

A stylized, golden dragon head logo, rendered in a geometric, blocky style. The dragon's head is facing forward, with its eyes and snout clearly defined. The logo is composed of several interconnected golden shapes that form the dragon's features. The text "DRAGON AGE II" and "SHORT STORIES" is overlaid on the dragon's snout.

# DRAGON AGE II SHORT STORIES

BIOWARE

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Anders

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*Jennifer Hepler*

The light here isn't right. It's too yellow. Too harsh. And it all comes from above. For a moment, I'm not sure why that seems wrong. The sun... that's always been there, right? What am I remembering?

The word comes back to me. *The Fade*. I am a mage. I've spent time in the place I remember. It is a land of mist, of dreams. And I'm right; the light there is different, emanating from the ground, the walls, not a single pinpoint source. But I've never been more than a visitor there. Why does it suddenly feel like home?

What else can't I remember?

I sit up, and the light brightens, darkens, steadies. The throb in my head returns and without thinking, I draw on a breath of mana to drive it away. The pain lifts as the magic settles over it, soothing and cooling. I try to think. Let's start with something simple. My name. What is my name?

*I am Anders.*

*I am Justice.*

This never used to be so hard.

Suddenly it comes back to me. Justice's voice, *my* voice, speaking through the rotting face of the body he once claimed. "It is time. You have shown me an injustice greater than any I have faced. Do you have the courage to accept my aid?"

I knew what he offered.

To stay in the mortal realm, he needs a host, a body to inhabit for a lifetime, not a corpse which will rot out from beneath him. If I gave him that, he would give me all he had, all he was.

Together, we could remake Thedas into a world where justice rules, not fear.

A world with no Circle. No templars. A world where every mage can learn to use their gifts and still return home at night. Where no mother ever need hide her child... or lose him to the fear of his neighbors. Where magic is recognized as a gift of the Maker, not the curse it has become.

It's almost too much to imagine. The Circle, the templars, they've shaped my life. I was no more than twelve when they came for me. My mother wept when they fixed the chains to my wrists, but my father was glad to see me gone. He had been afraid, ever since the fire in the barn. Not just afraid of what I could do, but afraid of *me*, afraid my magic was punishment for whatever petty sins he imagined the Maker sat in judgment upon.

I always knew I wouldn't submit. I could never be what they wanted from me -- compliant, obedient, *guilty*. But before Justice, I was alone. I never thought beyond my own escape: Where would I hide? How long before they found me?

Now, even that thought repulses me. Why should so many others live with what I will not? Why must the Circle of Magi stand? Just because it always has, just because those who read Andraste's words twisted them to mean that mages must be prisoners? Why has there never been a revolution?

"He's coming to." A voice, getting closer. Someone I know. A Grey Warden.

"What in the Maker's name happened to him?" There are two of them. This one I don't know.

"He just went crazy. His eyes were glowing... His bloody skin cracked open and it was like he was on fire inside. Just kept raving... something about injustice, a revolution. Thought I was going to have to put the blighter down like a mad dog, then he just collapsed."

"Damned mages."

I struggle to stand, to open my eyes and face them like a man, not the chewed-up pile of hurlock spew I feel like. I can see them now. It's Rolan; of course it is. The price I had to pay for the Grey Wardens' generosity in recruiting me out from under the templars' noses. He was one of them, before his Chantry was destroyed by the darkspawn and he felt the calling to join the Wardens. No one ever said a deal had been struck, but as soon as the templars stopped their protests, Rolan turned up in the Wardens, and we've fielded every assignment together since. It's all too clear the templars sent him to keep watch.

And whatever possessed me to make my deal with Justice anywhere he might witness?

As he appears, I regret that choice of words, because something stirs inside me, and I wonder if it's harder for Justice to exert his will in a body that a living consciousness still inhabits. But it's a futile question, because his thoughts are mine and he is me, and I'm no longer sure what I was even asking.

Rolan is in front of me now, and the white griffin on his chest plate blurs in my sight with the steel-grey sword-of-flames on his companion's armor, and I know with white-hot certainty that Rolan has betrayed me.

