!’ Maybe a little…

The Elder One showed me no emotion. ‘Words mortals often hurl at the darkness.’ Or at spiders, I thought. ‘Once they were mine. They are always lies.’ The Elder One flashed his rotten teeth. ‘Know me, know what you have pretended to be. Exalt the Elder One! The will that is Corypheus!’

‘Oh!’ I laughed mockingly, a cheeky grin twisting along my face. ‘Exalt the Herald of Andraste. The will that is Maxwell?’ Humour to mask fear. Good one, Max.

The Elder One, or Corypheus, whatever, ignored my comment. ‘You will kneel.’ He ordered instead. The dragon behind me whisked its tail impatiently, its damp breaths tickling my back.

I scoffed again, trying not to show how damned scared I was. ‘Sorry snowflake, I don’t really kneel for anyone.’ Unless perhaps for Cassandra —if I live —one day.

‘You will resist. You will always resist. It matters not.’ Corypheus said tiredly. And then, he lifted his long, bony arm. Within his hand, encircled by awful black claws, the Elder One held an orb. It was strange, with swirly lines on it, and reminded me of… ‘I am here for the Anchor.’ Corypheus continued, activating the orb in his hand. The little thing suddenly clicked, glowing an emerald green and a crimson red. Green and Red. A little memory flashed in the back of my mind, of a future never meant to be. A memory of a Bride. ‘The process of removing it, begins now.’

‘Shit!’ I groaned as the Elder One lifted his mangled hand towards me, the magic twisting and spitting. The mark on my hand started to flare again, hurting the veins from my fingertips to my toes. The scar then started to pulse, as if it was reacting to that —that flashing orb? Instead of following the
beating of my heart, it hummed to something else, something it vaguely recognized. My stomach turned, and I grabbed my wrist in despair, trying to pinch the pain away.

‘It is your fault, “Herald”.’ The Elder One mocked me. ‘You interrupted a ritual years in the planning. And instead of dying, you stole its purpose.’ He twisted his hand and the red magic flared brighter, harder. I cried out, feeling how my skin was burning from the inside out. But the mark—the Anchor—didn’t give in and refused to let go of its grasp on me. ‘I do not know how you survived.’ Corypheus bit. ‘But what marks you as “touched”, what you flail at Rifts, I crafted to assault the very heavens.’

Again, he pushed out his magic further. I tumbled over, my knees digging into the icy soil beneath. I bit my tongue until the coppery taste of blood filled my mouth. The dragon behind me slowly surrounded me with its blighted large body, growling with my every movement.

Corypheus ignored my pain, and continued as if nothing was even happening at all, as if the magic he used didn’t require any strength. ‘And you used the Anchor to undo my work! The gall!’

I gripped my wrist tighter, to will my body to calm down. ‘Why are you doing this? Do you have a thing for chaos or something?’ I hissed and blood splattered across the pure white snow before me.

‘The “chaos” will empower me, and ensure we no longer beg at the feet of the invisible.’ The Elder One growled as he slowly walked towards me, stopping in front of my balled-up figure. He then grabbed the wrist I was clenching, pushing me up and lifting me into the air, until his face was right in front of mine. I flinched as the muscles in my shoulder protested against the weight of my body. The pain that flowed through my mark had free reign now, and clawed across my body teasingly. ‘I once breached the Fade in the name of another, to serve the Old Gods of the Empire in person.’

The dragon behind me quieted, its eyes following the pulsing light of the orb and the Anchor. My body started to convulse, and I thrashed against the Elder One’s hold.

‘I found only chaos and corruption.’ The Elder One continued. Uncaring. ‘Dead whispers. For a thousand years I was confused. No more. I have gathered the will to return under no name but my own. To champion withered Tevinter and correct this blighted world.’ The Elder One held me closer to his face. Maker’s balls this man is ugly. ‘Beg that I succeed, for I have seen the throne of the gods, and it was empty!’

And then, with just a flick of his hand, I was flying across the clearing. The sky toppled in front of my eyes, until I crashed against the trebuchet.

I cried out as I heard something crack… My ribs, I had broken perhaps two of them. I shrieked with agony.

‘The Anchor is permanent.’ The Elder One took a step towards me. ‘You have spoiled it with your stumbling.’ The dragon spread its enormous wings, almost playing with me, to show me it was dinner time. And guess who’s desert?

Andraste’s shimmering ass, I’d rather be a frozen corpse than dragon shit. I will not go down like this.

I can’t fail them.

I can’t fail her. Cassandra.

I looked to my side and noticed a steel sword laying not too far from me. I flexed my arm and grabbed the weapon, stumbling back to my feet. Hunching over, I held the sword in front of me as
the dragon closed in on me. Its sharp, black claws buried themselves into the ground below, and the earth shuddered in response.

The sight of the Elder One nearing me, and the dragon drooling behind him, made me realize that this was it.

This is the end.

Tears of despair rolled down my face, and I blinked rapidly.

I don’t want to die.

Please.

‘So be it. I will begin again, find another way to give this world a nation –and god –it requires.’ The Elder One sighed. I was just another obstacle in his path. An annoying one at best.

And then… a sign.

My heart burst in my chest as a flaming arrow was launched into the sky, far away into the mountains. Its glistening flames lit up the heavy clouds around it. It looked like a falling star. A last wish.

And I wished for them to survive.

I knew what I had to do now.

I followed the arrow until it spiralled down to the valley. The skies turned dark once more, but my mind couldn’t be clearer. I closed my eyes, my breath trembling.

‘And you.’ The Elder One hadn’t noticed the flaming arrow, it seemed. Good. ‘I will not suffer even an unknowing enemy. You must die.’

I opened my eyes. The Elder One won’t kill me. Maybe the snow will, but I won’t give that monster the pleasure.

I’m going to bury Haven.

I grabbed the rusty sword with both hands, tightening my grip on it, tilting the point upwards. I stared into the Elder One’s eyes, unflinching. Bastard.

‘You expect me to fight, but that’s not why I kept you talking.’ I grinned and lifted my chin mockingly. ‘Enjoy your victory. Here’s your prize!’ I quickly turned to my left and kicked the wheel of the trebuchet with my boot. The wheel spurred, releasing the tight ropes of the trebuchet and launching a huge boulder towards the mountain peak behind me. An echoing thunder cascaded through the valley, ringing in my ears.

Waves upon waves of snow rolled down the mountain, consuming everything on its path.

I didn’t look at the Elder One anymore, and instead just made a run for it. Fuck that guy.

My lungs emptied themselves as I screamed out. The broken ribs were stabbing me from the inside while I ran, faster and faster. I heard the wings of the dragon spreading as it was taking flight.

Yes, you better run, coward! Well, guess I’m the one who’s running.
I tried to get as far as I could, perhaps the snow wouldn’t reach me, perhaps I could find a latch I could hide under. But deep down, I knew I needed a miracle to survive this.

I’m going to be buried like all the others. Never to be found again. Frozen for eternity.

I felt the shuddering avalanche nearing, but didn’t dare to look behind me to watch it consume Haven, to watch how it would consume me.

Cassandra. I’m sorry.
Andraste guide me.

‘MAXWELL!’

Andraste?

Suddenly, I felt two invisible hands grabbing my shoulders. I closed my eyes, ready to embrace death as it welcomed me. Is this really Andraste? Is she here to guide me? I never thought she’d be real…

The two hands caressed my skin. But then they pushed me away, launching me forwards. I cried out in surprise.

And down I went.

***

I groaned. Everything hurt. I think I broke something else… I’m bleeding… a lot.

But I’m alive.

Maker’s balls.

Did Andraste just call out to me? Is she –is she real?

I opened my eyes, feeling how the wood beneath me pierced right through my stomach. That’s the only thing I knew. I was hurt, and I needed to get out of here. All else was dark and strange. I couldn’t understand what had happened… I just escaped the Elder One and his pet dragon, and I clearly heard someone scream my name as I prayed to Andraste.

I felt hands on my back. I know I did. They pushed me, saved me!

Well… mostly… I’ll die if I don’t get moving, if I don’t find the Inquisition soon.

I looked around and noticed I had fallen into a dark… cave? I heaved as I tried to straighten myself, clenching my bloodied stomach and ribs. Before me was a large tunnel carved out in stone. Had I fallen into a mine? Another pilgrimage path?

Alright, let’s do this. I have to.

With every step I took, I felt my body scream in agony. I could feel my bones moving, and not in the good way. Blood was drenching my ripped-up armour. And I felt cold. So cold.

Come on!

Hunching over, I limped forwards along the long and dark tunnel.
Sometimes, I thought I could hear footsteps coming closer, and couldn’t stop thinking it was death nearing me, trying to catch me. So I quickened my pace, almost stumbling over a loose rock.

I moaned and felt the skin around my wounds rip.

Don’t cry. Man-up. It’s but a flesh wound. It’ll be a nice scar when this is over. It’ll look cool.

As I continued on, I feared the tunnel might stop in a dead end, or that it just wouldn’t end at all, and that I was dead already. Maybe… at the end of this tunnel… awaits the Maker and His paradise?

I will have to find out.

You could understand how happy I was when I reached the end of the tunnel, and met only snow and ice and wind.

‘Good. I’m not dead yet.’ I sighed jokingly.

The sky had turned pitch black, and thousands of stars were twinkling beside the moon. And as the wind howled, so did the pine trees. Snow was blasted around into the air, like a thick foggy curtain, but then wet and really cold.

I took one step forward, and then another, and another. My footprints were drenched in blood, and I was too afraid to check where it was coming from. I’ll worry about that later.

I held my arm in front of my face to keep the scorching wind from scarring my skin. But I kept pushing on, only forwards. Even if all the odds are against me, I will find my friends… I have to.

I can’t die here.

I had been pushing against the snow for what felt like hours… and… I’m so damn tired.

I’m so fucking cold.

And then, I stopped. The wind blasted against me like I was a rock, I felt like a rock. I couldn’t move, couldn’t blink or breathe. My heart was punching my chest as I felt two ghostly hands touch my shoulders again.

They felt so familiar.

Like little warm kisses, I could feel the hands searching my body. My wounds were stopping to rip, my bones starting to mend. The hands caressed my bruised knuckles, healing my ailments…

I twisted around, staring into the distance.

But all I could see was white. Pure white and grey and black. The snow here consumed everything, melting into sky. The only thing I could see were my bloodied footprints.

I turned back and resumed my struggle, thinking I had just imagined it all.

If only I had waited.

But no, I thought I was having delusions. I heard you would see hallucinations before death by frost. Never knew they would be so vivid. So warm. So… good.

I thought, perhaps it was Andraste again? Helping me on my way.
I didn’t know.

My sister, Evelyn, truly believed in the Maker and His Bride. She told me many stories. But that’s what I thought they were, just stories. I had never seen something “divine”. I had only seen pain and death and hardships. I believed in demons. I could see they were real. But how could I believe in something I couldn’t see? Couldn’t feel or sense? If there was a Maker, is He then such an asshole to leave mortals to suffer like that? Is He that petty? When they proclaimed me “Herald of Andraste”, I presumed it was just another title. I could use it to my advantage… become a symbol of hope.

But now, being so alone, and yet feeling so cared for. Those warm, heavenly hands… it cannot be… yet it must be Andraste?

Who else wanders these wastelands? Who else could survive here and have strength left to heal me, warm me up?

But it’s actually all but a load of crap.

The Maker doesn’t exist. Andraste wasn’t His Bride. She never helped me. Never chose me. I’m just a fool who was at the wrong place at the wrong time, and got himself into way over his head. I am nobody. I mean nothing.

I realized that when I reached the end of my cold journey, when Cassandra and Cullen found me. I realized I was a damned fool.

I deserved to die.

I had meant to die.

It should have been me.

Not her.

Not Saeris.

‘There, it’s him!’

‘Thank the Maker!’

Cassandra took my hands, tears of joy running over her flushed cheeks. I stared into her beautiful brown eyes. The stars reflected in them. ‘Maxwell’, she whispered.

‘Help! Someone’s over there!’

I heard Commander Cullen and a scout rush past me. It didn’t register, I only stared at my Seeker, who searched and found me.

I was so selfish to be happy to be alive.

I thought this awful ordeal was over.

Cassandra hoisted me back on my feet, supporting me from under my shoulder. I took a step forward. and then Cassandra stopped, her grip loosening. She looked over her shoulder past me, towards the distance I had crossed.

‘Saeris.’ She breathed.
What?

Saeris? Where?

I turned around.

And then I saw her. I found her. Too late.

I screamed, pushing back Cassandra. She grabbed my chest, ordering me to calm down. But how could I?

There, on the ground, she stared at me. Saeris. She smiled, blood covering her face, her armour, drenching the snow around her. Her body was broken, frozen. She was paler than the snow, and yet so dark with crimson blood clinging to her frail figure.

She smiled at me and then looked up to the dark sky above us. The moon lit up her hair. Her vibrant, clear emerald eye stopped glowing.

‘Maker – no! Please no!’ Cullen held her in his arms like a ragdoll, rocking back and forth, calling out her name in vain. I never saw the man cry before. Now I had. ‘Saeris – Saeris please! You there! Get more help! QUICKLY!’ Cullen ordered the scout, and then looked back to the frail girl he held within his arms. ‘Stay with me!’

Saeris stared forwards, and the stars called out to her.

And then they took her.

Andraste had not been guiding me.

Saeris had.

***

I was laying on my back, staring towards the ceiling of the worn-out tent. There were rips near the stitching at the point of its roof, and I could see the dark sky and its swirling stars through them. Some stars were sparkling brighter than the others, almost dancing to their own song.

I wondered if she was among them.

They had removed my armour and tucked me into one of the makeshift beds near the small bonfire of the camp. My ribs felt sore, even though Solas had healed them. I knew there were more scars on my body than before. The biggest one though, wasn’t visible. Enemies can stab me, impale me, and the healers can close those wounds. But not this one.

This gaping hole will be here forever. An invisible scar. I can feel the empty wind howling through me, crying her name.

Saeris.

‘What would you have me tell them? This isn’t what we’ve asked them to do!’ Commander Cullen’s voice stormed through the camp. His voice was coarse, broken.

I think the Commander feels a hole too. I think I could see his invisible scar almost as clearly as he could see mine.

Cullen had carried her through the open planes of darkness and ice. He had cradled her broken body,
rocked it back and forth, hushing her name. I think he could still feel her in his arms, feel how she sighed her last breath. It still clung to him.

‘Maker… Maker don’t take her away.’ I had heard him cry before we had entered the camp. He hadn’t realised she was gone already. He still believed.

How can he? How can he believe there’s a Maker who would take away a gift like that?

I don’t want to believe in such a monster. Not anymore.

‘We cannot simply ignore this! We must find a way!’ Cassandra bit back. She was so strong, stronger than any of us men. I knew though, she was barely keeping up. I heard her cry next to me when I was pretending to sleep not so long ago.

‘And who put you in charge? We need a consensus, or we have nothing!’ Cullen ordered. I could hear his ragged breaths, his roaring anger.

His guilt.

I pushed myself straight, and stared into the distance, at the group of people arguing. My advisors… what were they now?

‘Please, we must use reason!’ Josephine intervened. Her wavy, black-brown hair had fallen from her sophisticated hairdo, curling along her olive skin that had turned a sickly pale green. ‘Without the infrastructure of the Inquisition, we’re hobbled!’

‘That can’t come from nowhere!’ Cullen sighed back. His fur, lion-like mantle, was still absent. It was keeping Saeris’ cold body warm.

‘She didn’t say it could!’ Leliana countered. The Spymaster had surprised me most. The deadly woman had looked distraught when we entered camp. Happy first, broken later. But I saw how she had straightened her back. Leliana had seen death before, and I knew she believed where Saeris would be now. To the damned Maker’s side.

But I can’t see it like that.

Saeris is gone. She’s fucking gone… and it’s because of me.

I’m an incompetent twit. Someone who can’t even take care of himself. I’m an infant who relies on others to die for him. And Saeris had known that.

‘Enough!’ Cassandra cried out. ‘This is getting us nowhere!’

‘Well, we’ll agree on that much!’ Cullen bit back.

I closed my eyes. If only she were here. If only….

‘Shhh…’ Mother Giselle rested her soft, warm hand on my shivering shoulder. ‘You need to rest.’

‘They’ve been at it for hours.’ I answered. The voice that came out of my mouth didn’t sound like me. No, it was foreign, cold, uncaring. I felt so muted. Stopped. Like a Tranquil. I hated how the people around me were so loud, so angry at one another and their situation. But I liked their yelling more than their silence. The camp, which was so small in comparison, had been deadly silent when we had entered it. I hadn’t been able to believe my eyes. How many others had lost their lives…

I saw how others smiled at my presence. And then stopped smiling at the lack of Saeris’.
Varric had run towards me, his arms opened wide, a big smile on his face. The others, Sera, Blackwall, Vivienne, The Iron Bull and Dorian, were on his heels. All happy. Until the Commander appeared behind Cassandra and I.

I wanted to push away the memories of their faces when they saw her body. I don’t want to remember.

I don’t want to remember how Solas had pushed through the crowd that had formed around us. I wish I hadn’t seen his face. The man had always been able to conceal what he felt. It was comforting at times, neutral and honest. But when he saw our Saeris, I saw his mask slip from his face.

He had screamed her name.

It had made me shrink until I was non-existent. I wanted to be. I knew what Solas had felt for her, and I had seen her look at him too. Had he known she would follow me? Had he let her go because he had been sure she’d be alright, that I could protect her.

I hadn’t seen her… I hadn’t heard her…

Solas was still with her now. I could see her tent in the corner of my eyes, at the far end of the camp. So many people had died here already. From the cold, injuries, sadness… I could see the figures of their bodies at the back of the camp. Some were getting buried already. They had put Saeris in a tent of her own. Solas hadn’t stepped away from her side. I could hear his voice slithering from underneath the tent’s edges… his Elven words trickled from its walls. I could smell his magic… I knew he was using a lot of it if even I could smell it.

But no magic can bring her back.

‘YOU! YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO…’ Solas was no man to raise his voice, but he had against the Commander. ‘You were supposed to stop her…’

‘I thought…’ Cullen had shrunk from a Commander to a ghost. He hadn’t entered Saeris’ tent ever since.

‘They have that luxury, thanks to you.’ Mother Giselle answered me, shaking me from my trance. I didn’t even remember what I had said to her. ‘The enemy could not follow, and with time to doubt, we turn to blame.’

‘No… not thanks to me.’ I mumbled back.

Mother Giselle stared at me, her white and red gown was dirty, and I noticed blood was splattered across it. I didn’t know if it was my blood, or the blood of others who had died. ‘Infighting may threaten as much as this Corypheus.’ She said, ignoring my words, or perhaps heeding them.

‘I have to be there, with them.’ Not laying around like a useless pig. I was so useless already.

‘Another heated voice won’t help. Even yours. Perhaps especially yours.’ Mother Giselle stared at the mark on my hand. ‘Our leaders struggle because of what we survivors witnessed. We saw our defender stand… and fall. And now we have seen him return.’

I scoffed. ‘I shouldn’t have returned. Their true defender, their hero, has fallen. And they ignore her, and argue instead. She should’ve returned.’
Mother Giselle shook her head. ‘Lady Saeris has given her life for you, like many others have. She has done what she thought was her duty. Do not be sad because of that. The Maker has given you a chance through her.’ The Chantry Mother smiled faintly. ‘And that is hard to accept. What “we” have been called to endure? What, “we”, must come to believe?’

‘I don’t have time to believe in your Maker.’ I said bitterly. ‘Not anymore after what I have seen. What is hope to “us” now, when “we” have seen hope die in the snow?’ I pushed myself straight, my bones shaking with anger. ‘Saeris was our hope. Now I’ve lost them both. We all have.’

I walked away from the tent, around the campfire. The advisors stopped arguing as I passed them. Cassandra bit her chapped lips, almost wanting to say something. She couldn’t.

What could she say to me? To everyone?

If I can’t even protect my own friend, how am I to save Thedas?

I’m not the Herald of anyone. I am the damned Herald of Death. Everyone I care for will fall because of me.

I stopped in front of Saeris’ tent. I balled my fists. Then, I opened the flap of the tent, and stepped inside.

Candles were lit across the border of the tent, lining up all the way towards her bed. I could see her pale hands, her palms turned downwards, lying next to her sides. Her bare feet peeked from underneath the white blanked that covered her naked, but clean body. They had washed her, dressed her wounds, prepared her for what was to come.

She seemed so perfect. Almost asleep.

Solas’ back was turned towards me. He didn’t move. Perhaps he had turned into statue. Cold and dead inside, just like me.

‘You have come.’ He said. His voice was coarse, like he had been screaming or crying, or both. The Elf didn’t turn around to look at me. His eyes couldn’t leave her. They never would.

‘Yes.’ I whispered. Every word seemed wrong.

Solas swallowed. ‘I shall leave you.’ He whispered. ‘I will be outside.’ The Elf turned around, still not looking at me. Every step he took seemed painful, like leaving her alone was unbearable. I understood that. He left her alone once, and never saw her alive again. Because of me. I couldn’t look at myself either. As the man passed me, I saw the dark circles underneath his cold, grey eyes. They looked determined, angry… and alone.

As Solas left the tent, I took a step closer towards her bed.

‘Saeris?’ I whispered. A single tear glided across my cheek, dripping from my chin. She didn’t answer. I would never hear her say my name again.

Do I even remember the last time she called out to me?

Had it been her when I thought it was Andraste?

Did she try to reach me in the mountains?

Why didn’t I hear her? WHY DIDN’T I TURN AROUND! WHY?
Her eyes were closed. I couldn’t see the emerald light seeping from underneath her lashes. Even that was gone. Her pale face was neutral, her lips almost resting into a faint smile. There was no colour on her cheeks. All colour was drained away. Her white hair curled along her face, barely masking the cut ear that I didn’t dare to stare at. There were scars on her face. Deep ones. As if somebody had taken a knife and carved at her. Perhaps someone had. Yet, there was no dirt underneath her fingernails, no blood on her wounds… She looked so clean, so unreal.

She was a ghost.

‘Damnit, Saeris.’ I hiccupped and fell to my knees. ‘You should’ve stayed away…’ I grabbed her hand and pinched it. She was so cold. Colder than the wind, the snow, and my heart combined. And yet I pressed her hand against my forehead. Warm, wet tears drowned me.

I didn’t know for how long I had been kneeling before her.

I dreamed how her hand pinched me back, that she lifted my chin and kissed away my tears.

But when I finally looked up, she hadn’t moved. The dead don’t comfort us, they don’t care anymore.

‘Saeris… I’m so sorry.’ I howled. ‘Please…’ Forgive me. Take me too.

‘Maxwell.’ Cassandra’s voice called out to me from outside. ‘Maxwell, we need to –we need you.’

I bit my lip.

‘Maxwell, please.’ Cassandra wailed. It would’ve broken me before. But there isn’t anything left to break.

I let go of Saeris’ hand and stood back up.

Solas pushed through the opening of the tent and walked back to her side. I stared at the ground, and turned back around. ‘I’m sorry.’ I said again. I didn’t know to who, to Saeris, or to Solas… or to myself.

Solas stopped in his tracks, his shoulders heaved up, his breath harsh. I knew he wanted to call me out, to threaten and hurt me and curse me and… and he just sighed. ‘You should leave.’ He only said, his voice empty of emotion.

And I did, slowly, painfully, broken.

Cassandra was waiting outside, her eyes deep and hollow. Her skin had turned pale, her lips blue because of the cold. There was a heavy frown on her forehead, and I noticed how purple her dark circles were, how red her nose, how flat her hair. ‘It’s time.’ She said. Her voice was soft, like a little girl’s. There was nothing left of that strong woman I had heard arguing before. She didn’t have to keep up that façade for me.

I nodded slowly.

When I followed Cassandra to the centre of the camp, I looked over my shoulder one more time. Through the crack of the opening of Saeris’ tent, I could still see her lying in the bed. Eternally resting. Solas stepped in front of her, softly singing the words of a lullaby I couldn’t understand. His words sounded like the howling of a wolf that had lost its mate. The Elven man bent forwards and pressed his lips to her forehead.
His words clung to the air. They were drifting along towards the sky.

*Ar lath ma, vhenan.*

I didn’t have to speak Elven to know what those words meant.

They were as much as a declaration as a goodbye. It was time now.

Time to move on, time to grieve as we bury the dead.

Everyone gathered in front of the large fire in the centre of the small survivors’ camp. Leliana and Josephine were sitting on a bench nearby, eyeing Cassandra and I as we came closer. Commander Cullen stood up as we passed him. He seemed older. The lines in his face deeper. In his hand, he held his fur mantle. It was sticky with dirt and blood.

Nobody said a word.

Even the stars were louder.

Dorian was leaning against The Iron Bull’s chest, the Qunari’s arm curling along his shoulders. A warm embrace, to stop the cold that was starting to spread inside all of us. Sera sat on another bench, her droopy ears purple. She stared at the ground while drawing small circles into the snow with a broken arrow. Blackwall sat next to her, tears gliding from his cheeks and into his beard that was soaking wet by now. Vivienne was standing next to Mother Giselle, talking silently. Madame de Fer nodded towards me. Like she understood.

Varric was standing alone in front of the fire, looking how the flames curled and crackled. ‘Damnit, Twinkle.’ I heard him mumble. ‘Shit.’

