

Chapter 1

I use to live in a world where magic was so hidden only the mundane persisted. Lot's of people called it, "The Real World." What happened to me shouldn't have happened. I still don't know how it did. I don't know if it was a weird government experiment that hit my house one night or if I just willed myself away because I was so damn tired of being in a place where I felt like I didn't belong. And not just a, you don't fit in type of feeling, mine was soul deep. Don't laugh. Feeling like the world you live in is wrong on fundamental levels you can't explain is maddening. Wanting to change it and not knowing how, sinking into a depression you can't explain either... ugh. Life was just tough for me, for reasons I couldn't articulate to anyone. I had yet to find my tribe and I didn't have the energy to go looking. I was a hermit in a beautiful home, going through the motions of living because what else was I to do? I was trying though, I really was. To remember who I was, to find happiness in my purpose and all that jazz.

It was on a Monday, just another boring Monday when the most absurd fucking thing happened to me - I got transported? Teleported? Into Dragon Age Inquisition.

I was sitting in my home office, drinking coffee and dragging ass through shit I needed to get done in hopes that I would somehow have enough energy to work on projects that actually mattered to me, that hopefully would one day make me the money I needed so I could stop dragging ass through shit I needed to get done. That fucking cycle, am I right? Anyway, there was nothing out of the ordinary happening. It was raining outside, a nice summer thunderstorm. I remember stopping what I was doing and turning to look out the window. Thunder hit, loud and dramatically. A crack of lightening followed and I remember in that moment how intensely I did not want to be where I was. That feeling filled me up, consumed and overwhelmed me. I wanted so much to be in a place where I felt like I belonged, where I was fighting for something that could actually make a difference...

The thunder boomed again, so loud it shook the house. The crack of lightning that followed was just as ear deafening to the point it startled me. That's when I started to feel funny. My palms got clammy, my heart was racing and my whole body felt wrong. It set off alarm bells in my head and I briefly wondered if I was having a heart attack or about to pass out or something. Which I did; pass out. One moment there's the rain and the storm, the next everything is fuzzy as hell, a feeling of pressure closing in around me on all sides bears down on me, and it all happens so fast I don't have time to panic. Then, nothing.

You want to know where I woke up? In the fucking Fade ya'll. The Fade.

A strange smell was the first thing that assaulted me. No, not strange, fucking gross. It was smokey and tainted, like something foul was burning. I groaned, because my head was pounding and slowly opened up my eyes. I thought I was dreaming. Stuck in a nightmare,

truly, because what I was seeing could not be possible. I was standing on a rocky slab. It was moist. There was this weird green tint to everything and I could hear whispers. Creepy, horror movie like whispers in surround sound and I couldn't make out what they were saying. Not that I particularly wanted to. At this point, I was in full blown panic mode. My breath was coming fast and hard, my heart was beating so violently against my chest I worried I really might have a heart attack. I snapped my eyes shut again and started willing myself to wake up.

It didn't work of course. When I opened my eyes the environment persisted. I couldn't see much in the distance, there was this thick green like fog keeping it all hidden. Slowly in the back of my brain something started nagging at me, a sense of familiarity with this place. In the next breath it slammed into me all at once. I had played Dragon Age Inquisition so many times. This was the starting point. Character creation spot. My brain didn't want to register to this. My panic started rising and now I was questioning my sanity, because it was utterly impossible. I was hallucinating. Straight up tripping. I grabbed my head, a full on sob breaking free.

"Get your shit together, Simone," I started talking to myself. "This isn't real. This is not real."

I was proven wrong in a horrific manner. There really are no words for experiencing a story and then actually living the story.

"Run! Run!"

The unfamiliar voice boomed out. I heard pounding footsteps. The splash of water. And behind that, I heard this horrible clicking/chittering sound.

I jerked my head up, dropping my hands. I knew that accented voice. It was Divine Justina. Which meant the sounds behind her...

Fuck.

She came into view, and looked exactly like she had in the video game. But there was panic on her face, a fear in her eyes, along with a kind of bravery and determination that I did not feel at all. Because when I saw what was behind her - the giant spider like things, I freaked the fuck out. I realized I was screaming, because it started ringing in my ears and I turned around and hauled ass my fright/flight instinct kicking in. I stumbled up a cliff face, vaguely registering how familiar this was, and I knew at the top was a doorway. In fact I could see the light. I pushed hard, and felt the muscles in my legs burning along with my lungs. Exercise life was not mine. I was an ass in chair kind of woman so all this abrupt movement was a sudden strain on my body but the adrenaline kept me going.

I reached the top, stumbled again, but managed to stay on my feet. The doorway, all bright blinding light coming out of it was right there.

I halted because I remembered Divine Justina was behind me. Mustering up a small measure of courage I looked behind me and saw her. She was right at the ledge, struggling to get up it. I hesitated. I'm not proud of it, but I did. I went over to her though, bending down to grab her hands and tried to help pull her up, categorically refusing to look at what was behind her. It was bad enough that I could hear it and that alone was scaring the crap out of me.

I got her up to her feet, something I was proud of in that moment. "We must hurry," she said to me.

I didn't need to be told twice, I hauled ass towards that doorway again. I had almost reached it when I heard her scream.

It was a horrible sound. The most blood curling thing I'd ever heard in my life, born of pure terror and it ripped right through me. I looked over my shoulder and they had her. *It* had her. This horrible spider like thing was on her back, it's tentacles wrapping around her body.

"Run!" She shouted at me. "Save yourself!"

I wish I could tell you I suddenly turned into some hero and saved her. But, the truth of the matter was I was frozen in fear until I saw another one of those things run around Justina at me, and with another scream of terror I ran through the doorway and into the light.

Chapter 2

I remember passing through the white light. I don't think I was completely conscious. It felt like being stuck between that moment right before you wake up, when you're still mostly asleep. I was propelled along and during that weird journey a sudden pain began to manifest on my left hand. It grew stronger and stronger, and became utterly excruciating to the point I was screaming again. Then I felt like I was falling, and apparently I was because in the next breath I hit the ground hard, more pain lancing up my arm and shoulder. I looked up, and saw two men standing above me. I think I asked them for help, before I passed out again.

I don't know how long I was out of it. I came awake violently, jerking upright, heard the rattling of chains and shivered because I was freezing. Fuck. I looked down and saw that my wrists were shackled to the floor. I had never been chained to anything. The metal cuffs were heavy and closed tightly around my wrists. Moving my hands too much caused the metal to rub against my skin and to say that was an uncomfortable sensation was an understatement. I shivered and tried to get my bearings as awareness returned. I knew where I was and a bit of panic started rising again. I was in the cell. Beginning of the game. Cassandra and Leliana would come in here soon. And my hand... holy shit.

I looked down at my left hand, which felt hot and achy in the center and was glowing a very faint green. The mark. “Oh you’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I muttered out loud and then opened up my hand. There it was. This horrible looking circular scar was burned into my palm and somehow a faint green light was coming out of it. Either I was having the best/worst hallucination ever or somehow no matter how impossible, I really was in Dragon Age Inquisition. I mean the universe was a vast place, multiple dimensions, all that stuff right? It was possible I supposed. But if I was now here in this world how the hell was I going to get home? Even more pressing, how the hell was I going to survive it?

It was a lot to process. To deal with. I abruptly remembered Divine Justina and how she’d died and well, I sunk back onto the floor, hugged my dirty, jean covered knees to my chest, pressed my forehead against them and started crying. I was not a public crier. I didn’t like anyone to see me upset, I didn’t like being vulnerable in front of people like that, letting them see my pain. In this moment though, I couldn’t help it.

I was so into my pity party/emotional breakdown I heard the cell door opening but I didn’t really register the sounds of two people entering.

“Are those tears of guilt?”

That was the first thing Cassandra ever said to me.

I dragged my sweatshirt covered arm under my nose and then over my eyes, looked up and forgot how to breathe. I cannot fully articulate how imposing Cassandra Pentaghast truly is. She is the epitome of a silent, intense, feminine strength and this regal grace that speaks to her lineage rolled up into this incredibly hot badass of a human being. Standing next to her, in a very Sith like getup, was Leliana. She was the reason I couldn’t breathe. The game hadn’t done her justice. It just hadn’t. The sight of someone literally stealing my breath away had only happened once before and I’d loved that person very much once upon a time. I had the world’s biggest crush on Leliana when I was back in my world, playing the game. I had romanced her in Dragon Age Origins and been bummed as fuck when she wasn’t available in DA:I. Now she was real. Not two feet from me and I didn’t know how the hell to process that. Leliana was looking at me from underneath her cowl with a very intense unreadable expression and I could not stop staring at her. She radiated confidence, power. It was more subtle than Cassandra’s making them a perfect match standing next to each other.

Suddenly, decisions I’d made in Dragon Age Origins slammed into my mind. Oh my god. I killed the Warden in my last play-through. Romanced Leliana, and then left her without her love. Did that carry over here? Had I unknowingly written pieces of her life?

“Have you nothing to say?” Cassandra asked, coming closer to me in a very menacing manner. Not gonna lie, it was a little arousing, but also very disconcerting. This wasn’t a video game. There was no dialogue wheel. I had no idea how things worked here and if I

fucked this up, I had the very real feeling that Cassandra would pull out her sword and run me through, or Leliana would torture me and both of those thoughts made my hands tremble.

It took me a second to find my voice, and it trembled too. "I didn't do this. What you think I did. The explosion. The Divine..." Tears formed in my eyes again as I remembered Justina and I struggled to make my brain work (it was hard, Leliana standing there was distracting as fuck despite my fear). I needed to play this right. Carefully. I had a lot of information in my head about what was going to happen but, I didn't know how to tell them or how to use that information to my advantage. I also needed to figure out how the hell to get back home, which meant I was probably going to need the council of Dorian, Vivienne or Morrigan. Actually Morrigan might know better than any of them what had happened to me. But, that was a ways to go in this story and if I was going to get that kind of help I needed to figure out how to survive this and actually get to that point. Then there was Solas. That lying motherfucker was the reason all this was happening in the first place. Anger shot through me.

While I was doing all those mental gymnastics, Cassandra circled around me speaking angrily. "You claim innocence? The conclave is destroyed. Everyone who attended is dead. Except for you. And..." she roughly grabbed my arm, holding up my hand. The stupid mark started sparking, which hurt by the way. "Explain *this*."

I could explain. Everything. But I was not entirely certain she and Leliana would believe me. And if Solas got wind that I could foresee events, if he suspected that I knew who he was that was another set of problems entirely. Shit. I wracked my brain again, thinking. If I could make it to the part right before Haven, when we got back to the destruction, they would hear Corypheus and have an enemy. But, I'd have to survive the journey there. Fuck. I didn't want to lie to them. Either of them. I knew they were hurting and a sudden sadness ripped through me and more tears spilled out of my eyes. I looked up at Cassandra's furious face, then Leliana's, trading my eyes between the two of them. "I didn't hurt them. Anyone. The explosion - that wasn't my fault. I swear to you both it wasn't." It was all I could give either of them just now.

My words made Cassandra snap, and even though I expected it to happen, being the target of Cassandra's fury is not fun at all. I could feel her anger and I felt no shame in the fact that I was truly afraid of her in that moment. She surged at me, grabbing the front of my sweatshirt and growled in my face, "You're lying!"

And just like it had happened in the game, Leliana was quick to act, breaking Cassandra away from me. "We need her, Cassandra." She looked back at me and said pointedly. "For now."

I wasn't dense I read the threat loud and clear in those words, even if I was slightly distracted by the sheer sexiness of Leliana's voice. That feeling was enhanced by the fact that Leliana's

gaze stayed on mine for another heartbeat before she looked back at Cassandra. Her added words were different than the games dialogue though. What happened here wasn't going to follow the storyline 100% to the letter I realized. Which meant that maybe the things I knew weren't as reliable as I thought they were. That presented another host of problems I didn't have the mental capacity to deal with just then.

Cassandra gave Leliana a nod. Leliana let her go and turned around to face me, while Cassandra continued circling around me like a tiger waiting to pounce.

"Do you remember what happened? How this began?" Leliana asked.

I wanted to be honest with her. I desperately wanted that. But I needed them to trust me over Solas, and just trust me in general. I was going to have to earn it. I paused and hoped she didn't think it was because I was lying. Leliana knew how to read people, she was very, very good at it. I was hoping that would work in my favor. "I was in the fade, I don't know how I got there," I paused, my brow pinching as I remembered Divine Justina again. "I think Divine Justina was with me. We were being chased by these horrible..." my hands started shaking harder as I remembered, the chains rattling. Cassandra had stopped pacing and both were watching me intently now. "Creatures. They..." I swallowed. "She didn't make it and I couldn't..." Fuck today really. I was crying openly now and I couldn't stop it, and I hated that I was crying in front of these incredibly strong and dangerous women. "I'm so sorry. I'm not a fighter. I don't know how, I really don't. I couldn't save her. She told me to run and I did."

"You saw Divine Justina? In the Fade? And you do not know how you got there?" Leliana pressed on.

I felt like my heart was breaking. I knew how close Leliana was to Justina. Their history. This was someone else that had been taken from her and I wondered if I would have been able to save Justina in that moment if I'd only tried instead of running like the big coward I was. It took me a moment to find my voice, "Yes. And No." And then I said so very quietly, "I'm so sorry." And I cut myself off before I said her name.

Leliana kept staring at me now and I felt so very small underneath the weight of her gaze. Cassandra broke in after a moment, putting herself in front of Leliana and guided her back to the door. "Go to the forward camp, Leliana. I will take her to the rift."

Leliana went with Cassandra's motion but she still looked at me. "What is your name?" Leliana asked.

"Simone," I answered.

"And your families name?"

“Durate.” I knew she was filing that information away. She would search for it. I wondered briefly what the consequences of that would be.

Leliana left the room and Cassandra walked over to me, removing a key from her belt to unlock my chains. Cassandra took a good look at my clothing. “You are... dressed strangely. Your clothes do not look like they will be enough for the weather outside.”

With everything else going on, I had momentarily forgotten the fact that I was so cold. Cassandra’s words reminded me and I shivered. “If you have a coat or cloak or something that will fit someone just slightly taller than a dwarf I’ll deal.”

She turned sideways into the doorway, so she could keep an eye on me and called out to one of the guards, exchanging words with him. I was both dishearten and slightly amused that she thought of me as a threat even though I completely understood why. Cassandra could have squashed me without breaking a sweat. That thought reminded me that there were battles to fight ahead. There were no save points here. No redos. At least I was pretty sure there weren't, this all felt too... real. But maybe if I did die here I’d wake up back home? Or maybe I’d just die. I wasn’t ready to take that gamble.