"The Wardens agreed we can't harbor an abomination," he is saying, nasal voice vibrating with smug satisfaction, and I



don't need to hear more. He's brought the templars down on me, on us, and this is just what we've been waiting for.

I don't see myself when I change, only the reflection in their eyes and the sound of their screams. My arm lashes out and silverite doesn't so much break as explode in a shower of molten metal. The sword melts, running down the templar's chest, and I follow up with a wave of flames which scorch the flesh from his face, leaving only bone so hot it smolders. The trees are burning... the tent... everything around us.

Rolan is still standing, and I smell the lyrium he drank, which guarded him from the blast. But he's afraid. I see his shield jerk and know he barely resisted the urge to flee, and I have a sudden thought, "*What am I?*" for I've seen him face both broodmothers and abominations without fear.

And then his sword is level with my chest, and I let it come, because it is only steel and cannot hurt me, for I am not of mortal men. And when it sinks hilt-deep in my flesh with no reaction, that's when he gives up. He turns and runs, and from behind, I tear his head off at the neck, no magic, just *me*, whatever that is now. His blood splashes into my open mouth and it tastes like honeyed wine and the warmth spreads through me. He hated me, and he is dead. He feared me, and he is dead. He hunted me, and he is dead.

They will all die. Every templar, every holy sister who stands in the way of our freedom will die in agony and their deaths will be our fuel. We will have justice. We will have *vengeance*.

And suddenly I'm alone, standing in a burning forest, with the bodies of templars and wardens at my feet. So many, and I didn't even know they were there. Didn't even know I had killed them, but the evidence is all around me. Not the aftermath of

a battle as I've known it, but a bloody abattoir of rent limbs and torn and eaten flesh.

This is not justice. This is not the spirit who was my friend, my *self*. What has he become? What have I become? We must get out of here. There is no place for me in the Grey Wardens now.

Is there a place for me anywhere?

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Aveline

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*Lukas Kristjanson*

*My watch—no one dies tonight.* The thought was clear, repeating to the rhythm of her stride. Aveline du Lac ran through darkness, her eyes on distant fires. *No one dies tonight.*

Aveline was one of thirty recruits stationed outside Dales End, a backwater that hadn't seen a king's soldier in years. Their commander had chosen the location for its lawless hills—bandits and the odd beast would serve as combat training. But tonight was different. A wounded squire had run the message: templars in trouble. Either unaware or knowing and foolish, six had entered a freehold a few leagues distant, and something had gone very wrong.

Doubt reached across the path. Aveline shrugged it aside and ran on. She'd been on watch, still in full kit while everyone slept. Her fellows would be quick to gather arms and follow, but the fear in the squire had told the urgency, so Aveline had set out alone. She knew the risk—the duty of the week had been to flush out highwaymen, not make the land safe for sprinting in the dark. But a soldier doesn't always have the luxury of fortifying every step. Sometimes all that matters to the spear is the destination.

Doubt reached again. Aveline shrugged it aside and ran on.

Scraggly trees gave way to a clearing that seemed to hold the moon overhead. A man was struggling at the approach to a small estate, grasping for a bent blade, his dark hair matted with sweat. Even at distance, Aveline could see that his breastplate—templar issue—was split on the left. Three gashes through the finest armour, from no weapon she knew. Doubt reached for her. She cast it back without thought and knelt at his side.

"King's soldier. We heard your call. Are there others?" She spoke in a monotone as she set to work, tearing strips from her tabard to bind his wounds. They were deep, but his reply was edged with wonder, not pain.

"Maker, woman! You have their blood from head to foot!"

Aveline blinked and looked down at herself, then to the path she'd taken. Black ichor trailed from the hesitations of her run, the doubts she had barely acknowledged—clawed deformities now dissolving into the earth, like liquid ash. She had denied them, her strikes unconscious, automatic. She felt a chill at their strangeness, but pushed it from her mind.

"We need to get you out of here," she said, lifting the templar to his feet. But once righted, he turned to the manor. A sickly yellow glow outlined the door.