Not far from him, also close to the fire, sat Cole. The young, ghostly boy supported Chancellor Roderick as the man turned in his sleep. From Cole’s troubled stare, I could tell the man would die soon. As Cassandra and I passed them, Cole stared up to us from underneath his large hat.

‘Broken, lost, alone. It should have been me. Not her.’ Cole mumbled, blurring out my naked thoughts.

I smiled a little at the boy. Weird kid. Too bad he didn’t get the chance to get to know Saeris. She would’ve liked him. She liked mysteries. She was one herself.

‘He has lost The One. He didn’t feel alone, now he *is.*’ Cole mumbled again, his eyes staring past me. I followed his stare and saw Solas coming out of Saeris’ tent. ‘She was the one, my hope. *Ase amin, ma’alas.*’

That explains that one. I smiled to myself. I didn’t think Solas and I had much in common. But we have. She was my hope too.

Behind Solas, two Inquisition soldiers left the tent, carrying Saeris’ bed. They had covered her face too. I could only see her figure underneath the white, clean blanket that covered her, and her pale hand sliding from underneath it, hanging down the bed. My heart stopped.

We do not bury the dead in the ground. We bury them in flames. Like Andraste was. Some Andrastrians scatter the ashes of the dead near a Chantry, or on sacred ground, or at the feet of one of Andraste’s statues. Some families keep the ashes of the dead in a case or vessel, store them at home so they’re always close. Some people do bury their dead instead of cremating them. There were people who buried the dead at graveyards, or grounds that are special to them.
Most people choose how they are buried, or burned, before they die.

But some people, like Saeris, didn’t get the chance to express their wishes. Here, in the Frostback Mountains, no one gets a chance.

You can’t be buried in ice.

The soldiers carried her body forwards, leaving Solas alone standing next to the now empty tent. Perhaps the tent had always been empty. Saeris was long gone when we put her in there.

Cassandra took my hand in hers, and squeezed it. She then raised her chin, keeping the tears from escaping her eyes as the soldiers neared the fire. ‘The Light shall lead her safely,’ Cassandra began, her voice small but loud enough for the others to hear. ‘Through the paths of this world, and into the next. For she who trusts in the Maker, fire is her water. As the moth sees light and goes toward flame, She should see fire and go towards Light.’

I cried, unable to contain myself. Let them see their “Herald” cry. Let them see their coward “defender” fall. I am but a man that has lost his friend. His sister. His hope. I am a man with no divine power protecting me. I am a man who was lucky enough to have had a honourable, loyal, beautiful and wise woman like Saeris protecting me.

She was my Andraste.

‘The Veil holds no uncertainty for her,’ Cassandra continued, crying together with me. ‘and she will know no fear of death, for the Maker shall be her beacon and her shield, her foundation and her sword.’

Saeris was placed into the fire.

It consumed her figure immediately.

I fell to my knees, screaming for the flames to stop. For the stars to bring her back.

The Commander broke down. The Spymaster prayed silently. The Ambassador shrieked.

All of our friends cried for the flames to be gentle.

To carry our Saeris gently towards the heavens, wherever those might be.

Shadows fall
And hope has fled
Steel your heart
The dawn will come

Mother Giselle started to sing. Her voice was loud, howling with the wind. I stared at the flames consuming Saeris bit by bit. Until she was nothing but ashes.

The night is long
And the path is dark
Look to the sky
For one day soon
The dawn will come

The flames became fluid with the stars, lighting up the dark skies with a hopeful, warm light. People from all around us, soldiers, scouts, villagers, pilgrims, advisors and friends, believers and non-
believers, joined in on the song. Gone was the silence of death.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The shepherd's lost} \\
\text{And his home is far} \\
\text{Keep to the stars} \\
\text{The dawn will come} \\
\hline \\
\text{The night is long} \\
\text{And the path is dark} \\
\text{Look to the sky} \\
\text{For one day soon} \\
\text{The dawn will come}
\end{align*}
\]

Between my cold tears, I felt my heart thumping again. Not with sadness anymore. But with rage. Corypheus will pay for this. His whole freaking cult will.

I will avenge Saeris.

We all will.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Bare your blade} \\
\text{And raise it high} \\
\text{Stand your ground} \\
\text{The dawn will come} \\
\hline \\
\hline \\
\end{align*}
\]

And then, suddenly, I heard Cole shriek behind me. I turned around and stared into his frightened eyes. They were big, giant as they glared at the fire. ‘It burns!’ He screamed. ‘It hurts! She’s hurting! IT BURNS!’

I turned around, seeing how Solas ran through the crowds of chanting and crying people. His face had turned white, his mouth opened wide as he roared at the top of his lungs. ‘STOP! SHE IS ALIVE!’

I screamed and pushed myself from the ground, almost making Cassandra tumble to the ground. I reached to the fire in agony. The mark, the Anchor, on my hand started to hurt a familiar pain.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The night is long} \\
\text{And the path is dark} \\
\text{Look to the sky} \\
\text{For one day soon…}
\end{align*}
\]

Between the dancing fire, I saw a figure standing up.

Two bright eyes appeared behind the curtain of flame. One blue, and one green.

They stared at me.

\[
\text{The dawn will come.}
\]

Chapter End Notes

*Voice of Doctor Frankenstein* SHE’S ALIIIIIIVE!!!!!
Thank you for reading! I hope it was worth the wait! Sorry again for not including Solas’ POV, but I’m working on it!
Dawned

Chapter Notes

Here it is!
Did I want to update sooner? Yes! Did I manage to? Obviously not :p Life has happened, but do know I am not stopping this story! I'm thinking about it every day, and I am always trying to update as soon as I am able to! Thank you all for being so patient with me!

Aaaand, I replied to most of your last comments, but today I noticed none of my answers showed up, so I replied again, sorry for that! I hope my replies got through this time <3 You are all amazing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The ninth sacred mountain upon which rests
The moral dust of Our Lady ascended
Whole into the heavens, to be given high honour
In the Realm of Dreams forever.
And around it, a chorus of spirits sang:
"Whatsoever passes through the fire
Is not lost, but made eternal;
As air can never be broken nor crushed,
The tempered soul is everlasting!"

- Chant of Light, Canticle of Exaltations

***

I remember the stars.

I remember how they sang for me, danced for me, called out my name.

I remember the stars smiling down on me, their light engulfing me, soothing me.

And then, it was like falling asleep.

You’re out.

You're gone.

Game over.

And yet, even after dying before, it felt so different.

I had hoped that I would see all of them. My friends, my family…. I thought they’d come rushing towards me through a field of long, soft leaves of grass. Or that I would fall into their arms among the skies.
But nothing of that sort happened.

Instead, the stars became the ground again. And I stared into my own, dulled eyes.

I have heard before, that when you die, you get this “out-of-body” experience, as you look down onto your own dying self. There, between the snow and the sky, my body laid broken and bloodied. Cullen was next to me, shaking me back and forth.

I heard him whisper my name.

“Saeris.” He hushed, like I had hushed Sybil’s name when she had died, “Do not leave us.”

I closed my eyes, hoping that I would just wake up if I opened them again, if I willed it. After a century of longing for death, it still had come too soon. Too sudden.

And I couldn’t believe this was the end.

It can’t.

I cannot die unless I fulfil my promise, whatever that is… Did saving Maxwell, closing the Breach, … truly free me? Am I free to go? Why am I then not free to stay? Perhaps death doesn’t work that way.

Another person screamed my name.

Maxwell.

I turned around, and saw him struggling in Cassandra’s arms. His face was pale but red, his lips cold, his eyes wet. Tears were streaming down his cheek as he clawed into the ground. Cassandra held Max back, rocking him back and forth. Her eyes flickered towards my corpse and back, as if she’d look for too long, she’d be unable to remain strong. For Maxwell.

“Please… Saeris… Please.” Cullen’s voice trickled inside my head.

I looked down to him once more.

“I’m sorry.” I answered, though knowing he wouldn’t hear. The wind was howling, going right through me. I couldn’t even feel it anymore. The sky became brighter, bigger, closer as I moved away further and further into what I thought was the beyond. I put my hand on the Commander’s steel shoulder, and saw my skin becoming translucent. “Take care of Max for me.”

Cullen swallowed deeply, and stared at his shoulder. And then back to my body. He cried my name again.

But I wouldn’t answer anymore.

Instead, I let the wind take me into the sky to join the stars.

***

I woke up.

And I was back where I once started. A meadow, one I had conjured up inside my mind ever since I came here, to Thedas.

I stretched out my limbs, and they felt somewhat sore, like I had been taking a too-long-nap. Flowers
of all colours curled against my arms, hugging me. Through the dense leaves of the willow tree I laid under, the sun cast dancing rays across my body. There was a nice wind gliding across the meadow, making the vibrant leaves of grass dance violently.

I smiled to myself.

And then I wiggled my toes.

A cool summer day.

Is this what my heaven looks like?

I don’t mind.

Suddenly, behind the curtains of trees that bordered the meadow, a bush started to move and shudder. I sat myself straight, heart thumping.

And there, toddling out of the bush, came my favourite fuzzy cat. I almost cried as Pickles lifted her head towards me, blinking her bright yellow eyes sleepily. She sauntered towards me, her paws burying themselves between the pillows of flora.

“Oh… Pickles baby…” I whispered.

Pickles purred contently and continued to stroll towards me. When she reached me, she placed herself into my lap. As if nothing had happened, as if she had seen me just the day before… Of course she would be in my heaven. I laughed as I pulled my fingers through her long fur. The cat cocked her head as I scratched her behind her droopy ears. She squinted her feline, golden eyes.

For a moment, I thought her eyes glowed.

Had they always been so incredibly yellow?

Pickles closed her eyes and rested her chin on my leg, dozing back off.

I must’ve imagined it.

I continued to look around the meadow. Everlasting happiness… but why is this place so empty? Why am I still alone?

Where is… everyone?

If Pickles is here… where’s mum and dad? My brother and Sybil? Nenhara, Elgadira and Daniel? Do they have a place of their own?

Where am I exactly… Is this an image my mind has created to comprehend death? Am I in the Fade? Or is this truly… a Beyond of some sort? Past the machinations of the soul, past the Fade, past the universe?

I pushed myself from the ground. Pickles meowed slightly, complaining that her cushion was moving. She stretched her legs and moved further along the bed of grass, lying down on top of the flowers.

My feet were planted on the ground, and the sensation felt… off. The grass beyond the shade cast by the willow tree was cold, too cold. It shouldn’t be this cold during the summer. It felt like ice. I tiptoed towards the treeline, and tried to peek beyond it. Yet I couldn’t. There wasn’t anything beyond but more trees and grass and bushes… too dense for me to move through.
I stepped back, confused.

What is this place?

“Hello!” I called, my voice was clear and loud. It surprised me. “Can anybody hear me?”

No answer.

I turned around, and saw Pickles looking at me confused.

*Isn’t this what you want?* Her gaze seemed to say.

Panic started to climb its way through my throat. I need to get out of here. This was a mistake… I… I want to live… I’m not ready yet. I walked around the meadow, searching for a way out. After wandering for what felt like hours—perhaps days, who knows?—I returned back to Pickles underneath the willow tree.

As I neared her, Pickles purred and stood up, stretching her limbs again.

“Pickles, come!” I tutted.

But the golden-eyed cat blinked at me curiously, and jumped away before I could reach her.

I paused, and stepped inside the shadows of the tree again. Strange how the ground felt warmer here, my heart more at ease. Pickles sauntered towards the broad and—unnaturally—large tree trunk. And it was then that I noticed, as my eyes followed the length of the tree, that the branches were seemingly reaching to the sky above, which was so bright, I had to squint my eyes against the light. The air wasn’t even blue. It was…

The leaves of the willow tree suddenly turned bright white instead of green. They lit up everything.

I breathed, my heart pumping. The tree was shining… wailing?

Pickles climbed onto the trunk, and then jumped onto one of the lower branches of the tree. Her grey and brown fur was stark against the bright lights coming from the leaves. The cat cocked her head, and her golden eyes stared at me intensely.

*Come.* They seemed to say. *Come here, to the tree, towards the light.*

I took a step forward. But then I stopped.

If I go to that tree… is that then fully the end?

My curse… I felt it now, deep down, rumbling inside of me, humming with the beat of my heart. I hadn’t fulfilled my promise yet. Whatever it was, it wasn’t over.

And yet, here I was, in a sort of in-between, a limbo that was this meadow. I felt the panic and stress within me ebb away… And that light… it feels so soothing.

I felt hypnotized. I felt that I needed to let go… let go and move on… climb into that tree and let myself dissolve into its light.

My head screamed as I took another step, and I swear my eye started to twist like before… like with the Breach…

But my feet wouldn’t stop moving, and as I neared the tree, I noticed Pickles’ eyes getting bigger and
bigger, more golden, more yellow…

*Almost there.*

I stopped again, my mind and body returning to be my own.

That voice… coming from Pickles… It sounds like.

Pickles hissed suddenly and then… the grass! The ground! Everything started to turn into water, I screamed and tried to run towards the tree, but my feet were drowning in dirt. I sank deeper and deeper, until I could only see the top of the tree, its bright lights turning to darkness… Heaven was slipping away. And I was falling deeper.

And then the earth swallowed me again.

I saw flashes of light, of mountains and snow and fire,… I heard people call out to me, the rummaging of ground –like an earthquake was raging above my head –and I was turned upside down.

I opened my eyes, sweat dripping from my face. My body shook, limbs trembling, bones shaking… There was darkness all around me. Not that kind of darkness that lights up after a while, as your eyes get used to it… No, it was that kind of darkness that was pitch black, the colour of the night sky without stars. It was the colour of sleep, when you close your eyes, it is the colour of the dark you’re afraid of as a child.

“Calm down…” I heaved to myself, hoping my own voice would talk some sense into me. But instead, I sounded coarse, panicked, and it made me feel more lost. I was absolutely alone in this dark place, and there wasn’t even an echo to keep me company.

Where did the light go?

Why had I fallen through the ground?

How did that tree call out to me?

Who was that voice from, that voice that had come from my cat’s bright yellow eyes…

“Breathe –Breathe.” I continued, and I felt the darkness coming nearer, sticking to my arms and body like the web of a spider clung to its prey. “Please…” I cried.

And then, like the waves of the ocean, the darkness retreated, perhaps to somewhere or someone else calling out to it.

I turned around as the dark room got brighter and brighter, until it was so bright I couldn’t keep my eyes open.

And then… wet…

Rain dripped down onto my head, slowly at first, and then the cloud above me broke and I was showered with water.

I blinked, heart still raging.

“Unbelievable,” I mouthed as I noticed the tall, modern buildings reaching to the skies around me… as I felt the hard, cold and wet cobbles beneath me… as I saw the people crossing the street, rainbows of umbrellas in the grey autumn air. I could hear the rushing cars not far away, people
smiling and talking and cursing at the rain.

“You wouldn’t believe what she said!”

I whisked my head around, eyes big.

“No –Mum, I know. Yes, yes I’m almost home. Perhaps twenty minutes? Yes.” My human self crossed the road opposite to where I sat. This can’t be real…

“Uhuh,” She –or I? –continued. My blonde hair was short already, my frame sickly… I pulled my scarf tighter around my neck, rolling my eyes as my mother continued her nagging. “Yeah, got it.”

I pushed myself straight, eyes focussing. “Saeris!” I screamed.

The old me smiled, flashing her teeth that weren’t perfectly straight, or purely white. I looked perfect though. I wished I knew then how lucky I was. She didn’t hear me, and continued to strut towards the Underground, where she, I, would catch her, my, train back home. The human me was wearing my favourite, yellow boots, and held a transparent umbrella tightly in her hands. She was like a flicker of light within the dull city centre. Yet, I was still sitting on the ground, like a shadow, unreal. People past me, no one stopped. No one could see me sitting here.

I was a ghost.

“Hey!” Damnit, look around! “Saeris!”

“Mum, wait….” She stopped, and then turned around. Her dulled blue eyes flashed along the dreary square, scanning the people hiding under their umbrella. “I swear, Mum, I thought I heard…” She took a step back, and swallowed. “Never mind, I’ll see you at home.”

“No! Sae –“ But my old self was already stepping away, and she disappeared down the flight of stairs that lead down the subway station.

I pushed myself from the ground and ran. People cursed as a rush of wind seemed to sweep past them, they couldn’t see me. I ran, hands reaching forward. “Wait!” I called.

But I forgot how dangerous this world was as well. And as I crossed the street, I hadn’t seen the car coming towards me.

The ground shook again.

Darkness flashing by.

Moving me.

And then I was standing somewhere dark and crowded. Bodies of people were squirming against each other. Flashes of red and pink and yellow lights were flickering across the room, lighting up a face here and there. I didn’t recognize anyone.

The smell of sex hung in the air, damp and arousing. People moved against each other as if they were possessed by the music.

“Dance! Dance ’cause this night ain’t over yet!” A robotic voice that resembled a woman’s sounded through the bass of the music. At least I still vaguely recognized that song…

And then the lights flashed again, focussing on another stranger within the swaying ground.
There I was again, and I looked healthier. My hair, although flat because of the sweat, was still long and voluminous, my body still muscular instead of sickly, my skin tan and full of freckles. The short sequin dress I wore, was bright and stood out from the black mass around me. A man was standing behind me… I couldn’t see his face that well, but I guess that didn’t matter, he didn’t matter, not now and not then.

I know this memory…

The drunk me twirled, moving wilder and wilder as the music swelled. The man behind me slid his hands along my thighs, and it seemed I didn’t mind it either.

“Saeris!” I cried, hoping she would hear me now. But she didn’t, even though this time my voice sounded as loud as the music itself.

I ignored it.

The lights flashed again, and then, the dark overpowered me once more.

The music sounded like it was inside a tunnel, and I was carried further and further away…

It kept happening… I woke up somewhere, saw my old self, and she always almost saw me… saw my eyes, or heard my voice… A ghost was haunting me, and that ghost was myself. It was me.

I saw myself on a hospital bed… I saw myself waiting for my train. Flashes of my old life… I wondered how many times I would see me… For how long was this ordeal going to last? This hell of seeing but not able to reach out…

I was falling back through time, through my past life on Earth, and I saw myself getting younger and younger, healthier and healthier… Until I was a teenager, then a child, then a baby and then…

The darkness swallowed me again. I had just seen myself in a cradle, my little chubby hands playing with the rays of light above me. And then those white rays turned into white locks of hair, and the little chubby hands grabbed the soft strings that looked like silver… And I’m sure my old self had finally, truly seen me.

The baby me had smiled with a toothless grin, eyes squinting. Not scared, not curious, just… happy.

And then, as the darkness carried me away again, I was expecting to see my own birth.

But instead, I ended up inside a stranger’s bedroom.

The moon was creeping through the blinders of the window, and there was a warm wind howling inside the room, making the white, transparent curtains billow. My eyes got used to this kind of darkness, the darkness of the night… And I followed the trails made by the moonlight. I was standing in a doorway that lead towards a small bedroom. The walls were painted blue. There was a fluffy white rug on the floor, and a wardrobe next to the door. In the centre of the room, stood a bed. King size.

I took a step forward, and the wooden floor underneath me creaked.

I held my breath.

My surroundings hadn’t reacted to me before, not like that.

There were people sleeping inside, and someone pushed themselves straight, in shock, and stared
right at me.

First, I thought it was my brother.

But it was my father.

He was still young, no grey hairs, no wrinkles,… His eyes squinted against the darkness, trying to see who had entered their room. The air here was dense, and smelled of sweat and fresh cotton.

“Who’s there?” My dad said, almost whispering, not sure he was dreaming or not.

My heart sank, and I stopped breathing. Could he see me?

“Hello?” Dad said again, more cautious this time.

I took a step forward, into the light of the moon trickling down the window… “It’s me…” My voice sounded clear, yet frightened as well, unsure. “Saeris.”

My dad swallowed, unmoving, and stared right at me, into my eyes. “Who?”

I bit my lip, but felt no pain. Of course… I am dead.

“Saeris.” I said again. Louder this time.

My dad blinked, and kept staring into my eyes, the eyes of his future daughter. “Saeris.” He repeated, the syllables strange in his mouth.

And then, suddenly, the person next to my father inhaled sharply.

My father turned to his side, his face full of concern. My mother sat straight, clutching her stomach, which was huge and swollen… “Shit!” Mum cursed, her gorgeous hair curling along her fresh face, “She’s here!” And then she started to huff, and I saw something move within her.

Myself.

This time, I stepped inside the darkness voluntarily.

This moment wasn’t for me to remember. But I’m glad I saw it. I’m glad I know now how my parents came up with my name… It wasn’t anything grand, or special… Not a long lost family member, or a friend, who I was named after.

I named myself.

I did it.

The darkness felt warm this time, yet also thicker, stranger.

Next was my last stop. I knew that now. What will I see now? Who will I see now? Will I go back to that meadow, will I be able to reach that tree of light?

The darkness around me started to lighten up, and it felt so familiar now… So…

Old.

***

The sky was a bright mixture of blue and purple, and although it was daytime, I could see the stars
clearly among the white clouds. The trees before me were huge, their trunks thick and old, their branches glistening with dew, almost as high up as the stars. Twisting along the branches were clear spires of crystal, lights dancing within.

The sweet taste of magic hung in the air… it didn’t taste of anyone, it just tastes like magic itself. Pure. Untethered.

I took a step forward, away from the darkness behind me, and gaped at the wondrous place I had wandered into.

There was a long road in front of me, and I could see small runes along the side of the road, glowing gently, showing me the way. Along the path, the earth was littered with grass and flowers and brightly coloured stones. The ground also split up, leading away to air below, as if we were floating. I understood then that on top of the clouds above me, there were buildings and other places… just like this one.

Where in the world was I?

I followed the meanders slowly, taking in the magic around me.

It was everywhere.

It was everything.

Magic wasn’t just a tool here, it was a source… it was the flowers and the grass, the road, the tree and its branches… magic was the sky, and the clouds floating in it, and the stars shining down on me. I was magic. It was the air I breathed, the sounds I heard,…

The meandering road was like a river, taking turns in unexpected places. I passed the crystal woods, the palaces above my head, until I saw a flicker of light in the distance. On the horizon stood a bright city of white and gold, so far away, yet I could hear its gates opening to me…

“Saeris?”

A foreign voice whispered in my ear, and my whole body froze. I could feel breath as cold as ice trickling down the brim of my ear, dry lips smiling against my lobe, a hand, cold as well, pressing down on my shoulders.

“Saeris, ny salaimem. Ny salaimem shala em’an.”

“What?” I heaved and turned around.

The darkness consumed me again, just for a brief moment, until it ebbed away.

I was standing inside a courtyard, filled with exotic flowers that couldn’t be found on Earth or Thedas. The walls surrounding me were old, yet seemed brand new, built with shimmering stones and decorated with colourful murals and tiles depicting strange creatures.

I swallowed. Whose voice was that?

I stared at the sky, and it was still the same, brightly coloured, the sun and the stars intertwining… I’m in the same world, but at another place… Am I in the city I saw near the horizon? I looked around this courtyard, and noticed in the centre, not far from me, a little garden… filled with statues of… creatures I had definitely seen before… Perhaps in books? On images? Memories? I could see nine statues, though their faces were blurry… As if their artist hadn’t finished his masterwork yet…
the details still missed… the last one of the nine statues was almost missing completely. The head of this last creature was gone, seemingly ripped off by someone… I think somebody really didn’t like this statue, or the creature, man or woman, representing it.

The magic tasted more vibrant here, deeper and older.

And as I crossed that ninth statue, I swear the taste was… familiar.

Suddenly, as if a hand was sliding along my back, I heard that same voice cry in the distance, behind the walls of the courtyard. My heart started to beat rapidly, and I was surprised that a dead heart could be so vivid. Screams and alarm bells were ringing in my head, and everything around me, all the perfect and beautiful gardens, buildings and monuments felt wrong… distorted.

Everything felt dazed… Vile.

Tears glided down my cheeks, blurring my vision, choking me out of breath.

That cry –the echo still lingering –that was mine.

“Saeris!”

It was my voice, and I felt sorrow so deeply, I couldn’t even comprehend it. My arms and legs started to shake from anger and defeat.

I moved, no ran, sprinted, forwards… I couldn’t even see what was around me anymore. I just followed the voice, its eerie hands pushing me, its breaths of ice guiding me…

I had to find myself.

I am here. I was here. I don’t remember it but now I’m so sure… This is a place from before. It’s from before I was born, before I existed… this was the home of my ancestor… And she is here now.

I need to find her.

“Ghi’la me! Sathan!” The voice, my voice, cried again. She begged.

And then, I closed my eyes and when I opened them again… there she was, sitting on the ground, eyes focussed on the marble floor.

I blinked rapidly, but everything was blurry, like peeping through a misty mirror… I couldn’t see anything but her –myself – sitting in front of me.

Her back was turned to me, her long, slick black hair hanging loosely around her frail shoulders. Her hair was as black as the darkness that had swallowed me. Not even the Veilfire on the torches hanging from the stone walls, or the runes on the floor, could brighten it… Her pale, greyish ears stuck between the strands of night, twitching as she hiccupped.

I took a step closer.

The Elven girl in front of me shivered, and looked over her shoulder.

I held my breath. Her face was almost like mine, but sharper, paler and… she looked so tired, so stricken with sadness and desperation. Her blue eyes were deep-set into her face, dark circles underneath them. And along her cheeks, nose, forehead and chin, twisted thick inked lines, their colour a dark grey. The Vallaslin was so stark against her porcelain skin, it almost seemed she wanted them to be seen so vividly. I followed the tattoo and furrowed my brows as they went on
below her chin, along her neck and... her whole body was covered... She was wearing a loose, pale green gown that exposed most of her chest, shoulders and back. She shivered so badly, I wanted to cover her up. But covering up meant hiding those Vallaslin that twisted along her collarbones, her shoulders, along her visible spine. The black lines disappeared in her cleavage, curling around her breasts underneath.