The guard returned with a thick coat that I’m sure was probably for a dwarf. Cassandra tossed it in my direction and I put it on eagerly. It was incredibly warm if not a bit heavy but I would deal with weight. “Thank you,” I said to her quietly sincere and then held up my hands. Cassandra studied me in silence for a moment before she bound my wrists with a thick rope. She turned and walked down the hallway and I followed her.

The Guards we passed looked at me furiously. I could feel their intent and I knew that if Cassandra hadn’t been there, they might have taken a few swings at me because they thought I was to blame for what happened. I can say with certainty that it is a horrible, horrible feeling to have that kind of pain and anger projected at you, especially when you know you are innocent. I swallowed back a lump in my throat and reached up, managing to pull my hoodie from underneath the coat and put it over my head like some kind of protective barrier.

A blast of cold air swept towards us from the open doors that Cassandra strode through. I kept up, another little shiver hitting me as we stepped out into the cold. Immediately my eyes turned towards the sky and I gasped. The game hadn’t done the breach justice either. It was downright terrifying and brought me to an abrupt halt. Never mind that I had literally walked into a medieval village (Renaissance Faires had gotten things close, but being in the real deal holy shit) the sky was fucking broken. In the center of it, a bright green tear cut a circle in the dark, and cast a funnel of light down towards the ground. What looked like debris levitated around it. It was utterly unnerving.

“We call it the breach. It is a growing rift into the world of demons that grows larger with each passing hour,” Cassandra said, looking at it and then back at me. “It’s not the only such rift. Just the largest. All were caused by the explosion at the conclave and unless we act, the breach may grow until it swallows the world.”

I knew this speech of hers by heart, and I was barely listening. I couldn’t stop staring at the breach and I did not feel at all in control of my fear. The mere thought of demons terrified me in my world, now I was in a place where they were real. I was going to have to find a way to fight them and survive - it was too much again. I felt nausea rising, the bile pushing up into the back of my throat and I stumbled away from Cassandra towards the side of the building we’d just exited and vomited. I hadn’t eaten anything today, whatever day it was, so all that came up was the coffee I’d been sipping before all this had happened. Cassandra stood near, watching me. Likely assessing what a freaking wuss I was and realizing how screwed they all were that the fucking mark was on my hand of all peoples.

That thought must have been the breach’s cue or something because the sky sparked and so did my hand and it fucking hurt. A white hot, searing pain exploded in my palm, the green light emanating. That pain shot down my arm, making me feel like my nerve endings were literally on fire and I cried out. Whimpering, falling to my knees and more tears from the sheer pain of it pushed themselves from my eyes. Cassandra knelt in front of me, grasping me by my shoulders to keep me up right. “Each time the rift expands -”

“I know! So does this fucking mark,” I snapped at her, my pain and fear overwhelming me in that moment.

My words caused Cassandra to stare at me in renewed suspicion. “So you know-”

“The sky exploded and then my hand did. I’m a wimp but I’m not dumb,” I grumbled, lifting my arms to wipe the tears from my face again. “You need my help. You need this thing to close these rifts don’t you?” I knew the answer of course.

Cassandra studied me a moment longer before she nodded. “We think your mark may be the key to closing the breach. Something we shall find out shortly. It is our only lead and our only chance. And yours. It is killing you.”

It was killing me, I could feel it and that too is a terrifying sensation. I was being taken to heights of fear today I had never experienced before in my life. It’s so easy to make the choice when your playing the game - living the game, it didn't feel like a choice. It felt like desperation, like the only way out and it sucked. I drew in a watery breath and met her steely, assessing gaze. I was honest with her, “I’m going to help, Cassandra. I’m not the enemy here, but I’m definitely not the hero. I’m terrified, as scared as I’ve ever been in my life. I’m going to be the weak link in this and I’m sorry for that.”

The tight features of Cassandra's face softened a little at my words. I couldn't help that it felt like a small victory. "You are not the only one who is afraid. But, your willingness to help will not be forgotten."

That was something at least. I nodded at her and clambered to my feet. She assisted me and led the way down the road. The village people we passed were as furious at me as the guards were, just like in the video game. I kept my head down and followed Cassandra. The intensity of the environment didn't give me much time to think about my situation, which was a small blessing I suppose.

I was in a war zone. We passed by burning debris, soldiers running past us and shouting things I couldn't quite make out. Green balls of light hurtled themselves from the breach in the sky and when one struck near us, I could feel the reverberation in the ground. The mark on my hand sparked twice more as I trudged up a snow hill, the second time the pain of it brought me down to my knees, and Cassandra help me up. I was terrified, I well and truly was. What if this thing killed me before I got to the rift at the Conclave? Or something worse?

Something worse - we were crossing a wooden bridge. Memory sparked and panic followed, we were going to fall, because- "Cassandra look out-" Right as it said it, one of those green balls came tearing out of the sky and slammed into the bridge in front of us.

I knew what came next. Shit.

Chapter 3

Anyone who has ever fallen on ice knows it fucking hurts. Not only did we fall, but the debris of the bridge came down around us. I was glad the coat I was wearing was so thick because it padded my landing somewhat, but I still made a loud sound of pain as we hit the ice and then covered my head with my hands as the pieces of wood and whatever else was on the bridge fell down around us. A board smacked into my shoulder, which hurt, and I felt other little pieces rain down around me.

No sooner had that stopped then I heard the sounds. I wanted to curl in on myself, but instead I felt myself pushing the board off me, sitting up amidst the broken bridge debris and saw them on the ice in front of us; fucking demons. The game hadn't done them any justice either - they were terrifying. Their eyes glowed this unnatural yellow color like a possessed cat. Their torsos were almost human like, but with an unnatural looking brownish tinge. They had long freakishly thin arms, but at the end of those arms were claws that looked razor sharp.

"Demons! Stay back!" Cassandra shouted at me, her sword and shield already in her hand. She went charging forward like the badass she was. I wanted to run. My flight instinct was

strong and just looking at those things was giving me this terrified sensation at my back, crawling up my spine, my heart was racing and a cold sweat clung to my body.

I don't know where the third one came from. Maybe I wasn't paying close enough attention to my surroundings. My view of Cassandra taking on two of them was blocked by one right in front of me. I flat out screamed. It screamed back at me, the difference being the sounds it was making were terrifying, the sounds I was making probably resembled that of a dying animal.

"Cassandra, help!" I shouted for her, and scrambled backwards. I couldn't get my feet underneath me, but the glint of a knife on the ground within reach caught my attention. Great. Apparently this world had decided I was going to be a Rogue. I had no fucking idea how I was going to pull that off, but it didn't matter because I was going to die. I was positive. Still, I picked up the knife. The demon surged forward, closing the distance faster than I could scramble and then it was over me, and I was certain I was going to pee in my pants I was so scared. I was crying and blubbing when it took a swipe at me and I shrieked and rolled to the side, and kept rolling and praying and finally I felt snow. I stumbled to my feet and whirled around just as it came at me and took another swipe at me with its clawed hand. This one ripped the fabric of my coat and my sweatshirt and I felt the scratch across my skin. It stung and I could feel trickles of blood running down my side but I wasn't going to die thank small miracles. I realized quickly if I didn't fight back I probably was, so fuck it. Screaming more, this was no battle cry it was literally just a sound of desperation I fought against every instinct that told me to try and book it and flung myself at the Demon, shoving the blade into its chest. Getting that close to it, I vaguely registered that it smelled horrible, like some dead thing. It made that scratchy shrieking noise and pulled itself off my knife, stumbling back then dissipated in this hazy smoke that left pieces of itself on the ground.

"So not looting that," I muttered, breathing hard and sinking to my knees. I was trembling, probably the adrenaline. My hands were shaking violently. I'd just killed a demon. Literally just killed a monster. And I was still alive. I didn't know how to feel about that. Proud of myself maybe, but I was still really scared. And cold. And my body hurt. And my hand.

Dragon Age sucked.

"Drop your weapon!"

I looked up when I heard Cassandra's command and saw her standing near with her sword now pointed at me. I dropped the dagger without hesitation. "I don't even know how to use that thing!" I shouted at her.

"That much is apparent. You could have easily been killed." Cassandra sheathed her sword.

“Well, you were busy and I was out of options.” I was still trembling. I wrapped my arms around myself and winced as the motion irritated my side.

I watched Cassandra’s stern face soften slightly. “How deep is the wound?”

I shook my head. “Not terrible. I’d be crying more about if it was, trust me. I’ll live.”

Cassandra went over to the knife I’d dropped and picked it up. She hesitated and then she cut the ropes around my hand and offered me the blade. “Here. Keep this. You will do better to try and flank a creature I am fighting. Stab it in the back quickly, then get out of it’s range. You are small and quick and you can use this to your advantage.”

“That’s me. Mini, wimp, ninja.” I sighed and reluctantly took the knife from her, getting back on my feet.

“You are not a fighter, but you are not a wimp. Not many have fought a demon and lived to tell the tale. Come.” Cassandra gave me a pat on the shoulder and we continued on.

I knew Cassandra wasn’t one to give false praise so I went ahead and basked a little in what she just told me. It helped to take my mind off of, everything else.

“We need to test your mark on a smaller rift before we reach the conclave,” Cassandra said and had broken into a light jog down the snow covered path. I was keeping up as best as I could. In the near distance I could hear the sounds of fighting. I knew what was ahead - another rift, Varric... and fucking Solas. Now I had new concern - what if Solas realized what I was somehow?

I didn’t have an answer for my concern. And I needed to focus on the fact that I was going to be in another fight. The sounds ahead grew louder, and I could see the green glow hovering above the fighting pair. Rifts are strange looking up close. It’s like a ball of green water the way they move and simmer but that’s right before things like demons come flying out of them in little balls of light. They splatter onto the ground, and you hear them before they begin to take shape. Then the rift above them solidifies, no longer water but takes on this strange geometric shape, as if uncut emeralds were hurled chaotically into a hole.

Cassandra pulled out her sword again. “Remember, flank them. Strike hard and fast.” She charged forward, smashing her sword against her shield, the loud sound drawing the attention of the demons.

“Right. Hard and fast,” I can’t say I suddenly got a huge boost of courage. Just the sight of those demons sent waves of fear clawing through my body, my heart was racing, my palms were sweaty and I stood standing there for I don’t know how long. But I took some strength in the sight of Cassandra, and Varric and for now even Solas going toe to toe with those

things. I climbed down the broken wall section, holding my knife in hand and eyeballed the battle field ready to -

“That’s the last of them,” Varric said just as his cross bolt tore through the head of a demon.

Right. Apparently my standing there being afraid had been a lot longer than I thought, or the three of them were just that good. Probably both.

“Quick, use your mark to seal the rift!” Solas came over to me, taking hold of my hand and dragged me closer to the rift.

I had no fucking idea how to use the mark. I mean in the game it was a point and click situation. I pulled my hand out of Solas’s grasp (mostly because I didn’t want him touching me) and well, I thrust my hand very dramatically up at the rift.

Guess what happened? Not a fucking thing. There I was, standing with my arm outstretched, and it’s possible I was trying to look as cool as the Dragon Age Inquisition artwork and wasn’t coming close. There was nothing but awkward silence, the trio looking at me, then the rift with wary eyes, still combat ready.

I huffed, lowered my hand and looked at Solas. “How do I use this mark?”

“I am not certain. I had hopped just being in the same vicinity as the rift would cause some kind of connection,” Solas said. “Do you have any magical teachings?”

Cassandra snorted.

Gee thanks, I thought but I shook my head. “No, I’m not an apostate.” I looked up at the rift and then down at my hand. Maybe I could... will it out? It sounded stupid in my head but what the hell else was I going to do? So, fuck it. I raised my hand again towards the rift (a lot less dramatically this time) and focused on my palm. The moment I did I felt this fuzzy sort of awareness and my hand started tingling, my palm especially. I pushed. That’s the only way I can describe it, I could feel the energy in my palm and I pushed it outward. At first it felt like pushing against a door that’s jammed. I could feel it moving by degrees, little by little. I started huffing, then grunting, and I could hear around me-

“It’s working,” Solas’s voice.

“That’s it, you’re doing it,” Cassandra’s.

“Doing what exactly? Is that safe for her?” Varric’s voice.

“We do not have a choice,” Cassandra’s.

I tuned them out, which wasn't too hard. I was close, I knew I was close to something, and with a grunting sort of shout I pushed as hard as I could and felt the burst. My hand felt hot, but a lot less achy. The mark was like a weight in my palm and suddenly I felt that weight being projected outward and connecting with the rift. The connection jerked me backwards, it felt like running into a wall. But I kept pushing and felt the give again. It was a weird sensation closing the rift. I could literally feel the dimension being stitched back together, piece by piece and then it simply gave away. As it did, I stumbled, then fell to my knees, wincing because it felt like the power of the mark slammed back into my hand, and that dull weighty ache returned.

I was breathing hard, sweating despite the cold. I was also bone tired and I knew we had a much longer way to go. This mark was draining me. The bigger the breach was growing the more I felt like my energy was just being sucked out of me. It's a terrifying thing to realize you're on borrowed time.

"You all right?" Varric asked, walking over to me.

Cassandra reached me first, offering her arm down to me and when I looked up at her, the expression on her face was a combination of maybe a touch proud and a lot more relieved. I took her arm and let her help me back to my feet, nodding at Varric. "Yeah, yeah, I'm okay."

"How did you do it?" Solas asked me.

I glanced over my shoulder at him. I didn't want to tell him shit. *I know who you are Fen'harel*, I thought but I kept that to myself and hoped my features weren't giving my feelings away. "I pushed," I said honestly. "I can focus on it, and when I do I can feel it's power. It's weird. And then I push and it connects with the rift. The pushing is the hard part."

"I suspect that may get easier. At any rate, I am Solas."

Lying ass liar, I thought but I didn't say that either. I just nodded and let the introductions take place.

When that was done, and Cassandra and Varric had their little bicker (Cassandra making her disgusted noises at Varric is a thousand times more hilarious in person) we continued on.