"No," he said, steady. He braced his blade against the ground and forced it straight with his foot. "If it fully manifests in this realm, we'll never cage it." Aveline looked the man up and down: pale, bleeding, not a trace of fear. She had never understood templars. Their world seemed impossibly distant from hers. His words were nonsense. He may as well be mad. Then he bowed his head and quietly added, "No one else dies tonight." Aveline stared, recognizing the soldier behind the heraldry. He glanced back, the slightest turn, and she knew that look as well—appraisal. She could help, and maybe survive.

"All right, templar," she said, shaking her head but drawing her blade. They stared at the door for a moment, side by side. The light behind it pulsed to a vile heartbeat. "Don't believe anything it says," he warned.

"I won't," she said plainly. He raised an eyebrow at her confidence. Aveline glared. "You either know your business, or you don't." He nodded grimly and turned back to the door, but she could tell he was searching for words, as if the right combination could make this meeting normal.

"Ser Wesley Vallen," he started. "And you are...?"

"Waiting to be impressed." Her reply was colder than she had intended, an instinct borne of long weeks in coarse company. He didn't react, but it annoyed her and she forced herself to try again.

"It's Aveline," she offered, "and you can impress me later." She winced at how improper it sounded, and stood board-straight for several seconds before chancing to look for the response. Wesley's gaze remained fixed on the door, but a smile crept across his face. Once more, Aveline somehow knew his mind. A small foolishness had cut the gloom; perhaps their blades were likewise not outmatched.

"As you say," he said, with a smirk that was... warm.

And with sudden bond and steeled resolve, the two of them shouldered the door off its hinges.

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"A knight, you say?" Benoit du Lac regarded his daughter with cloudy eyes, his voice thin but hopeful. Aveline cradled his hand, hesitating.

"He's a templar, father."

"Pish," he spat. "Then he has no holdings. A waste of you." The outburst echoed through the ward, bringing glares from



attending sisters. Aveline ignored them and looked past to the Chantry doors concealing the bustle of Denerim beyond. She sighed and turned back, dreading familiar arguments. But the old man had softened as he lay back in his berth. Perhaps he was just as tired of the cost of victory.

"He's a good man?"

She looked skyward, thoughts fondly elsewhere. "I believe so."

"Then take his name," he said, grudgingly.

Aveline chuckled, shaking her head. "You know I wasn't asking permission."

The old man smiled, closing his eyes. "That's my big girl."

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# Fenris

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*David Gaider*

The hunters were after him again.

Truth be told, he'd known for several days. He'd seen it in the eyes of the innkeeper, the way the fat man guiltily glanced away and refused to meet his gaze. He'd seen it in the pitying look of the whore that stood on the corner, and the way she covered it up with a smile. The patrons in that squalid tavern where he went to buy his meals grew quiet when he entered now, and it was not the uncomfortable silence of human townsfolk being confronted with a strange elf covered in strange skin markings and carrying a large sword—rather it was the silence of men who knew trouble had just walked through the door and were now doing their best to pretend it didn't exist. Fenris knew the difference very well.

He'd been lazy. Despite the fact that he'd known, still part of him refused to admit that it was so. He'd hoped against hope that he was wrong, that the signs were simply a fugitive's paranoia. His stay in the last three towns had been longer and longer, his efforts to cover up his distinctive markings almost nonexistent. He told himself that this was a challenge. Let them come. Let them try and take him back, if they dared. Deep down, however, he wondered if he hadn't simply grown weary of the chase.

Now was the time. He'd already cleaned his few meager possessions out of his room at the inn and jumped out the window. It led to a dark alley in the back, with enough ledges below that a quick descent was easily accomplished. That was why Fenris had chosen the room after an inspection that had the innkeeper staring at him in worry. He almost had to wonder how long it would take the fat man before curiosity, or a lack of payment, would lead him to check and find Fenris gone. A week, perhaps less if the innkeeper was the one who'd sold him out.

There was nothing in the alley save for a few lone rats and an elven vagrant asleep against a garbage heap. Fenris paused and stared at the man in disgust. He'd thought to blend in more once he'd escaped the Imperium. In a land where elves were free, certainly one more elf would go unnoticed? He'd been a fool, of course. How was he to know that so many of his people would squander their freedom living like frightened cattle? If his only choices were to either dress as meekly as the local humans expected their elves to be, run off to find the wandering clans that grubbed in the dirt for whatever scraps the human kingdoms threw them, or to fight... then his choice was clear.