She lifted up her hands, tucking away a strand of hair behind her ears. Even her earlobes and her fingers and knuckles were inked.

Her eyes, red from crying, were big and curious, though she couldn’t see me, she felt me.

“Ghi’la me...” She sighed, her voice breaking mid-sentence, tears streaming down her face.

And then, someone else entered the space, which felt empty –purely empty except for us. The light coming from its sole window was so bright, I couldn’t even see how big the room was, and who else was there.

My eyes squinted as they stared passed my ancestor... and on the floor, I could clearly see... seven shadows. They moved, mumbled amongst each other.

My ancestor looked back to her front, her eyes unwavering this time. She stopped shaking, stopped crying and heaving.

The seven shadows came closer –if only I could see them.

I bit my lip, and slowly felt a strange heat rising along my toes to my knees.

My ancestor opened her mouth, though her voice sounded small, almost too silent to hear. A whisper.

I could only hear her utter “ma halani”, help me, to the shadows in front of her.

The shadows whispered amongst themselves, hushing and arguing. My ancestor bowed her head, almost in shame. Or in fear?

Sweat started to drip from my forehead as the minutes ticked away... My cheeks started to flush, and I could feel warmth underneath my feet –as if I was standing on hot coals.

I wiped the sweat from my face, ignoring the heat, focussing on the murmuring shadows in front of me... but they were getting more blurry, their voices unintelligible...

And then... they became quiet...

My ancestor lifted her face, her slick hair sliding from her shoulders with the movements of a snake...

The shadows said something again. The shaking girl in front of me she –she smiled? Baring her white teeth, she nodded her head a final time. “Vin.” She said. Yes.

And then she screamed.

And then I screamed with her.

“Ra nuisen! RA NUISEN!” She screamed and clawed at her own skin.

I followed her screams, I felt her nails scraping along my arms... And it burns! IT BURNS!
I coughed, my hands flailing at my throat! I can’t breathe! I can’t –I can’t see! Everything was burning, my body felt like it was turning to ashes.

And my ancestor in front of me fell to the ground, pushing her face against the cold marble floor as she hurled in agony and despair. The shadows in front of us didn’t do anything but stare down to our crying figures, twisting in pain… burning from the inside out.

And through the sea of tears, I could see the Vallaslin on the bare back of the girl before me, slowly retreat, being burned away pigment by pigment. Blood seeped from her pores, until she was nothing more but a mass of blood and bones and tears… The roots of her deep black hair started to wither, but instead of falling out, it turned to white –pure white –like the light coming from the window, like the blinding light of the wailing willow tree…

She screamed louder, and I felt my own scalp burning, follicle by follicle, and I wanted to rip the skin off of my head, until I too was nothing more but burning and seething bones.

“MAKE IT STOP!” I roared. “IT’S BURNING!”

But it didn’t stop, and the white started to turn red and orange and black… to flames.

And, and, and… And then the Elven girl stopped screaming. She became like the clouds, drifting calmly as she raised herself slowly. Dark red blood dripped from her whole body, as if she had bathed in it. And as the blood dripped onto the marble floor, I noticed her bare skin underneath, which was now pure, fair, no sign of scars or the black Vallaslin…

She breathed in deeply, almost jaggedly… as if a great burden had been lifted off her shoulders.

The seven shadows murmured amongst themselves proudly… and then their voices were as clear as day… And they weren’t directed towards my ancestor, but to me.

“Tel’ena’ra bellana bana’vhenadahl, sethen’a ir san’shiral, mala tel’halani. Ir sa’vir te’usu’ledin va’r bana’vallaslin, vora’nas’as san banal’him emma abel revas. Ir tela’ena glandival, vir amin tel’hanin. Ir tela las ir Fen halam, vir am’tela’elvahen.” They sang, the notes ringing inside of my head, filling my own thoughts.

I cried, and I felt that burning sensation creeping on my skin again… Why didn’t it stop?

My ancestor laughed out loud, incredibly deeply, and now her voice didn’t resemble mine anymore… She turned around very slowly, her face raising towards me.

She opened her eyes.

“Saeris.” She howled. “Saeris, ny salaimem.” You have forgotten.

Tears streamed down my face again, yet now, they were red as well. The same blood as hers.

Her eyes stared deep into mine.

One blue.

And now… One emerald green.

“Ny salaimem mar dirtha’vhen’an.” She whispered, and her green eye twisted and turned.

She wasn’t my ancestor anymore. She was my reflection. She was me.
I screamed, the burning sensation taking control, flames filling the entire room. They ate the shadows, they ate away the reflection in front of me, until everything turned into ash and flame and pain and blood.

*Ny salaimem mar dirtha‘vhen’an.*

I was burning away, the darkness skulking from the window and the shadows and my ancestor’s soulless eyes.

*Mar dirtha‘vhen’an.*

It hurts! It burns! STOP!

The flames were all around me now, and I screamed, my lungs literally on fire, and I ran forwards… I pushed against the flames as if they were a howling wind…

But this time…

_The night is long_
_And the path is dark_

I stepped outside the flames and I was so happy the cold darkness greeted me… But this time… I could see the stars as well.

_Look to the sky_
_For one day soon_

‘STOP! SHE IS ALIVE!’

This time… Instead of the darkness… The dawn came…

Chapter End Notes

Here are some translations to the Elven:

*“Saeris, ny salaimem. Ny salaimem shala em’an.” = Saeris, you have forgotten. You have forgotten to protect us.*

*“Ghi’la me! Sathan!” = Guide me! Please!*

*“Ra nuisen!” = It burns!*

“Tel’enara bellana bana’vhenadahl, sethen’a ir san’shiral…” = the words of lullaby “Where Willows Wail”

This chapter is supposed to be quite strange and confusing... and it raised more questions than it answers... but everything will eventually become clear. Is this chapter, and the last part of it, confusing you? Good, Saeris is confused as well!

Next chapter we will see what happens after Saeris wakes up.... and we'll finally go to a very pretty castle called Skyhold.
Cursed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Has she awakened yet?’
‘No… She hasn’t…’
‘She isn’t –?’
‘She still sleeps. She will wake soon. I hope.’
‘Tell me when something happens, Solas.’
‘I will, Seeker.’

There was a scuffling outside, people wandering about around the tent.

My eyes moved against my lids, and for a second I wondered if that darkness would be forever. I curled my toes, stretched my fingers, twitched my ears… And I realized I was alive.

I’m back.

And I can open my eyes.

So I did. Slowly, trying to get used to the light that trickled inside the makeshift tent… Outside the sun was shining lazily… it was morning, I guessed.

I bit my lip. It hurts. I’m so happy it hurts…

I blinked, and it felt like there was a plug inside my throat… making it dry and coarse and hard to breathe… I think I’m thirsty… How long have I been laying here?

How long had I’d been dead?

And… how did I wake up?

I don’t remember… or do I? I saw –I saw my old self! I saw Pickles and, and dad! Was it all a dream? What about… I don’t know… There’s something strange I can’t seem to remember… No, shadows, I didn’t forget. Seven shadows… And my ancestor… my promise…

I pushed myself straight, and whimpered as the muscles in my arms protested, sour from doing nothing… from being reborn…

It’s true then, I cannot die unless I fulfil my promise…

That promise to those seven shadows, whatever they were…

I turned to my side, swaying my legs off the bed. I noticed then the thick fur mantle that covered my shoulders. I touched it carefully, pushing against the soft, dark reddish brown fabric.

That’s Cullen’s…

Suddenly, the flap of the tent was slid aside, and a bright light entered the damp tent. I hissed, and
held my hand before my eyes as a cover.

A familiar voice cursed, surprised. ‘Saeris!’

Solas rushed to the bed. I don’t remember ever seeing such an expression on that Elf’s face.

I smiled lazily… ‘Good morning, Solas.’ My voice sounded strange.

Solas walked over to my bed with two long, rushed strides. His face was pulled in a grimace mixed with concern and… and reassurance. There were extremely dark circles under his deep grey eyes, which now almost looked feral as he stared at me intensely. The woollen tunic he wore was dirty… so were his pants… he hadn’t changed since long. The jawbone necklace hung loosely around his neck, and I noticed him swallowing deeply as he stopped in front of me.

I furrowed my brows, ‘I –’

And then, Solas grabbed my shoulders, his fingers burying into the mantle, and he pulled me against his chest. He rested his cheek on top of my head, his face planted in my unruly hair. He breathed shakily, and swallowed again, as if in tears. He smelled of Elfroot and dirt… and blood… and fire.

A flash of dancing flames rushed inside my mind… the feeling of being burned alive.

‘Saeris, I… I have been so worried.’ Solas hushed against my skin.

‘I’m sorry.’ I mumbled, ‘I’m okay.’

‘You were dead.’ He bit, and pushed himself slightly away, just so he could see my face. His hands were still holding onto my shoulders as he held me at arm’s length. ‘I… I had tried everything imaginable, yet I was so sure…’

‘I know.’ I shook my head, my hair dancing in curls around my face. ‘I know, Solas.’

‘It matters not…’ Solas stared into my eyes, holding me there. ‘You are here. That is what is important. For now.’

I hummed slightly.

‘Is there anything you need?’ He hadn’t stopped staring at me, his face close to mine.

How could I forget that kiss we had shared before… before Haven…

‘Some water…’ I smiled faintly. ‘My throat feels like it’s filled with dust.’

There was a flash of pain in Solas’ eyes. ‘Of course.’ He mumbled absent-mindedly. ‘I will get you some…’ He let go of my shoulders reluctantly, finger by finger, and then took another step back. ‘Stay here.’

‘I will.’

Solas’ mouth twitched, an unsure expression. And then he turned around quickly and rushed out of the tent. I tried to stare past him as he opened the entrance of the tent, hoping to see what was going on outside. But the light was too strong, and I could only see shadows rushing by before the tent was closed off again.

I rolled back my shoulders, my muscles protesting slightly.
I had been wounded before. Now, I feel fine.

Again, there was a rush of footsteps and voices outside. My head jolted straight.

‘Solas! Is she…’

The flap of the tent was slid aside again, and I squinted my eyes. Solas rushed back inside, a bowl of water in his ever so slightly trembling, large hands. And right behind him followed Cassandra. She was in full gear, her steel armour dirty, her hair wild. She had smears of dust on her face, and her brown eyes large and deep-set.

‘You are awake!’ She gasped, her lips were blue.

‘Cass…’ I started, my voice still hoarse.

Solas interrupted, standing before the Seeker to cut her off too. He held a large bowl of fresh water in his hands, and slowly shoved it towards me. I looked up to him and nodded gratefully. He stared at me as if I was still but a ghost that was going to disappear at any given moment.

As I took the bowl from his hands, my fingers slightly touched his. He was colder than I was.

I held the bowl in front of me and swallowed. Damn I was so thirsty. But as I cupped the bowl and brought it closer to my face, I noticed my reflection within the water.

I cried out and dropped the bowl, and it fell onto the ground into little pieces.

‘Maker’s grace! Are you –’ Cassandra rushed towards me at the same moment Solas did, and they both grabbed my upper arms, shaking me slightly.

‘I’m…’ I mumbled.

I… I looked like before… nothing had changed. No scars. Not even a hint there had been bruising before… I reached for my ears. One of them had been cut in half by – and it was whole again. Like my body had melted and created anew.

There was no sign of the battle I had fought.

I stared back at Solas, eyes big and confused. He nodded slowly. He understood.

And Cassandra got the cue of my surprise, and pulled my sleeve so I turned towards her instead.

‘Who,’ she started, her voice stern and somewhat cold, ‘what are you?’

I swallowed again, and stared at my trembling hands.

‘I don’t know.’ I hiccupped. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘You have to tell us everything.’ Leliana suddenly appeared from behind the Seeker. I hadn’t even seen her come in. ‘What happened? You died.’

‘And then you came back.’ Cassandra continued, not even looking behind her.

Leliana peered at me from underneath her hood, her arms crossed before her. There was a caution to her voice, to her whole stance… as if she didn’t know to be afraid or to be in awe, and it made her angry. It made me angry too.

What do I tell them?
'What did you see?' Cassandra’s eyes were big, demanding even. ‘Where did you go?’

‘I…’

‘Stop this!’ Solas pushed himself back to his feet, his voice thundering. ‘She has just awakened. Give her time.’

‘We do not have time, Solas.’ Cassandra bit back.

‘No. He is right. She needs to come to her senses first. An hour.’ Leliana’s voice sounded soft and calm, even though she didn’t move or breathe for all that matter.

My head was pounding, my throat stinging…

‘But –’ Cassandra tutted.

‘An hour.’ Leliana stated coldly.

I have an hour… an hour to understand what has happened… and an hour to figure out what to tell them.

Leliana turned away and left the tent. Cassandra took a step back, still gaping at me. But then she followed Leliana outside, her shoulders trembling impatiently.

I blinked. This is all too much.

What in Mythal’s… Maker’s… What in fuck’s name happened.

‘Can you stand?’ Solas was the only one who remained calm and patient, his eyes sweet and concerned. He stretched his hand towards me, his palm turned towards the ceiling. There was no rushing here, no questions. He only smiled faintly, and it made my stomach twist a little bit.

‘I’ll try.’ I sighed and grabbed his hand, his fingers softly caressing mine.

I almost fell as I stood up, but Solas held me up steadily. ‘You need fresh air. And I will get someone to bring you water.’ He said as his other arm slid underneath my shoulder and supported my lower back. I noticed how he pushed himself slightly against me. No space left untouched, no way for me to fall back down again.

Solas guided me outside. Into the light. It rushed against me like a storm. And even though it was cold outside, the wind howling and the snow pushing against us, the sun surrounded me with warmth. And for a second, I was so incredibly happy to be alive… to be able to feel that warmth again, to squint against the light.

But as my eyes adjusted, I noticed the group of people that had started to gather around my tent.

Solas hissed, his fingers burying into the fabric of my shirt at my back.

‘Our Lady has awakened!’ Someone called.

What?

‘Our Lady!’ People started to clap. ‘The Miracle!’ Some whispered. There were around a hundred of them, humans and Elves alike, and they all stood in front of us. Their faces were blue and red, clothes tattered and dirty. And they fell to their knees in unison, into the icy snow below. Some cried, some prayed, and others screamed my name.
‘What is happening?’ I heaved.

‘They think you have been saved by Andraste herself. Or perhaps you are Her.’ Mother Giselle appeared from between the curtains of people. ‘Are you?’

People cheered at my confused silence.

‘N –No! I don’t…’ I sighed, my throat still as dry as the desert.

‘Saeris!’ Someone called. That voice… ‘Move aside! Maker’s ass, man, move! Let me through!’ Maxwell ran through the crowd, his eyes searching… for me. His soft brown curls were wet and dirty, and his eyes were like the others, deep-set and large. I noticed new scars on his tanned face that looked quite pale and blue. A long, deep cut from his eyebrow to his chin was set into his face, and it had healed already and turned white. He also looked older. Tired. But all of that couldn’t wipe away the huge smile that curled along his dark lips as he found me. ‘Saeris.’ He whispered my name, and it made me warm inside.

He was worth dying for. My friend.

He sprinted towards me, and almost somersaulted over the kneeling and praying people before my feet. And then he was in front of me.

‘Hi, Max.’ I grinned.

And he couldn’t say anything, his eyes tearing up. ‘Damnit Saeris.’ He cursed, and then his strong arms were around me. Solas protested silently as he had to let go of me, but Maxwell was there to lift me up. He was everywhere. His arms around my waist, his chest against mine, his cheek against my forehead, and his breath along my ears. And that smell – it was the smell of life itself. Sweat and dirt and everything that was Maxwell. If I’d bottled it, the perfume would be called happiness. It made me happy, and it made me forget the crowd, the prayers, the questions… it made me forget everything that had happened. Because now I’m back again. I’m here. I’m alive and I… Max’s alive. He’s here. He’s fine. That alone was worth everything.

‘I swear to the Maker, Saeris. If you do that again…’ He couldn’t finish his sentence, but instead hugged me even harder.

‘I’m sorry.’ I mumbled against his shoulder, so only he could hear. ‘I didn’t want you to…’

‘I know.’ Maxwell breathed. He was so warm. ‘But never do anything like that. Never again. I can’t… I can’t deal with that again. I won’t.’

‘But if I didn’t you’d…’

‘No. I would’ve taken care of it. It wasn’t your duty. It was mine. And if I had to die for it, then so be it. But… Don’t you dare ever do that again… I wanted to protect you, everyone, and I was ready for it. So don’t… please promise me you’ll never…’

‘I can’t promise that, Max.’ I pushed my face from his shoulder to look at him. ‘You are my friend.’

‘And you are mine. Let me protect you.’ Maxwell furrowed his brows and sighed. ‘Maker, Saeris, I’m so angry… but I’m so happy you’re here… I thought you were gone forever.’

‘We all did.’ Solas interrupted. I forgot he was there. I even forgot the people around us.

‘Please, disperse!’ Commander Cullen stepped from between the people. They moved aside
immediately.

My heart skipped a beat… And the fur cape on my shoulders felt as heavy as lead. Cullen stopped in front of us, and Maxwell let go of me and nodded at his Commander. Solas immediately took Max’ place at my side, supporting me again. But I only stared at Cullen.

He had been the last one I’d seen. The last one I’d heard… I remember his words, his tears on my face… his arms shaking me… and for a moment it all came back to me, rushing in a thousand images. Dying. The stars.

‘Lady Saeris.’ Cullen broke the silence. There was a mixture of emotions on his face. Sadness, confusion… anger. Boy, he was really angry. I understood. I’d be angry too if he secretly went out, alone, into enemy lines, died and then came back… just like that. I’m angry too. Maybe I should’ve stayed dead? Maybe they would’ve learned to cope with my death, and it wouldn’t all be so damn confusing.

Cullen kept staring at me, his golden brown eyes almost too afraid to stop… as if I’d be gone after he blinked. I wish I was… The praying crowd around us was only growing larger and larger, their voices louder and louder.

‘You cannot be here.’ His voice was cold and distant. He sounded like he was in pain. Not physical. I knew that pain. And I hated myself for letting him feel that. ‘Follow me.’

‘Alright, let’s go.’ Maxwell exhaled, and supported my other side together with Solas.

‘The Lady!’ The kneeling people still applauded as we passed them. ‘She has returned to us!’

But with every prayer, I could hear silent threats. ‘Demon…’ I heard them whisper, their eyes piercing. ‘Witch… foul demon… should’ve stayed dead… perhaps we burn her again…’

I closed my eyes shut.

Am I a demon?

I could be.

***

‘How are you feeling?’ Solas hushed. I gulped down the water in one go. It wasn’t enough. I could drink gallons, but the taste and feel of fire and dust in my throat wouldn’t ebb away. Perhaps I’m still burning inside.

I coughed. And Solas’ hands were on my shoulders. ‘I’m fine, I’m fine.’ I pushed him back.

‘Guards, leave us.’ Leliana ordered as she strutted back and forth behind the wobbly, makeshift table. A map was spread out on it. Parts of it were ripped off or burned. ‘Solas, you too.’

Solas sneered at the Spymaster.

‘I’m alright, falon.’ I nodded assuredly at the Elf.

He cocked his head. ‘As you wish.’ He said and left, slowly, still looking at me.

‘He is concerned.’ I smiled at Maxwell, who stood next to me.

‘I can see that.’ Max winked.
‘Alright. Let us begin.’ Leliana stopped in front of the table. Her eyes were glistening as she stared at me again. Ambassador Josephine was standing next to her, and she looked down to the table nervously. And next to her stood the Commander. The fact that he stared at me, yet still couldn’t look at me directly in the eyes, made me even more nervous. I need to give him his mantle back.

‘What happened?’ Cassandra asked first. She was leaning against the wooden beam that supported the tent. Her face was clear and curious, cautious, but filled with wonder.

‘I…’ I started, ‘I followed Max.’ I told them everything. I told them how I was attacked by Simon, who had turned into a Red-Lyrium Templar. Cullen shifted on his feet visibly at that. I left out how he had stabbed me. There’s no need for those details. And then I told them about how I saw the Elder One, Corypheus, and heard parts of what he said to Maxwell.

‘He was one ugly bastard, wasn’t he?’ Maxwell joked, but I could see him getting nervous with the memory of that scene.

I nodded. And then continued. I told them how I pushed Maxwell and got buried underneath the avalanche, and fell to the cavern below. I recalled following Maxwell’s bloodied footsteps, his moaning in the distance… and from the corner of my eyes, I saw Max and Cassandra sharing a pained look… ‘I couldn’t catch up to Max… I was too slow, wounded… so I gave him the last I had, so he could survive.’

‘And then you died.’ Leliana confirmed.

Swallowing, I answered, ‘I think so.’

Cullen shook his head. ‘No, I know you did. I held you… I felt…’ He stopped and grunted. Josephine put her hand on his steel shoulder, and looked at him sympathetically.

‘And then what happened?’ Cassandra interrupted, her voice loud and high. ‘Did you see the Maker? Where did you go? What…’

‘Cassandra.’ Leliana held up her hand to silence the Seeker. But I saw the interest sparkling in Leliana’s eyes. I knew she was as devout as Cassandra was. And I knew they both wanted me to answer their religious questions. Had I seen the Maker? Did Andraste join Him at his side? Did I see Her there? Is there truly an afterlife?

‘There was darkness first.’ I answered. And it surprised them. They turned to me, and Maxwell had gone silent at my side. Shall I tell them everything? Or… ‘And then… I…’ Shall I tell them of the glowing willow tree? ‘I saw my life flashing before me.’

‘And?’ Leliana spread her hands on the table, her nails ticking against the wood impatiently.

‘And then I…’ I bit the inside of my lip. ‘I felt I was burning.’

‘Stop. I cannot hear this.’ Josephine covered her mouth with her hand.

But I continued anyway. ‘And then I saw flames and… and then I was back again.’ Perhaps that’s not entirely how it went. But some things were personal. And I don’t understand much yet… they didn’t need to know of the shadows I saw… my ancestor…

‘You did not see anything more?’ Cassandra asked, her voice filled with disappointment.

‘No.’
‘Then… how did you return? Why?’ Leliana sighed, her eyes moving from one side to another as she thought deeply.

‘Did Andraste return you to us? For saving the Herald?’ Cassandra thought aloud.

‘Like I said, I’m not Andraste’s Herald.’ Maxwell bit.

‘We don’t know that.’ Leliana clapped back.

‘I do.’ Max shook his head.

‘Then what are you?’ Josephine tapped her foot on the ground, and I just noticed then how her curls were escaping her hairdo, and how dirty her dress was.

‘Yes, if you were not blessed by Andraste… How did you return? Solas did not detect any magic used…’ Leliana mumbled. ‘Then are you…?’

‘She is not a demon!’ Maxwell suddenly commanded, stomping his feet on the ground. ‘I know you’re all thinking it! And stop! She isn’t!’

I scraped my throat. ‘Not that I know of.’

‘Then how did you come back?’

‘The Maker! Or Andraste! This couldn’t be anything but a divine intervention. Our cause…’

‘Can we verify if she is possessed? Cullen can you…’

‘NO!’ Cullen smacked his fist on the table, and everyone went silent. The Commander’s fist trembled as he slowly retreated.

‘I’m cursed.’

There. I said it. It might not be wholly true. But in a way I am cursed. I cursed myself by promising something I don’t even recall. They should know, or they will continue to argue.

‘What?’ Maxwell blinked rapidly, furrowing his brows. He took a step away from me.

‘I’m cursed,’ I said again. ‘I… I promised something… and I don’t remember. I can’t die, unless I fulfil it.’ My head felt heavy. I hadn’t told anyone this before. Not for a hundred years. But perhaps I shouldn’t yet tell them my age. We’re confused enough as it is.

‘How can you be…’ Cassandra breathed…

‘I don’t know… I thought closing the Breach would’ve… freed me… but it didn’t.’

‘Obviously…’ Josephine mumbled.

‘Why did you not tell us any of this sooner?’ Leliana skulked around the table towards me, still not satisfied. ‘We could have helped, perhaps, or –’

‘I was scared.’ I intercepted. ‘I thought it didn’t matter… I thought I’d just… help out and… and it would all… get solved.’

‘But it didn’t.’ Leliana cocked her head. ‘Does Solas…’
‘No, I wanted to tell him but then… everything happened.’

‘This needs to be studied… We need to –’ Josephine gaped at me.

‘Indeed. But we do not have the resources.’ Commander Cullen finally stopped staring at me, and instead looked over the map before him. ‘Perhaps when we reach the stronghold.’

‘The stronghold?’ I stared at the map, and saw a new, golden pin sticking on a location in the Frostback Mountains… what stronghold could be hidden here? Shouldn’t we flee from the mountains? From Corypheus?

‘I’ll tell you later.’ Maxwell pinched my knee, and winked at me again.

‘What will we tell the people? Word of this occurrence will spread.’ Josephine continued against Leliana and Cassandra.

Leliana stopped in front of me, her hands bound behind her back. ‘I propose we use this to our advantage. We do not yet know the details of this… this curse, you say… Perhaps this could boost our already infamous reputation…’

‘Possibly…’ Josephine clasped her hands. ‘We are in dire need of this after Haven.’