I was useless in the fighting so I did what I could to pretty much stay out of the way. Cassandra, Solas and Varric worked seamlessly, and very effectively at taking out the demons and wisps things that we passed. Cassandra only had to shield me once, a green floaty bastard sent a projectile at me and I realized I wasn't going to be fast enough, so I just tucked in, squeezed my eyes shut, hunched up a shoulder and braced for impact. In the next breath Cassandra's frame bumped into mine, knocking me back into the snow and her shield caught the blast. Solas finished the thing off with a blast from his staff.

“Thank you,” I said sincerely, offering her a tiny smile, got myself to my feet and continued on. I closed the next rift faster, feeling the need to contribute in whatever small way I could, but still felt pretty drained after wards. Nonetheless, I pressed on, keeping up as best I could. I didn't have a choice. Cassandra moved at a brisk pace, Solas at her back. Varric stuck with me, and I was grateful for the hands he extended when I got so winded that climbing through another snow bank, or up another set of stone steps felt impossible.

When we finally reached the forward camp, passing through the big wooden doorways, I was thankful. I found the first barrel I could put my ass on and sat, elbows on my knees, head in my hands and just worked on breathing and trying to ignore all the aches and pains in my body.

I was so involved in this I didn't hear her come up to me. To be fair, if Leliana didn't want you to hear her coming, you wouldn't. I finally realized someone was in front of me and when I dropped my hands and raised my head she was crouched down and her eyes collided with mine.

I couldn't breath again. Her eyes were so incredibly blue. They reminded me of winter, silent and deadly. Something that could be beautiful or terrifying. “Wow,” I whispered and then realized I had said that in my out loud voice and could not stop the blush that colored my neck.

She heard me, I know she did because I watched her mouth move in the barest twitch of perhaps amusement. She offered me a flask. “It will warm you. I am told you were wounded?”

“Thank you,” I didn't realize how parched I was. I unscrewed the top and took a healthy swallow. No idea what the hell I was drinking, all I knew was that it was warm and spicy. I lowered it after a moment, and nodded. “I was, but it isn't bad.”

“May I check? We have a vested interest in keeping the woman who can close the rifts alive.”

I nodded, my perspective on the situation widening again. I was the one who could close the rifts. The only one. Oh, fuck. The enormity of that came crashing down on me. I knew what happened if the rifts didn't get closed. If Corypheus didn't get stopped. The Redcliff quest line went shooting through my mind. I didn't want to go through that - I didn't want my companions to go through that. I didn't want Leliana to go through that. The thought of what they'd do to her in that alternative reality made my heart clench painfully and a lump form in my throat.

Leliana had lifted my coat and sweatshirt up, briefly baring my skin to the cold to check my side. She glanced up at me and through my information haze I saw concern suddenly move into her eyes as she looked at mine. “Are you unwell?”

“What? Shit. No. No. Just... it’s a lot.” I tried to explain, lifting my hand with the mark on it to indicate what I was talking about. “I don’t want to let you all down.”

“You have not so far. Cassandra says you handled yourself well,” Leliana let my sweatshirt drop and tucked the coat back around me. And I mean that, she took hold of the lapels and literally pulled it closer to me. My chest did funny things again and I prayed my mouth would not vomit out more embarrassing words.

“Cassandra means I hid well,” I said with a self deprecating smirk.

“You did what you could, instead of acting foolish and or recklessly.”

I chuckled. “Give it time.”

Her mouth twitched again, like she wanted to smile at me and this video game crush that I had on Leliana was now a full blown real thing, because she was a real thing. I felt dizzy with it. I took another healthy drink from the flask, but kept my eyes on hers. She hadn’t looked away yet either.

Commotion finally drew our eyes apart. I looked to the right and saw Chancellor Roderick storming over the bridge, Cassandra flanking him with an utterly annoyed expression on her face.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath.

Leliana cast me a brief expression that I swore was amusement before she stood up, facing the man. I clambered to my feet as well. My feet protested this, they had very much liked sitting.

“Chancellor Roderick this is-” Leliana started.

“I know who she is,” Roderick cut her off. “As Grand Chancellor of the Chantry-”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen,” I interrupted the speech of his I knew was coming. “I have to close the breach, because I’ve got the mark and the sooner you deal with that the sooner we can get on with the business of doing it.” I don’t know where this bravery came from. As soon as the words left my mouth I felt unsure about them. What if he did arrest me and had me executed? What if Cassandra and Leliana couldn’t stop him?

“How dare-”

“Enough,” Cassandra said, and I was pretty sure I heard amusement in her tone. “She is right. We can stop this before it’s too late.”

“How? You won’t survive long enough to reach the temple, even with all your soldiers,” Roderick said. Some of the bite had gone out of his tone and I could tell by the look on his face he was genuinely scared. I understood that feeling deeply.

I was going to push a line here with my foreknowledge but it was time I put some of the information I had to good use. “But, they will.” I insisted and looked at Cassandra and Leliana. “Have your forces charge as a distraction and we’ll go through the mountain pass.” I pointed upwards.

Leliana snapped her gaze to mine. Her eyes bore into me, and I knew there were many questions swirling in her head. Even so she said, “I agree.”

“We lost contact with an entire squad on the mountain pass. It’s too risky,” Cassandra said.

“They might just need our help, Cassandra,” I said to her. “What if we can reach them in time? If we can sneak into this that will be better. Especially with my lack of combat skills.”

Cassandra considered this a moment. She sighed. “All right. Leliana, bring everyone in the valley. Everyone.”

I took a deep breath, pulling my gaze from them and looked up at the mountain pass. I suddenly realized what I had just agreed to. Fuck. I was afraid of heights and I was going to have to climb a mountain. It would be some kind of irony if I had survived my first fight with demons only to slip off the damn mountain. I tried to steel my courage, what little of it I had, what else could I do and started to move forward to follow Cassandra, Varric and Solas.

Leliana touched my arm. I offered her back the flask and she shook her head. “Keep it, and be careful.”

I knew that Leliana’s concern was born from the fact that I had the mark and they needed the mark. That didn’t stop my chest from doing funny things again. Or me from briefly touching the top of her hand on my arm. “I will. You be careful too.” I offered her a smile.

She just looked at me for a second more, released her grasp on my arm and went in the other direction. I took a deep breath, another swig from the flask, tucked it into the coats pocket and hurried to catch up with my companions. I had a mountain to climb.

Oh, who was I kidding, Cassandra was probably going to have to carry me.

Chapter 4

The good news about the mountain pass was ladders. The bad news was that they were tall, rickety ladders. I came to the conclusion as I approached the first that this day was going to be a lesson in fear. One right after the other apparently.

Cassandra sensed my hesitation. “Have you changed your mind regarding our approach?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I’m afraid of heights.”

Cassandra arched a brow at me. “And still you choose this way? We could have protected you during the cha-”

“We can save your soldiers if we hurry, Cassandra. I know we can.” And before she could ask me how I knew that, I swallowed back my fear and started climbing. I hoped I was right, that we weren’t too late. They weren’t just NPCs to be discarded anymore, they were people and they mattered. I had a lot of shortcomings, but if I could guide Cassandra and the others to saving the lives I couldn’t, that would be a small victory.

I refused to look down on the climb up and Varric ribbed a little at Cassandra, which made me laugh. I wondered if he did it because he liked annoying her or he was trying to help take my mind off the fact my legs were shaking as I climbed those ladders. Probably both.

At one point we reached a platform and I paused to catch my breath and peeked up at the sky. It felt like I was closer to the breach here and as I stared up at it, I got the feeling that it was this horrible malevolent thing tearing the world apart. I hated it, passionately in that moment, for the pain it would cause, the lives it would take. I forced myself not to look at Solas, lest he see my sudden anger. The mark on my hand began pulsing, the hot achy feeling intensifying. I clenched my hand into a fist and continued on.

“Does it hurt?” Varric asked.

I shrugged. “It’s manageable. I don’t notice it when I’m busy being terrified.”

“We all are these days,” Varric said.

I appreciated his words, but I knew his story and what he had been through. He and Cassandra were about a billion times braver than I could ever be.

Once at the top we reached an old mining tunnel. It was dark inside save for the faint glow of a few scattered torches on the walls that cast more shadows than light. Somewhere, deeper inside, a demon shrieked, its sound echoing creepily through the stone walls. I just stared into the darkness an incredulous look on my face. “Fuck. Really? It wasn’t that sc-” I was

going to say that this area hadn't been that scary in the game. The reality was something out of a horror movie. I shut myself up and just sighed. "I hate the dark."

"Afraid of the dark too? I'm going to start calling you Scaredy Cat," Varric grinned at me.

I gave Varric a playful punch in the shoulder but it was an apropos nickname.

Solas waved a hand over his staff and the gem at the top glowed a fairly bright blue. He smiled at me and took the lead, Cassandra at his back.

"Stay together and keep as quiet as possible," Cassandra said in a low tone.

I sandwiched myself between Cassandra and Varric, no way I was going to be able to bring up the rear. I suppose given the atmosphere of the cave, it was inevitable that I saw my first dead body. Two of them. Solas was leading the way around the corner and there they were, the light from his staff illuminated them. I clapped my hands over my mouth to keep back the scream and struggled to contain the nausea that welled up inside of me.

Death at the hands of demons was a lot more grotesque than the game had allowed. One half of the male soldiers face was indistinguishable, his flesh having been torn to pieces by the demon's claw, his eye hanging out of the socket. A female soldier was near him, slumped against the wall, the contents of her stomach spilled out onto the floor and the smell of it all was nauseating.

I finally had to look away or I was going to throw up. I stumbled past them, past Solas to a torch lit wall, struggling to catch my breath. I was never going to forget that. It was going to haunt my dreams. My nightmares. I didn't just feel ill, I was incredibly saddened by the sight of the dead bodies. Did they have family? Friends? What had they left unfinished? I began to think about the family I had left behind and I couldn't stop the tears that started falling silently down my face. Had they noticed I was gone? What did they think happened to me? I couldn't imagine how worried they were going to be.

"Your soldiers, Seeker?" Varric asked.

"Not all of them," Cassandra sounded grim. "But whatever has done this is likely still here. We should keep moving."

Solas took the lead again, passing by me. Cassandra paused at my side. "Are you all right?"

I inhaled a watery breath, dashed at my eyes again nodded. "Never seen a dead body before," I said quietly. "Didn't think it would suck that much." I looked up at Cassandra. "I'm really sorry they died."

Cassandra studied me like she was surprised by my answer. She put a gentle hand on my shoulder. "It is not your fault, but a consequence of the threat we now face. We will overcome it. They did not die in vain. Come."

I nodded, took another deep breath and followed behind her.

We didn't run into what had killed the pair of soldiers until we were back out in the cold. They had been drawn back to the rift that had formed just a few feet from the tunnel, and as we exited we could hear the sounds of fighting. I took in a deep breath of that crisp cold air, it was a thousand times better than the stale, dead smell inside of the tunnel. Relief passed through me too because we'd reached the soldiers in time.

I found that I didn't have to wait until everything was dead to close the rifts here. While Cassandra, Varric and Solas joined the fray to help the soldiers and pulled all the attention of the demons and wisps towards them I got as close to the rift as I could and closed it. The reverberation of it snapping shut actually knocked a few of the creatures on their asses, which pleased me greatly. Closing these rifts though was exhausting though, and I wondered after we stopped the breach from growing if it would get an easier. I hoped so. I had a long way to go to figure out how to get back home.

"Thank the maker you arrived Lady Cassandra. I don't think we could have held out," the Lieutenant said the familiar line as Cassandra helped her to her feet.

I gave the woman a smile and noticed the other soldiers looking at me strangely. I thought I understood; they weren't sure what to make of my ability to close the rifts yet. I understood, I didn't know what the hell to make of my situation either and still wasn't completely convinced I wasn't having the biggest hallucination.

"Thank the Prisoner, Lieutenant," Cassandra looked over at me. "She insisted we could save you."

"Just had a hunch," I said. "Glad it paid off and you guys are all right."

"You have my sincere gratitude," the Lieutenant made a fist and touched her chest. It was a small thing, I remember thinking it was cool in game, but to watch someone go through the motion in person and towards me was powerful. I hoped the Lieutenant lived through this story. I hope they all did.

"The path behind you is clear," Cassandra told her.

"And the path before us appears to be clear as well," Solas said.

"Then let us hurry before that changes," Cassandra led the way and we all followed her.

I wasn't prepared for what had happened at the conclave. It was yet another instance of how underwhelming it had been in the game versus how truly horrific the sight was to experience in reality.

"The Temple of Sacred Ashes," Cassandra said and I could hear the note of sadness in her tone. "This is where you walked out of the rift and our soldiers found you. They say, they saw a woman in the rift behind you."

"Divine Justina," I whispered. I couldn't move as I looked over the destruction. The smell was terrible and made me nauseous again but the sight of it all was the most heart wrenching thing. I clasped my hands together and pressed them against my mouth, my heart breaking as I looked over it all. The final moments of some of the attendees had been caught in a macabre fashion, and even in the burnt remains of faces I could see the silent screams, feel their terror. Some were even still burning. "There's so many," I still whispered, I could barely find my voice just then. The Temple must have been nearly full at the time of the explosion, the dead bodies littered the ground so clustered together we would have to walk over top of them to get through. It felt like a terrible loss of life for a story. Had this been created in my world and manifested here some how or did this world that I thought was fiction always exist? And even more importantly had my choices in previous games affected this one?

I couldn't control it, I just broke down. This whole day was making me overly emotional and the sight of the conclave was just another last straw. I covered my face with my hands and my shoulders shook.

I didn't know Leliana had joined us until I felt her gloved hand touch my shoulder. I don't know how I knew it was her, I just did and without thinking about it I turned around and her arms encircled me and held me tightly against her. It's a stupid very romcom thing to say that she felt familiar but she really did. Even in my grief there was this feeling of coming alive. I pressed my face against her shoulder and her hand came up to cradle the back of my head.

"Did you lose someone in the Conclave?" she asked me quietly.

"No," I whispered back through my crying I was trying desperately to get under control. "I've just... never seen anything like this. They were people. So many. Too many. They mattered to someone."

Leliana was silent after my words. I don't know how long she let me cry but finally she said, "There will be time to mourn what we have lost. But right now we must stop this, before it and your mark get worse."

She was right, I needed to pull myself together. I couldn't imagine what they must have thought of me. I couldn't fight, I was afraid of heights, the dark, demons, and apparently I was prone to bursting into tears at the sight of a dead body or several. They must have felt real secure about the future with the mark on my hand. Yeah, right.