The vagrant stirred awake as Fenris drew the greatsword from his back. The elf squealed in sudden terror but Fenris ignored him. There were others coming now, cloaked in the alley's shadows—at least two on either side and... one above? He listened, and heard the faintest scraping on the clay tiles up above. Yes, no doubt a crossbowman. They thought they had him pinned.

Fenris launched himself towards the end of the alley that led away from the main street. Here it led into a maze of twisty courtyards, sewage and lines of hung laundry... but it would be darker there, easier for him to run without stirring the town guard. Why the hunters never tried bribing the guard to help their hunt he couldn't say. Regardless, he'd run amiss of the guard in another town and they'd impeded his efforts to escape as much as they impeded the hunters. It wasn't worth the risk.

The vagrant shouted in fear and drunkenly scrambled to his feet, but Fenris was already past him. Two long figures approached, barely visible but moving fast now as they realized their quarry was aware of the chase. Fenris caught a

glimpse of maroon. Tevinter soldiers, then. Good, that would make this easier. Not that he wouldn't have killed mercenaries just as easily, but it was less pleasant than slaughtering dogs like these.

A wide arc of his blade knocked the first hunter aside as he parried. The second rushed forward, hoping to take advantage of an opening—only to meet Fenris's fist. The markings on his skin flashed brightly, the lyrium within them sending magic crawling through his flesh, and his fist phased through the man's helmet and directly into his head. He lurched to a halt, stunned with terror.

So they weren't warned. Fools.

The lyrium markings flashed again as Fenris partially solidified his fist. The hunter jolted back, blood gushing forth from his mouth and his ears. By now the first hunter was already recovered and swinging his blade. Fenris expertly hauled the second around by his head, putting him into the path of the swing. The sword chopped deeply into the man's shoulder, and with a kick he sent both of them flying together into the brick wall. His fist was covered in dark red gore.

He would have stayed to finish them off, but the other hunters were already figuring things out. A crossbow bolt flew by Fenris's head, barely nicking one of his ears, and he could hear the booted feet of more soldiers rushing his way. He ran into the alleyway, leaping over the hunter who struggled to push off his dead comrade, and sped into the maze. Dark doorways flew by as he raced. He cut down clotheslines and tossed over barrels to present obstacles behind him. They were definitely giving chase—he could hear them swearing in Tevinter, and the crossbowman above scrambling to get into position.

The first pair of open shutters he saw and Fenris dived through. He landed in a kitchen filled with the smell of baking bread, and a human woman screamed as he rolled to his feet. No doubt the sight of an elf in skintight armor, carrying a blade almost as large as himself, wasn't a welcome sight. He got to his feet and noticed the surprisingly comely woman, dressed in a nightgown that revealed more of her cleavage than she no doubt expected, pressing against the wall.

He grinned at her, and she screamed again. So he grabbed a freshly-baked loaf off the counter and raced for the front door of the hovel. Already a soldier was climbing through the window, causing the woman to scream once more and faint dead away. The others would be coming around to the front, so he had to get out before...

...he stopped cold. He knew the man who stood at the doorway: maroon cloak and jet-black hair barely covering those soulless eyes. Not to mention a scar on his neck, one that Fenris had put there. Damned healing potions and their foul magic. Why couldn't anyone stay dead?

"*Avanna*, Fenris. Good to see you again." The hunter's voice was a cold purr as he raised his crossbow and pointed the bolt at Fenris's chest. The one on the roof, then. Clever.

"Considering what happened last time, I'm surprised you decided to try again."

"It's not just about the coin any longer, slave." Oh, how Fenris loved it when they said that. "Not afraid you'll lose your head for good?"

"Not when we have the drop on you. You've become careless. Time to give yourself up." The other hunter had made it through the window, and he could hear others shouting in the

street. He supposed that he really had only two choices: give up and hope for a chance to escape later... or take his chances.

It wasn't really a choice. He tightened his grip on the hilt of his blade and smiled at the hunter, slow and deadly.

"*Vishante kaffar*," he hissed. And he attacked.