Maxwell sighed deeply, ‘Is telling the people I’m Andraste’s Herald not good enough anymore? I’m hurt. That was my favourite lie of the month.’

‘It could very well not be a lie.’ Cassandra hissed. ‘We do not know the Maker’s way… We do not know what has happened to Saeris…’

‘What? No!’ I protested and tried to stand up. I almost fell, and Cullen twitched. But Maxwell was already supporting me. ‘This has nothing to do with the Maker!’

‘Does it?’ Leliana hushed, almost like Mother Giselle does all the time.

I grinded my teeth against each other, my blood boiling. I don’t want to be mistaken for another Herald… I saw the pressure it put on Maxwell… And I’m not… I don’t believe in that sort of thing. ‘I’m not a Herald.’

‘But you saved one. And were rewarded for it. This is what people will believe, what they will hear. And this is what will attract them to the Inquisition, together with the Herald’s reputation.’ Josephine’s face was becoming brighter, her eyes filled with hope. If they used my “fake” story… it will rouse people, instigate them to join us…

But was I ready to be in the spotlight after decades in the shadows?

I liked the shadows… they were safe and cool. There were no expectations, no demands. Only the few that mattered would see me.

But then Maxwell grabbed my hand, and pinched it.

I looked over to him, and saw the understanding in his face. He knew the responsibility… But if I had been ready to die for him, I was ready for this too.

If I can truly help the Inquisition… And perhaps they can help me too…

‘We can work together.’ Josephine smiled faintly, encouraging.
‘I… alright.’ I exhaled, as if I had been holding my breath all this time. I will inspire and galvanize… and I will help. Is that not what I wanted? Maxwell sighed, almost disappointedly… He had hoped for an easier life for me. And I saw Cullen almost curse under his breath, not in anger or disappointment, but in concern. Leliana, Josephine and Cassandra nodded assuredly, though I feared they would never treat me as an equal again. Please don’t believe in this lie.

I am cursed. Not blessed.

***

‘Holy crap! Look who’s up!’ Varric grinned and walked up towards us as we stepped out of the large tent, which was supposed to be a war room…

I smiled, and Maxwell finally did too.

‘Enjoyed your little nap, Twinkle? Or should I say Firefly now?’ Varric laughed.

‘Not funny, Dwarf.’ Maxwell tutted.

‘I like Twinkle more.’ I winked.

‘Well, well.’ Dorian joined us too, and he looked me up and down slowly… and interested. ‘You caused quite the stir, my Lady.’

‘And it was awesome.’ The Iron Bull stood next to Dorian, butting him with his elbow. ‘Can you do that again? Are you fireproof, or somethin’?’ Bull joked. There were fresh scratches on his dark horns.

‘There you are, my dear.’ And Vivienne turned around the corner, her face, although pale and dirty, was still filled with disdain and pride. ‘I was hoping to have a moment with you…’

‘Oh, don’t be interested now, Madame.’ Dorian scoffed mockingly.

Vivienne lifted her nose. I was sure she still thought of me as a demon. Perhaps even more now. Though I saw another flicker of interest in her eyes. She could use me for something now, I saw her think. Perhaps for her own reputation.

‘Oi, what’s… blegh!’ Sera peeped over Dorian’s shoulder curiously. But as soon as the quirky Elf saw me, she rolled her eyes and twisted her nose. As if I smelled. Perhaps I do. Blackwall was behind her. He didn’t say anything. He looked at me with suspicion though. I guess this will be people’s reaction to me now. Either awe, or suspicion and disgust.

‘Well, since everyone’s here…’ Maxwell started, a smile on his face still, ‘Where’s Cole?’

‘That demon boy,’ Vivienne bit, and glanced my way for a second, ‘has been popping up everywhere around the encampment. Perhaps a binding spell…’

‘Viv.’ Dorian sighed. ‘Could you not be so dreadful?’


‘Kid’s here.’ Varric laughed again. Bianca was still strapped to his back. His clothes were torn, I
noticed.

‘Fuck man. Can you stop?’ Maxwell was still swearing. ‘I peed a little.’ He grinned.

The group laughed. I even saw Vivienne chuckle.

I’m glad to be alive. I’m glad to see them again, even if some of them aren’t happy to see me.

‘Alright. Saeris’s up, and this is the plan. We’re –’ Max continued.

But then Solas showed up. He walked over to stand next to me, his hand caressing my arm, his eyes demanding my gaze.

Maxwell scraped his throat. ‘Well, uh… Let’s discuss this inside… shall we…’ His eyes flickered from Solas to me and then back to the group. ‘Saeris… I’ll bring them up to date. You, uh, you go rest.’ Maxwell winked at me, and my cheeks flushed red.

‘I understand, Herald, but I still need to speak –’ Vivienne continued anyway.

‘Ah for the Maker’s sake, let them have their moment.’ Dorian jeered.

‘See ‘ya later, Firefly!’ Varric giggled and smacked my back as he passed me.

Maxwell winked at us, and walked over to another tent nearby. Other people and Inquisition soldiers were hanging around. I felt their eyes on me. I wanted to hide.

The others followed Maxwell. Vivienne glared at me again, but was pulled away by Dorian. Bull followed them eagerly, together with Blackwall and Sera, who turned around and stuck out her tongue towards me for some unknown reason. Cole tiptoed on his feet, his big eyes boring into my soul.

I’m alright, Cole. I thought, hoping he’d hear me.

Cole then mumbled something, and disappeared. I heard someone cry out in surprise somewhere in the camp. What a strange boy… well maybe I’m stranger now.

Solas remained quiet, his hand touching my arm sliding down towards my hand. He grabbed it softly. And it made my heart flutter for a moment. And then my eye twisted for the first time again since I’d awakened. ‘You need rest.’ He said. His voice was deep.

‘I’ve rested enough.’

Solas dipped his head. ‘Let us walk, then.’

I followed Solas, holding his hand, and we passed through the encampment. The tents were makeshift, old and some even ripped. It was all the people had been able to bring or salvage at the last moment… when Haven was attacked. They had nothing but the clothes on their bodies, and the small backpacks on their backs, filled with some food and little memories from their previous home. They had lost everything.

What was the Inquisition now?

People stopped what they were doing as we neared them. Some froze in place, other bowed or even kneeled. I used to be happy when they ignored me. Even feared me.

‘What happened after I…’ I mumbled to Solas, who had remained silent during our walk at first.
‘We thought you had died.’ Solas said while still staring forward. He couldn’t look at me as he spoke. ‘We had no way to bury you, or the others. So we opted for –’

‘Cremation.’ I sighed. I was burned. Like Haven.

‘But then you reappeared within the flames.’ Solas continued. We passed the healer’s hut. There were more dead than alive laying on the beds. I wondered for how long we were here… how many had died already. I bet some wished for others to have come back, instead of myself. ‘The humans have not raised one of our People so high for ages beyond counting. Some argued you were but Andraste herself. Or a demon, perchance.’ Solas glanced at me.

I stopped in my tracks. The people around us gasped, and made way. I tried to ignore them. ‘What did… do you think, Solas?’ His name felt warm in my mouth.

Solas stopped a few steps after me, and slowly turned around. ‘Come.’ He said, and stretched his hand. I grabbed it again, and he lead me around the corner of one of the tents, a few feet outside the encampment.

Even though it was still morning, I could see nothing but snow and mountains. Where were we? I didn’t recognize this part of the mountains.

Solas pinched my hand, made me stop and turn towards him. ‘I think of you as Saeris.’ He said, slowly, savouring my name in his mouth. ‘I think of you as you are. More than what you make others believe, or believe yourself to be.’ Solas took a step closer to me, until his chest almost touched mine.

‘Solas… I…’ I swallowed, but couldn’t look away from his eyes.

Solas rested his forehead against mine, his breath against my skin. His lips… so close, slowly opened and…

I moved my head away, and let go of his hands. ‘We can’t Solas. I… You know I’m…’ I’m cursed. I can’t die. I’m immortal.

‘You are perfect.’ He whispered.

I looked down to my feet. ‘I’m not… We can’t…’

Solas grabbed my hands again. ‘We shouldn’t.’ Solas smiled faintly. ‘You are correct. And yet…’ He smiled faintly.

And yet, here we are. And I can’t deny it. Not for much longer.

I heard people laughing loudly from the encampment. It shook me awake. I blinked rapidly, and took a step back. Solas dropped his hands. Perhaps that kiss at Haven was a mistake. I’m only hurting him.

‘Not… now. Not here, Solas.’ I mumbled.

Solas chuckled ever so slightly. Confident even. ‘We have time.’

That’s an understatement. For me at least.

I smiled back faintly. And then changed the subject. I still have many questions, and rather ask them before he asks his. ‘Are there still… things I need to know.’
Solas cocked his head in thought. And then he sighed. ‘You have seen the threat Corypheus wields, have you not?’ How does he… Did he eavesdrop when I told the Advisors everything?

I grinned slightly. ‘Yes. The orb.’

Solas dipped his head, and then stared beyond me, in the distance. ‘It is ours.’

I furrowed my brows. ‘Ours?’

‘Elven. Corypheus used the orb to open the Breach.’ Solas explained. And I remembered how the orb had reminded me of the Breach, that feeling that had frozen me in place… I remember I wanted to take it for myself. I shook that thought away very quickly. Solas didn’t notice and continued: ‘Unlocking it must have caused the explosion that destroyed the Conclave. We must find out how he survived… perhaps he is like you on that matter…’ He whispered that last part, more in thought than to me. ‘And we must prepare for their reaction… when they learn the orb is of our people.’

‘How do you know of this?’

Solas chuckled again. ‘Such things were foci, said to channel power from our gods. Some were dedicated to specific members of our pantheon.’ My eye started to flare a little, as if the information was of great importance… as if I was to remember something. ‘All that remains are references in ruins, and…’ Solas was doubting to say something, and I felt like he decided not to. ‘…faint visions of memory in the Fade, echoes of a dead empire.’ He looked back to me now. ‘But however Corypheus came to it, the orb is Elven, and with it, he threatens the heart of human faith. As do you.’

I bit my lip and stared at the ground. ‘What do we do now?’

Solas took my chin in his hand, lifting my face up. His eyes were glistening.

‘Pack up! We leave!’ I heard the Commander order, his voice ringing through the camp, all the way to Solas and I outside.

I wringed my head from his grasp gently. ‘We’re leaving? Where to?’

Solas took a step back, and clasped his hands behind his back. Again, he looked at me as if I was a puzzle to solve. I hated that look.

‘You have been asleep for more than two weeks, if I counted correctly.’ Solas said, and that surprised me.

‘What?’

‘We are scouting to the North.’ He ignored my surprise and walked past me towards the camp. He stopped a few steps away from me, and turned around. ‘There’s a place that waits for a force to hold it. A place where the Inquisition can build…’ He dipped his head. ‘… and grow.’ He held out his hand again. How many times does he have to do it for me to take it and not let go? ‘Come,’ Solas chuckled. ‘It is not far now.’

And I took his hand again.

We packed things up at the camp. They had planned to leave earlier this day, but then I woke up and the journey was delayed for some hours. Everyone had been waiting for me to wake up… and they had carried me for more than two weeks during the travels in one of the only carriages they’d had… and every night as they made up camp, they had hoped to see me wake up… and today I finally did.
Just in time. The last day of their journey to the North.

They only had a few more hours to walk.

I sat on a horse, Maxwell in front of me, leading the animal. Others followed by foot. Solas used his staff as a way to slog through the heavy snow to keep by my side.

People stayed at a safe radius away from us. Two saints on a horse.

‘I’m happy you’re here, Saeris.’ Maxwell said. We had left camp some hours ago. Now, I could see only snow and mountains on the horizon… And perhaps a valley? In the distance?

‘Me too.’ I smiled. ‘But Max, no one has yet told me about this stronghold were going to…’

‘Ah.’ Maxwell chuckled, and looked down to Solas walking next to us. ‘It was his idea.’

‘And we have arrived.’ Solas exclaimed.

Maxwell stopped his horse, and put his hand in the sky. A sign.

The people and soldiers of the Inquisition stopped and cheered. Their long journey had come to an end. And a new beginning was in front of them. A new home. It wouldn’t be taken away from them this time. Not if it’s up to us.

Solas helped me from the horse. Maxwell jumped off too. His advisors and friends were around him, and they walked closer to the cliff in front of us that gave way to another valley, and stared at what was beyond them.

Solas and I followed. He helped me walk as I failed to easily plow through the thick snow as he did. Commander Cullen was walking in front of us, and I saw him glance behind him every so often.

‘There!’ Maxwell pointed towards the valley. Cassandra stood next to him. I saw her reach for his hand and pinch it.

‘Oh my!’ Josephine cried out gleefully. Leliana sighed assuredly and threw her arm across the shoulders of her Ambassador friend.

And then, as Solas and I neared the others, the mist in the valley ebbed away, showing us the great castle built against the cliffs of the valley.

A new home.

Solas pulled me closer to his side, his voice whispering in my healed ears.

‘Skyhold.’

Chapter End Notes

*Plays Journey to Skyhold theme and screams* YASSSS!!! WERE HERE!

Hey, if you guys want to ask me stuff you can't ask here, or fangirl with me... or scream about -I don't know uh,- cats, you can follow me on Tumblr under hannahier (no caps!). I reblog Dragon Age stuff, memes and felines ;-)
Did you like it? Thank you for reading!
Skyhold. Tarasyl'an Te'las. The place where the sky is kept.

The ancient stone walls seem like they have grown from the Frostback rocks naturally. As if the castle had always been here. Since the beginnings of time. Every crack whispers long forgotten stories. And no one has been here for centuries to reclaim the lost tales that roam the chambers, the gardens, the battlements…

Who knows who else stepped foot near this place, in their own time of need. Who even built this stronghold? Did they know it’d stand for so long? And why? Was it built as a home? A prison? A fortress to withstand siege? And why was it once abandoned? Not even the stones can tell. For this they remain silent. In some way, Skyhold is like myself. Forgotten by history for all but those who’ve been there. Old, but at first glance incredibly new. The ones who’ve lived here before must’ve taken care of it well, because these stones do not only feel ancient, they feel loved as well. And now we’ve arrived to take care of it, to love it, and to call it our home.

The Inquisition has come.

Magic is permeating the stones, the song calling for us to come, and for evil to stay away. And I felt it when I stepped through the gates… I could smell the magic, feeling it caress my skin. The Veil was thin here, so thin, I could almost truly grab it. My green eye flared silently, humming with the beat of the wind dancing between these walls.

And something happened here.

Something important… neither truly good or bad.

I closed my eyes and inhaled the crisp air. I let it fill me, until my whole body felt refreshed.

I was standing in the courtyard. Even though it was cold and storming outside, inside these walls, it felt like a never-ending spring. The grass had grown long, plants were climbing along the walls. The fortress was in disrepair. There were collapses, rubble making rooms inaccessible. There was clutter and dust everywhere. Even the roof of the main castle, above the throne room, had collapsed. But with enough imagination, you could still see the potential. Some tweaks here and there, renovations, structural work, some tending to the garden and the stables… Perhaps the building over there could be made into a tavern… And after all is cleaned up… This place could become a mighty fortress once more.

‘Lady Saeris? There you are!’

I exhaled… I didn’t know I wasn’t breathing… I turned around, as saw Lady Josephine hurrying down the broken, stone stairs that lead up towards the entrance of the main castle. We had arrived two days ago, and it was still too dangerous to sleep inside the buildings. So, the inner circle and the advisors made camp on the courtyard, along with Haven’s surviving villagers and some soldiers. The other soldiers, recruits, mages and ex-Templars, and the small but growing army of pilgrims, made camp down in the valley. I could see their fires burning from the battlements. There was a whole new village being made down there…

‘Milady?’ Josephine stopped in front of me, the heel of her frilly boots tapping on the ground. She
looked better, her skin glowing, her eyes big, her dress… big as well. ‘We have been assigning the chambers… are there any you wish to claim? There is a big suite next to the Herald’s, above the Throne room… the view is…’

‘Good morning, Josephine.’ I smiled calmly. The Ambassador looked enthusiastic. She had a new goal, a new place to document… people to write, connections to secure… She was on a roll. ‘Please, just call me Saeris…’ Like you used to. ‘And I’d rather like a smaller room… perhaps outside the main building…’

‘That cannot do!’ Josephine gasped. ‘You are of importance, your accommodation should reflect that…’

I hummed, somewhat disappointed. ‘Then… there is a room above the garden, the one with the balcony?’

‘Ah yes! I’ll make arrangements immediately!’ Josephine smiled brightly. She seemed somewhat nervous around me, more than before. Everyone does.

‘Is there anything I can help you with?’ I asked, cocking my head.

‘Not at this very moment, Milady, uhm, Saeris.’ Josephine dipped her head, took out a scroll of paper from one of the hundreds of folds in her golden dress, and scribbled something on it with a quill. She then nodded, and took off for the stairs again. Soldiers were running up and about, villagers carrying wood and rubble… Everyone was busy working on the repairs. Every time I wanted to help, pick something up, people gasped and hushed, or prayed, me away. I couldn’t even help the healers, the surgeon, or Adan… every time I tried to heal a person, they would faint again at the sight of me. I felt useless.

My eyes followed the Ambassador rush up the stairs. The Commander greeted her, raising his hand in a friendly gesture, and then went back to work at the foot of the stone staircase. Soldiers were passing his make-shift desk, putting down reports, checking in… Cullen mumbled orders, put his autograph on a report, and signalled the next soldier to come closer. The sun was shining on Cullen’s golden hair, his armour polished and clean. I still had his fur mantle. I should return it.

I quickly turned around to my tent that was placed near the stables, and grabbed the mantle from my stuff. I had tried to clean it, asked the other Elven servants for help… They averted their eyes as I spoke to them, didn’t dare to speak even when I encouraged them to. But they had helped me clean the mantle, washed it with fresh mountain water and herbs. And as I held it in my hands now, it looked and smelled completely new. I hope the Commander won’t mind. My hands were sweaty, trembling as I tucked the mantle against my chest while nearing Cullen’s desk.

‘Send men to scout the area. We need to know what’s out there.’ Cullen ordered.

Two Inquisition scouts shifted in front of the wobbly table, but they pumped their chests and nodded, ‘Yes, Ser!’; and then moved away immediately.

‘Commander. Soldiers have been assigned temporary quarters.’ Another soldier took the other’s spot in front of the Commander. The young man held a document in his hand and pushed it towards Cullen, who took it and signed it.

‘Very good.’ He mumbled. ‘I’ll need an update on the armoury as well.’

The soldier, who had hay-like blonde hair sticking from underneath his helmet, nodded slowly. I noticed the boy nearly pissed his trousers as the Commander snarled impatiently, ‘Now!’ The boy
swallowed and quickly bowed his head and pumped his chest. As he whisked around, he almost bumped head first into me… or my chest. I was nearly two heads taller than him.

‘Oops.’ I smiled. ‘Tall Elf alert.’ Be witty and funny, that works for Maxwell… they all seem comfortable around him.

But the young soldier boy almost cried out, his knees wobbly. ‘Forgive me! Milady!’ His voice squeaked a little higher than before.

‘Oh don’t –‘ I hushed but the soldier already hurried away, barely breathing. That went well.

Meanwhile, Commander Cullen had already turned around. His stare was trying to be distant, but there was a spark of warmth in them. ‘Lady Saeris.’ He dipped his head.

‘I thought we were past the Lady thing.’ I tried to grin, but it probably looked as if I was in pain… at least if I read Cullen’s response well. His eyes connected with mine for a small moment, but he averted them almost immediately.

Cullen scraped his throat. ‘I shall try.’ He won’t, not after what happened. Cullen looked down to the reports on his desk again… and I felt awkward.

‘So… How’s Skyhold for you.’ I tried to keep up the conversation. We still hadn’t truly spoken ever since…

The Commander straightened his back, and his voice was monotone, as if he was speaking to his superior, not a friend. Was I not a friend anymore? ‘Work on Skyhold is underway, guards’ rotations established. We should have everything on course within the week.’ Cullen glanced back to me. ‘We are safe here.’ He said that under his breath, almost in thought.

‘What happened at Haven… You did everything you could’ve…’ I mumbled…

‘It was not enough.’ He interrupted, his voice suddenly deeper. The soldiers waiting at his desk dispersed, sensing the heavy conversation. ‘Most of our people made it out of Haven… yet you… You stayed behind, and I let you. Because of that you…’

‘I had to make sure Maxwell was…’ I swallowed.

Cullen suddenly hissed, and took three strides forward, until he was up close to my face. His golden eyes turned cold. ‘And what if… Did you know? Did you know you’d… come back?’

‘No.’ I answered truthfully. ‘I didn’t.’

Cullen looked down to my feet, and then back into my eyes. ‘You would have died for him?’

‘For all of you.’ My voice broke at the end of my sentence. Finally, I held out the mantle in front of me. I had been clinging to it the entire time.

Cullen took a step back, his eyes staring at his cape. ‘You…’

‘It’s yours. I cleaned it…’ I swallowed again. Damnit. I pushed the mantle onto Cullen’s steel plated chest. He grabbed it in response, though he held it like it was a strange, otherworldly object. ‘I’m sorry.’ I quickly turned back, and speedwalked away.

The Commander was left behind at his makeshift tent. I saw him scratch the back of his neck with one hand. With the other hand, he clutched the fur fabric against his heart, and sighed.
I climbed towards the battlements, atop the great stone walls, away from prying eyes and haunting
whispers. The stairs were broken here and there, debris obscuring the path. I twisted my hands, until
green sprouts grew from between the stone cracks. The green sprouts crawled over the heavy blocks
of stone, pushing them away slowly, until the path was clear. I peeked around, no one saw. I
continued, climbing higher and higher, until the people below were but little dots. I don’t think
anyone had climbed this path before…

I finally reached one of the towers atop Skyhold’s battlements. I inhaled sharply. Not out of breath,
but out of words. The horizon, adorned with snowy mountain peaks, clear-grey clouds, and a bright,
shimmering sun, was before me, reaching to what seemed like eternity. And below us, below the
fortress, I saw the hundreds of growing lights. Soldiers, pilgrims, villagers, were settling again in the
valley. There were mountains all around us, pure white from the ever-lasting snow atop of them. I
closed my eyes and felt the sharp wind rush against my still body. I was like the mountains.
Unmoving. Unchanging.

‘It seems this spot is already taken.’

Gasping, I turned around. Cassandra was leaning against one of the stone bulwarks across from me.
She tried to smile, albeit awkwardly. I had tried to avoid the Seeker and the thousands of questions
drowning inside of her. Questions I couldn’t answer, not like she wanted.

I turned back towards the view. The sun was already sinking to the earth. I bit my lips and remained
silent, hoping she’d understand that this wasn’t the moment, and leave.

Yet, Cassandra hummed, and I heard the tapping of her steel boots as she neared me. ‘You told
Leliana you had seen nothing but darkness.’ She said, a tremble in her voice, ‘Yet I cannot believe
so.’ She said that last sentence as if it was a question. A cry.

I swallowed. It had been a lie. I had seen more than that.

‘Milady I-’ Cassandra tried again. ‘There must have been a reason for this to happen!’ I heard her
behind me, walking back and forth, the gears in her head turning. ‘The Maker’s help takes many
forms. Sometimes it is difficult to truly understand what He expects from us. But was this not a sign?
Was this not a telling of His plans?’ Cassandra heaved, the words coming out like vomit. She was
my friend. But now, she couldn’t see me past my curse, past her own religion. What am I now, to
Cassandra? To all of the people I’ve started to befriend? Have I lost them? Because of what I am?

I groaned and pulled my hands into fists, pinching the inside of my palms until my nails punctured
the skin. The wounds healed immediately.

I cannot even feel my own pain.

Cassandra sighed. ‘You knew. You knew about your situation, yet failed to tell us. Why? Do you
truly not trust us?’ The Seeker stopped, took a deep breath, and then continued her tirade. She’d been
keeping this in.

I whimpered, unable to answer the questions that spilled from the Seeker’s lips. She truly was a
Seeker of Truth, of Faith… If only she’d stop searching around me. What I am, what happened to
me, has nothing to do with faith.

Cassandra sighed, ignoring my silence. Perhaps for her it was a sign to continue. ‘You have risen
from death, through the fire as Andraste failed to… The blessings you have…’
I could tell her that I was afraid, afraid of her worship, the faith… I wasn’t like Maxwell, who could shake it off with a joke. All my life, I strived for normality. For a life that could fulfil my dreams. I wished to grow, to feel pain, and release… I could’ve lived my life as a human, and when that was taken from me, I had been given the chance to live my life as an Elf… I found a new world, I had found a new purpose… And every time it was taken from me. Daniel… Sybil… and I was left alone. I kept on living, if this is what is truly called living… And when I found the Inquisition, I found a new purpose… The people here became my friends, some even more than that… And finally my curse was a blessing. Not only could I stop it, I could help others. My life, even if I’d throw it away, had a meaning. Close the Breach. Save the world. Save my friends. And then… die like everybody else. No one had to know my past. It was a fresh start.

And now that was taken from me again.

Now, even my friends have forgotten my name again. Call me Lady. Call me holy. They fear or worship me. That’s why I didn’t tell them. If they hadn’t known…

I let out the air inside of me. I can’t tell her that.

But I have time.

I turned around and looked back to the Seeker. I can’t tell her everything. It’s my curse. It’s mine to bear, to carry. But perhaps I could tell her another truth. ‘I saw a tree.’