I pulled back from her, and probably imagined that she was reluctant to let me leave the circle of her arms. It was Varric who handed me a handkerchief. "Here blubber face scaredy cat," but there was a gentleness in his voice and a solemn look in his eyes like he too was effected by the sight of the destruction.

Varric was a class act at his core, he really was. I offered him a tremulous smile but gratefully took the handkerchief to dry my tears and deal with my runny nose.

"Seeker! You must hear this!" Solas shouted at us. He had gone ahead. I knew what he was hearing. Well, I thought I knew what he was hearing. This would be a moment of truth - but it had to be different than it had played out in game, I realized. I hadn't been at the conclave. So who or what then, had interrupted Corypheus' ritual?

Cassandra passed her gloved hand over the top of my head in what felt like a very camaraderie gesture and jogged ahead. I pocketed the handkerchief, thanking Varric and shot a meaningful look up at Leliana before we all followed.

As we moved into the canyon, we were surrounded on all sides by black charred rock, jutting up in between the pieces of stone that had been the parts of the temple. In certain sections, the rock glowed, no pulsed would be a better word, red. Red Iryium I realized. It was menacing, and if you stared at it long enough it felt like it was watching. We moved down a rocky, uneven path, and Leliana began giving orders to the soldiers to take up positions around the temple.

As we moved through a booming voice echoed out around us. I knew that voice. Fucking Corypheus.

"Now is the hour of victory. Bring forth the sacrifice."

"What are we hearing?" Cassandra asked, her tone unsettled.

"At a guess? The person who created the breach," Solas said.

Because of your bullshit, I thought but I kept that to myself.

"Keep the sacrifice still."

"Someone, help me!"

When we reached the bottom of the hill, it happened just as it had in game. A ghostly image appeared in front of the rift but the scene playing out in front of me was different from the one I had experienced in game. My brow furrowed as I watched.

Corypheus stood in front of Justina, his visage all black and inky, like he was some kind of demon himself. We couldn't make out any details of his form or face, his eyes glittering red. We could see Justina clearly, her arms outstretched, red lines of magic wrapping around her arms keeping her immobile.

Corypheus extended his arm, the orb in his palm. It started sparking, glowing green. What happened next had definitely not been part of the game play. The sound of lightening cracking, loud and sharp. It felt familiar to me, like it was the same lightening I'd heard in my office before I'd come here.

"What is happening?" Corypheus' voice, his head turning this way and that. Another snap of lightening, and the deep boom of thunder followed. The abrupt storm sounds must have distracted the Wardens keeping her prisoner because Divine Justina got one arm free and smacked the orb out of Corypheus' hand.

"No!" he shouted, a blinding flash of light punctuating his words. But what made me gasp was that inside of that light a faint image could be made out; of me, sitting at my desk, coffee cup in hand, staring out the window as a green taint began closing in. The image lasted for a few seconds before it faded.

"That was you!" Cassandra turned to look at me, coming towards me. "How did you get there? How did the mark get on your hand? How did you and Most Holy wind up in the fade?"

Her questions came at me rapid fire and while some part of me understood she was unnerved by what she'd seen, another part of me was just as unnerved as she was. Was it the orb's magic that had brought me here? Not only pierced the veil but somehow pierced dimensions? And if that was the case, now that that kind of power had been spent how the fuck was I going to pierce it again to get home? "I don't know!" I snapped back at Cassandra, more harshly than I had intended, but my mind was still spinning. What if I found Morrigan and she couldn't help me? What if only someone like Solas could?

"Echoes of what happened here," Solas said. "The fade bleeds into this place. This rift is not sealed but it is closed." He looked up at the rift that had positioned itself directly underneath the breach in the sky.

The bright green light coming down from the breach seemed to circle around the closed rift and it hummed with power. My brain finally caught up with what was going on with my body and I realized that my hand was aching a lot worse than before and I don't think I'd ever felt as exhausted. I couldn't rightly say what was keeping me up right.

"Open it up, then close it the right way," I said. I looked over at Cassandra. "That means Demons."

Cassandra pulled out her sword and gripped her shield, calling out to the men positioned around the canyon, "Stand ready!"

I took a deep breath and looked up at the rift. It was the biggest one I had to close so far.

"You sure you're up for this scary cat?" Varric asked me.

"No choice. This thing is gonna kill me if I don't close it right and that hole in the sky is gonna kill of you. I'm not really cool with either of those things happening," I gave him a wry smile.

Varric smiled at me and held Bianca at the ready, giving me an encouraging nod.

"You can do this," Leliana said and already her bow was in hand. "Open it, get back, let the wave come out. We will draw their attention while you seal it." She instructed me.

I'm pretty sure I was imaging the concerned looked in her eye. Leliana was a hardened badass who had known me all of ten seconds really. If she was concerned it was that I might die failing. I wasn't going to fail though. At least I hoped I wasn't. I didn't want to die of course, I really didn't, but I realized I didn't want to let them down even more. I liked Cassandra, Varric and of course Leliana in the game. Now that I had truly met them, I liked them even more. If I could make a difference here, could actually keep them safe and get the next part of the story, I was going to take a full ten minutes to feel like a badass.

I held my hand up at the rift and instead of pushing, I pulled. I figured the reverse would work in getting a rift open and it did. It also hurt like hell. I cried out at the blinding pain, tears forming in my eyes again because I just wasn't use to the severity of how much it hurt. But the rift opened. I stumbled backwards and just like it had happened in game, the worlds biggest fucking demon came out. Seriously it was massive and my fear reached brand new levels as I stared up at it in sheer, abject terror.

"Simone move!" Leliana shouted at me.

Her words pulled me out of my fear stare and I quickly scrambled backwards, just as the Demon let loose an energy whip where I had been standing. I refused to think about how close that had been. I was back in the midst of battle now, and that was starting to become familiar. I trusted that my companions would be able to handle the giant demon and I focused on the rift. I raised my arm again, at least I tried but it felt like lead. I'd never felt so weak, like the very life force was being drained out of me. I used my opposite hand to help me hold my arm up, muscles straining, and pushed.

At first nothing happened and I was panicked for a moment that I was too weak and wouldn't be able to do it. "C'mon you stupid fucking thing... c'mon!" I shouted and grunted

and just when I thought I was going to pass out, I felt the give. “Yeah, that’s right, c’mon... fucking close!” The bright green stream pushed out from my palm, crashing into the rift. The pain of closing this rift was terrible. I didn’t know if I was going to be able to take it. I’d never had a high tolerance for pain and this was pushing me beyond my limit. I couldn’t stop though, I knew I couldn’t stop. I could hear the soldiers cries, the shouts of battle, the howls of the Demon. Their lives, and mine, depended on me being able to do this.

So, I kept pushing, falling to my knees underneath the strain of it, my head bowed, tears of agony streaming down my face. My hand felt like it was on fire, a sensation that traveled down my arm and kept going. The horrible sensations were as if someone was running a lit match over my nerve endings and it kept spreading, across my shoulder, up and down my neck, until it felt like my whole body was on fire, being stitched together and ripped apart and it just kept going. I was going to die, I thought. This was it. This was the reality of the situation. The game storyline had been bullshit and I was going to die.

“Simone!”

I heard Leliana’s shout but I didn’t know why she was shouting my name. I couldn’t see, everything was blurry, and I knew without question I was going to pass out now, or it was simply death. I felt a bit of panic at this prospect but I couldn’t stop it.

In the next breath there was this small moment of silence. Of what felt like nothing. Just the most peaceful pause, a gentle inhale and it lasted a heartbeat. The exhale was an explosion. It brought me right up from my knee’s and sent me flying backwards. I don’t know what I hit or what I landed on. I don’t know if they killed the demon or if that explosion was the rift and breach closing. As I went flying backwards, the world went dark.

Yeah, Dragon Age sucked.

Chapter 5

When I woke up for a moment I thought I was back home. I was warm, and comfortable and consciousness returned slowly, in a lazy sort of way, like after a really good sleep. I stretched, blinked open my eyes and stared up at a wooden ceiling. I startled at the unfamiliar architecture before the memory of everything that had happened returned. I lifted my hand, and there it was on my palm - that mark. It didn’t hurt the way it had before, thank the goddess. I flexed my fingers, opened and closed my fist. In the absence of pain the mark tingled almost, but very faintly. It was the kind of sensation that could drive you crazy if you focused on it for too long, or you could end up forgetting about it if you were busy doing something else.

So this was real. I was still in Dragon Age, and looking around the small cabin, I recognized it. I was in Haven. There were minor differences to the interior, namely the fireplace that

someone had kept going. I also wasn't in the ugliest outfit ever created. I was in a long bed shirt. Draped over a chair near the hearth were other clothes more fitting the era and weather situation. They looked nice. Harritt's doing, probably. I wanted my sweatshirt back though, it was my favorite. Hopefully it had survived the battle at the conclave.

I sat up, tousling my unruly curls that likely looked a mess. I couldn't remember what had happened after I passed out. I hoped the fact that my mark didn't hurt and I didn't feel like the life was being sucked out of me meant that I had succeeded in stopping the breach from growing. If I had, hopefully that meant they trusted me now. Which brought on another thought...

"Oh, shit. Am I the herald?" I asked out-loud as I remembered the scene that occurred in game. Would I open the door to the people of Haven standing there staring all cult like creepy at me, expecting me to save the world? "Fuck," I muttered and pressed my hand against my forehead. I didn't want to just wing this, but I didn't know how to plan it out either. I couldn't tell my companions about the things that were going to happen until we got to Skyhold. Then I could expose Solas for the lying bastard he was, and hopefully we could stop him before his power grew too great. In the game though, getting to Skyhold had been delegated by a progression system. I had no fucking clue how that was going to work here.

I took my bottom lip between my teeth thinking. There were also a few tragedies I didn't want to let happen. These people were real, and I had knowledge that could save lives. It felt wrong to just sit on it. What I needed was to find a way to confide in Leliana. At least somewhat until I could tell her the full truth. If I did things right just maybe I could take the Mages *and* the Templars away from Corypheus. Maybe Haven didn't have to burn.

The only way to get any kind of answers to all the questions swimming around in my head was to get up, get dressed and find out what was waiting for me on the other side of that door. I pulled back the blankets, put my feet on the chilly floor -

- and the door to my room burst open.

It was not the cute little eleven boy, instead it was a pair of soldiers and Chancellor Roderick was behind them. They moved fast, and my shock made me immobile. This was *not* what happened in game. This was completely fucking new. Fear shot up my spine as Roderick stood in the doorway like a watch dog. "Arrest her. Do it quickly. She will be taken to Val Royeaux, where she will stand trial."

"What? Are you fucking kidding me? After what I just did?" I shouted at him.

The soldiers came at me, one with a pair of shackles in his hand, and my fear mounted.

“You fixed a problem you caused!” Roderick snapped.

“I did not cause the explosion at the conclave!”

“I will hear no more of your lies! Take her! Quickly.”

I had every intention of trying to fend them off, or scream, or run but none of that happened. What did happen was my painful cry when one of the soldiers sent the back of his hand across my face. I'd never in my life been struck before. I fell to the ground as pain exploded across my face with blinding intensity, making my vision blur.

It gave them enough time to shove the shackles on me, and shove me inside a burlap bag. I was hauled over someone's armored shoulder which dug uncomfortably into my gut. When I felt my brain working again after that smack I tried to struggle but all it did was cause pain and it didn't work much either. I was being kidnapped and I had no idea if I was going to be rescued.

Fuck.

I heard them muttering, but I couldn't make out full sentences. Something about a ladder. That was confirmed when I felt upward movement and lot more jostling. I was literally tossed over the wall. Thankfully I was caught, though barely. I was going to struggle again, and I did a little but I stopped myself. One, I was in a fucking bag. So struggling was really just a lot of wiggling. Not very effective. Two, if I started screaming they'd just hit me, or worse knock me out and I needed to hear what information I could, try and see where they were taking me and search for any opportunity I had to escape. I couldn't do that if I was KO'd.

I was tossed in the back of a wagon, none to gently, that smelled like horse ass. Not that I knew what horse ass smelled like, but I'm pretty sure this would be it. I heard more voices, I counted four. A cloak that smelled worse than the back of the wagon was tossed over me, and then we started moving. I was freezing in nothing but a nightshirt and no frigging shoes so screw it, I curled up as best I could being in a frigging bag, to keep every part of me underneath that cloak.

“Two miles, then ditch the wagon. We'll take the horses,” I heard one of the men say. “It'll snow tonight I can smell it. That'll cover the wagon tracks. Once we hit the main road they won't be able to track our horses. Once we get to the docks, they'll be no rescuing her.”

“If they even come looking for her,” the wagon driver said. “You hear that murderer - Roderick's tellin 'em you ran away. I bet they believe it.”

I clenched my eyes shut, my fear rising to another level. What if my companions did believe that I ran away? I'd like to think that in the few short hours we'd spent together I'd at the very least given them the impression I wanted to help, no matter how bad I was at it. But what if I hadn't? What if they decided I wasn't worth it, or believed that I had run, or found a way to continue on without me and the mark? It could happen. The story was different, what was happening to me right now made that clear.

I curled in tighter on myself, swallowed back the lump in my throat, refused to cry and stayed silent. I had to have faith, but I needed to find every opportunity I could to help myself. I had no idea what I was doing, that was true but screw it. Desperate times and all that. First step, get some frigging shoes so my feet didn't fall off from the cold. Second step, find a way to find out where they were taking me. Third step, find a way to leave a message on the trail that one of Leliana's people could find if they were looking for me. Fourth step do not under any circumstances get on that boat. I wasn't going to be taken to Val Royeaux and left to rot in a jail cell. I had no idea how exactly I was going to prevent that, but I was damn sure going to try.

The soldiers that were complicit in my kidnapping were mostly silent. I knew we'd hit the two mile marker when the wagon stopped. There were the sounds of movement and then the cloak was pulled off me, and the bag I was in was grabbed. They dragged me to the edge of the wagon then cut it off. A pair of old, worn boots and trousers that looked patched together were shoved at me. "Put on those and the cloak if you don't want to freeze to death before your hung for your crimes," the soldier standing in front of me was a big guy, with a thick beard and wild hair. There was something... off about him. I couldn't say what, just some people give bad vibes and this guy was radiating with it.

I put the boots on, they kind of fit, and they were somewhat warm at least. The trousers were the same. Itchy though, but again another layer of protection against the stupid cold weather. I shook my wrists at him. "Just so I can put the coat on," I said, shivering.