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Isabela

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*Sheryl Chee*

The woman that walks into the Hanged Man is a sight, bedraggled and scruffy, like a rat that's been soaking in the bilge for a week. Her ripped, weather-beaten smock is stained with soot from Lowtown's chimneys and her boots, while of fine leather, are well-worn and crudely patched in a number of places. Her bearing, however, is proud, even arrogant, and she strides into the tavern like she owns the place.

"They told me I could get a drink here," she says, coming toward the bar with a singular purpose. She slaps a half-dozen silver coins onto my counter. "What'll this get me?"

"It'll get you drunk enough," I say.

"Then keep the liquor coming till the coin runs out. And make it strong."

I wipe a chipped clay tumbler with my apron and fill it with the tavern's most potent brew. She snatches it from my hand before I'm done pouring, and downs the drink in one gulp.

"You really needed that, didn't you?" I pour her another drink.

"You have no idea." She sighs and rubs her temples. "They call me Isabela, by the way. You might as well learn the name. I think I'm going to be here a while."

It doesn't take long for a foul-smelling longshoreman to show up. Isabela stiffens as she feels a hand, low on her back. The longshoreman opens his mouth to say something, but never gets the chance. Isabela grabs the man by the wrist, twisting his arm behind him. His cry is one of shock rather than pain, but that quickly changes as Isabela rams her elbow into the back of the neck, slamming his face into the wooden bar-top.

"Touch me again, and I'll break more than just these," she hisses in his ear. And then she snaps the fingers of the

offending hand. I hear a crunch, several sickening pops, and a howl of pain. The longshoreman slinks away, cradling his hand and spitting curses.

"What?" she says, holding the empty tumbler out for a refill and daring me to make a comment, any comment. I gesture towards her striking outfit—nothing but a chemise worn without the benefit of a jacket or cloak, covering only the barest minimum required for decency. Put on something like that, and you're going to get attention whether you want it or not.

"What? This?" She picks at the laces on her bodice, then lets out a short, bitter laugh. "Would've dressed up for you, but I left all my polite clothes at the bottom of the ocean."

As I ponder the meaning of that statement, one of a group of Lowtown ruffians sidles up to the bar. He smirks, greasy lips sliding over yellow teeth in an expression that's more grimace than smile. "I'm Lucky," he says.

"Is that a name, or a description?" she asks, not even looking at him.

"It's both. And If you're new in Kirkwall, you'll want to talk to me. My boys and I know everything going on in this town."

"You know," says Isabela, coldly. "I once knew a dog named Lucky. Obnoxious little thing, and too stupid to know when he was two yaps away from a kick in the side."

Lucky turns beet red, and glances at his mates for moral support. Lucky's boys jeer and laugh, offering no support whatsoever, and Lucky beats a hasty retreat. Isabela plays with the clay tumbler, turning it around this way and that, examining its numerous imperfections. Her eyes narrow.

"Wait," she says suddenly. "If you know everything going on in Kirkwall, maybe we should talk."

Lucky nods and grins. Isabela turns to him and I catch a mischievous glint in her eye.

"You see," she says, smiling for the first time. "I lost something in a shipwreck, and I'd like for it to be found."

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Merrill

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*Mary Kirby*

"Watch your step, da'len."

The Keeper's warning comes too late -- as usual -- and I trip over the rock, bruising my knees and losing the skin on my palms to the jagged mountain rock. Mythal'enast! Someday, I'll learn to watch where I'm going. I struggle to my feet, hands covered in blood, and look around.

We're here.

The cave mouth is unbearably spooky, even for Sundermount, which you'd think was trying for some sort of spookiness medal. Most Terrifying Mountain in Thedas, maybe. Mist swirls out of the blackness as if it's breathing, and the hillside around it is barren. A gaping maw, devouring all the life within its reach...

Not a good mindset, Merrill. Think positive! At least the weather's fair.

"You feel it too, then." The Keeper's voice snaps me back to reality. She's looking at me expectantly. .. which means I've forgotten something. I try to smooth my tunic and succeed in smearing blood down the front. Wonderful. And I still don't know what it is she's waiting for—oh! Answer. Right.

"Yes, Keeper. The voice is much louder here." The whisper tugs at the edge of my thoughts, and I can make it out if I concentrate. In the camp, I could only hear it in my dreams, and the words were lost upon waking. Only a memory of terrible loneliness remained. Even the Keeper woke sobbing the second night.