‘What?’ Cassandra squinted her eyes, and took a step back, and then a step closer.

‘When I died, I saw a tree. It was shining ever so brightly. I heard voices, calling out to me.’ I continued. ‘And those voices were behind that light. I knew, just felt, it was right. And I wanted to go beyond that light.’

‘Did you hear her? Andraste? Or the Maker?’ Cassandra mouthed, and I could barely hear her.

‘No.’

Cassandra exhaled all of the air she had been holding.

‘I couldn’t go beyond that light. I wasn’t allowed to.’ Death didn’t want me. Not yet. ‘But I don’t know what was beyond that light, Cassandra. I’m not supposed to know. Perhaps it is your Maker, perhaps it’s something else, or perhaps… there isn’t anything at all. Just light.’

Cassandra blinked, her hands dangling at her sides. Perhaps what I had told her just now was a diversion of what I wanted to say… that I was afraid… of losing everyone and everything over and over again. But saying that I was afraid, wasn’t going to help Cassandra solve her questions… and I was so sick of answering them.

‘Thank you.’ Cassandra whispered, tears in her eyes.

I dipped my head, and slowly walked past the Seeker. Now she knows. Maybe I should’ve told her sooner, what I had seen. I can tell her of the light… but the darkness that had followed… the darkness I still felt… She isn’t ready for that. She will have to find out for herself.

***

I hurried down the stairs again. Where can I hide? You’d think there’d be enough places, enough cracks, enough shadows… yet, all eyes were on me, and I couldn’t hide myself from them any longer. I knew Vivienne had been looking for me these last few days… I knew she’d find me if she
tried. But she expected me to come to her, who wouldn’t? And then Solas… his concern was most…
disconcerting of all. His eyes pried the deepest, the hardest… He hadn’t stopped hovering over me,
and it made the air around us stuffy and heavy with all the things unsaid between us. As of now,
Solas was busy with helping Maxwell figure out the Anchor. After things happened with Corypheus,
and after we found out the Orb is Elven, there was far more to be studied about Max’ mark… But
when I saw Maxwell and Cole talking near the makeshift infirmary in the courtyard, I knew Solas
was already looking for me.

Better to go to him. Get it over with. He had tried to act normal, after what happened. Concerned,
but normal. But I knew that if there was someone with questions, it would be him. The scholar, the
arcane expert… He had come closer to me than any other had dared to… I knew I had to give him
an explanation, a deeper one…

And so, I climbed the stairs towards the main castle. Its giant wooden doors were already hauled
open. A group of Dwarfs, employed for the renovations, were hard at work in the main hall, or
throne room. They had spread plans across the walls, had started to build gantries to get to the holes
in the roofs. And there was much more to fix… Orlesian artists had been hired to paint the re-
plastered walls and to design new glass-stained windows… This place was to be grand. A home to
the Inquisition. To a Herald of Andraste and his followers. This place was to become a beacon of
hope, alliance, and faith. But also strength and power… Lady Josephine and Leliana were speaking
to the Dwarfs, checking the plans they had made, the designs they had come up with. I clung to the
walls, the shadows covering me whole, and slid by them. Leliana stopped talking for a moment, her
murderous eyes glancing my way, piercing right through me. A small smile curled along her thin, red
lips. And then she continued talking as if she hadn’t even noticed me.

I didn’t dare to breathe.

For once, the Spymaster had shown mercy. I thanked her quietly inside my head, and continued to
skulk the shadows, past the fireplace, that I had controlled so the flames’ light danced around me,
instead of onto me. Next to the fireplace was a door that lead towards another room formed like a
rotunda. Above the rotunda there were balconies and other rooms that spiralled upwards. They were
building a library upstairs, collecting books from all over. I heard Dorian was in charge of it. And
above that library was a rookery, which would probably become a home for Leliana’s ravens. But
the ground floor of the rotunda had been claimed by Solas. I don’t really understand why. There are
no windows, the walls were barren, and because it was a circle, the place felt very claustrophobic.
The only light that entered this room, came from the windows of the roof above, from the rookery
and the library.

I eyed the room. It was silent. I could hear the ravens already nesting above me, and some surviving
mages scurrying the library, turning pages, and whispering amongst each other.

Candles were placed along the curved walls, and some Fereldan carpets were thrown on the cold
stone floor. An old sofa was placed against the wall on my left. Its fabric, off-red like burgundy,
seemed rich, but had been patched-up in several places. In the centre of the room stood a large desk.
Books were already scattered on top of it, along with some scrolls, and a quill and ink. Behind it
stood an armchair, made from the same luxurious, but old red fabric as the sofa against the wall.
There was little to no other furniture in the room. Perhaps another chair, or a table, but they were still
covered with dusty blankets and covers. I walked towards the desk and slid my fingers across its
surface. The wood was quite rough, rough enough to get splinters from it. My eyes followed the
intricate swirls of the material, until they landed on a pile of papers.

The handwriting is Solas’.
I furrowed my brows as I tried to comprehend what was written, but the alphabet was strange to me… or perhaps I’d seen it before, at the Circle… this was an arcane alphabet, used to describe magic. There were many such alphabets, all different and complicated. I knew a few, but not this one. This one was old. And dead.

‘Ancient writings about long-forgotten magic. Interesting, is it not?’

I gave a tiny scream, turned around quickly, my back pushing against the table, making it move with a harsh creaking sound.

Solas’ hand was already on my bicep, holding me in place, a hint of concern on his face, next to the chuckle he gave me. ‘Apologies, I did not intend to surprise you.’

‘You did.’ I swallowed while straightening myself. The paper was scrunched up underneath my hand, which I removed quickly. ‘I’m sorry, I wasn’t…’

Solas gave me a warm smile, his hand slowly moving upwards to my shoulder. He squeezed it a little. ‘I have been looking for you.’ He was getting better at asking questions without asking one. He meant, where have you been all day?

‘I was… just walking around… perhaps hiding.’ I said honestly. I could feel more at ease around him. Perhaps because he was one of the few saying my name instead of Milady. Solas had become my friend, perhaps even more – I don’t know. I remember how I had avoided the man, how he’d made me sick to my stomach whenever he was around… but ever since we closed the Breach, that feeling was gone. Why?

‘Ah yes.’ Solas sighed. ‘Away from the admiring gazes thrown at you. You ought to be the next Herald.’

‘Stop joking.’

Solas dipped his head, the grin fading from his face. ‘Does it make you uncomfortable?’

‘Incredibly.’ I smiled awkwardly, remembering the questions he too must have. I shook his hand from my shoulder, and walked around the desk, putting the paper I had scrunched back on the pile. Solas had taken a step back, observing me quietly, his eyes darting across my body – not in a weird way. He was looking at my fingers, I noticed, and how I slid my hand across the arcane writings before retreating my hand. ‘I do not want their worship.’

‘What do you wish to have, then?’

I smiled faintly again. ‘I don’t know anymore.’ My throat felt sore, my fingers numb. ‘What are you studying?’

Solas pursed his lips for a moment, perhaps in hesitation, and then he slowly walked around his desk and stopped right next to me. His shoulder brushed against mine, and I could feel his breath as he leaned forward and grabbed the piece of paper in front of me. ‘The Nightingale has connections that reach beyond my expectations. How her agents have acquired these documents, I do not know – perchance I do not wish to – but these tell of many magical inquiries.’

I cocked my head. ‘You can read those? They’re ancient.’

Solas smirked. ‘I have seen such writings before in…’ He stopped for a moment, and swallowed. Solas then straightened his back and let go of the paper, looking straight at me.
'In the Fade?' I continued his sentence.

Solas frowned for a moment.

Somebody upstairs dropped something, and I could hear a dull knock. I could hear Dorian curse. ‘You clumsy twat! You know how old that book is? It’ll be dust if you drop it any harder!’

‘Let us continue this… preferably somewhere … in private.’ Solas glanced to the balconies above, his eyes darting from one corner to another.

I’m not going to invite Solas to my room just yet, I thought to myself. ‘I will meet you in the Fade.’ I coughed to regain Solas’ attention.

Solas snapped his head back to me, and a smile curled along his lips again. ‘It has been a while since we met there. Yes, we can meet there.’ He was right, I hadn’t visited the Fade in quite a while… Not since, well… And ever since I woke up again, the Fade was too hard to get to, I had been too tired. But perhaps I could do so again now.

I nodded and took a step back without turning away from him. ‘I’ll go then.’

‘Until soon, Saeris.’

***

It took a while for me to get to sleep. My chambers weren’t ready yet, and I was tired of sleeping in this tent in the courtyard. I could hear people walking around outside, hushing as they passed my tent. It was hard concentrating to sleep with so much noise around.

The guards standing in front of my tent were changing shifts. I could hear them whisper about me, their armour clanking as they moved.

‘Milady is inside.’ One said.

I could the other one hum in response.

Josephine had told me these guards were here for my safety. Now that I’m considered “special”, I need special protection. Now I know how Maxwell feels.

I was trying to sleep for perhaps an hour when it finally happened. The sounds of Skyhold became white noise, and the singing air, the rustling leaves of the trees moved from the background, lulling me deeper and deeper, until my consciousness travelled further.

***

*The Fade felt more distant now that the Breach was closed. It was like before, I could still sense it when I was awake, and when I entered it, I could still sense the waking world. They were connected, deeply rooted in one another. Now I felt the attachment was gone, cut. The only strings connecting me to the waking world was my body.*

*If only I could cut that off too. Then I could float away.*

*The background of the Fade was my standard place. I always come here. The meadow. But now, as I looked across it, I felt an eerie shiver climb up my spine. Was this the same meadow I saw when I died? No. The tree was missing.*

*I walked towards the treeline, where the meadow stopped and the forest began. I touched the*
I breathed calmly, controlled. After witnessing the darkness, this fog was nothing. In my mind I formed the thought of Solas. His long, pointed ears, his head, shaved meticulously, and the freckles on his cheeks and nose. I thought of his eyes, clear grey with sparks of blue. Like the fog, but not thick enough so the sky could get through. His lips, full, chuckling... The fog ebbed away. Slowly, but steadily. When it all cleared up, I stood at the entrance of Solas’ ward. Behind it, his controlled dream, his own space. The fog was still behind me, but in front of me there stood a large door, made out of marble and gold and glass.

And all I had to do, was knock.

I felt the ward shift around me. The door opened.

‘You have found me.’ Solas greeted me.

I dipped my head. ‘Of course.’ I said and stepped inside. Slowly, the space started to come together. ‘Where are we?’ I asked.

Solas closed the door behind me. But I was smart enough to will it, and to leave a crack open. Always have a way out. He taught me that. Though, I doubt it will be necessary. Solas walked behind me, his hands bound behind his back.

‘This is a place long lost.’ He answered vaguely, and then stopped next to me. ‘We can talk freely here.’

My brows knitted together. ‘Is there something you want to talk about, then?’ I can be vague too. I knew when he asked me to meet him here, that he needed to ask me “those” questions. They were long overdue. He could pretend everything was normal, wear the mask of a concerned friend, but not here. Here, in the Fade, Solas was real.

‘Undoubtedly.’ Solas chuckled and walked past me.

I followed him through the hall in silence. It was a chance to look around. We were inside what seemed to be an Elven temple. But this one was... brand new it seemed. The walls, made out of a white marble with dark swirls in it, were high and decorated with mosaic and stained-glass windows. The tiles of the mosaic stones were bordered with golden frames. The patterns on the walls continued on in the floor, which was mosaic only. Though the swirls beneath our feet formed stars, and further on, the sun and the moon. It was beautiful.

Solas stopped when we entered a room less extravagant. There was a desk in the corner, and some chairs. The remainder of the room was filled with books, kept within glass cases. There was a large window across the door we entered from, and it was opened wide. The gold-threaded curtains billowed against the soft, spring wind blowing inside. I walked further inside, towards that window. But I couldn’t see anything. I couldn’t see if we were high up, inside a city, or perhaps in the woods. I could only see blue sky. Nothing beyond it.

Again, Solas closed the marble door behind him, and chuckled as he noticed that I willed it open again, just a little. ‘You have improved. You continue to surprise me.’

‘You’re a very good teacher.’ I looked over my shoulder to him and smiled faintly.

I turned around and saw that Solas had conjured two additional armchairs in the middle of
room. They were perfect replicas of the ones in the rotunda, and seemed out of place. The burgundy was too dark, the fabric too tattered. ‘Please, have a seat.’ Solas hummed and signalled to the armchairs.

I nodded and sat myself in the one closest to the door. I couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable in someone else’s “bubble” in the Fade.

But I’m with Solas. I’m fine. I can trust him.

Solas sat across of me, and rested his arms on the armrests. His eyes were large, willing me to look up too. And so I did. My green eye flared, but it didn’t hurt. Instead, it was soothing and kept me focussed. The eye was always brighter in the Fade, more active. Perhaps, just like Solas.

‘Ask away.’ I sighed, and folded my legs uncomfortably as I looked Solas up and down. I noted his clean, white linen shirt, unbuttoned at the top. His pants were of the same material, but more structured. The fabric seemed soft and new, it was like nothing he ever wore in the waking world. He didn’t look… homeless. Well, he was at home here.

Solas folded his hands on his lap and cocked his head. ‘The curse you have spoken of. How did you come of it?’

‘One day, I woke up. And I had it.’ My stomach felt like lead as I thought of telling him I was human once, in a different world. But that world is gone. It doesn’t matter, right? Some things were better kept to myself.

‘When?’

I blinked a couple of times. ‘Long ago… perhaps almost two centuries… In the Blessed Age.’

Solas hummed, his eyes squinting. He didn’t seem too surprised. ‘Do you remember anything from… before?’ The tone in his voice had gone low, suspicious almost. I shifted on the chair.

‘No… I don’t.’

I saw Solas breathe, as if he had been holding it.

I continued. ‘As I told the advisors before, I was…’

Solas lifted up his hands. ‘The curse, is that what has affected your eye?’

‘I think so. I remember it was strange at first. Too strong. I learned to control it, and my magic, throughout the decades. It took me longer than most.’

‘Most do not acquire such strength in one day.’ Solas cocked his head to the other side. ‘Have you never searched for answers?’

‘Not in the beginning… I was afraid of it.’ I said honestly. ‘After a while I discovered that I couldn’t… die.’ Solas swallowed visibly at that sentence, but I continued. ‘And that this immortality was because of my curse.’ I did not tell him of the dream I had at Yavana’s… The dream where I left my room, where voices told me of my “promise”. It doesn’t matter what they said. They were clearly wrong, had put me on a path that lead me astray for decades. They said to search for he who holds my eye in his hand. Clearly Maxwell. They said to look for my eye in the sky. Clearly the Breach. But none have helped me comprehend my curse, nor help me break it.

‘You see immortality as a curse? Many would claim otherwise.’ Solas leaned forwards in his chair.
‘Immortality is a curse when everything… and everyone… is mortal.’ Everyone dies. Everything changes. But I am like stone. Unchanging, and alone.

Solas leaned back in his chair, a look on his face that could be only understanding. As if he knew. But he couldn’t, could he? ‘How do you know immortality is your curse? How do you know you were not immortal before?’

Good one. ‘You saw Solas, that I cannot die. What else could it be but my curse?’

‘During ancient times it was simply part of being Elven. The subtle beauty of their magic was the effect, not the cause, of their nature.’ Solas smiled faintly, as if remembrance.

I, on the other hand, scoffed. ‘So you’re saying that perhaps I’m an ancient Elf? That my curse is not the cause of my immortality? Yet, the Ancient Elves have all died. There’s none left? How could you explain me being here? How come I can’t die, when I clearly did.’

‘Perhaps, though if your memories are lost, there is no way of truly discovering your nature. And it is true,’ Solas swallowed visibly, ‘Elvhenan was lost centuries ago, yet perchance some of its inhabitants may still linger, undiscovered as you always have been… Though that is but pure speculation.’ And then, Solas came closer again, sitting on the edge of his seat. ‘But what I do know, is what happened to you after Haven was nothing short of a miracle. The magic used to bring back a person, heal their wounds… the magic that flares within your eye… is from a source so ancient, it cannot be from anywhere but Elvhenan.’

‘How do you know for sure?’

‘Many spells used by the Ancient Elves took years to cast. Echoes can linger for centuries, harmonizing with new magic in an unending symphony. A spell, or curse you say, this grant, echoes like a waterfall in the ocean. I heard those echoes, even before I had met you. None are this loud, louder now you are here.’

‘You heard… why didn’t you tell me this?’

‘Because I had no way of knowing these echoes were about you. I cannot understand them, for they are too far away, too silent to comprehend.’

‘Can we find a way to understand them? To hear them?’

‘I do not know… It will require time to study… And I will need your help. We must go deeper into the Fade than ever before.’

‘Maybe if we go there… physically… we could…’ I hummed, brows furrowing in thought. My head hurt.

Solas shook his head. ‘It is nearly impossible to accomplish such a feat. Corypheus had tried, and dare I say that did not turn out too well as I suspect the blast that destroyed the Conclave was more an accident than anything.’ Solas looked at his hands, thoughts clearly on his face, thoughts he didn’t want me to see. ‘Perhaps after understanding the Anchor… or the Orb…’ Solas looked back up to me, eyes sparkling. ‘Perhaps if we could study the Orb used by Corypheus, we could understand your situation? He managed to survive the explosion caused by the Orb and its powers, perhaps these powers are similar to the ones keeping you from death.’

‘Could be…’ I mumbled. ‘You said the Orb is Elven… and if my curse is indeed of ancient Elven origin… that could make sense… But it’s clearly too dangerous.’ I lifted my hands up and sighed. ‘I do not want another Breach.’ My curse is Elven… when I died, the seven shadows clearly spoke to
me in Elven... Should I tell him of what I saw?

‘Perhaps you are right.’ Solas blinked his eyes, the sparkles within gone. ‘This is all speculation. We can look into this together, if you would want.’

‘I’d…’ I stared out the window, a slight blush glowing across my face. ‘I’d like that.’

‘Good.’

I scratched my throat. ‘You haven’t yet told me where we are?’

Solas smiled again, baring his teeth a little. ‘Come.’ He said, stood up from the armchair and reached out his hand. ‘I will show you.’

I took his hand, my palms sweaty but he didn’t seem to mind, and led me out of the room, back into the hall. We walked through many corridors, passed many rooms that were too foggy for me to see. He was warding them off. Though, I respect his privacy, I shouldn’t pry.

‘Close your eyes for me.’ He said as we stopped in front of another large door.

‘Why are we –’ I protested, but Solas chuckled and I complied anyway.

I heard the door creak open, and then I felt the sun glow upon me. Solas’ hand guided me outside. He walked slowly, somewhat hesitant. When he let go of my hand, I felt him go stand behind me, his chest pressing against my back, his hands pressing down on my shoulders gently. His lips almost touched my ears as he spoke. ‘Open your eyes.’

And I did. I gasped, wanting to take a step back but couldn’t with Solas being there. I think I even cried. I don’t know. All I know is that it was beautiful. In front of me was a large city, spreading out from underneath the balcony we were standing on. Thousands of palaces, all marble, glowing softly with the hum of magic that blew through the sky simultaneously with the wind. There were waterfalls in the skies, springing from floating rocks that looked like clouds, and coming down to fountains in courtyards on the ground. I could see people, all Elven, lithe and ethereal, walking on the meandering paths between the palaces. The sky was of a blue hue, mixed with splashes of pink and purple and orange. I could see the stars even. But it was clearly still daytime. It was... magnificent. And... I recognized it from somewhere. A city of white and gold... the sky, the sun and the stars together...

‘Arlathan...’ I whispered. That’s where we are... crafted by Solas... It cannot be anything but Elyhenan’s greatest city...

Slowly, I started to realize what power this must’ve taken... this was... building this in your mind, brick by brick within the Fade... it must've taken a lifetime. I can nearly craft a meadow, or a vague memory... But a whole city... a city that he could only have seen in dreams... But it was so... so real?

‘Very good.’ Solas chuckled. ‘Beautiful, is it not?’

‘How did you do this!’ I gasped.

‘The same way you do.’ He hummed. Guess he doesn’t want me to know all of his tricks just yet.

Solas stepped from behind me, his hand sliding from my shoulder to my hand. He pinched it softly, his eyes boring into mine. ‘You do not remember what you were like before your curse?’
My eyes felt heavy, the left one glowing and spitting and turning. It hurt a little.

‘Has it affected you? Changed you in any way? Your mind, your morals, your… spirit?’

‘I don’t think so. I do not remember my past… But I am myself. I don’t think the curse changed any of that? And if it had, do you really think I’d have noticed?’ I laughed quietly, my eyes darting from him to the city below, going on beyond the horizon.

‘No. That’s an excellent point.’ He smirked.

I turned away from him and leaned against the marble and gold balcony.

Solas took a step closer to me, and I noticed his fingers trembling slightly, as if he was nervous for something. ‘You are… not what I expected.’

I scoffed. ‘You thought that when you would meet an “Ancient Elf”, if that’s what I am, I’d be wiser? More aware of my past and traditions? Sorry to disappoint.’ I’m a cursed woman. A woman that can’t grow, can’t change, can’t remember and can’t die.

‘It’s not disappointment, it’s…’ He sighed, his words jumbled.

‘I do not remember most of my life.’ I interrupted. ‘Though I’ve lived many the past one and a half century. I have tried to hide my curse. Fight it. I gave up on it too. Perhaps I should embrace it again, now that everyone knows…’ I said to myself. Perhaps, the woman I saw when I died, who resembled me but wasn’t me… was just my ancestor, like the voices at Yavana’s had told me… or perhaps it was me… and Earth was just a dream as I slept? Perhaps Solas is right? Was I ever human?

‘And yet you have shown subtlety in your actions, a wisdom that goes against everything I expected, what you have gone through. You may have forgotten, but you are always yearning to understand. To comprehend. Even when most would go bitter. You are here. You…’ Solas swallowed, and came a little closer again, bending slightly so his voice could reach me as he whispered… ‘Even when the world shunned you, you would have given it your life.’

The memory of our kiss at Haven crawled through my mind. What I had felt then… did then… I thought I had broken my curse by sealing the Breach... now, everything has changed.

I swallowed. ‘Solas.’ He closed his eyes as I said his name. ‘… we shouldn’t.’

He opened his eyes again, but there was a determination I hadn’t seen before. ‘I know. It would be kinder in the long run…’ But despite what he said, he took another step closer. I straightened my back as his chest brushed against mine, his trembling fingers found their way to my back and stopped trembling and… ‘But losing you… again… would…’

I pushed myself from the balcony, my mind empty. Solas enclosed his arms around me, his lips finding mine. The Fade had gone silent. All I could hear were our heartbeats, our breaths entwining with one another, until we breathed as one. Solas held back, his kiss slow and steady. I pushed myself flush against him, and Solas grabbed my waist in response. He kissed me deeper then, his tongue searching for mine and I let him. He explored me, ravaged me. And I him. Fully, without holding back. Nothing held us back here. I was alive. Everything was a mess, but I was alive and with him and he was here to hold me. I’m not alone.

Am I?

I broke off our kiss abruptly, putting my hands on Solas’ chest and pushing him two steps back. I
heaved, he did too, completely out of our breaths now that we weren’t sharing them anymore.

‘Saeris?’ He asked, concerned, and breathing heavily. His hands reached for me again.

‘Solas… I’m… we can’t.’ My voice felt coarse, unsteady. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘No, don’t be, I –’ He interrupted.

But I shook my head. ‘No, this kiss was… like the one back in Haven… it was impulsive of me. I shouldn’t have encouraged it. This isn’t a good idea… there are so many… considerations.’ I knew what I had felt was true. I wanted him. I needed him… but… ‘You know Solas, for quite some time, that I am incapable of aging, of growing… I can’t do this to both of us. I do not want to lose…’

‘You are afraid of your immortality? That we…’

‘If what you said is true, and my immortality isn’t… a curse… then I will always be like this. Perhaps I can when,… but I will never age, Solas… I cannot give you what you want.’

Solas took another step, a big one, with haste. ‘You do not understand, Saeris, I am…’

‘–Stop it Solas!’ I stepped aside and walked past him towards the door. I need to wake up.

‘No!’ He grabbed my arm again, willed me to stop. ‘You are exactly…’ He sighed and shook his head, a desperation on his face.

‘Solas –’

‘You asked me how I created this, this city, in the Fade. If it is not a memory of my own, if I have created this out of shards of memories from the Fade, it would have taken an immense amount of work. The details, the… reality that you feel here… could not be solely imagined.’

‘What are you trying to say!’ I cried. I was exhausted. This is too difficult, I shouldn’t have let him kiss me! We both know better!

‘I am trying to say that…’ Solas furrowed his brows, and his fingers trembled again against my skin. The words he said seemed painful to say, as if he wasn’t yet prepared to say them. ‘These memories were not scattered across the Fade. These were… these were mine.’

I stopped pulling away. ‘What?’ All air escaped from my being.

‘I was here. These memories are my own.’ Solas shook his head. He looked as if he was hurting, every ounce of his body, the pain seeping from his pores. ‘I kept it a secret, to…’

‘What? What… you are… I don’t… how can these be your memories? You aren’t… you are…’

Solas is…

Solas is an Ancient?

He is immortal?

He is…

Am I not alone?

‘I wanted to tell you before, but I never got the chance, did not know if it mattered…’ Solas tried to
catch my gaze, but my eyes darted from his face to his hands, to the balcony and the city and…

‘You…’

‘Saeris.’