He stared at me for a short moment then pointed a dirty finger at me. "You try anything, I'll mark that pretty face. My orders are only to deliver you alive. You've got plenty bones to break."

I believed him, and swallowed back my fear, lowering my gaze. I didn't want to antagonize him. I had a plan, I just needed to stick with it. I held up my wrists so he could take the shackles off, and quickly put on the smelly cloak. I'd barely gotten it on before Bad Vibes (that's what I was going to call the burly one until I found out his name) grabbed my arm so he could snap the shackles back around my wrists. He pulled me out of the wagon with a tight painful grip on my upper arm, not even giving me the chance to walk myself to where ever I was being dragged.

He stopped in front of a horse, shoving me at it. "Get on."

I'd never ridden a horse before either. I thought I'd seen enough moves, read enough stories that I could figure this out. I grabbed the saddle for purchase, stuck my foot in the stirrups and climb up with some difficulty but I managed.

"Andraste's tits, have you never ridden a horse before?"

"Never," I said to him, and grabbed hold of the saddle.

"At your age? Impossible. The murder keeps on lyin," he snorted at me, then grabbed hold of the horses lead, mounting his own with a lot more ease than I had displayed.

They left the wagon on the side of the road and we galloped off.

We rode for the rest of the day, with very short breaks in between and the men didn't talk to each other. They glared at me, but otherwise stayed focused on their task of getting to where ever it was we were going to go. It was late into the night before we finally stopped and I was thankful for it. I was sore as hell from my first horseback ride. I clambered off and no sooner had my feet touched the ground then Bad Vibe was coming at me and sent his hand across my face in a harsh slap.

I cried out at the unexpected violence, my head whipping to the side, tears of pain blurring my vision that I struggled to push back, but by the goddess did it hurt. The entire side of my face throbbed and for a second I thought my eye was going to explode.

"Lucian!" one of the soldiers, a tall skinny guy whose armor seemed to hang off him then really fit him, moved over to us.

"You don't do shit until I tell you. We clear?" Lucian grabbed my shackled wrists and dragged me over to one of the trees, ignoring the soldier that had shouted at him. He shoved me hard and I fell right on my ass. He knelt down with a thick rope in his hand and tied my ankles together. It was tight, and uncomfortable but at least it wasn't cutting off my circulation. Small miracles.

I didn't say anything, I just glared up at him. Fear and anger were starting to mingle now. I was furious at my situation, furious at this guy for thinking it was all right to just smack me around whenever I broke a rule he'd never made clear in the first place. But, I wasn't going to antagonize him. I had a plan, I had to stick to the plan, I kept reminding myself.

Lucian walked over to skinny soldier who had been watching us, patted him on the shoulder in a placating gesture and begun to help the others make camp. The wagon driver, a man whose beard could rival that of any dwarfs came over to me and gave me a flask of water. I was allowed a few sips from it, and then he tossed a crust of bread at me too. It was hard, and gross but I was starving and I swallowed it all down. Unfortunately my captors didn't talk

much. They went about the business of feeding themselves, taking care of the horses and making their bedrolls in mostly silence.

Lucian kept glancing my way through all of it, and I didn't like the looks he was giving me. It felt like he was controlling himself from coming over to slap me again for whatever reason he'd made up in his head and it felt like that control of his was a fragile thing. I didn't look back at him, I kept my gaze down turned and settled in against the tree at my back, curling into the smelly cloak as best I could. I wasn't going to sleep much. I was tired sure, but I was also really fucking cold and my situation had me on edge. I did close my eyes though, giving off the pretense of sleep in hope that would inspire them to make conversation.

It didn't and eventually I heard snoring. I sighed and peeked open my eyes, looking around. It was a little creepy being out in the wilderness at night. Pretty but also creepy. I wasn't use to all the sounds I could hear around me. I hunched down into the cloak more, letting my thoughts wander. When playing Dragon Age Inquisition you didn't get a strong sense of the Inquisition's enemies. I mean, besides the big obvious ones, you didn't come across many individuals, npcs, that hated the Herald or the Inquisitor. The game thrust you right into the hero role with minor challenges to that narrative. It was startling here and I suppose, pretty realistic to be shown the other side of it. These men, really did believe I was responsible for what happened at the conclave and nothing I said was going to convince them otherwise. That was frightening and terrifying. I wonder if they had lost people. Friends, family, loved ones. If grief was spurring their hatred of me. My brow pinched. It made me sad, in between all the other things I was feeling. I was sad for their loss and sadder still that they were directing their anger at the wrong place. If they'd just help the Inquisition they could get the revenge, vengeance, justice whatever they were looking for. I spent most of the night trying to think of a way I could convince them.

The morning brought trouble and the break I was looking for.

The soldiers roused themselves at the break of dawn. I had dozed a little but not much. Still, as I heard them coming to I kept my eyes closed still feigning sleep evening though it had begun to snow and I started shivering.

"Think we can make it to Edgehall today?" It was the wagon drivers voice.

"Idiot." Lucian snapped. I could almost feel his eyes on me. "Keep your trap shut. We'll get there when were there."

Bingo, I thought. Okay. Now I knew where they were going to take me. The first major stop at least. I just had to figure out how to leave a clue for Leliana's people if they were searching for me.

I heard approaching footsteps and then felt him kicking my feet. "Wake up, murderer. Time to go."

I opened up my eyes, watching as he pulled a knife from his belt and cut the rope around my feet. I slowly stood up as the snow fell around us.

"Do you think I could squat some where and -"

The mark on my hand suddenly sparked. The sensation was unexpected and really uncomfortable, a lancing heat and prickly sort of pressure spreading across my palm and fingers that made me wince. Simultaneously right over the camp a rift appeared. It was the craziest thing to witness, the space above the fire that had long since gone out glowed, green geometric like shapes began twisting around and from behind them we could all hear whispering and growling.

"Fuck me it's a rift!"

"Is she doing that? Tell her to stop!"

Lucian snapped his eyes to me, grabbing my arm in a pinching grip. "Make it go away!"

"I can't! I'm not doing this!" I shouted at him and as I did, the rift burst open, four green balls of light splattering onto the ground and out of them emerged demons. Fuck.

Lucian's attention snapped right back to the rift. He let go of my arm, drawing his sword. "Kill them!" He roared and rushed right into battle.

I just stood there. This was my shot, I realized. I could run. I turned towards the woods, but the sounds of the battle gave me pause. They would die. That rift would just keep spewing out demon after demon and worse if I didn't close it. I had no idea who or what else was in this area. The demons wouldn't just stay here, this wasn't the game. And if other innocent people came by... shit.

I turned around, watching the soldiers fight and pointed my hand up to the rift. I knew how to do this at least. I pushed. The sensation was familiar and the green light shot out of my palm, crashing into the rift. It took me a few seconds before the rift exploded again, snapping closed.

The soldiers were still fighting the demons that had come out of it though. That was my queue. I took off, running into the woods as fast I could run. I thought about just continuing to run, but I had to be realistic here. I had no idea which direction to go, I had no idea how to make a fire when it got dark, and I had no idea what manner of wild animals were in these

woods and if I used the road, my captors would just chase me down on horseback. I needed to give Leliana a way to find me.

This was banking of course, on the idea that they were in fact trying to find me. Fuck it. I had to try. I halted, grabbed the edge of the night shirt and tugged. So, people ripping their shit in movies with ease? Fuck movies. Nothing happened. I cursed, looking around on the ground. Lucky me, I found a stick. I dropped to my knees, stretching out the night shirt as much as I could without taking the cloak off and started poking holes. It started to rip, and I was ecstatic. I got two good pieces. "Okay, great Simone. Now what?" Yes, I was talking to myself. I needed to work this out and quickly. I didn't have a lot of time, and I didn't have a fucking pen either.

I looked around and a plan formed. Maybe a bad one, but it was all I had. I ran towards the road, and threw the first tear into a bush. It was snowing, so I didn't know how well it was going to stand out. I shook the previous layer of snow off the bush, trying to make the piece of fabric as visible as I could. I grabbed three more sticks and assembled them into a sort of arrow that I put underneath the bush, pointing further into the woods off the road. I backed tracked, at least I think I was, moving as deep into the forest as I dared to go, which wasn't too far. I grabbed more sticks, and arranged them into the name of the docks. Taking in a deep breath at my really dumb plan, I shrugged off the cloak, immediately shivering. But, I used it cover up what I had written so the falling snow wouldn't hide it.

I was banking on a lot of things going right but I didn't have a choice. That Leliana's people would find the tear, follow the trail, and not kick the cloak and my stick message underneath it before they could read it.

I paused for just a moment, then shivered. I really hoped they had another cloak for me to wear or something, so I didn't freeze to death before I got rescued. If I got rescued I reminded myself grimly. I sighed and ran out of the forest back towards the road. I sprinted down it, running as hard and as fast as I could. I was terrible with directions. I was pretty sure I was running back towards where my captors were. I knew I was right when I heard the pound of horses and saw two of them. Of course, it would be Lucian and the skinny guy whose name I still didn't know.

I heard Lucian shout, "There she is! Get her! Stop right there!"

The fear on my face was probably real. He looked furious. There was blood on his hands, and his armor was dirty with what I think was demon blood. Even with the snow falling on him, he looked terrifying. I skidded to a halt, did an about face and took off. I knew I was going to get caught, but I wanted it to look convincing and hope they didn't figure out what I'd been up to out here. I heard the sound of the horses rearing back, then the pounding of boots behind me. I was out of shape. Terribly. My sprint ability needed a serious level up. I was running out of juice, I could feel it. The next thing I felt was the crash of a solid body into mine. He slammed into me like linebacker, and I hit the ground with a painful cry.

“You bitch! You did that!” Lucian roared at me and then I felt a fist slamming into the back of my head.

I’m guessing he meant that rift. Which I had not opened and I felt momentarily annoyed that he still thought I was that person. It was a strange delay of sensation because in the next breath came the pain, the blurring of my vision and a horrible woozy sensation. For a second I thought I was going to throw up, then I felt his weight lifted from me. He flipped me over, and I was powerless to stop him, or the fist that crashed into my face. That was horrible. Not just the pain, but the sheer violence I could feel radiating off him. I could taste blood, I started choking on it as it filled my mouth. I tried to get my hands up to fend off him, but it wasn’t working. He hit me again and I think I cried out.

The third time, the world went black.

I don’t know how long I was out of it. I had horrible dreams. Nightmares colliding. What had happened to Divine Justina mixed in with the laughing faces of my captors and other weird shit. I regained consciousness in small bursts. I felt movement underneath my stomach. I tried opening my eyes but could only get one to cooperate. I could see the ground. I was upside down. Over a horse? Maybe. I passed out again.

The next time I came too I was being lifted. Carried a few steps. I heard the crackle of a fire. I was dropped onto the ground, slightly padded by snow and something underneath me. A blanket? Sleeping roll? I wasn’t sure. There were voices around me I recognized. My captors. My face hurt. My eye hurt. Everything hurt really. This sucked. I wondered how long I had been out. Were we at Edgehall already? That thought brought panic. I slowly opened up the eye I could get open, as a blanket was thrown carelessly over me. I shivered. No, not at Edgehall but I didn’t know where we were. Back in a forest area, and night had fallen.

“We should keep going. If they’re looking for us-” I recognized the voice, it was the skinny one.

“They’re not,” Lucian snapped. “The Chancellor is handling things at Haven. I know it. We’re half days a way, and I’m not chancing this at night with demons running amok. You want to loose someone else? We rest. We go again at day light. Tomorrow she’ll be on her way to her hanging.”

Silence befell the men. Loose someone... I struggled to focus. The rift before, had one of them died? I looked around. There were three, not four. Oh no, the wagon driver. Despite the fact I really didn’t like these men, I couldn’t shake the sense of sadness I felt. In the game, closing rifts had felt like no big deal. Just another task to complete. Here, they were deadly and could literally kill people. I think I passed out again on that sad thought.

When I came too again, it was because of a bad feeling. I can't rightly describe it, just that kind of gut instinct that something is wrong. I blinked the one I could blink, and licked my chapped lips. It hurt when I did that, my tongue running over the cut on my lip. I winced, then tried to focus on my surroundings again to see what was going on. The thin guy and the other soldier who had been quiet and pretty non-descript this whole time were sitting around the fire on their bedrolls, staring into the flames, silent and moody. But Lucian had a flask in his hand and was staring at me. He wasn't hard to read, his face was like an open book and I saw a wealth of things there, but at the forefront was this anger. No, rage really and it was all directed at me.

"Yah know, I lost my sister in that conclave. Only family I had left," he said and rose, walking towards me. When he got closer, I could smell the liquor. Shit.

But with his words, I understood where all that anger came from now. Why he felt so unstable. He was grieving, in pain and not doing a very good job dealing with it. I looked up at him and said quietly and sincerely, "I'm sorry for your loss," my voice was hoarse. I cleared my throat and continued. "But, I wasn't responsible for what happened. I swear to you, I wasn't."

"Lying bitch!" He snarled at me, so viciously spit came out of his mouth and into his beard. He surged at me, and I felt a flood of panic tightening my muscles. He bent down, pulling the blanket off me just so he could grab my arm in a painful grip, shaking it, the one that bore the mark. "How the fuck can you explain this if you didn't have naught to do with it? Hmm?"

"I can't explain it!" I stared up at him, though I did not expect him to see reason. The other two soldiers ignoring us, or pretending too. Faces down turned, still staring into the fire. "I didn't want this thing," I said to Lucian. "Trust me. This thing is a curse."

"You know what I think? I think something went wrong with your plan, maybe you got this mark on your hand by accident. I think you killed my sister." He was growling the words.

My brow pinched. I shook my head. "I did. Not. Do it."

Apparently he didn't like me disagreeing with him because I was flat out punched and I was deeply tired of being punched by this guy. And just being punched in general. I cried out as pain exploded through my face again and I'm shocked nothing broke or I didn't lose a tooth or something truth be told. I could feel the skin on my face splitting open which is a horrible sensation. The force of it knocked me to the side.

He dropped his flask, reaching down and grabbed me by the front of the night shirt, fisting the fabric and hauled me to my feet so my face was in line with his. "Murderer. Fuckin' murderer!" He flung me backwards as if he couldn't tolerate me in his space any longer. I

stumbled, couldn't catch myself and fell, sliding a bit with the momentum across the cold wet snow. He advanced on me and when I could see his face an utterly frightening realization shot through me: I wasn't going to make it. This man was going to kill me in a drunken rage for something I didn't do, in a place that wasn't suppose to exist. The irony wasn't lost on me.