*Come to me.*

I shiver. This is definitely the source.

"Follow me, da'len. And keep your wits about you." The Keeper vanishes into the hungry mouth of the cave. I take a deep breath and go inside.

The dark is a shock after the sun-drenched mountainside. Like jumping into a pool of icy water on a hot day. My eyes adjust to the dimness, we pass through a narrow passageway into a grand chamber and I see... ruins. Light shines through cracks in the ceiling, broken by the shifting of time and tree roots. Not a cave after all then? A temple or a tomb or... I don't know what this is. Strange.

"It doesn't look elvish, does it, Keeper? Tevinter, maybe?" I look to the Keeper, who is peering silently at some sort of archway with a disapproving frown that I know all too well. Poor archway. It didn't do anything.

"If this place was part of the war, then it doesn't matter who built it. It is dangerous." The Keeper turns from the archway, apparently dismissing it. "If it isn't from the war, it is unknown, and probably still dangerous." I'm certain there's a flaw in her reasoning somewhere, but it seems like the middle of the creepy tomb-cavern is a bad place to argue the point. She descends a short stairway into the temple below.

I trail after her, giving the archway a reassuring pat as I pass.

*Come to me.*

The voice comes from the far end of the temple, from an ugly statue of a big squatting... thing with too many arms and legs. Well, that's not promising at all.

"Who calls us?" The Keeper demands, drawing herself up. She looks the way I imagine the elves of Arlathan did, regal and wise, and the timbre of her voice says, *I don't care if you are a*

*spirit, I will thrash you if you give me a reason.* She scolded a wild sylvan with that voice once, and it stumbled off looking ashamed of itself. Well, as ashamed as a tree can look, anyway.

*Help me.*

Oh, that was not the right answer at all.

Keeper Marethari seems to grow taller, becoming a towering pillar of angry Dalishness. "Name yourself! Or be left to your silence."

*I am One Who is Trapped. Help me.*

"Your name!" I have never seen the Keeper this angry. Not even when Tamlen disappeared.

Three seems to be the magic number. *Audacity.* The voice is like a winter wind, bitter and ragged.

"A demon." The Keeper spits the word as if it tastes foul. She nods at me, "Bound to the statue. It will not threaten the camp." She turns to leave, satisfied.

*Wait! I have been trapped here for time beyond counting. I bore witness to the fall of your kingdom. Help me, Keeper of the Dalish, and I will give you knowledge of all I have seen.* For a moment, I see visions of the world as it once was. An empire that spanned all Thedas, glittering cities of the elvhen.... *All this could be yours.*

"Come, da'len." The Keeper beckons. The vision fades.

I turn and follow her out into the light.

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Sebastian

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*Jennifer Hepler*

Princes aren't meant for chastity.

That's what I've been telling myself since my parents' soldiers dragged me to this cloister and left me to rot. They say I'm a disgrace to the Vael family name, that I'll be a weight around my brother's neck when he comes to rule Starkhaven. I say, if you're a prince with no power, you might as well use your title to have some fun.

"Sebastian?" The voice of my jailor, Captain Leland of my parents' personal guard, loyal to the death. In this case, my death. "Do you need anything more tonight, Your Highness?"

"I'm fine." Let him leave. I need to be alone. A moment, then his footsteps echo down the hall. We've done this every night; he should trust that I'll stay in my cell, obedient, asleep.

I unfold the note that was under my plate in the dining hall.

*Sebastian—I know you hate it here. If you wish to leave, come to the back entrance at midnight. I'll make sure no one disturbs us.*

It's a woman's handwriting, thin and gently looped. I wonder again who might have written it. Another novice, surely. There was a pretty girl I saw praying at the altar the other day; perhaps she was also given here against her will.

I check the door. I've been good; they haven't yet taken to locking me in. I mutter a quick prayer, "Andraste help me out of here and—"

The irony hits me and I stop. It's not that I don't believe. I've been faithful in my own way. I learned the Chant as a boy and can still jump in on any verse. I've tithed faithfully, what little coin I've ever called my own. I've stood up for what is right: I've fought against Tevinter's slavers setting foot in Starkhaven, I've



been kind to our elves. And in return, Andraste's gotten me out of a good number of scrapes. It never seemed strange before today to ask Her aid in winning a lady's heart or a bar brawl. But can I truly ask Her to help me escape Her service?