‘Don’t!’ I ripped my arm away from his grasp. ‘Don’t, Solas.’

All this time, he knew. He knew! And he didn’t say anything. He let me waddle in my fears, in the pain that I was all alone… He knew what I was, what he was, and he… he left me in the dark.

I have seen enough darkness.

‘I’m sorry Solas… I… This… I need some time.’

‘Wait!’ He called after me.

But I already disappeared between the little cracks of the dream, far away into the fog.

Because the fog was better than the darkness.

***

‘Milady! Milady!’ Someone called my name through the tent.

I sat up, sweat and tears dripping from my face.

Mythal preserve me.

Solas is an immortal?

‘Milady!’ The guard in front of my tent called again impatiently. ‘You have been summoned to the castle! –Shit I should’ve awoken her sooner, crap man the Commander is gonna quarter me! – Milady!’

‘Yes! I… I’m coming.’ My voice was hoarse, like an old man’s. I scratched my throat and coughed quietly. ‘Just a second!’

‘Shit it’s too late, shit.’ The guard mumbled again.

I dressed myself quickly, brushed through my hair, no time to put it up. When I went outside, I saw everyone gathering further along the courtyard. And I mean everyone. The Dwarven builders, the scouts and soldiers, the ex-Templars and the mages, the servants, the villagers and the pilgrims…

‘What’s going on?’

‘They are going to make an announcement!’ The guard, who was sweating profusely, looked me up and down, ‘This will do! Now go! Please, uhm, Lady.’

‘Alright, alright.’ I shook my head.

I followed the crowd of people. They were so preoccupied with what was going on that they didn’t even notice me standing among them.

Everyone gathered in front of the castle, below the stairs, under the bridge that lead to the battlements. High up, above us, in front of Skyhold’s castle doors, stood Maxwell. His eyes flashed across the crowd. Our eyes finally met from afar. I couldn’t get closer. But I saw his gaze softening
as he stared at me. We nodded at each other. Maxwell smiled. Next to him stood Cassandra, she followed his gaze and stared at me for a second, before averting her eyes again.

‘Ah, they’re finally doing it.’ Varric appeared next to me.

‘You also overslept?’ I smiled faintly. I haven’t really spoken to anyone of the Inner Circle.

Varric scoffed. ‘Got into a drinking game with Tiny, bad idea.’ The Dwarf looked up to me and winked.

‘What’s going on?’

‘You’ll see…’

And exactly at that cue, Leliana, Cullen and Josephine walked with a steady trot out of the castle’s gates towards Maxwell, who shifted on his feet.

I noticed Solas follow behind them, out of breath as well, his gaze searching and worried. He didn’t look too good. I suppose I didn’t either. I felt his stare finally land on me, but I focussed on Maxwell, trying to ignore the pain igniting within me.

Solas… Solas is immortal as well.

The thought repeated inside my head over and over again. Should I be happy? Angry? Afraid…?

The crowd suddenly went quiet, everyone fixating on the giant sword Leliana held in front of her. And the Herald, Maxwell, looked at it quietly, hesitant, maybe even somewhat scared. Cassandra whispered something in his ears. He looked at her, and they shared a long, but understanding look.

Then, Maxwell looked back to the sword laying in the Spymaster’s gloved hands, and took the hilt. From afar, the sword seemed old, too big to be really used, unless held by a giant like the Iron Bull. But it was a symbol nonetheless, only held by the most powerful people in Thedas.

This is what this is.

Maxwell is getting crowned.

As he spoke, it was too soft to hear it completely… for once I was happy with my Elven ears, as I heard him call determined.

‘I am not “chosen”, I have chosen, and I will lead us to victory. We will stop Corypheus. You have my word on it.’

Cassandra stared at him and smiled faintly, the love in her eyes for all of us to see. Then, the Seeker turned towards the crowd, the Commander and the Ambassador stepped to her side. ‘Have our people been told!’ Cassandra called.

‘They have. And soon the world!’ Lady Josephine answered with pride, not to Cassandra, but to the crowd. To all of us. I noticed Sera and Blackwall among the people, cheering. Dorian and Vivienne stood near the stairs. They too smiled. I couldn’t see Cole anywhere though, but I knew he was watching from somewhere. But I did see Bull, close to Dorian as well, staring at the leaders intensely.

Everybody was here.

‘Commander, will they follow!’ Cassandra called again.
Now, Cullen stepped forward, his armour shining brightly, his fur mantle attached across his shoulders. He raised his chin, his golden hair glowing in the midday sun. ‘Inquisition, will you follow!’

The crowd cheered.

‘Will you fight?’

The crowd cheered louder.

‘Will we triumph?’

The people screamed, Varric too, and Sera, Blackwall, Bull and Dorian… Vivienne even clapped her hands, smiling.

I raised my chin and dipped my head, pride smeared across my face. Maxwell winked at me from above, and lifted his sword up, the point towards the healed sky.

Culled raised his sword as well, his eyes sparkling… like Solas’ in the Fade…

‘Your leader!’ Cullen ordered. ‘Your Herald!’

The sun beckoned behind Maxwell. He was the sun. In the shadows stood Solas, his stare unreadable. But as I said, enough shadows. Enough darkness.

We go towards the sun.

‘Your Inquisitor!’

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Sorry to have kept you waiting! Unfortunately, something happened last month, before the holidays, that made me unable to do anything, really. I've lost someone very dear to me, who was too young, still a kid, and it's been a hard time not only for me, but my entire family. Nonetheless, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I wish everyone a great and happy 2019!

P.s. sorry for not answering any of your comments, please know I read every single one at least five times. A day. There have just been a lot of things clogging my mind lately, but I promise I will answer your comments from now on (because I appreaciate all of them!) Thanks you!
Yay! Update!
I want to thank everyone for their understanding and patience! I've been taking some time for myself and my family, but I'm finally having some space for other things as well... like writing ;-) Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I always thought I was alone. Inherently, we are all alone. Nobody can hear our thoughts, feel our pain, but ourselves. It’s ours to bear. When I came into this strange world, I hadn’t yet realized what was to come. And when I did realize, it was already too late. The feeling of loneliness would never go away.

Life is fleeting. It comes and goes, it starts and ends… and that’s alright. We aren’t meant for eternity. Death is what keeps us from laying low. We need to live, because every day could be our last. When I realized I was an exception, honestly, I was relieved. Death scared me. Numbed me. And now, I don’t have to be afraid of it anymore.

But then I became envious.

Because what is life when you can’t share it? What is eternity when you’re alone?

I realized my greatest fear wasn’t death anymore. It was eternity.

Alone for eternity.

‘Twinkle, hey! Hey!’ Varric grabbed the fabric of my sleeve and pulled it. ‘It’s your turn.’ He hiccupped, pointing to the deck of cards in front of me.

‘Ah yes…’ I smiled faintly. I took a card and put it between my stack. I’m going to lose this round.

‘Aaaand?’ Varric wiggled his eyebrows.

Out of the five cards in my hand, I had only one matching set. Two Serpents of Deceit. I pursed my lips and stared at the other cards. One Knight of Sacrifice… A Song of Mercy… and my new card is…

‘Don’t tell me!’ Varric started to laugh.

I cursed loudly and smacked the last card on the table. ‘Dammit, the Angel of Death.’ When she appears, the game ends, and you have to show all of your cards. The one with the most matching sets, wins.

Varric threw his cards on the table. A meddling hand, not too bad. Two Songs of Twilight and two Angels of Truth… I threw my cards on the table as well and sighed.

‘Ohh that’s a bad hand.’ Varric grinned and hauled the coins in the centre over to his side. ‘Want a rematch?’ He smiled and drank from his cup of ale. I stared at my cup, which was still full, the ale
lukewarm.

Today isn’t my day.

Well, today should be glorious. Maxwell was crowned Inquisitor. And I’m so proud of him.

But then… today… Last night… I realized I wasn’t alone anymore, and everything came tumbling down.

I was used to that, but this realization had come at a much greater cost.


I almost fell of my seat. ‘Damnit Varric, don’t call me that!’

‘At least you answered.’ Varric snickered. ‘What were ‘ya dreaming about? Oh don’t tell me it’s…’

Varric pursed his lips, his cheeks flustered. ‘Well speaking of… Chuckles!’

I looked over my shoulder, sighing. Solas walked towards us slowly. His gaze shot to mine, his eyes careful, as if he was on dangerous territory right now, like a mine field. I had tried to avoid him all day… After Maxwell’s coronation, Varric and Bull had dragged me to the tavern. Flissa was running it together with a Dwarf now. Bull was already too drunk for Wicked Grace. He left for the library not too long ago… and I don’t think it’s for reading.

Perhaps Solas had heard from Bull where I was… or he was chased away by the, uhm, noise. Or perhaps he had given me some space, to think, as I had asked him to. But it seemed he was done waiting now.

I groaned and turned back to the table, grabbed the cup of warm ale and gulped it down in one go.

‘One more round.’ I mumbled.

‘Master Tethras.’ Solas dipped his head towards Varric, who grinned back at the Elf. ‘Saeris.’ He said my name almost whispering, his eyes burning through my back. I refused to turn around. Instead I just hummed a greeting under my breath.

‘How’s our new Inquisitor!’ Varric smiled.

‘Overwhelmed.’ Solas answered. Had he been with Maxwell the whole day? ‘The burden of the Leader of the Inquisition is one heavier than the Herald’s.’

‘And the kid hasn’t even started yet.’ Varric sighed, sobering up just a little bit.

‘It will be difficult.’ Solas nodded. ‘Yet I think he is fit for the role.’

I took the deck of cards and shuffled through it, ignoring the conversation behind me. I had hoped the ale would affect me, but it didn’t.

‘I have heard that you have sent message to an old friend for help, is it true?’ Solas walked past my seat and sat down next to Varric, across from me. I clicked my tongue and focussed on shuffling the deck.

‘Ah yes. ‘ Varric hummed. ‘He’s crossed paths with Corypheus before, and may know more about what he’s doing. He can help, I think.’ Varric put his hand in the air, signalling Flissa over. The Dwarf ordered another round of ale. ‘You want anything?’ He nudged Solas, but the Elf politely refused. ‘Two ales, then.’
Varric doesn’t ask if I want anything anymore. He presumes I need it. I do.

‘And is your friend here already?’ Solas continued.

‘Not yet… well he could be, but we wouldn’t know it.’ Varric laughed loudly.

‘Who is it?’ I asked, my voice coarse.

‘You’ll see when he gets here.’ Varric sighed and leaned back in his chair. ‘It’s complicated, trust me…’ Flissa arrived at our table and put the cups of ale in front of us. She glanced at me quickly, and smiled faintly, somewhat scared.

I yanked the cup from the table, and took a large swig from it. Then I grabbed the shuffled deck of cards and placed it in the centre of the table. ‘Winner starts.’

‘Going right at it, Firefly.’ Varric winked.

I growled slightly.

‘Chuckles! Play with us!’ Varric smiled towards Solas, whose eyes were focussing on my fingers tapping on the wooden table nervously.

‘I do not want to intrude.’ He said politely, though his eyes begged me to look up.

I remained silent and took five cards from the deck, inspecting them. Two Songs of Mercy. Two Daggers. One Knight of Wisdom. Not bad.

‘Ahhh, Chuckles, you’d never!’ Varric kicked my shin under the table.

My head jolted up towards him, a curse on my lips.

‘Excuse me, Milady,’ Varric grinned, ‘my foot slipped.’

‘Didn’t think your legs were that long.’ I bit back. Varric laughed louder.

‘Then, I could do with a distraction.’ Solas smiled as if he wasn’t onto us.

‘Great!’ Varric clapped his hands enthusiastially. ‘You can start!’

I took another swig from my cup of ale. It was empty already. ‘Here.’ I threw my cards towards Solas. ‘You can have mine. I need some air.’ The chair screeched over the floor as I pushed it back. People behind us hushed as they saw me move, the tavern going silent for a second before people started talking and laughing again. ‘Thanks for the ale, Varric. I’ll pay you back later.’

Before the Dwarf could say anything, I turned around and walked off.

I heard Solas’ chair move as well. Varric’s hushed voice followed; ‘I’d wait if I were you.’

Solas sat back down, staring after me as I pushed through the crowd.

‘Angry Elf comin’ through!’ Sera giggled as I passed. I ignored her.

I stormed out of the tavern, the cold air smacking me in the face. It was already past midnight, the sky dark and filled with thousands of stars. There were bonfires all over the courtyard. People were celebrating; soldiers, nobles, villageres and pilgrims alike. More and more of them were joining the Inquisition every day. Now that we have an Inquisitor, I bet more people will make the journey to
Skyhold.

I didn’t blame them for coming. The rumours about us made us famous, and infamous, all over Thedas. The Breach… the Herald of Andraste who closed it, willed it, fought against a would-be god and survived… I don’t know what they say about me. Perhaps I don’t want to know.

Josephine had sent a scout earlier with a message that my chambers were ready… well, almost ready. But I’d rather sleep in a dusty room than in a tent amid people who either worship me or want me dead.

I walked across the numerous bonfires, between the shadows cast by their light. The flames scared me, reminded me of my own funeral. My fiery grave. I pulled my robe tighter around my body. I missed my cape, I had lost it during the siege on Haven… I missed the hood that could hide me, the dark colours that made me blend in the shadows. Now, my white hair was too visible, reflecting the flames, pushing the shadows away. People stopped dancing when I passed them. Stopped talking, and then resumed talking when I was at a safe distance.

I walked across the courtyard, towards the entrance of the garden, which was empty. When we arrived here but days ago, the garden was overgrown with weeds. Now, the grass was cut short, the weeds pulled out, and they had started to lay a stone, meandering path across the garden. Some ancient statues were discovered between the weeds and overgrown shrubs. The garden was cornered with battlement and castle walls. The halls bordering the garden were adorned with cut-out pointed arches, creating a roof where you could hide under if it rained. Those halls gave way to the castle itself, or to other rooms. My room was upstairs, the one with the balcony overseeing the garden itself.

And although people were celebrating, the garden was silent. It was too dark here, still too overgrown with nature. The laughter and music ebbed to the background, and the sounds of birds nesting in the trees, the wind rustling through the grass, became ever noticeable.

In the centre of the garden, they had placed a couple of wooden benches. I stopped before one.

‘Hello there, stranger.’ I whispered.

Maxwell lifted up his head slowly. He sat hunched over, the moon shining on his brown hair. It had grown even longer since Haven, curling softly onto his shoulders, framing his sun-kissed face. At the sound of my voice, Max lifted his head, his eyes so tired. The deep scar he got at Haven, the one from his eyebrow to his chin, was too white against his tanned skin that looked darker in the moonlight. He looked so much older than when I had first met him.

The Inquisitor.

That’s what he is now.

A man, a leader… not the holy boy from Haven.

‘Saeris.’ His voice was warm and soft.

‘Maxwell,’ I smiled and sat down next to him, ‘or should I say Inquisitor now?’

‘Please don’t.’ Max grinned. ‘Your Highness will do.’

I poked him with my elbow, rolling my eyes. Maxwell laughed quietly, before turning silent again, staring at his hands folded in his lap.

‘Do you think I… Am I enough?’
‘Of course you are.’ I hushed as Maxwell sighed and shifted his weight a little. ‘I can’t think of anyone better than you for this role.’

‘They should’ve asked Cullen… or Cassandra.’ Maxwell mumbled and combed his hand through his hair. ‘I know nothing of leading such an organisation. I don’t think I can do this…’

‘You have already been leading us, Max.’ I put my hand on his, stroking his fingers. Max lifted his head a little, his eyes doubtful. ‘People follow you, fight for you, believe in you! They’d die for you and –’

‘I don’t want them to die for me!’ Maxwell interrupted, his voice louder. ‘I don’t want to lose you or anyone else again…’

‘I know,’ I hushed, ‘I’m sorry for Haven.’ I said after a while of silence.

Maxwell groaned slightly. ‘I’d ask you to never do that again, but I doubt you’d listen.’

‘I doubt that too.’

Maxwell laughed again quietly, his voice slightly louder than the night. ‘How are you faring, by the way?’

Huffing, I mumbled, ‘Cassandra thinks I’m Andraste, people piss themselves when I pass them, Cullen is still angry at me and I fought with Solas. I’m fine.’

Maxwell laughed louder, slapping his knee. ‘Well, the Inquisition is a hotspot for saints.’ He chuckled. ‘Or for very unlucky people, you choose.’ He lifted his face and looked at me. ‘I’ll help you figure this all out, Saeris.’ He said that more seriously.

‘And I’ll help you.’ I smiled. ‘First Corypheus, then we’ll deal with the Anchor, and then… well I have time. Lots of it, Max. I mean your Highness.’

Maxwell grinned, ‘We’ll do this together. Cassandra will need time, but I’m working on it… and Cullen will come around. You haven’t seen how he was, Saeris… when you were… away.’ He swallowed. ‘He had lost all hope one night and then regained it all the next…’

‘I wish I hadn’t…’

‘But you have. What’s done is done. You’re here now, Saeris. That’s what counts. I don’t care what happened, what secrets you have –everyone has ‘em –and I don’t care what you are. As long as you’re here. You’re my friend, and I can’t do this without you, I can’t be the Inquisitor without you.’

I couldn’t help but smile softly. ‘I’m here.’ I whispered. ‘I will always be here.’

‘Good.’ Maxwell nodded. ‘Good…’ He scraped his throat. ‘So, you had a fight with Solas?’

I rolled my eyes and looked down at my feet. ‘Yeah.’

‘And… what happened?’ He wiggled his eyebrows. ‘Was it a lovers’ quarrel? Hmmm?’

‘Gods no!’ I spat, laughing. Was it?

‘Come on, Saeris!’ Maxwell turned his torso to me, leaning forward and gleaming like a teenager. ‘I’ve seen how he looks at you. There’s even a bet that –’

‘No, no I don’t want to hear it.’ I grinned.
Maxwell straightened his shoulders, still smiling. ‘Then what happened?’

‘He… I…’ I mumbled. Solas is immortal. He’s been lying this whole time… like I have, but…

But Solas had known… what I was… that I was immortal and I struggled with it and…

‘He lied about something… and… well, it doesn’t matter.’ I coughed.

‘If it doesn’t matter, why be mad about it?’ Maxwell shook his head.

‘Perhaps you’re right…’ I’m not angry that Solas is immortal… I’m happy… I’m not alone. There’s someone who will not wither as all do… someone who is like me, knows what it’s like. ‘I’ve been alone for so long, Maxwell.’ I said out of the blue. ‘I’m afraid of being alone… but I think that I’ve been alone for so long that being together with others is even more scary.’

‘Well…’ Maxwell said in thought. ‘We are afraid of the unknown. Of the future. I’m afraid of it as well, Saeris.’ He grabbed my hands, folded them in his, and held them to his heart. ‘I was always the youngest, the untalented one… I was a follower, and I always wanted to be the leader for once. But now I am, and I am afraid of it.’ He took my hands to his lips and kissed my knuckles. ‘But what doesn’t kill us, makes us stronger.’ He grinned and put my hands down. ‘And you’re so damn strong.’

‘So are you.’ I smiled.

‘I don’t know what happened between you two. But… I don’t think Solas is a bad guy. I mean, I don’t really understand what he’s talking about most of the time… if I’m even listening…’ Maxwell winked.

‘I know that… Perhaps I will talk to him…’ Perhaps I have to. I need to.

‘Good.’ Maxwell sighed and took a scrap of paper from his pocket, and unfolded it. I eyed the paper suspiciously, thinking it was a letter… or a speech… or… ‘It’s a poem.’ Maxwell answered my greedy eyes with a playful wink.

‘A poem?’ I gasped. ‘I didn’t know you wrote!’

Maxwell grimaced and tugged on the folded paper. ‘I don’t…’ He scraped his throat nervously. ‘Leliana told me that Cassandra likes these sort of… things…’

‘Oh.’ I tried to keep my face straight, but I couldn’t help the creepy smile that gleamed on my face. ‘It’s a love letter…’

‘It’s. A. Poem.’

‘I didn’t know you were into poetry.’

‘I’m not… It’s just… I don’t know.’ Maxwell sighed and then turned his head to me, his eyes pleading. ‘Could you read it for me? See if it’s any good?’

‘You should ask Varric that, he’s the writer.’ I huffed, but took the piece of paper anyway.

‘He’ll never stop pestering me about this if he ever finds out. You know the Dwarf.’ Maxwell snickered. ‘Besides, you were a minstrel, right?’

‘That was a very long time ago.’ I muttered, glancing at the words written in front of me in thick, inky letters. There were smudges everywhere, words scratched out and rewritten with another colour
ink. But it was adorable.

‘What do you think?’

‘I think Cassandra is a very lucky woman.’ I looked back up to Maxwell and handed him his poem back. ‘I think the poem is good, but the intention behind it even better. Cassandra will love it.’ I think… The words he had written down didn’t matter, it was the way he had written them, the time and feelings he had perfumed them with.

‘Really? Maker’s balls, thank you. I don’t want to rewrite it again!’ Maxwell smiled and folded the paper back to put it in his pocket. I laughed, he did too.

I leaned back into the bench, my shoulders grazing Maxwell’s. I lifted my eyes towards the skies splattered with stars. The moon disappeared behind a set of clouds for a moment, and then reappeared again. Next to me, Max did the same, his head falling off of the back of the bench, so he could look straight to the sky. The sound of the night took over again, our breaths intermingling with the wind, the faint laughter of people, the hushing of leaves… I don’t know how long we stayed there in silence. But it was a good silence. A silence that wasn’t filled with unanswered questions, fleeting doubts or gnawing fear and anger. It was a silence that you’d feel during the summer. A soft silence. A silence that doesn’t want or need anything. Maxwell and I could say so much to each other, and we also couldn’t say anything at all. And that would be fine too. We didn’t need anything from each other, but our presence. We, alone, were good enough. And that’s what friendship is. Needing nothing more but each other.

And it was then that I realized I was thinking of Solas. The whole time. His presence filled me, his words calmed me. And I realized that I wanted him here, not to fill the silence, but to enjoy it with me. I always felt like there was something unanswered between us. Something lingering. And now I understood that we both wanted each other, but couldn’t in fear of… in fear of time. But we had all the time in the world. Yes, I still had doubts, I still had so many questions… but the biggest one, the one that had filled our lingering silence, was answered already.

We were not alone.

Not anymore.

And that… that was liberating.

‘I need to go.’ I whispered, my voice too sudden.

Maxwell straightened his back, his eyes slowly breaking free from the stars above us. And as he looked at me, I could still see those glistering stars in his eyes, as if they were lingering there as well. He, too, realized something. ‘Me too.’ He whispered back.

We smiled brightly at one another and then simultaneously stood up from the bench. I put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. Maxwell did the same. ‘Sleep tight.’ He winked at me.

I grinned. ‘I will.’

***

I laid myself onto the king-sized bed. It was one of the only pieces of furniture in the room. Josephine hadn’t lied: these chambers were meant for nobility. They were large, with different rooms attaching to the largest one, the one with the bed. There was a dressing room — still empty, though — and an office area with a desk. There was a private bathroom, one with a large, stone tub embedded into the floor, and my very own latrine. But the bedroom was my favourite room, even though it only
had a bed in it, which was too large, and too comfy for my own good. The bed was covered in red velvet bed linen, and a dozen pillows. Yet, it wasn’t the bed that was my favourite part. It was the windows… and their view. On one side of the room was one large window, giving way to the Frostback Mountains that continued on beyond Skyhold. And on the other side of the room, were two tall windows that could be opened onto a balcony that overlooked the garden. I had opened them slightly, so the sound of the night could creep in, the wind billowing against the white and gold curtains.

Josephine had said my chambers hadn’t been entirely ready. But this was truly enough. More than I had ever needed. Still, I enjoyed the lavishness… but even more the privacy.

I buried myself between the soft pillows stuffed with hundreds of feathers. I hadn’t even bothered to take off my foot wraps, or my shirt and pants. I had only pulled the braids from my hair before I had fallen into the bed. And sleep came so fast, all the rest was for later.

My heart pumped as my body grew weary.

And as the Fade crept closer, I thought of only him. And I wasn’t alone anymore.

***

It had only been a day since I’d been here, in front of Solas’ warded dream, a closed-off door. And yet, everything seemed different, felt different.

What I presumed had been memories he had found in the Fade, could very well have been his own memories. This space he had created… it had felt so ancient, so real… And I knew now it once had been… perhaps he had been there when it was built.

I placed my hand on the door in front of me. The ward placed around it seemingly recognized me, and rippled underneath my fingers as if I was touching a body of water. The ward around me sizzled, and the door opened again.

I stepped inside, the space around me changing as it had yesterday. Fog turned into a big, marble hall. Just like before. Only this time, I was alone. Solas wasn’t here to welcome me, to guide me through his maze of a dream. I breathed in harshly, feeling like an intruder. But I knew Solas wouldn’t have let me in if he hadn’t wanted to. He controlled the Fade too well for that. Perhaps he was angry with me. He should be. He trusted in me, told me –what could be – his biggest secret. And what had I done? I had ignored him, sneered at him, thinking of him as… as if he had tricked me while he had tried to confide in me, like I had in him.

And I had left him all alone.

The one thing I had hated. Being all alone again.

He should be angry with me. I am angry with me.