I had no fighting skills. This guy was about three times my size. Aside from running there was nothing I could do to stop this and I didn't have much faith in my ability to run. The feeling of helplessness bore a feeling of anger inside of me I've never felt before. It was so intense. I rolled over in the snow, trying to crawl forward away from him, because I wasn't just going to lie there and take it. It was hard moving, and I know I wasn't fast, my shackled wrists making everything harder than it had to be. Through the biting snow I felt a rock. Thick and heavy. I knew it was a bad idea, but there were no good ideas at this point. I grabbed it, heard him muttering above me. He dropped to his knee in the snow next to me, and grabbed my shoulder, yanking on it to flip me over to probably more of his fists. I didn't resist, I went with the motion but sat up and slammed the rock into his knee as hard I could. I was rewarded with his unexpected shout and then I threw the rock right in his face. It smacked him in the nose, and he shouted again, letting go of me and cupping his hands around his face.

I scrambled backwards, using my feet to propel my butt over the snow and clambered to my feet. Lucian's shouting had caused the other two soldiers to stop pretending to ignore us and look over but they didn't move. The thin one sat up, but the other one just stared at me, then at Lucian then looked back into the fire. Whatever happened here, he was washing his hands of it and it his ambivalence pissed me off too. "You're just going to let him do this?!" I screamed at them and their silence spoke volumes.

Fuck it. I was ready to take my chance with the wilderness at this point so I tried to start running. But Mr. Ambivalent decided that was worth his time. He darted up, faster than I would have thought he could move, blocking my path and grabbing me by the arms.

I made a furious frustrated sound and stared up at him. "You're going to regret this. When you see who the real enemy is and what he wants to do, you're going to remember this moment," I hissed at him.

He frowned down at me, but simply gave me a push backwards, right into the fist that connected with the back of my head. My vision swam as pain exploded and I dropped right back down to the ground. I moved in and out of consciousness then, bursts of pain exploded through my body pulling me back into it, that same pain taking me out of it. It was another really weird and utterly terrifying sensation as Lucian's foot crashed into me, again and again, punishing my torso and back.

When he finally stopped, tears were streaming down my face and I'd never been in so much pain in my life. But I was still furious. I was. I was terrified, felt helpless and I was mad as hell.

I didn't want to just stay curled in a ball on the dirty snow covered ground while this jerk took his anger out on me. I uncoiled, and trying to swallow back my whimpers, managed to crawl up to my hands and knees. My arms were shaking badly, but I looked up at him, standing there over me. "Fuck you," I spat with all the venom I could muster.

Lucian didn't like my little retort either, because he dropped to one knee next to me and back handed me viciously. I cried out, and for a moment nearly blacked out. I didn't even realize he'd let go of my hair I just fell over again, and not even how furious I was could make my limbs move.

Through the haze of pain though, new sounds cut through -

"Shit they found us!"

"Get to the horses!"

"What about the-"

"Just leave - argh!"

"She's here! We've found her! We found the Herald!"

The voice referring to someone as the Herald made me find the strength to lift my head. Wait, wasn't I the Herald? I looked to my right and saw that Lucian had an arrow in his neck and was bleeding out into the snow. I felt a mixture of things staring into his dying eyes; sadness for what he'd lost that had turned him into a monster, scorn for that monster and relief that he couldn't hurt me anymore. I pulled my eyes from him and looked up. Around the small camp, men who were dressed like Leliana's men had taken up positions and my captors lay dead in the snow around them.

I was being rescued. I cannot explain what that kind of relief feels like. I whimpered with it and tried pushing myself upright. They'd come for me. They'd found me. I almost couldn't believe it. It was confirmed though, as Leliana came out of the brush and over to me quickly. Her eyes took in my appearance with a quick glance and I could have sworn I saw a mixture of things in her gaze; relief, concern, and anger. As the anger hit, her eyes went to the man next to me. Her glance was brief and then her attention returned to me.

"Bring a blanket and the carriage," she ordered. She reached over to Lucian, pulling the keys from his belt and released my shackled wrists.

"I couldn't... I couldn't fight back. I tried though. I..." I needed to shut up. I wish I could have just shut up, but I kept blubbering on as she freed me. "...he was going to kill me." I

whispered and then I dropped my head, looking away from her, trying to control the little break down I was having.

“Shh. You’re safe for now, Simone.” She came closer to me and wrapped the blanket snugly around me. Without another word I was lifted into her arms, and I couldn’t help but burrow into her and the sudden warmth. I was safe here, protected in this small bubble with Leliana’s arms around me, but I couldn’t stay in her arms anymore than I could stay in Dragon Age. I need to learn to survive a lot better and I needed to find my way out.

Later though. I was so tired and everything hurt. A lot.

She carried me over to a carriage, placed me gently inside of it and then climbed in with me. One of her men closed the door behind her.

“This will make you sleep, it will make it easier so I can tend to your wounds without causing you more pain.” Leliana offered me a small vial.

“You must think I’m the most helpless person you’ve ever met,” I said quietly. With trembling fingers, I reached out and took the vial downing the contents. It tasted horrible, but whatever.

Leliana looked surprised. “No. That is not what I think of you. Scout Harding found the bread crumbs you left us. Had you not, we may not have reached you in time. It was smart. And brave.” Her eyes moved over my face, and I couldn’t quite read the expression on hers. I know I must have looked horrible, but it couldn’t have been anything she hadn’t seen before. “It must have cost you.”

I exhaled a shaky breath at her words and closed my eyes, least she see me start crying again. “Thank you,” I whispered. “For not believing I ran away. For coming to get me.”

Leliana had taken off her gloves. She very carefully pushed a curly strand of hair away from my face. “You’re welcome,” she said quietly.

The last thing I remembered before I passed out was the gentle feeling of her hand on my face.

Chapter 6

I remember there being movement but this kind was much more gentle than before. I remember hearing voices; Cassandra’s. Cullen’s at one point. Leliana’s. Fucking Solas. Even Varric. I couldn’t really focus on what they were saying, I kept moving in and out of consciousness. I was warm now though, undressed at some point and I think cleaned up. By who I couldn’t tell you. I can say that the magic being used to heal me is a hard feeling to

describe but it felt weird. The sensation is slightly uncomfortable, soothing and a little painful at times, what I imagine getting stitches might feel like, but maybe less. When all that was over they let me sleep.

I couldn't say how long it was before I finally regained consciousness. It came back slowly, warmly, but I didn't mistake where I was this time. I blinked open my eyes and was pretty happy I could see out of both of them. I felt sore, but I wasn't in any where near the kind of pain I had been before. I was back in the cabin in Haven. And sitting at the table up against the wall was Varric. Bianca was propped up on the table leg next to him within easy reach. I could hear the scritch as a quill moved over parchment and I silently delighted in the fact he was writing.

I smiled a bit and didn't move, just laid there and listened, marveling at the fact that I was actually watching Varric Tethras write. I would have loved to compared notes with him on things I'd written, not that I had any of that with me. I slowly sat up, and the rustle of movement drew his attention. He turned his head and smiled. "Welcome back Scardey Cat."

I laughed a little at this nickname he'd given me. I liked it a lot more than Herald. "How long was I out?"

"Just two days. Chuckles said you needed to rest. Apparently you're a weird one."

A flicker of fear moved through me. Had Solas found out what I was? Did he know what I knew? "What do you mean?" I tried to ask casually.

"He couldn't explain it, at least not in a way any of us could understand. Something about the energy around you is different than any of the rest of us, could be the mark, yadda yadda. Long story short, let the Herald recover."

I grimaced. "Am I really the Herald?"

"That's what people are saying. Herald of Andraste, on account of the woman in the rift behind you. And because of what you did at the conclave," he smiled again. "I promise not everyone here thinks you're a murderer and wants to kill you."

I groaned and pressed my hands against my face. Leaving them there for a moment, before I dropped them and looked at Varric. "It wasn't Andraste. It was Justina and because I'm a scaredy cat, I couldn't save her."

Varric gave me a warm, understanding sort of expression. "Look, people need to believe what they need to believe. So long as you don't loose sight of who you are, that's all that matters."

I loved Varric Tethras in a completely platonic, please-be-my-friend-forever sort of way just then. “Thanks, Varric.”

“No problem. Occasionally, I say things that are deep and profound and not just useless babble with intent to get on Cassandra’s nerves.” He grinned and dropped down out of the chair. “People want to know that you’re awake so I’ll get on that and I’m sure you’re hungry.” He collected the pieces of parchment he’d been writing.

At the mention of food I realized how famished I was. “Food would be great.”

“Can do. And, don’t worry about getting snatched again. You’re under guard. Should have heard Leliana and Cassandra when they found out you’d been taken.” Varric looked amused as he picked up Bianca.

I felt my emotions warming to that bit of information. “They... didn’t believe I ran away?”

“Not for a second, Scaredy Cat. Not that it wasn’t hard to see through the Chancellor.”

I swallowed back a lump in my throat. By the goddess could I not stop crying in Dragon Age? They were going to have to rename it, “The Crying Inquisitor” if this kept up. “Is he still here?”

“Unfortunately. Whatever power he had here is gone for now. But I’ll let the inner circle fill you in on those details after you’ve had a good meal.” Varric went to the door and pulled it open.

“Thanks a lot, Varric. For taking first watch,” I gave him a smile.

“You know, interesting thing that. I wasn’t the first watch. I’d bet you’d never guess who was.”

I paused, thinking back to what I could remember and I zeroed in on that hazy moment. Leliana had been here, in a chair by my bedside I think. She’d brushed the hair back from my face, stood to go - I’d grabbed her hand and I think I’d asked her to stay. Fuck. Crying, embarrassing myself in front of Leliana and getting my ass kicked, that’s how I rolled apparently. Now I was blushing. Fucking hell. I could feel it and covering my face would only draw attention to it and Varric looked all knowingly amused anyway. “Not a word. Not one word,” I said.

Varric chuckled but, he didn’t say a thing, just backed out of the doorway.

Once the door clicked shut I groaned at myself and set my hands over my face again. Even through my embarrassment I couldn’t help but wonder if she had stayed when I’d reached

for her. I couldn't remember. And I sure as hell wasn't going to ask her. In fact I needed to set this little crush of mine aside and get focused. I needed to determine where I was in this storyline that had taken that shitty detour and get back on track with getting home. And maybe not look like a complete mess when the inner circle came calling. I pushed back the covers and stood up, walking over to the basin of water and mirror on a stand near the fireplace.

I took one look at my reflection and groaned again. I was a mess. Never mind my unruly hair, I sported a black eye, but at least it wasn't swollen shut anymore. There was a faint bruise on my jaw, but as I worked it back and forth it was tender but not that painful. I lifted up the plain, white cloth of the night gown I was in - the bruises along my sides weren't that bad either. Light and visible but as I twisted back and forth I didn't feel too stiff, which was good. I suspected I was going to get a lot more. At least my pain tolerance was going to go up, as shitty as that was too.

I dropped the shirt down and was splashing water on my face when the door to my room opened up and Leliana walked in.

You will not blush. You will not blush. You will not embarrass yourself for the millionth time. These are the words that rang through my head as I patted my face dry with the cloth and looked over at her, smiling. "Hi."

Leliana shut the door behind her, keeping out the chill. She looked me over with an expression I couldn't read, a set of clothes carried in her gloved hands. "You are well rested? How do you feel?"

I nodded, attempting to smooth down my unruly curls in a not completely self conscious fashion. "I am, very. And I feel fine. Thank you for asking." I paused, and then tacked on. "Sorry I slept so long."

Leliana moved further into the room, walking over to my bed and setting the clothes down on it, shaking her head. "Don't be. You needed the rest and with the way things are you may not get much more of it."

"How bad are things?" I asked.

"Not good. There's much to be done. But, eat first. These should fit you. Our blacksmith, Harritt made them."

I nodded. "Got it."

"When you are ready, you'll be escorted to the Chantry," Leliana looked at me again and I really wished I knew what she was thinking.

“Escorted huh? Personal bodyguards?”

“For now, yes,” Leliana said. “We can’t take anymore chances with your safety.”

As much as I wished she’d said that because she was deeply concerned about my personal safety, I knew what was behind those words. Rifts opening up around world, demons and whatever else running amok. Fucking Corypheus and his bullshit. The mark. They needed it. I glanced down at my hand. “We need to talk about that too, but I’ll save that for the meeting.”

“As you wish,” Leliana turned and headed back to the door.

I watched her and a sudden conversation you could have with her in game shot through my mind. One that was vital in making sure she wasn’t, well, that she didn’t turn into this person who murdered people without second thought. I wondered if I was too late. And there was of course the problem of how I knew... fuck it. “Leliana wait just a moment,” I stepped towards her.

Her steps halted and for a reason unknown to me, she paused for a heartbeat before she turned around, looking at me with the unspoken question in her eyes.

I took a breath. “I’m going to earn this trust I’m going to ask you to give me right now, I swear it. But... has there been... did you loose an Agent? Because of someone named Butler?”

Leliana’s brows shot upwards a moment. They lowered and I could almost feel the subtle shift as her suspicion rose. “How do you know about that?”

“I can’t say. I can’t say yet,” I corrected myself, keeping my eyes on hers. “For a really, really good reason. Please trust me. How I know it’s because... I’m different. In the way Solas hinted at. But, what’s more important right now is don’t kill him. Butler. I know you may not think now is the time for ideals, but it’s exactly the time for it,” My voice gentled as the next words tumbled out of my mouth. “The person you want to be, you can still be that person Leliana and do everything else that needs to be done.”

The silence weighed heavily. She didn’t look away from me, and there was a lot in the silence, in the way her eyes bore into mine. I can’t imagine all the things that were going through her head. I just hoped a woman who could read people so well could read me and maybe give me a little bit of the trust I was asking for.

“I will think on your words,” she said finally. “Is there anything else?”

That was as good as it was going to get. I shook my head. “No. Nothing else.”

She gave me a dismissive nod, turned around and left.

I blew out a heavy breath, trying to calm my nerves. She did that to me, got my insides all twisted up and... no, stop it Simone. Focus. I reminded myself. I really did need to earn that trust I was asking her for, and that meant not be useless aside from pointing my hand at rifts. I walked over to the bed, looking down at the clothes that had been made for me. They looked familiar too and I couldn't help but grin.