*Let me leave now, I plead silently, and you can have whatever you ask of me later. When I'm old, I'll gladly take vows in my retirement, like Grandfather, just don't make me give up my life now.*

The hall is empty. No sign one way or the other if She heard.

My bow is in my hands. Grand Cleric Elthina insisted I be allowed to keep my belongings, thank the Maker.

There's a candle lit at the end of the hall. I loose an arrow, and it passes through the wick, leaving us in darkness. I wait, but no one comes. I am alone.

I run lightly and silently down the woven Antivan rug. I'm used to moving in darkness. At the end of the hall, a large window is shuttered against the winter chill. The wood is stiff with the dampness and difficult to move, but a hard shove of my shoulder gets one side opened to the night. There are no trees outside the Kirkwall Chantry, but I'm in luck. One of the outbuildings is wood, and tall enough to use.

There's a coil of rope at my hip, left to me by my mysterious partner-in-crime. I make a tight knot just past the fletching of an arrow and let it fly. With a quick addendum to my earlier prayer, I think, *All right, Andraste, if you're going to let your Mothers catch me, do it, but just let this arrow hold.* I can't think of a worse way to die than breaking my neck while trying to climb out the Chantry's window.

And she must be listening because the rope is taut, the arrow is strong, my grip is good, and in a heartbeat, my legs hit wood and I'm spooling the rope out slowly, climbing down.

A shadow moves below. For a moment I curse that I need both hands for the rope, and my bow is hanging uselessly from my back. Then I shake my head. If someone catches me, I won't fight. I have no hatred for anyone in this Chantry; they are good people, serving the Maker as they can. My complaint is with my parents, for sending me here as punishment, for forcing me to a vow of celibacy to protect my brothers' children from any rival heirs I might beget.

I will kill no one for my freedom. It's mine to value as I will and it's not worth a single life.

I drop to the ground and my boots stick in the clay. And now I see what I couldn't before. More than one person is waiting for me in the darkness of the Chantry's wall. This can't be my mysterious collaborator— she would be alone, not flanked by templars. For a moment, I think to flee, but my early training is too much. If I've lost this battle, I'll at least lose it with dignity. Princes never run.

One of the forms steps forward. It is a woman, grey-haired and crimson-robed.

"I see you got my note."

My heart leaps— can it be her after all, my fellow rebel novice? But then I recognize the voice. I've heard it, after all, for most of my life, leading the Chant in Kirkwall, in Starkhaven, throughout the Free Marches. Grand Cleric Elthina, Mother of us all.

"Y-your Grace," I stammer. Then it hits me. "*You* sent that note?"

She turns to the templars. "Leave us," she says briskly, but they hesitate. "I am in no danger from His Highness."

The templars leave and we are alone in the darkness.

"*You* sent the note?" She nods. "And the rope?" Again. Now I'm getting angry. "Why? Just so I'd show you how desperate I am? Do you think this is funny?"

"I wrote because I understand how you feel."

"I'm at your mercy here. Did you really need to taunt me with it?"

"Sebastian." Her voice is sharp enough to make me meet her eyes. They are dove-grey, soft, compassionate. "I am sworn to Andraste's service, but that does not make me ignorant of the world. I know it's not your choice to be here."

"It's not that I don't have faith—" I feel the need to explain.

"I know." Her voice is low, sad, and I suspect she's telling the truth. "Your parents want to use the Chantry to further their political goals." She pauses. "That is *not* an act of faith."

She takes my hand in hers and turns it over. She sets a bag in it, heavy with coin. I look inside — all gold. "This is the endowment they made in your name. If this isn't the life you want, use it to make another." As I stare, dumbfounded, she gently closes my fingers. "People serve the Maker in many ways, Sebastian. You don't need to take vows to do His work."

She gives me a crooked smile, deepening the lines in her face, then turns to walk inside. As her hand touches the door, I find my voice.

"But why?"