I pushed my hair behind my ears, my bare feet shuffling across the cold, stone floor. Even my breath had an echo, that’s how quiet it was. I looked around, from the mosaic tiles on the floor, to the white marble walls with dark swirls of stone within it, and the beautiful stained-glass windows, the sun gleaming through them and making the colours and patterns even more vibrant. Yesterday, it had all just been pretty. But now, everything had a meaning. This dream wasn’t built… these were his own memories.

I walked to the other side of the giant hall, and opened a door that I remembered going through yesterday. I pushed it open gently and peeped inside. It was the same room as yesterday, nothing
had changed. There was a desk in the corner together with some chairs, glass cases filled with books were stacked against the walls, and one large window in front of me, opened wide, framed with gold-threaded curtains. I stepped inside, leaving the marble door open behind me.

No one’s here.

The two tattered armchairs Solas had conjured up yesterday were still placed in the centre of the room. As I walked past them, I rested my hand on the back of one of the chairs, the one he sat in yesterday, and followed the burgundy fabric with my fingers.

I continued on towards the window that opened onto the balcony we had… kissed on yesterday.

I hadn’t forgotten that kiss.

And how I’d felt during it. His mouth against mine, his chest heaving, his arms around me, his fingers trembling… I could taste the memory of his tongue, feel his lashes brushing against my cheeks… a shiver crawled across my spine, and I wrapped my arms around my torso and walked onto the balcony. Before me, I could see the great city of Arlathan, buzzing with people and spirits alike. Castles and fountains were levitating across the skies, meandering paths of gold and marble cobblestones connecting them to the earth like bridges. Magic swirled across the skies like the wind, rocks floating through them like clouds…

I leaned against the balcony frame, arms still wrapped around me, and stared towards the city. Had he lived here? Did he have a family? Friends? Where were they? Was he the only ancient still alive? Did he live in this palace? Or had he been a servant?

Had he known the Elvhen Gods? The Evanuris? Were they real?

The lively city below was intoxicating to stare at, and it was difficult to look away. If only I could get closer, walk among those people…

I straightened and took a step back, beckoning away from the balcony slowly, without turning around, unable to as the city called to me.

Had I once been here?

‘Saeris.’

The spell was suddenly broken, and I turned around. Back inside stood Solas, leaning against the marble door he had closed behind him. For a second, I panicked. A closed door. I can’t get away.

Solas blinked, as if he noticed, and leaned away from the door, opening it just a little.

I swallowed as Solas stepped aside, walking slowly towards one of the glass cases against the wall. He opened it, and grabbed a book from inside and browsed through it. He closed the book again, so sudden that I jumped a little, and placed it back into its container. The ancient sighed, as if bored, his face folded in a neutral mask that betrayed no emotion.

‘Solas.’ I whispered, and dared to take a step forward.

Solas stopped breathing for a split second when I said his name. I could see the muscles of his back tense beneath the thin fabric of his white long-sleeved linen tunic.

I scraped my throat. He’s angry. Like I was.
‘I…’ I mumbled, daring to take another step closer. Solas’ back was still turned to me, but I saw him glance over his shoulder towards me. ‘I’m sorry about… about yesterday… and today.’ I mumbled. ‘You… surprised me.’

Solas dipped his head and looked back to the glass case, eyeing yet another book. The silent treatment.

I took another step forward. ‘I’m… I have so many questions… since you’re… well you’re like me and…’

Solas sighed and grabbed some kind of tome, his fingers caressing the thick leather cover.

I bit my lower lip, not too hard to wake up, but hard enough.

Solas turned back and walked around me, the tome still in his hands, and sat in the armchair across the room. With a monotone voice, he started talking. ‘I suspected you may have some.’ He said, like a scholar to a student, bored already. And it hurt. It hurt that he refused to look up at me… just like I had refused back at the tavern.

I kind of deserved this.

But I can’t back down… I need to fix this. I want to. I want him. I’m done being alone. I’m ready for it. I’m ready for him. I’m ready for us. I am indeed done with the darkness. I was ready to go towards the sun. Undoubted.

‘Solas.’ I said again. He didn’t look up from the tome. ‘Fenedhis, Solas! Look at me!’

The sudden anger in my voice made him jerk his face up right towards me. I balled my fists and stared at him fiercely, into his grey and blue eyes.

‘You knew what I was, and when you told me that you were the same, it angered me. You left me in the dark and it angered me. I’m so angry.’ I blurted. Solas’ eyes betrayed his emotions, finally. I could see them glance at my balled fists, then at my piercing eyes and trembling lips. ‘And I’m afraid.’

Solas closed his tome slowly as I continued.

‘I’m afraid that it isn’t true. And that I am truly alone. But I’m also afraid that it is true, and that everything I know is false… that everything I presumed wasn’t real. That I’m not alone… That I can share it with someone… it scared me. And… and for once I’m afraid that my curse is my immortality… and that by breaking it… I’ll lose everything all over again… I’m afraid that breaking it will kill me… and… and… I do not want… to lose you. Yet, I’m afraid of being with you.’ I heaved, the words coming out all jumbled. ‘You confuse me, Solas.’

‘As you do me.’ He finally answered. ‘You do not even realize how much you do.’

‘Does it scare you, ever?’ I tried to hold back my tears. I don’t know why I wanted to cry anyway. ‘Eternity?’

‘It does. Always.’

Solas slowly stood up from his armchair. With two long strides he stood in front of me and smiled ever so faintly, the mask slipping from his face. He softly grabbed my hands, and I relaxed them in his. But his touch was still doubtful.
‘I don’t know what the future holds… no one does… but I want to live. I want to try.’ I whispered under my breath.

Solas inhaled, his lips parting slightly. ‘You always run away.’

‘I can’t promise I will never do so again. It has become a habit.’ I sighed.

Solas said something in response, but I wasn’t listening anymore. I stared at his lips, at his eyes and… and he was real. So real. I’m not alone. I’m not alone. I’m not alone. I’m not alone. I’m…

I cocked my head, slowly moving towards his face. I closed my eyes as I neared him, feeling his breath fluttering as I did so. His hands grabbed mine harder, his fingers trembling just like mine… and his lips parted even more, almost grazing mine and…

‘Your questions…’ He swallowed and moved his head away. It felt like rejection. But as I opened my eyes, I saw the fire in his. Solas’ eyes were large, strong, a fire burning within them. He stared at my lips as he spoke, regretting he had said something. ‘Ask them… first.’ He swallowed.

‘I won’t turn away again, whatever your answers are.’ I dipped my head, taking another step towards him.

Solas took another step back again. Lifting up his hands in defence, a chuckle hidden in his sultry, hoarse voice as he said; ‘Yes… but I do not know if I will be able to answer them… to let you even ask them once I hold you.’

Ah.

I grinned. ‘I don’t care.’ I took his defensive hands again into my own. ‘We have all the time in the world to ask questions, and to answer them.’

‘Yes, but…’

‘But this can’t wait anymore.’ I pulled his hands so his chest bumped into mine. Solas swallowed again, his breath staggering.

I pressed my lips against his. It was a quick kiss, just a peck, really. Too hard, too sudden, too small. And yet, it was all I had wanted. All day, I had been supressing it by being angry for no reason, for being scared of nothing. And nothing of that mattered anymore. We all have our secrets… but this one, we shared. We were not alone. Not I. Not Solas. I tilted my head back a little, so I could look into his eyes. Solas’ body froze up for a second, not being able to react as I let go way too fast, my cheeks reddening.

There was a little part of me that thought he wouldn’t want me anymore. That I had ruined it. But his eyes –oh, his eyes –were wild.

Solas pulled me back in, his kiss deeper, hotter, than ever before. His lips trembled at first, but then the trembling gave way to passion as his kiss deepened, his brows furrowing because of the intensity. His arm curled along my back while his other hand slid behind my neck, grabbing the back of my hair as he pushed my face even closer to his, our foreheads touching. My left hand rested on his chest, feeling his heart beat quickening underneath my fingers, as my right hand caressed his cheek. He leaned into my touch, his lashes fluttering against my own.

I parted my lips and let him inside. His tongue explored my own, slow at first, then passionate.
Solas’ hand raked through my hair, his other hand slowly exploring my back, going lower to my backside. I smiled against his lips as he became conscious of his touch, and chastely moved his hand up again.

We have time to move slow.

I let go of his cheek and lightly ran my fingers along the lines of his jaw and neck, where I stopped, my thumb caressing the veins that were popping up because of the restraint I felt he was holding.

I moved my head back a little, gulping up some essential air.

But Solas shook his head and pulled me close again, his kiss so hard it made me stagger back until my back bumped against the wall.

Solas placed one hand against the wall, leaning into me. The other hand moved to my face, and held up my chin. He broke of our kiss, and then gave in again, giving me one small kiss after another, savouring me with every touch. As he held back one moment, he slipped a wild strand of hair behind my pointed ear, his cold fingers running along the brim of them.

‘You are beautiful.’ He whispered against my mouth, refusing to move away.

I smiled.

That made him move on me again, his hand gliding down from my ear to my shoulder, pressing me against the wall as his body pushed against me again as his kiss grew from easy to devout.

‘Solas.’ I grinned as I noticed the hoarseness of my voice.

He moved his head away, staring into my eyes, heaving as I was. He swallowed and stared at me in silence. There were so many thoughts crossing his mind. I could see it as his expression changed ever so slightly. I wondered what he was thinking… he too must have doubts, considerations…

But then he shook his head, as if to shake the doubts away, and stared back at me clearly.

‘Saeris.’ He savoured my name and took a deep breath. ‘Vhe –‘

***

Someone knocked on my door intensely.

I pushed myself up, eyes squinting against the incoming sun.

Fuck, I woke up. Solas was going to say something… well, never mind… We… I smiled as I touched my lips with my fingertips. I partly expected them to still be wet of his kiss, swollen by his touch… but nothing. It was a dream… but not entirely.

I grinned. Why had I been afraid again? Why had I been angry? This was… this was perfect. It had been so long since I had felt so free to kiss someone again… to feel again. I do not know if this is love, or just a want… but I know that this is real, and good, and I wanted to kiss him again. And this time… I don’t need to be afraid of time.

Solas is immortal.

But he can die.

‘Milady!’ Another hasty knock on my door. ‘Lady Saeris!’
I combed through my wild hair with my hands, and flattened my shirt, before I crawled out of the bed towards the door. I opened it slightly and peered through the crack.

Damn it, it’s but morning! I could’ve… slept… longer.

‘Yes?’ I asked, my voice indeed still hoarse.

The scout in front of my door shifted on her feet. She had red braided hair and freckles ran down the bridge of her small, pixy nose. ‘We, uhm, we have been appointed to continue the furnishing of your chambers… Oh Maker, you were still sleeping –of course you were, it’s morning… cursed Sam – Did I disturb you?’

Squinting, I glanced at the scouts standing behind the girl, and at the chests next to them.

‘Ah.’ Was all I said.

‘We… we can come back later…’ the scout mumbled.

‘No, that won’t be necessary. I’m up, so…’ I pushed a strand behind my ear, lingering with the thought of Solas’s long fingers against the brim… sliding across my neck… I shook my head. ‘Just give me a couple of minutes to freshen up, okay?’

‘Of course, Milady.’ The scout dipped her head.

I closed the door again, and leaned against it for just a moment to recollect myself. My heart was still beating as if he was still there, right in front of me. I felt like a teenager again. Just like I had felt with… Daniel.

I felt jab of pain in my chest.

Somehow, it felt a little like I was… cheating? I hadn’t been with anyone, not like this, since his death… I know it’s been decades… I know that I was being ridiculous. Nothing could ever replace him, or take away his place in my heart. There’ll always be a spot just for him.

But I moved on.

And Solas… I… It means something. That kiss meant something. Something that I hadn’t felt for a long, long time.

‘Come on.’ I hummed and pushed myself straight again. I ran to my bag I had thrown onto the floor in front of my bed and grabbed a pair of trousers and a grey shirt, which I tucked into the pants. Nothing fancy. I bound my leather foot wraps whilst simultaneously hopping to the dressing room, where a large mirror stood – Orlesian style. I tutted, but knew Josephine had meant well. I combed through my hair and put it up with a simple ponytail, with braids at the side of my head, showing off my pointed ears. As my eyes met with my reflection in the mirror, I blushed for a moment. My lips were tainted red, as if I had been biting on them. I dangled my hands at my side. I looked…

Another knock. ‘Milady?’

‘Coming!’ I called.

***

I walked down towards the garden. I had seen the scouts bring one lavish furniture into the room after another. An Orlesian-styled dresser, two big Fereldan armchairs, a bookcase, and so on… even
a couple of chests stuffed with clothes and –Sweet Maker help me –dresses. I hoped they had made a mistake and that these clothes were meant for Vivienne or Josephine. I wondered why I even needed those to begin with. I am a mage, and a healer. I need armour to protect myself during battle, or clothes that can be thrown away easily when stained with blood and Maker-knows-what.

I brushed the thought aside as I remembered I still needed to meet up with Vivienne. I was surprised she had waited for me so patiently.

I walked towards the castle, intending to go straight to Vivienne, but slightly hoping to bump into a certain someone. I felt all giddy today.

But as I turned around the corner, wanting to take the stairs down from the battlements to the courtyard, I noticed Varric standing at the edge of one of the battlement walls. I stopped as I noticed Maxwell as well, in full armour that is –not his fighting armour, but his diplomatic one. I stopped and stared, squinting against the morning sun.

There was a third person.

Varric noticed me and waved, nudging me to come closer.

Well, Vivienne can wait ten minutes more.

I turned back and strolled towards them.

‘Mornin’ Firefly!’ Varric grinned.

‘You’re… active.’ I mumbled.

‘Of course!’ Varric grinned, his hair washed and his face clean-shaven. ‘My friend’s here.’ He smiled.

‘Your friend?’

‘Saeris!’ Maxwell smiled as he walked my way. He had combed his hair and bound it in a tight, low ponytail at the back of his head. His armour, steel and gold plated, with the Inquisition emblem engraved on the chest, gleamed. ‘Good to see you! I want you to meet someone.’

I hummed as Maxwell turned around, waving for that unknown third person to step out of the shadows.

‘This is her. Saeris. The one I was talking about.’ Maxwell smiled.

A man – tall and rough – stepped towards us. He had short, straight black hair, and a trimmed black beard. He had soft, brown eyes, and a smear of red Fereldan war paint crossing the bridge of his nose.

‘This is Garrett Hawke.’ Maxwell smiled. ‘The Champion of Kirkwall.’

Chapter End Notes

Lol... Fade tongue *ahem*
The Solaeris ship has finally sailed. All aboard :D
With Hawke coming to town, the ball finally starts rolling again. I have lots of adventure and drama planned for the chapters to come! And thank you all for reading!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

9:36 Dragon

‘Garrett Hawke. That’s the Champion’s name!’

‘Oh Maker! And Kirkwall is so close… Can’t he come by? I’d love to see the Champion!’

‘Me too!’

‘Ah, Jess told me he has like really good looks, you know? Thick black hair, full beard, so damn rugged and manly!’

‘Damn, why aren’t we at Kirkwall’s Circle?’

The three apprentices giggled, filling up the silent library with squealing noises. The giggling squad of young girls annoyed me more than usual. I pushed myself from the shadows, placing back another book I’ve read five times already. For how much longer do I need to stay in this Circle? It’s been six years already. Today was one of those days I’d rather stay in my room, dreaming of the Fade, of the sun. But I shouldn’t mope around like that, better to go to the Fade sparsely, just so I could enjoy it even more.

‘You know mages get tortured in the Gallows?’ I bit.

The girls gasped as they noticed me, foul expressions on their faces.

One girl tutted and threw her muddy brown hair over her shoulder. ‘What do you know, demon!’

Ah, demon. She probably spoke with Ruth. She liked that nickname. I took a step forward, my green eye coiling. ‘You speak of rumours, yet have not heard those about Kirkwall’s Circle?’ I purred, trying to be as scary as possible. It’s the only thing I can do here, read and piss people off. ‘You have not heard of what the Templars do to young, impressionable girls like you? You have not heard of the humans jumping from the highest room of the tower, just to be met with the cold hard ground and death, rather than to live another day inside that same tower? You really envy them? Would you swap places with them to meet your rugged Champion? Would you?’

Another girl stepped forward, trying to be brave but clearly shaking. ‘W… We were just joking! Why do you need to take things so serious!’

‘Yeah, piss off!’ The third girl muttered.

I scoffed, and stared at the three of them silently, taking my sweet time before speaking again, pronouncing my words carefully. It wasn’t just to scare them, but to warn them. There might be a day that these girls might be freed, thrown into the big, scary world. There will be no one to protect them as their dreams become their greatest nightmares.

‘It might not be serious to you, little girl. You’ve been here longer than you remember. You can joke around. The girls your age at Kirkwall, aren’t as lucky. So don’t wish for meeting your Champion. It would probably mean that you’re in some deep, deep shit.’
‘Saeris,’ Maxwell smiled politely, this is Garrett Hawke, the Champion of Kirkwall!’

‘Though, I don’t use that title much anymore.’ Hawke smiled politely, dipping his head. ‘I’ve heard a lot about you.’

I swallowed and straightened my back. ‘So have I. I’m honoured to be finally meeting you.’ I lifted my chin and smiled faintly. So this is the Champion I had heard so much about. The rugged hero, Kirkwall’s saviour,… I hadn’t needed to read Varric’s book to know who this man was and what he had done.

I glanced over to Maxwell, who gleamed proudly. He was meeting one of his great examples. A childhood hero. And now, Max is a hero himself. And it was quite the sight to see him standing next to Hawke. All of Thedas’ heroes were gathering at Skyhold, it seemed.

I couldn’t feel more out of place among these bright humans.

‘Varric,’ I sighed, ‘so this is the friend you were speaking of?’

‘That’s right!’ Varric winked.

‘Aww, you’ve been talking about me? I missed you too, Varric.’ Hawke grinned, smacking the Dwarf on his shoulder.

‘How could I not have been talking about you, Hawke! You’re my special snowflake!’ Varric grinned back, his voice filled with warmth and memories.

‘And it’s good you’ve decided to join us.’ Maxwell intervened. ‘We could use your expertise, especially with Corypheus.’

‘You’ve already dropped half a mountain on the bastard.’ Hawke smiled, crossing his arms across his body while leaning against the balustrade of the battlement wall. ‘I’m sure anything I can tell you pales in comparison.’

Maxwell glanced my way apologetically. No one needs to know that I was there too. I’d rather have Maxwell get all the credit. He was the one to pull the trebuchet. He faced Corypheus on his own. ‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Maxwell changed the subject away from Haven quickly. ‘You did save a city from a horde of rampaging Qunari.’

Hawke wiggled his eyebrows –he reminded me very much of Varric, I understood why they had become such good friends –‘I don’t see how that really applies… Or is there a horde of rampaging Qunari I don’t know about?’

Max cocked his head, ‘There’s a Qunari. He almost qualifies as a horde all by himself. Fortunately, he’s on our side.’

‘Yet, you should never really mess with him, either way.’ I grinned as Varric nudged me.

‘I’ll leave you gentlemen to discuss.’ I’d rather not talk about Corypheus. ‘But I would love to hear some of your stories, perhaps later, Ser Hawke.’ I said politely.

‘Hawke’s fine.’ He said in reply. ‘It was wonderful meeting you.’ The Champion winked at me.
‘Hold it in your knickers, Casanova.’ Varric laughed. ‘I’ll leave you guys to it, too.’

‘I’ll talk to you later then, Saeris?’ Maxwell called after me, cocking his head like a puppy who was about to be abandoned.

‘Sure.’ I waved back, glancing at Hawke one more time, whose face had turned serious in thought.

‘See you at the tavern!’ Varric called to the two heroes.

‘Of course…’ Hawke chuckled.

I continued my walk down the stairs of the battlement, Varric right behind me. A nauseating feeling was bubbling inside my stomach. Another storm was about to settle again. And another one was on its way. I knew why Hawke was here. I had heard the stories. We could use his help. But I knew this would start the ball to roll once more. Will we be battling Corypheus again soon? Or are there other things amiss I haven’t yet heard about? Maxwell would enlighten me soon, I guessed. But the iffy feeling I had, told me there was something more going on.

Don’t settle too soon. We might be leaving for Maker-knows-what again.

Varric called my name behind me. ‘Wanna come with me! Revenge for yesterday? You know, after you left, Chuckles beat me. Hard. Twice.’

I laughed. ‘No, I have somewhere to go, maybe later.’

‘You should play against Hawke too. He sucks even more at it than our Inquisitor does.’ Varric giggled at his own joke, and continued his walk to the tavern.

I waved him goodbye and turned to Skyhold’s main castle. I climbed another flight of stairs, and entered through the main hall. Again, a lot of soldiers and workers alike were passing through these halls, filing reports, moving furniture, fixing and painting walls,… I noticed a few Dwarven workers placing a large armchair –or throne—at the back of the great hall, in front of the large stained-glass windows. The back of the red velvet chair was broad and high, with edges of steel swords protruding from the side like sunbeams. I blinked a couple of times, dismissing the thought of how Maxwell would think about this. He’s going to hate it.

I stopped and turned to my right, going through the door that lead to either the rotunda or the upstairs. I admit, I was thinking of going to the rotunda first… just to see him. It felt so strange, what had happened between us, what was established in the Fade. I knew there was an immortal man behind these doors. A man I had kissed. A man who had kissed me. And I wanted him to do it again. But, first I had to meet someone else. I turned towards the stairs that lead to the first floor of the large balcony that encircled the whole throne room. On one side of that balustrade, the spot above the main entrance, Madame de Fer had nested. Right underneath a pair of huge, glass-stained windows. As I turned around the corner, I eyed the Orlesian armoires, mirror and tapestries with a smear of disgust on my face.

‘There you are, darling.’ Vivienne stood up from her white and gold leather armchair. She wore a gold threaded tunic, the flowy materials resembling silk. The corset she wore had iridescent boning, pushing up her voluptuous breasts. Her pants were tight and made from some luxury fabric I’d never seen before, and had patterns of gold swirls that continued on in her kitten heels. ‘Had a rough night? You look dreadful.’ She said and clicked her tongue, her eyes sneering at my wrapped feet.
‘Thank you, Vivienne. Always a pleasure.’ I bit away a sneer and smiled politely. ‘You requested my presence?’ Be quick about it.

Vivienne slowly walked around me and ignored my last question as she continued. ‘You need to keep up appearances, my dear. The Inquisitor saved many lives, lives that are now indebted to him. Eyes are going our way, and staying there, darling. We all need to look the part.’

I cocked an eyebrow. ‘We are at war, people are dying. I don’t think fashion is going to save lives.’

‘Ah, but there you are wrong. It is not but blood and muscle that wins war. Coin wins war. Power wins war. If not through alliances, we would be but blood and muscle under the snow already – at least, some of us –’ she added that last part quietly, but I heard it nevertheless. ‘But enough of that, my dear. Please, take a seat, make yourself comfortable.’ She pointed to one of the armchairs across the balcony doors, which were opened to let in the fresh mountain breeze.

I dipped my head and sat myself down, crossing my legs and trying to look as poised as possible. I didn’t really like Madame de Fer, but she did demand a certain presence in the room, one that made everyone straighten their backs and act haughtily.

Vivienne walked towards the armchair across from me, sat down whilst crossing her legs, and leaned back comfortably, no real emotion on her face but a polite smile. I know he wouldn’t like me saying it – but she seemed like she was channelling Solas. ‘To be honest, my dear, I do not trust you.’ She said outright, although it was nothing I didn’t already know. ‘Despite your years in a proper Circle, you refuse to see yourself as anything but an enchanter and present yourself as an apostate. As an Enchanter at the Imperial Court of Orlais, I simply cannot condone such a mindset, I hope you understand, darling.’

‘S –Sure…’

‘But that does not mean you do not have my respect, dear. You have shown great talents and loyalty, and that I can condone.’ Vivienne leaned forward. ‘I do not think you are a demon. Yet, the magic that kept you alive at Haven could very well be, that is demonic. It should be studied, my dear. I, nor the Inquisition, should leave it be like that.’

I nodded silently, pursing my lips. ‘I understand your concerns, Madame, but you do not need to worry. Solas is already doing research on the matter.’

‘Research, is it?’ Vivienne grinned as if she knew something. ‘Solas is indeed… well versed in such obscure matters. Yet, I think it does not hurt if this is studied by more than one person, don’t you think?’

‘Yes but –’

‘Indeed, darling. After what happened –after you re-joined us –I came to realise that perhaps this is of a divine nature. I think it is necessary for us, as an organisation, to take a public stand on this.’

‘So, what are you proposing exactly?’ I cocked an eyebrow and crossed my arms. What is she aiming at?

‘Aside from researching your “curse”, I would suggest I could help with your public image, as I do with the Inquisitor.’

Ah. Power. She not only wants to “research” me, keep my “demonic” powers in check, but she also wants to be linked with me. Publicity is publicity. She wants power, recognition. I am a great magical mystery, who would better be suited to study and guide me but the Empress’s own
Enchanter herself? If she’d prance me around like a talking donkey, she’d surely be in a position to get a promotion of some sort, like become the Grand Enchanter… or maybe even the new Divine.

I’m sure she has enough puppets.

‘I am sure Solas is open to discuss his findings with you, Madame. And I agree that more than one person should research my case. Perhaps Dorian is a suitable candidate, you can surely work together with him.’ I trust Dorian more than Vivienne. If she is to study me, I’d rather have her do it with someone I know, someone who can keep her in check. ‘And as for, uhm, public appearances… I appreciate your offer, Madame, yet I think Lady Josephine is already taking care of that.’