I was getting dressed as the elven boy I did recognize from the game came in with a plate. He was just as sweet and bashful as he was in the game. I thanked him and the moment I smelled everything my stomach growled. I didn't linger, I shoveled the food into my mouth, thankful I wasn't being watched because there were no table manners present. I was starving. When I was properly full, I finished getting dressed. Everything fit perfectly. The trousers, the undershirt, the thick jacket, even the gloves.

I glanced at myself in the mirror. "This is as good as it's going to get, Simone," I said to myself. I didn't look bad. My curls were still a little more unruly than I wanted them to be, but my frizz really wasn't the most pressing issue right now. "Thank the goddess for winter," I mused and pulled open the door and froze in the doorway.

"Oh fuck," I said underneath my breath. Here it was, the scene from the game. What the hell? Had that eleven boy told everyone I was awake and about to come outside? The game hadn't really done this scene justice either. There were a lot of people in Haven and it seemed like all of them were lined up and looking at me. It was overwhelming, it really was. There was so much emotion coming from them all too. I could see the hope in their faces, their fear, the ones that were wary of me as I looked over the crowd. It was a little exhilarating but it came with this sudden weight too and that knowledge that most of these people were putting their hopes and their lives on the line because they believed I was sent to them by some divine providence.

I swallowed hard and for another moment I didn't move. I didn't know what to do. Wave? Smile? Not smile? I was at a complete loss.

I recognized Lysette who came forward, saluting me with her arm to her chest. "Herald. I'll escort you to the Chantry."

I felt awkward again. Did I salute her back? What was the proper procedure here? Crap. I settled for giving her what I hope was a respectful nod, reaching behind me to close the door to the cabin. "Thanks," I said quietly and followed her. I could hear whispers as we moved down the path, throngs of people on either side, though I couldn't quite make them out. But, I'd played Inquisition enough I could guess what they were saying. I kept my head down, though I did meet the eyes of some. I'm not sure if they got the reassurance they were looking for.

I breathed a sigh of relief once I was inside the Chantry; Lysette leaving me at the doorway. I thanked her again and moved inside. There were a lot less people here, I could hear faint prayers coming from the vestibules on either side and I paused to just take in how pretty the architecture was. Reminding myself I wasn't a tourist and I had shit to do, I strode over to the door at the end of the hall. I paused because I could hear the hum of voices from inside. It sounded like they were all in that room. I took a deep breath steeling my nerves and opened up the door.

I'm not going to lie, I almost shut it and walked right back out.

I had often joked back in my world that if I was ever actually in a meeting with all the Inquisitor's advisers I wouldn't be able to concentrate because they were so hot. This was a completely accurate statement. The first face that greeted me was Cullen. He was... look Dragon Age Inquisition the game was a gross under-representation of literally fucking everything. Cullen was... strong. But there was something in his eyes, a depth and a kindness that I knew based on his history he'd worked to hold onto. He was stupidly handsome with that strand of his blond hair caressing his forehead. He smiled when he saw me, and I felt like my knees were going to give out. That sensation only got worse when I noted the concern that moved unconcealed across his face when his gaze touched upon my injuries.

"Herald. Welcome. It's good to see you up and about," Cullen said.

Even his voice was sexy. What the fuck. *Get it together, Simone. Get it together*, I chanted mentally.

"It is. I am glad you are all right. And I feel I owe you an apology," Cassandra came to my side, looking me over like a mother hen.

I managed to pull my gaze from Cullen and looked over at her. This put me in a line of sight to see Leliana who stood just behind and to the side of Cassandra, though her gaze upon me was still unreadable. Even so she said, "We all do. Chancellor Roderick should not have been able to do what he did."

"It's not something you have to worry about happening again, you have my word on that," Cullen added and half smiled at me again. "Though I suppose that won't mean much since we've just met. I'm Cullen."

"Commander Cullen leads our armed forces. He is a former Templar," Cassandra made the introduction.

I cleared my throat and prayed my voice wouldn't shake. "It's good to meet you Commander Cullen. And I believe you. But, really, you all don't owe me an apology. In fact I need to

thank you.” I looked at Cassandra and then Leliana. “For believing that I wouldn’t run away and that I want to stay here and help you make this right.”

“You showed us the person you are at the Conclave. And Roderick is slime,” Cassandra said the disgust and anger in her tone evident.

“He is scared Cassandra, she should be. And it drove him to make a foolish decision,” Leliana said.

“Be that as it may, the Chantry is still a problem, regardless of Chancellor Roderick’s transgressions,” Josephine spoke up.

“Herald this is Lady Josephine Montilyet. She will be handling our diplomatic affairs,” Cassandra said.

Josephine was utterly charming. And I think, just by looking at her, she would have given Leliana a run for her money in a fight. It wasn’t that Josephine looked like a fighter, but knowing what I knew about her, I just felt like she hid that side of her well, but it was there, the knowledge of it was there, a part of her that made her so good at what she did.

“It’s wonderful to meet you Lady Montilyet.” I looked around at them. “I know there’s a lot to cover. The things I’ve missed.”

“We have officially formed an Inquisition,” Cassandra said. “It is good to say you want to continue helping, because we need you and your mark.”

I looked at Cassandra. “Let’s be real here, okay? You don’t need me, you need my hand. If you could cut off my hand, and use it yourself to close rifts you’d be in better shape. I may want to help but right now I’m more of a liability in a fight than anything else. I need that to change, I want that to change.” I took a deep breath. “So, while I know you’ve got a long list for me, the first order of business needs to be, I need to train. With your soldiers, with you, with someone else it doesn’t matter. I have to learn how to defend myself, how to navigate all this, at least a little so what happened to me with Roderick can’t happen again.”

Cassandra frowned lightly at me, but I could tell she was considering my words.

“She’s right,” Leliana said. “Though not completely. You have become a symbol. They believe you are the Herald of Andraste-”

“I’m not,” I interrupted. “I understand giving people hope but, is there no way I can do that simply by closing rifts? It wasn’t Andraste behind me, it was Justina and... and I wasn’t strong enough or brave enough to save her.” I looked away. I’d never not regret that moment, never not wish I could have somehow have turned into a hero.

There was silence around the table again, until Cassandra came closer and touched my shoulder. “Perhaps it was not Andraste in the fade with you. But you are still precisely what we need, when we needed it. I believe there is some Divine guidance in that. Perhaps Andraste’s hand, in all of this.”

“But she is correct in that she needs to train,” Leliana said. “And letting our soldiers see her among them will be a good thing. I will see to her instruction.”

I was surprised at that and hoped that any internal giddiness I felt at being able to spend more time with Leliana didn’t show on my face. “You don’t want me to train with Cullen’s men?”

“You will in part,” Leliana said. “But you are small and don’t have much in the way of physical strength. Your size won’t change, your muscles will grow, but even that won’t be enough against someone like Cullen or Cassandra or anyone who is simply bigger than you are. You must learn to fight in a different way if you are to beat opponents like that. That is something I can teach you.”

“That is settled then. And may I interject that some of this training will have to be done in the field. There is a Chantry sister in the Hinterlands who wishes to speak to the Herald,” Josephine said.

“And we have reports of numerous rifts there,” Cullen said. “The area is dangerous though, but it is a good place to begin to spread word of the Inquisition.”

“It is also a hot bed for the conflict between the Mages and the Templar,” Josephine said.

“We will need the Templar to close the rift,” Cullen said.

“Maybe not,” Leliana interrupted. “The Mages could do it just as easily.”

My mind immediately swam with what I knew would occur if we had to choose a side. “What if we could use them both?” I asked. “The Templars to weaken it, and the Mages to bolster the magic in my hand? I’m assuming that’s what it needs right? More juice?”

I could feel Leliana’s eyes on me when I said that. It was a heck of feat okay, trying not to be distracted by her, and not stare at Cullen because he was gorgeous. Even Josephine and Cassandra were hot in their own ways, and I just didn’t know where to put my eyes just then. So I looked at the map on the table. Studiously I hoped.

“That would be quite the diplomatic feat. But right now we don’t have enough influence to approach either of those groups,” Josephine said. “If we want them to help us and work with each other somehow, the first step is proving our worth,” Josephine said.

“Do we have that kind of time?” I asked.

“Let us hope we do. We know little to nothing about who is responsible for this or what his intentions are,” Cassandra said. “But we have a plan. We will act on. And let us all consider other ways we can spread the word of the Inquisition. I will not put this all on the Herald.”

“Agreed,” Cullen said.

“Spend the rest of the day familiarizing yourself with Haven. Let the people see you. Talk to them if you like. Tomorrow morning we will begin. I will have word sent to Mother Giselle that the Herald will meet her there in a weeks time,” Leliana said.

That felt like a meeting adjourned to me, so I went to the door and pulled it open. “Nice meeting all of you,” I said to them and walked out, heading out of the Chantry. I was thinking back to Cassandra’s words. I did know who was responsible for this and what he wanted. If I shared it now, could we stop Corpehyus before he did any more damage? And how much could I share without tipping off Solas who already knew I was ‘different?’. I needed to talk to him eventually, try and feel him out, though I no idea how to do that either.

I kept pondering all this as I wandered around Haven. My new outfit kept most of the chill away, it was cold but not unbearably so and after a while I didn’t even notice it. I was slowly being drawn in by actually being in Haven. A real medieval village so to speak. It was also a lot busier than the game had depicted, and it felt more alive, no surprise there. There were just so many layers to the place, people rushing about, carrying supplies, actually chasing around chickens, and almost everyone cast wary glances up at the sky at some point as if they expected at any second it would start shooting out those green balls of demon eggs. I did talk to some, where I could. Awkwardly mind you. I had no idea what to say to these people, so all the conversations were mostly of the: “Hi, how are you, do you need anything?” variety. For the most part, everyone was friendly, though a few did eyeball me suspiciously and a few others ignored me all together. I really didn’t fault them for that, I might have been suspicious of me too.

Through my tour of Haven, Lysette tailed me though she gave me plenty of space. Still I knew she was nearby and I’d be lying if I didn’t say I thought that was comforting. I’m sure she thought it was boring as hell and probably had a dozen other things she’d rather be doing. I’d have to find some way to thank her, pay her back for having to babysit me though I supposed actually closing the breach would be a great start.

I eventually wandered outside the main gates and was startled by the actual amount of soldiers that were camped out there. The outskirts of Haven looked absolutely nothing like the game. There wasn’t a empty space, and the tents were far back towards where I knew the apothecary cabin was going to be. It was noisy, busy, the definition of organized chaos. I was

standing there, taking it all in, so engrossed in the reality of it I didn't notice when Cullen came beside me.

"It's something isn't it?" Cullen asked.

His voice startled me, and I jumped, which put a sheepish concerned expression on his face that was so adorable I thought I was going to melt. Like literally melt in the stupidest romcom way and by the goddess was it impossible for me to get my shit together?

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," his voice took on a softer note that was waging a new level of war on my ability to think straight. "How are you holding up?"

I stole another quick glance at him and then looked back out over the troops. I did not feel that I was at a level that I could safely look at him, while holding a conversation with him when he was talking to me in that kind of tone. "I feel better having Lysette near me for now, though I'm sure she's got better things to do," I said honestly. "But I'm okay. It's a lot to take in, and I'm trying to... get my feet under me I guess, but I bet a lot of people feel like that."

"She volunteered," Cullen said, his words surprising me. "People saw what you did at the conclave. And you rescued our soldiers from the mountains. It's a small start, but it was a positive one for a lot of people nonetheless."

"I can't take full credit for that," I said, even though it was really nice to hear that my attempts to help had some kind of positive effect. "I just made a call, the rest of them did the heavy lifting."

"You still made the call," Cullen smiled. "And it saved lives. That's not nothing."

Cullen giving me a compliment made me feel like a teenager who'd never been in love before. And I couldn't stop my brain from thinking back to how his romance progressed in the game, or how it was one of my favorites, and I think my cheeks were getting hot. I forced those thoughts from my mind, clearing my throat. "I hope we can save a lot more lives before this is done."

"With you and your mark on our side, I believe we can," Cullen said.

I shook my head. "Please don't call it my mark. I didn't want this. And my worth to the Inquisition can't just be this thing I got because of chance. I want to earn my place here and this blind trust so many have in me."

Cullen studied me in silence, I could feel his eyes on my side profile. I felt brave, and like I should really look at him at some point so I did just to watch a half smile move across his face. "I believe you will, Herald."

I groaned. “You’re not going to call me Simone are you?”

Cullen chuckled. “If one of the men were to hear me address you so informally it could send the wrong message, and we need to build you up.”

That was probably for the best. If he used my real name I might have jumped him. Talk about the wrong message. Or the right one. Ugh. Hot mess. Me. Still I managed to speak, “Oh. Well. I suppose that means I have to call you Commander Cullen then,” I even grinned up at him.

Cullen laughed, and I could have sworn there was color to his cheeks as he glanced away from me. “I should get back to work.”

“Yeah me too. My tour. Finding ways to be useful. Thank you for the talk, Commander.”

“Of course S-” He opened his mouth. Closed it, gave me that half smile again that was so utterly sexy on him I really hoped I wasn’t just staring at his mouth. “Herald.” He walked forward, heading over to his troops.

I took a deep breath, and thoroughly enjoyed watching him walk away. Okay, so, maybe Dragon Age wasn’t *that bad* after all. At least right now. I cleared my throat again, and headed over to the Blacksmith stand. I figured I should thank Harriett for my new outfit, and continue my tour of Haven and use this downtime to come up with a plan. Tomorrow my ‘leveling’ as it were was going to start in earnest and I meant what I said to Cullen; yes I wanted to get out of here, but I wanted to save as many lives as we could too.

I just didn’t have any idea how to do that. Yet.

Chapter 7

In movies back in my world when someone is training it’s usually shown as this epic montages of scenes that flash by in about a minute and shows how badass the character you’re watching is becoming.

This was *nothing* like that. Training sucked.

My expectation that it would suck, was an understatement of the reality of the situation. I spent the seven days before our trip to the Hinterlands getting my ass kicked, literally and figuratively. For someone not use to this kind of physical effort, it was more than a little trying, and I would be lying if I said I didn’t fall into bed most nights thinking there was no way I would be able to do this, or crying myself to sleep like a big frigging baby because *everything* was hard in a way I had never experienced before. It didn’t help that I also had nightmares. Bad ones. I had never been assaulted before, not the way Roderick’s men had done, and sometimes being alone at night was hard, even with my screaming

muscles and exercise fatigue. It helped, seeing the shadow of my bodyguard outside my door, but the nightmares were terrible. I didn't tell anyone about them though, I felt useless enough.