Elthina turns, and the moonlight gives her a glowing halo that I'm sure is no accident. "Because no one should ever enter the Chantry through the back door," she says. "The only one who can make this commitment is you, Sebastian. The front door will always be open."

With that, she's inside, and I'm alone in the night. I look at the bag of coins, enough to be free of my family, my titles, forever. Enough to start the life I've always wanted, free to follow my whims, to laugh and love where I choose. Enough to be...

Words race through my head: *useless, aimless, selfish, alone.*

I was in a tavern when Captain Leland found me. Is that where I want to meet my Maker?

Before I'm aware of it, my feet are moving, taking me out of the shadows, into the full light of torches and moon. "Thank you," I whisper to Andraste, before my hand touches the smooth bronze of the door handle, and I walk into the Chantry. From the front.

## Links

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Varric

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*Mary Kirby*

The Hanged Man: Loud, stinks of spilled ale, burned meat, and at any hour of the day is full of honest people doing desperate, crazy, or embarrassing things they won't remember in the morning.

My favorite place in the world.

Gallard rubs his ear and glares at me over his cards. "Well, are you in, or not?" Poor elf's lost four sovereigns so far, and the night's not looking up for him. He shifts in his chair.

"I'm in." I toss another silver onto the pile. "Ser Thrask?" The templar is staring at his hand as if Blessed Andraste might be appearing to him. She could be, for all I know. He's had three pints, and he's swaying slightly.

At the sound of his name, Thrask looks up from his cards and squints at me. "You're bluffing. You can't fool me, dwarf."

"The last three hands beg to differ," Gallard mutters, still rubbing his ear. He's got a notch taken out of it -- got off lucky in a Darktown knife fight a few years back, and he can't keep his hands off the scar when he's nervous. "If you're calling, call. Don't just make eyes at him."

"Well, can you blame him? I am awfully pretty." I brush some imaginary dust from my coat. Gallard struggles not to laugh and succeeds when the tavern door opens.

"Varric Tethras? Has anybody seen Varric Tethras?" The messenger is in Merchant Guild livery. It's not so much a specific uniform as a visible aura of self-importance. He doesn't come more than two steps inside, possibly for fear of being attacked or, more likely, because he doesn't want to get any Lowtown on his clothes.



"Never heard of him." Comes the chorus from around the room. The messenger stands by the doorway for another heartbeat, squinting into the dark tavern, then turns on his heel and leaves.

"Well, ser knight?" I break out my most charming smile for Thrask, who responds by downing the remaining ale in his tankard.

The templar nods. "I'll see that silver, and raise you another."

"I'm out." Gallard sighs. "And you, ser, are crazier than a bag of wolverines."

"I'm in." I smile again and gesture for the waitress.

"So now I've lost four and a half sovereigns to you, Varric, I want to know: What's this story about your brother going into the Deep Roads?" Gallard leans forward, and his eyes catch the light like a cat's.

"It's not much of a tale yet. I'll have to wait and tell it to you after we get back." The waitress brings me a glass of wine, which I make a great show of sniffing. The Hanged Man's wine cellar is terrible. I don't actually drink anything here. I order wine because it makes people in taverns nervous if you spend all night talking to them and you never have a glass in your hand.

"No one comes back from the Deep Roads." Thrask mutters. He actually does drink here. If I had his job, I'd probably drink more, too.

"Four-fingered Eddie is giving this expedition of Bartrand's fifteen-to-one odds against, Varric." Gallard shakes his head. Trust the Coterie to run the numbers on my life expectancy. I just smile and shake my head.

The tavern door slams open and another messenger appears. "Varric Tethras? I need to find Varric Tethras. It's an urgent matter of business."

"Never heard of him."

The second messenger disappears.

The templar scowls. "You're going to get killed down there. I've heard the Fereldan refugees talking. Twisted monsters that live in the dark."

The elf nods, rubbing his notched ear. "Honestly, Varric. Let Bartrand go by himself."

I shake my head again. "Thrask, are you in?"

"I call." Thrask lays his cards on the table and sits back, waiting.

"Four knights." I smile, gathering up my winnings. "I wouldn't take that bet, Gallard. I'm not always bluffing, you know."

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