Vivienne’s confident sneer faltered a little. I can play this game, too.

‘But of course.’ Vivienne recollected herself. She’d underestimated me. ‘I shall be inquiring with Solas, then.’ She smiled politely. ‘As I will do Lady Montilyet. As ambassador, she will surely have enough to worry about.’

‘She didn’t mind it, though.’ I countered. ‘But I ensure you, Madame, if I ever require any help, or if Lady Josephine has too full of a schedule, I will surely ask your expertise.’

Vivienne dipped her head. I’d won this round. But this isn’t over just yet.

‘Ah, I would appreciate that greatly, Saeris darling. I would not want you to be thrown in front of the wolves. Though we may not agree with one another, I am sure we could help each other… with certain matters.’ She fluttered her lashes, almost sarcastically.

‘I will remember that.’ I smiled. ‘Now, if you excuse me, Madame, I have to attend to the Inquisitor.’ I lied, but I wanted to sound important just to jest her a little more.

‘Do come by often, my dear.’ She tutted, also lying.

I balled my fists and stood up from my chair and half-heartedly curtsied, before taking off. The curtsy was curt, and I was really trying to hold in my breath. Don’t say anything, breathe, she’s not worth it. As I turned around the corner, I let out my breath, and felt that my fingernails had left marks on the inside of my palm.

Maker! That woman… Of course, that’s why she asked to speak to me directly after what happened at the camp between Haven and Skyhold! She wanted to jump on the bandwagon, as soon as possible. But she didn’t want to look too eager, she knew I’d notice, and others would too. But I will not be used by her, not if I have a say in it!

But she won’t give up so easily. She didn’t make it in the Orlesian Court just by complying and taking a step back. I hope Josephine is truly intending on managing my public image, as she does with Maxwell… I hadn’t even asked her, just presumed.

I slowly walked down the stairs and entered the hall again, knowing that Vivienne was still watching me, I raised my head up high, trying not to look up and sneer. I crossed the hall and stopped in front of the Ambassador’s office. After I closed the door behind me, I sighed, taking a moment to recollect myself.

‘Lady Montilyet, do you have a moment?’ I asked as I entered the room.

Josephine sat behind her desk, her body obscured by piles upon piles of letters and reports. ‘Oh my, is that you, Lady Saeris? Please, do come in!’ She said eagerly from behind the towers of paper, which she pushed aside so she could actually see me, and I her.
'I'm not disturbing you, am I?'

‘Of course not! Things have become busy after… Haven…’ She swallowed. Max had told me she had difficulty forgetting Corypheus’ attack. ‘After the Herald’s appointment as Inquisitor, things are going fast. Nobles are inquiring, alliances are questioned and proposed,… I even have five marriage proposals already…’ Josephine sighed and stared at a small stack of papers at her side.

I smiled and shifted on my feet. ‘I don’t think Maxwell, uhm the Inquisitor, has any need for marriage just yet.’ And not with anyone but Cassandra.

‘Oh, they’re not all for the Inquisitor, Milady.’ Josephine winked, and dipped her head towards the chair in front of her desk. ‘Please, take a seat.’

‘They’re not for me, are they?’ There was a hint of panic in my voice.

‘I will refuse them, politely.’ The Ambassador smiled. ‘Do not worry.’

I heaved a sigh of relief and sat down. ‘Thank you.’ I grinned.

‘With what can I help you, Milady? Is it your chambers? Are they not to your liking?’ Josephine put down her quill and looked at me straight on.

‘Oh, no, they’re perfect… I wouldn’t have minded it if they were smaller even.’ I waved my hands. ‘No, it’s something else…’

‘I can guess.’ Josephine almost snorted—which was quite unlikely for her. ‘Was it Madame de Fer? She has been inquiring into… advising you and your public… position. I understand you do not wish for her guidance?’

‘I do not… I fear that Madame has her own agenda –which is fine, really –but I don’t wish to be a part of it.’ I smiled sheepishly. ‘I was wondering… if you’d be willing to… help me address my…’

‘I’m more than happy to help you with any situations that arise. Including the Inquisition’s position on your current… situation.’ Josephine continued on my part, smiling warmly. ‘Speaking of the matter, I was wondering how you’d like for us to address the rumours regarding yourself. Madame de Fer has a point in proposing to take an official, and public position about all of this, as we did with the Inquisitor.’

I rolled back my shoulders uncomfortably. Let’s get on with it, then. ‘What are these… rumours that need addressing?’

‘Well…’ Josephine stared at a blank piece of paper in front of her, thinking. ‘There are many contradicting, yet consistent rumours about what happened to you after Haven. With the Inquisitor being hailed as the Herald of Andraste, sent by the Maker to close the Breach, you are linked to the divine as well. Some say you were blessed by Andraste herself as well, and that you were brought back to the Herald as a sign of gratitude… from the Maker. Some say you were returned to us because you saved the Herald’s life… others are… proposing that the both of you are in a rather… intimate relationship, and Andraste has blessed your… joining.’

‘Oh… oh.’ I mumbled, blushing. ‘Max… the Inquisitor and I are merely friends… nothing… too intimate like that.’

‘I… understand.’ Josephine coughed and continued with the list of rumours she had practically learned by heart already. ‘There are rumours saying you are the incarnation of Andraste… though the Chantry would never stand behind such a stance. It would be blasphemous to call an… Elven
mage such as yourself… the reincarnation of the Maker’s Bride.’

‘Of course.’ I rolled my eyes. Because only humans can be divine, right?

‘Those are the rather positive rumours.’ Josephine leaned forward, her eyes darkening. ‘Many are guessing that your return was of a demonic origin. Rumours have it that you are an evil apostate, using blood magic to either gain power, or use the Inquisition for much worse. Others are implying that you are a spy from Corypheus. And last but not least, there are those who are certain you are a demon, or an abomination.’ Josephine took a deep breath after saying all of that in one go.

‘And what do you believe?’

The Ambassador seemed taken aback a little, blinking rapidly. ‘I, uhm, I do not presume anything of the latter.’ She answered. ‘To be honest, my Lady, I do not know. I do not know if the Inquisitor was truly sent by the Maker. But I do know he’s here to help, as are you. And I tend to believe in the goodness of people.’

‘Thank you…’ I mumbled.

‘And how would you like me to address these inconsistent rumours?’ Josephine took up her quill again, ready to note down anything I’d say on the piece of parchment in front of her.

‘I… How did the Inquisitor address his?’

Josephine looked back up to me, the quill loosening between her fingers. ‘He ordered –fervently that is –that we shall not endorse or favour rumours regarding him being sent by the Maker, for he does not believe that, he told me. He does, though, not object to the idea of using these rumours for… diplomatic matters.’

‘So… like for propaganda?’

‘Publicity.’ Josephine corrected. ‘Rumours and the attention of nobles and commoners alike, is a powerful tool. It makes the Inquisition known to the world, known to our allies as well as our enemies. The Inquisitor can inspire hope for those who wish to join us, and fear for those who are against us. The inquisitor understands this very well.’

I pursed my lips. I didn’t want to be used for anyone’s agenda, not for Vivienne’s and neither for Inquisition diplomats… but perhaps this is the only way I can help Maxwell? At least I have a hand in these rumours, control them as I’d like. ‘Alright…’ I sighed, and Josephine’s grip on her quill tightened again. ‘I… don’t like the rumours… but you may use them as you use Maxwell’s, the Inquisitor’s, rumours. But… not the ones about me and him being together,’ that won’t be fair to Cassandra, ‘and neither the ones about me being an evil apostate, a demon or a spy… I have enough enemies as it is.’

‘I understand, excellent decision! And you need not worry, I will oversee to this personally. I shall keep our position about your case vague, perhaps the mystery regarding you will do you, and the Inquisition, better than the other options… We will not endorse or feed into any rumours. It is noted.’ She smiled and scribbled an autograph onto the parchment, the letters thin and elegant.

‘Thank you, Lady Montilyet… again. I really appreciate it.’

‘You may call me Josephine… and there is no need, really. It is why I am here.’ She smiled warmly, like a sister or a mother would.

I dipped my head. ‘And if there’s anything I can help you with, just tell me.’ I said awkwardly.
‘Though I’m not well-versed in diplomacy.’

‘I appreciate the offer nonetheless.’ Josephine dipped her head back at me politely.

I stood up from the chair, smiling as I took a step back. But before I could fully turn around and walk off, the Ambassador quietly called after me again. ‘Did it hurt, death?’

I turned around slowly, taking in Josephine. Her voice was small when she asked, a worried, but curious look on her face. I could see she regretted asking, but she was too curious not to. I smiled faintly and swallowed. ‘It doesn’t. One moment you’re there, the next, you’re not. That’s it.’ I didn’t tell her about the cold, the darkness that swallows you up… the feeling of losing grip on your body, and slipping away until you’re not there anymore.

‘That’s it, huh.’ She mumbled to herself, her eyes vacant. ‘Thank you.’

I smiled back, and then strutted off to the door. Before I closed it behind me, I threw one more glance towards the Ambassador, her quill almost falling from her fingers as she was lost in deep, deep thought.

And then I closed the door.

***

I tiptoed inside, eyeing the seemingly empty rotunda. It felt awkward, seeing Solas again, realizing the feelings I had wouldn’t just go away like that. I wanted to see him, to see if he was still real, or if I had been dreaming. Yet, I also didn’t want to see him. If I could just ignore what happened, focus on the tasks at hand… saving Thedas, the Inquisition, helping Maxwell defeat Corypheus, find out my truth, free myself and…

And I couldn’t think about any of that or he would come to mind. It was everything I did not expect. I hadn’t calculated for this, hadn’t realized it was even possible. But there was someone, someone who wanted me as I wanted him, someone who was unchangeable like me, stuck, and willing to share that… with me. I’m not alone. I’m still afraid, but I’m so, so glad I’m not alone.

I straightened my back, my face neutral, and I walked inside casually. I tried not to gawk at the unfinished mural in front of me. It was but a sketch, markings that still needed to be coloured in, but I could see the potential. Abstract figures I couldn’t make sense of yet were drawn onto the curved wall… a scene unfolding before me, one that wasn’t yet clear. Buckets of paint were set on the ground before the wall on top of a faded blanket to protect the floor. On the left of the room stood a scaffold, built so that even the top of the wall could be painted. I could see this was the beginning of a grand work of art. I slowly walked towards it, passing along the desk in the centre of the room, past the sofa, and stopped right in front of the wall, reaching out to touch it and…

‘Sleep well?’

His voice came out too suddenly, and I swallowed in a gasp, pulling back my hand to my body. I turned around swiftly, only to meet his eyes.

‘I did.’ I smiled, wanting to take a step back, but didn’t dare to, as I could smudge the sketches on the wall. Solas stood right in front of me, his eyes glistering, though his face set in a scholarly gaze. Still, the corners of his mouth quirked, a small chuckle escaping his lips. ‘And… you as well?’ Of course he did, Saeris.

‘I did, too.’ Solas bound his hands on his back, his head cocking, eyes still big and gentle. ‘Though it has been… a long time. Things have always been easier for me in the Fade.’
'It has been a long time for me as well.' I smiled faintly, knowing what a long time meant for the both of us. ‘Yet… I do not… regret it.’ I bit my lip. Maker how old am I?

‘Good.’ Solas leaned back, his eyes gleaming as they took me in.

I slipped past him, and strolled to his desk, staring at the scrolls spread out on it. ‘You seem busy, I didn’t want to disturb you or anything.’

I heard Solas walk behind me, and when he stopped, I didn’t know where he stood until his arm appeared along my shoulder, his chest pressing against my back as he grabbed a book from his desk. My breath staggered, but Solas continued to walk alongside the desk until he stood behind it, across from me. He stared at the book’s cover, and then put it back down again. ‘You are not disturbing.’ He said quietly. ‘If you wish to discuss anything, I would enjoy talking.’

There was so much I wanted to ask… who he truly was, where he came from, and how he, an ancient Elvhen, had found the Inquisition… Has he been wandering since the ages of Elvhenan? I think Solas noticed the questions burning in my throat. Yet, I knew I couldn’t ask them, not here. ‘What are you painting? I didn’t know you had such talent.’

Solas chuckled, his laugh warming my ears. ‘It is but to immortalize the Inquisition’s story, very much like Master Tethras does with his writings, I do with… these.’ He pointed his chin to the wall. ‘And perhaps these barren walls could do with some colour.’ He stared back to me. ‘They are but sketches still.’

‘Well, you have time.’ I joked half-heartedly. ‘When it’s done, I imagine it will be beautiful.’

Solas gave me a knowing look. His hand still on the table, his fingertips tensing as his stare connected with mine.

Someone coughed upstairs.

I broke contact again, staring down at my feet. ‘So… Varric’s friend has arrived, did you know?’

Solas bound his hands behind his back, cocking an eyebrow. ‘Ah, I presumed as much when I heard the ruckus outside. The Inquisitor seemed quite taken aback.’

‘Yes,’ I smiled to myself, ‘I was surprised as well to see the Champion of Kirkwall standing there.’

‘And what did you think of this champion?’ Solas said, his face still that neutral mask I was starting to really dislike. What was he thinking?

‘Well, aside from being quite handsome,’ I grinned, ‘he is… nicer than I thought he would be.’ I recalled the friendly look on Hawke’s face, the warmth in his eyes when he spoke to Varric… ‘I always thought… well, considering the stories… he was a ruthless, dangerous man.’ I mused, ‘But he was… different.’

Solas shifted on his legs as I whispered, ‘Where were you… during the events at Kirkwall?’

He shook his head in response. ‘Not here.’ He answered back, his voice hushed but not as quiet as mine was, perhaps not to raise suspicion. Whispering is always suspicious.

I dipped my head, cheeks slightly turning red. There were so many questions I wanted to ask… and I wanted to know the answers right now, beg him for it even… Was he in Ferelden fighting the Blight? Was he far away, not even knowing where Kirkwall even was?
Solas walked around the desk, until he was beside me once again, and he took my hand, his long fingers entangling around my palm, his warmth spreading. He made me look up, and at that moment, I felt as if we were still in the Fade, nothing mattered… His eyes were encouraging, strong and…

A book fell from the balcony upstairs, plopping down to the ground next to me. I yelped and pulled my hand from Solas’, who looked somewhat disappointed at the loss of touch.

‘Kaffas!’ Dorian swore under his breath as he looked down the railing, towards us. ‘Oh my… Did it hit one of you?’

Solas didn’t answer, or do anything at all, as I looked up and smiled at the Tevinter mage, ‘No! We’re fine!’

‘Ah, Saeris!’ Dorian didn’t bother calling me lady, like so many did. He was too prideful for that, and I appreciated it. ‘I’ve been looking for our Maxwell, have you seen him, my dear?’

‘I saw him this morning… he’s with Varric… and his friend.’ I called back, my voice echoing. Solas stayed quiet next to me, his face almost bored.

‘Ahhh… his friend… Cassandra’s going to have a fit. Maker, do I want to see that.’ Dorian laughed loudly, coughed and then continued, ‘Could you tell him I’ve been asking for him, when you… have the time, of course.’ He winked down at us, well, to me as Solas was already shuffling through another tome on his desk.

‘I…” I glanced back to Solas, who seemed too busy to notice. ‘I was going to look for him anyway, I’ll tell him.’ I smiled back sheepishly.

‘Thank you!’ Dorian grinned, his face pulled into a mischievous glare before he disappeared back behind the balcony.

I looked back to Solas apologetically, and he answered me with a sigh, still staring at the tome in his hands. I walked towards him, and when he didn’t look up, I rested my hand on his shoulder. The sudden touch made him straighten his back and stagger back a little, his eyes softening as they met mine. I realized that what we had was something new, something strange and unknown to both of us. We weren’t anything at all, yet we were already so much more than before. And it didn’t only scare me, it was ill at ease for the both of us. I smiled kindly at the man in front of me, my voice not a whisper anymore.

‘I need to talk to you. Later.’ I stressed the last word, not only implying the time, but the place as well.

Solas understood. A small grin curled on his face, his mask slipping once again. Only for me. ‘Later.’ He mused.

I let go of his shoulder and walked away. He needs time. I need time. Luckily, we both have plenty.

Leaving the rotunda, I turned to the courtyard, taking the stairs down to the tavern. If I would look for Maxwell and Varric, the first place would always be the tavern. In Haven, and now in Skyhold. And nine times out of ten, I’d find him here. But it seemed this one was the one time I didn’t. I furrowed my brows, scanning the crowded area. Bull was sitting in the corner with a bunch of his Chargers. He nodded at me, head inclining politely. I smiled back faintly before turning back around and leaving. Bull was a nice man… Qunari… but he had this dissecting stare, the same kind Leliana had, and Solas too sometimes.

I went back up the stairs, to the main castle. Perhaps Max was in his room, taking a nap? I walked
across the hall, trying to ignore the hushed whispers coming my way. I stopped and turned around, planning to scowl at them, because I felt like it today, but then I noticed it wasn’t me the people were gossiping about. It was Commander Cullen. He strutted out of the main door, in full armour. Steel and gold and red. His fur mantle hung loosely around his shoulders, and it made my stomach turn awkwardly. His eyes were set on the Ambassador’s door. It was only when he passed some people, that he noticed me. He stopped for a second, a couple of paces away. His eyes searched for mine. I looked back and smiled faintly, dipping my head. Cullen’s mouth twitched, almost smiling, but then turned all serious again. He walked towards me, head raised high.

‘Commander.’ I dipped my head. Was he looking for Maxwell as well? Why was he dressed in full armour, so official? Cullen walked forwards, his steps large and confident. He stopped in front of me at a distance too far for us to talk casually. People in the hall stopped what they were doing and glanced at us, before continuing, yet still slightly peeking. I tried not to hiss at the attention, and instead focused on the man in front of me, taking in his face. His lips were pulled into a stern line, his jaw tight. Yet I saw some kindness behind his serious eyes. There was emotion in them, many feelings I could very well see. Concern. Anger. Trust. Everything in one simple stare.

‘Milady.’ Cullen answered back, his voice cracking to reveal a soft hum when he addressed me. He was still so angry at me, for what had happened. I had lied to him. And he had seen me die.

‘Have you seen Maxwell?’ I scraped my throat, feeling so small as he stood in front of me. I don’t know why, but the man had that effect on me. Not that I was scared of him… on the contrary, I wanted to do good for him. I wanted him to smile and laugh, just so I could hear his voice – Daniel’s voice – one more time. It was wrong of me. Cullen isn’t Daniel. Daniel is dead.

‘The Inquisitor has summoned his advisors to the War Room.’ Cullen answered politely.

‘Oh?’ I quirked an eyebrow. ‘What for?’ I didn’t even know they had set up a War Room already. ‘Is this about…’ I lowered my voice, ‘Varric’s friend?’

‘I expect as much.’ Cullen answered, his eyes troubled. Cullen had been at Kirkwall before. He knew Hawke. The troubled look made me uncomfortable.

‘It will take a while then… probably.’ I mumbled to myself. I knew they wouldn’t allow me to join the meeting –not that I wanted to. I didn’t want to be there when Cassandra realized who she’d meet at that table, if she didn’t know already. She was a bomb ready to explode. And I didn’t want it to be in my face.

The Commander shifted on his feet.

‘Oh, you should go… then. I don’t want to detain you.’ It had become so awkward between us. So strained.

Cullen cocked his head, blinking a couple of times. ‘You are not.’ That, he whispered, his eyes softening.

‘Could you tell Maxwell that I asked for him? Oh, and Dorian as well?’ I jabbered. Smiling nervous as I stepped aside.

‘I will.’ Cullen took the cue, and dipped his head. He walked forward towards Josephine’s office.

Before he passed me, I heaved and spoke up without thinking first. ‘I’m happy you’re wearing the cape again.’ What am I saying? Ugh.

Cullen stopped again and turned towards me, eyes lowering. ‘Thank you… For giving it back to
me.’ He raised his hand to his shoulder to touch the soft fur. I saw the memories flash behind his
eyes. How he had draped the fur over my freezing body as I grew colder and colder. How my blood
had seeped through the fabric and tinted it even more red. Deep burgundy. ‘I do not intent to lose it
ever again.’ He said that in such a serious tone. Intending so much.

I dragged my eyes to his and nodded. ‘You won’t.’

Cullen turned around before I could see the answer in his eyes and face, and walked through the
door. I stared after him.

I wanted to know what was going on. I knew Hawke’s arrival would stir things up, get the wheels
rolling again. I bet he was inside the War Room now, discussing with Maxwell what the Inquisition
should do next. Do we even have any leads? Any way to know what Corypheus will do next, and
how we can stop him?

I considered going in. But then I decided to turn around, perhaps head outside, go to the infirmary to
help. What gives if the patients faint when they see me? At least they won’t struggle as I heal them.
But I’m done feeling bad about what happened at Haven. I need to do something, help out… I can’t
wander around Skyhold while everyone is busy working, researching, whatever. I need to put my
mind onto something. I need to lose myself, even for a while.

As I walked to the door, I noticed Varric standing by the fireplace. I hadn’t seen him when I had
entered? Was he waiting for Hawke to finish?

I walked towards him. ‘Varric!’ I called.

The Dwarf almost jumped. He sighed when he turned around and saw it was me.

‘Waiting for your friend?’ I smiled calmly. The man looked nervous.

‘I am.’ He grinned.

‘When did you enter? I didn’t see you when I walked in.’ I cocked my head.

‘That was the intention.’ Varric laughed. ‘I’m hiding from… Oh, shit!’ He suddenly cursed and
ducked underneath the table behind me as Cassandra literally stormed in. Her eyes were large, her
mouth almost open as she heaved. She scanned the room, and as her eyes landed on me, I bet she
didn’t even really see me. She continued to storm off towards the War Room. People jumped away
as she passed. She was like a raging bull running towards a red, fluttering blanket. The Seeker
disappeared inside Josephine’s office, hurrying to the War Room.

‘Is the coast clear?’ Varric groaned from underneath the table.

‘You can come out now.’ I laughed.

‘It would be funny if my life wouldn’t be on the line here, Firefly.’ Varric cursed, stretching his back.
I heard something crack and Varric sighed.

‘I suppose she knows of your friend?’

‘Or she’s about to find out.’ Varric rolled his eyes. ‘Oh, she’s going to murder me, isn’t she?’

‘Oh, I don’t think she’d go that far.’ I rested my hand on the Dwarf’s shoulder.

‘I need to hide, don’t I?’ Varric grumbled.
'Yes, you probably do.’ I tried not to laugh. I failed.

‘Alright, if I suddenly disappear within the next few hours… my will is in my drawer. Tell Hawke I will haunt his hairy ass if he tells anyone what happened at… well he knows.’ Varric chuckled, though it was a nervous chuckle.

‘Best of luck.’ I grinned back.

The Dwarf sighed and took off.

I pursed my lips, and waited a minute or two, staring into the fire of the fireplace. It didn’t take long for Cassandra to storm out of Josephine’s office again, steam coming out of her ears. ‘I knew it!’ I heard her heave. I hope Varric has hidden himself well.

Again, the Seeker didn’t notice me as she passed. She must be really angry. I’ll keep an eye on those two… intervene when it’s necessary… or Maxwell will. Cassandra won’t kill Varric… perhaps severely wound him…

And as if on cue, Maxwell ran out of the office, he was scanning the room, his face pulled in a concerned… yet amused grin. He was a drama queen after all. Loved seeing it, hated when it happened between his friends, though. Maxwell spotted me and ran my way.

‘Did you see…’

‘Varric and Cassandra?’ I sighed knowingly. ‘They went that way. I’d be quick if I were you, or we need to find a new Dwarf.’

‘Aah, Andraste’s ass.’ He cursed and ran outside as well.

I don’t think the meeting at the War Room went that well. I smiled softly to myself, rolled back my shoulders, and followed Maxwell outside. They will need a healer if things get out of hand.

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Eventually, everything came out to be alright. Cassandra didn’t murder Varric, though she was really angry at him. But Maxwell had handled the situation. And I knew he knew how to calm Cassandra down. Varric had meant well… he hadn’t told the Inquisition about Hawke’s whereabouts because he had been worried for his friend, had tried to protect him. I knew I would have done the same. Perhaps Hawke could’ve helped at the Conclave, perhaps not. We don’t know and we don’t need to know because we cannot turn back time. Well, Varric did apologize after everything. And I know Cassandra will forgive him eventually.

And when the skies darkened, Varric, Maxwell and Hawke gathered at the tavern and I knew Maxwell was gloating about how he had protected the Dwarf. People would be gossiping about the confrontation for days. Yet, all I could think about was what they had discussed at the war table. What did Hawke know about Corypheus? What were the next steps we were going to take?

In the evening, after attending to some injured scouts at the infirmary –yes, I went to help. Yes, the healers and surgeons had tried to shoo me away. Yes, of course I stayed. Though I didn’t do much, I was happy I helped a man or two. And nobody fainted.

I stepped outside the infirmary, staring up at the sky. Today needed to be over. I was so busy that I forgot the time. And now that I saw the moon raised high, my heart started to beat harder and harder.

I walked towards my room, and when I entered, I didn’t even bother to look around and gawk at the
new furniture. I could do that tomorrow. No, I undressed and plopped into bed, waiting for the Fade to catch up to me.

I knew that the night would be as busy as the day.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! This chapter was an "inbetweenie", arranging some stuff. Next up: Solas will be giving us *some* "answers" about himself.... and we're going to travel again as Hawke (who we will get to know even better) joins the party! Whoop!

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