Cassandra woke up me daily at the crack of dawn. I am not a morning person. I have a particular deep seated hatred for mornings, but I had to deal with it. The saving grace was that there was coffee. Delicious, fresh, the best shit I've ever tasted in my life. I did not spend a lot of time enjoying it though. I'd take a few sips, shove some food in my mouth, get properly outfitted, and Cassandra would usher me out the door to where all the other troops were preparing for the day. She put me with a group of ten and they looked very much the part of young fresh recruits.

I'm guessing they were like me; never seen combat a day in their lives. Cassandra instructed us that we wouldn't survive long if we didn't improve our stamina. I refrained from making a joke about not having to put points into stamina as Dragon Age Inquisition wasn't that kind of game. Not like they would have gotten it anyway. She put a full set of armor on us, gave us swords and shields, (I had no idea how frigging heavy either of these things were) and told us to run.

I was embarrassingly terrible at this. Clearly I had negative points in my stamina meter, because I barely made it five minutes before I had to stop to catch my breath and I could almost feel the disapproving look Cassandra was giving me. She didn't have to remind me, I knew. I was the Herald and I could barely run five meters forward with the weight of the armor and weapons I felt like my heart was going to give out.

I was the last one to finish this little course. I would have liked to tell you that by the weeks end I was the first, but that would be a hilarious lie. The only thing I accomplished by the end of the first week as far as stamina improvement was maybe getting out of the negative, and leveling it up one point. Basically I was able to keep up with the rest of the group, somewhat, but I was still last in that line.

Stamina leveling could go suck on a Dragon's tail.

Every day after stamina leveling, I reported to Leliana. This was a particular highlight for me for what are probably obvious reasons by now. The drawback was by the time I reached her, I felt like every muscle in my body was screaming and she gave me no quarter. My first instruction was with a bow. My arms felt like jelly after running with the weight of the sword and the shield (a very strong word for the pitiful thing I was doing) so holding that bow was really fucking difficult. It also didn't help that she kept standing behind me, touching my arms and hand, her lovely accented voice entirely too close to my ear, instructing me on the finer points of how to use this particular weapon.

Occasionally Varric looked on, and laughed at how bad I was. I may or may not have literally thrown arrows at him.

Poisons and how to coat a pair of daggers with them came next. That was pretty fascinating and I'm extremely proud I did not poison myself, not even once.

I expected Leliana would show me how to use the daggers next, but she didn't. Instead I was taken into an enclosed ring where Cassandra waited. I was given no weapons, my task was simply to make sure Cassandra didn't hit me with the wooden sword in her hand.

Cassandra is *a lot* faster than you might think she is. The first few days I got hit a lot, all with Leliana instructing me firmly in the background. She'd get into the ring at times, show me how to move, how to watch my opponent's body, the flick of their glance to determine their direction so I could counter. Leliana did not get hit by Cassandra once, something that irked Cassandra and would have made me laugh had I not been so damn sore (I also didn't want to antagonize Cassandra).

It was Cullen in the ring with me on the second day, and that was just as distracting as Leliana teaching me how to use a bow. I have never been so embarrassed in my life, because the sight of him coming towards me the way he was, with that strand of hair over his forehead, and the determined eyes of a hunter tracking my motions made me want to do literally anything but dodge him. At one point I even fell into him and I'm not entirely certain if my traitorous body didn't do it on purpose.

It was later on in the week that Leliana began to instruct me on the basics of how to use a pair of daggers, and despite how exhausted, and sore I was by the time these lessons rolled around, I really liked it.

By week's end I had made minimal progress, but I suppose it was good enough for seven days. I didn't feel like a badass, but I did feel a tiny bit more capable that perhaps I wouldn't die immediately in a fight if Cassandra or Varric didn't come to my rescue. And my training was pretty much ongoing, we just needed to get to the Hinterlands. In-between training, I was constantly invited to the war room to listen to the updates on what was happening. Nothing was getting better of course and I still had no idea what kind of a time table I was actually on.

The night before I was scheduled to head to the Hinterlands I asked Leliana to come to my cabin, telling her we needed to talk privately. She agreed and I spent the time in between pacing the small, comfortable space waiting for her. I had to do this right. I'd played this conversation in my head, over and over again, but once the words left my mouth - I just hoped it all sounded as coherent.

When the soft knock came I nearly jumped. I took a deep breath, smoothed my hands over my unruly hair and walked over to the door, pulling it open.

“Herald.” Leliana greeted in a quiet tone, and immediately slipped inside. I closed the door behind her, and the nervousness I felt was two fold, no longer just about what I needed to tell her. I was suddenly aware of how small this cabin was with two people inside of it. I gave a little shake of my head and turned around to focus on her, wringing my hands in front of me.

“I need to tell you things,” I said. “But, I think I have too, rather I should, give you the information you need for now and the rest... later.” The rest was hard. The rest included me telling her that the reason the man she loved was dead was my fault and I wasn’t ready for her to hate me yet.

Leliana studied me in silence with her piercing unreadable stare, her hands folded behind her back. Finally she said in a quiet tone, “I am listening.”

I took a deep breath and plunged ahead. “I know things. Things that are going to happen. I can’t... explain to you how I know, yet. It’s not magic. At least not the way you’re thinking,” I paced in a small line as I spoke. “It has to do with how different I am, the way... Solas hinted at.”

“He is very curious about you,” Leliana said, and her gaze had not left mine. I wish I could have read her the way I knew she was reading me.

“I’m sure he is,” I didn’t bother to hide the distaste in my tone. “He can’t be trusted Leliana, not completely. He wants to help us right now but... he’s going to be a problem, later on. I can’t tell you more yet. But, he’s not a problem now. At least he won’t be so long as he doesn’t know what I can do. That I know things about him.”

Leliana’s expression didn’t change, she just kept looking at me. “There is a more pressing problem now?”

“Yes,” I said. “Corephyus. The one we’re fighting, that’s his name. And soon we’re going to need Solas to take us out of here. Haven.”

Leliana took a step closer to me now, her head slightly canted. “Why would we need to leave Haven?”

“Because if we don’t get both the Mages and the Templars to fight with us, Corephyus is going to take the one that we don’t get on our side and use them to attack Haven. He’s got an Archdemon. Haven isn’t defensible. We won’t win. And the more we prepare for what I’m telling you, the more it will tip off Solas and if he finds out that I know who he is, before he

takes us to where we need to go, I don't know how the Inquisition survives." I sighed and stopped pacing. "It's complicated."

Leliana was silent at first, digesting the information I'd just thrown at her no doubt. "If we get them both and there is no attack on Haven, what happens to the Inquisition?"

"I don't know," I shook my head. "I don't know what happens if we get both, I've never seen that scenario. Corephyus might attack anyway. But we have to try Leliana. It's..." I frowned slightly, remembering what happened in game. The way the Mages and the Templars looked in the digital setting hadn't been that scary. But now I was thinking about how they would look in this strange reality and it was frankly terrifying. "...it's fucked up what he does to them, the group he gets his claws in. But the place we need to go, it's better. A lot better. It's defensible. We can really build the Inquisition there. It's called Skyhold and I know it's in the north in the mountains. I could point out it's general location on a map."

"And if we found this Skyhold without Solas help?"

"I don't know. It's not a scenario I've seen. He cannot know about me, that I know who he really is, not until we get there. Then I'll tell you all everything I know and you can handle him as you see fit." I paused. "I don't think it's good if we have to fight him and Corephyus at the same time. I think that might be really bad actually." Or maybe not. Maybe if we got to Solas in time, he would still be in the process of getting his powers back and we could take him. At least I hoped.

Leliana lapsed into silence again. Even though she was still looking at me, I could almost see the wheels in her head turning. Finally she spoke, "Your reaction at the conclave, to see the destruction felt genuine. Did you know that was going to happen?"

I paused and then I nodded, "Yes. But I'd never... seen it, not like that," I said very quietly. "And I wasn't... here to stop it. To warn you. I would have, Leliana, but I got here after. I started out this journey in the Fade, after it had all gone down."

"Where were you? You must know that we've been unable to find any traces of your family."

"You won't. I'm... not from Thedas." I sighed. "Look where I'm from, it's not important right now. I'll explain more, or at least I'll try once we get to Skyhold. I swear it Leliana."

"It is to Josephine," I swore I could almost detect a slight trace of amusement in her tone. "The ancestry of our Herald is something of importance to diplomatic relations."

I groaned, lifting my eyes briefly to the ceiling before I looked back at her. "Just... tell her I'm an Orphan or something. I've got no family here, no friends, I'm alone. It's just me."

“You’re not alone, Simone,” Leliana said quietly and something in her tone, the way she was looking at me sparked an awareness in my body that I can’t explain. It was a fleeting moment, gone in the next breath as she continued in her more usual tone, “Show me where this Skyhold is before you leave in the morning. I will send one of my trusted Agents to seek it out. Solas need not be the wiser. You’ve already suggested we find a way to approach both the Mages and Templars and I agree it is a good idea, even if can’t be achieved. Is there a preference to which group can help us more?”

I paused to consider that and finally shook my head. “No. Either group will be able to help us seal the breach.” At least, that’s how it had worked in game. But, what if here was different? I chewed my lower lip.

Leliana caught my expression. “Simone?”

“I’m just thinking, that what I’ve seen of the situation... things are a little different,” I tried to explain, “Not everything is happening exactly the way I saw it. Like Roderick for example. I knew he was a dick, but I never saw that he would do what he did to me. I’m worried that some parts of what I know might be different too. I just... don’t want to make the wrong call. It’s too important.”

Leliana came closer to me and there came that awareness again. I looked up at her, and my train of thought derailed completely as I was reminded how beautiful she was. I know it sounds stupid, but you try holding onto your train of thought when someone like Leliana is standing so close to you, you could touch her. Kiss her... oh god, was I blushing?

“From what I know of foresight,” she said, hopefully oblivious to the effect she had on me, “The mere knowledge of events can change their outcomes. Make the call you think is right with the information you have.”

My brief silence after her words was to get my thoughts back to where they should be, and consider what she said. This was no small thing, and I was really starting to feel the weight of my decisions. Not only did I genuinely want to help, to actually close this Breech and stop all the bad guys, but I needed to get home. I needed to get to the Winter Palace and find Morrigan. “Okay,” I said finally. “We go after both. But I can’t be in two places at once, and we need do to this kind of simultaneously once we have enough influence to do so. I’ll go after the Mages in Redcliff, someone else will have to go to the Templars. There will probably be a fight, at both places unless maybe we can prevent that, but I don’t know how.”

“It may be better for us not to change too many variables, so what you know remains as relevant as possible. The information in your head is as powerful a weapon as the mark on your hand,” Leliana touched the back of my hand that bore the mark. She was wearing her gloves, and I found myself wanting to feel - nope, not going there. Stop it, Simone.

I looked down at the small contact, and back up to her eyes. “Okay. So I go to the Hinterlands tomorrow and I close rifts and start spreading the Inquisitions name. Get our street cred up.”

“Good. There is much I can do with the information you shared, and I will ensure Solas is none the wiser.” She dropped her hand. “Is there anything else?”

I shook my head. “I think I’ve said enough for now.”

“Are you sleeping any better?”

Her question took me by surprise. “What?”

“You cry out some nights, in your sleep. It is in the reports from your personal guard,” Leliana said in a softer tone.

“Oh goddess,” I covered my face with my hands. I didn’t know my nightmares were loud.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” Leliana came closer and I felt her hand on the side of my shoulder. “Was it the first time someone has hurt you like that?”

I swallowed hard. Her words took me back to that nightmare and I couldn’t control the little tremble that went through me. Nor could I find my voice. I dropped my hands, and nodded, but I couldn’t look at her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It will get easier, the stronger you get. The more control you take back. And time.”

She’d already seen me at my worst, that might have been why my body decided it was a great idea to come closer and the next thing I knew I had my arms around her, hugging her. Despite what had caused my movement, the best part about that was she hugged me back, her arms folding around me easily. It was possible I was imagining it, but the way she held me felt protective and comforting.

“Sometimes when I close my eyes, it doesn’t matter how exhausted I am, I still see his face,” I admitted barely above a whisper. “How angry he was, the stench of the liquor on his breath. Then it’s his fist and in my nightmare you never come and it just gets worse and-”

“Shh. Shh. It’s all right.” Her hand cradled the back of my head, her opposite arm drawing tighter around me. She held me in silence a short moment before she said, “We made a mistake with you. I watched you nearly give your life to close the breach. We thought we would be safe in Haven to start working and Roderick...” there was a touch of anger in her tone. “We failed you. I failed you. I will not make that mistake again.”

Hearing her say that was doing all kinds of stupid things to my insides. I'm not sure if it was possible to hold her tighter than I currently was, but I was trying. "You didn't fail me. None of you did. I've got this... foresight thing going on and not even I can see everything that's coming. You came for me, and you didn't believe his lies. That's..." I swallowed hard and lifted my head from her shoulder to look at her. "I don't think I ever really thanked you for that," I said it quietly.

Have you ever gotten lost looking at someone? There's no way to describe it, there really isn't. How charged those moments are when you feel like you're being pulled into another person. She met my gaze and in that moment it felt like she wanted me too. That knowledge was shattering. I could have kissed her. I wanted to, despite how bad of an idea that was. Her gloved hand touched my cheek and I pressed against it, closing my eyes so I didn't do something stupid.

"You don't have to thank me." There was a huskiness to her tone that was so arousing I couldn't stop the embarrassing shiver that shot down my spine. "Your bravery is inspiring, and that is not something that can be taught. If you need to talk, I'm here." She let her hand drop, easing her grip on me.

I understood and drawing in a calming breath (or trying to at least) I let her go, opening my eyes to look at her.

Her smile was faint, but it was there. "I will bid you good night, Herald,"

I mimicked her smile. "Good night, Leliana. And thank you. Really. Thank you."

She stepped around me, walking over to the door but before she reached it paused. She didn't look back at me when she said, "I did not kill Butler."

I swallowed hard, relief crashing into me. "I'm really glad Leliana. It was the right call."

"We shall see. Try and sleep well, Simone." She let herself out.

I'm not sure how long I stood there, smiling like an idiot at the closed door, but eventually just how tired I was reminded me what kind of a day I had ahead of me, and I got some sleep.

To Be Continued...