

Schala

Inspired by the best-selling BioWare video game
series *Dragon Age*

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Edited by: Karin Weekes

My mother used to tell us tales about the hooded man. Whenever we misbehaved, she pinched our ears and made us sit down at her feet. With a stern glare, she retold the same story. Time and again, she warned us of what was to come if we didn't behave.

She embellished certain aspects of the tale over the years—sometimes the children were ripped from their families, never to be heard from again, other times, the children's heads were lopped off at the feet of a grieving mother—but the crux of the story remained the same: along came the righteous man in shiny plated armor, the banisher of evil. We would know him by the crest he bore, which instilled fear into the hearts of the wicked.

I never believed her, of course, but my baby brother swallowed every word as though told by Andraste herself. All mother ever need do was narrow her eyes in his direction, and he became mum's perfect little angel.

I suppose I could have shown her more respect, but her childish ramblings of mythical punishment merely infuriated me. I grew tired of mum's inability to recognize that I was aging and becoming a woman. She seemed keen to stunt my development into adulthood, and the anger I felt nestled in the pit of my belly. It begged me to lash out at my mother for trying to control me with scare tactics and fairy tales.

The resentment I felt grew as years passed and I could not understand why. Perhaps it was the price of growing up without a father, which was something that I had never entirely forgiven mother for.

I was not rebellious by nature, but as I matured, I felt the increasing need to assert my dominance. I always believed that I was meant for something greater than the life I was given. I wanted to open my cage and fly away and escape the horrendous world of poverty that surrounded us... but she would not have it. My mother would have confined me to her side until she perished if it were up to her, and that truth only drove us farther apart.

The quarrels with my mother continued throughout my adolescence, but I believed that they were harmless. And they were... at first. I remember the terror in my baby brother's eyes every time mum and I had a row. He would cower in a corner, wrap his arms around his knees, and bury his face between them.

"She'll bring the hooded man," he would cry. "You must stop this, Schala!"

My sweet, naïve baby brother's concern was genuine. I could see it in his bulging eyes and trembling bottom lip. He fought valiantly to hold back his tears because mum had always told him that men do not weep.

I remember the year that winter had come early and without warning. Cloudbursts of rain turned to shards of ice as they fell and shredded our modest crops within a mere day's passing. Without the spoils of our garden to sell at the markets, we had no coin to purchase food and I thought that we would surely starve. Mother did not want to bear her worry in front of her children, but she could not hide it from me.

Our situation hit my baby brother the hardest because he was a growing lad in need of sustenance. As a young man of fourteen years, he didn't particularly care for being referred to as a "baby brother" anymore, but he'd let me get away with it provided no one else was around. One evening, his stomach roared so loudly that even the hogs in the pen took notice. His cheeks flushed and he apologized. I asked him later why he would apologize for such a thing, and he told me that it had been an inappropriate and selfish expression of his hunger when we all suffered from the same affliction.

I could not take it anymore. My brother's arms were reduced to skin and bone, reminding me of the tree branches too weak to survive the winter that broke off as I passed through the woods. Maker bless his heart, he never once complained, even in those abysmal conditions. He had more right to call himself a man at fourteen than all the lousy drunks in our village combined.

I stared at my mother's near empty coin pouch on the table. I had begged her countless times to send me into town for bread, but she refused. My mother did not intend to be cruel in calculating a budget that, with a little luck, might allow us all to survive until spring. I only wish she had told us that at the time rather than allow our hunger to erode our relationship.

Mum was scared. I know that now. But, I was scared, too, and I could not rationalize her reluctance to purchase food. All I could see was my dear brother starving to death and wasting away before me. A confrontation between Mum and I was inevitable, and the moment had finally arrived.

My mother slapped me when I protested. I will never forget the cold sting of her palm against my cheek. She had never struck me before, no matter how little I heeded her instructions. I reached for the coin pouch again, but my mother clung on to the leather strap like a wild Mabari to a fresh kill. I had thought myself to be stronger than Mum, but I could not free the pouch from her grasp. In retrospect, that very moment was when my life changed forever. How different my life would be today had I simply let go.

A bright blue glow emitted from my arm and swirled from my elbow to the tips of my fingers. An intense heat enveloped the side of my face, though it did not burn. My mother's eyes shot wide open as she let go of the pouch and recoiled.

She moved away from me until her backside met the edge of the counter. She patted blindly against its surface until her grip found the cleaver. Oh, her eyes. I wish I could purge that image from my mind: She looked upon me as an abomination and not her daughter.

I should have been afraid, but I was not. I held my hand in front of my face and basked in the tranquility of its beautiful illumination. I felt stronger, somehow, and yet not all that different from the girl I had always been. Some part of me must have known of this power inside of me all along, but I knew not its full extent. Could I even control it? And why had it taken so long to manifest?

My mother lunged toward me, her fingers curled tight around the cleaver's handle as she waved it over her head. I raised my arms to block her strike and a burst of electricity shot forth from my hand. My mother flew backward and landed hard on the stone floor with a sickening splat. She writhed in pain on the ground as I stood over her. My emotions were torn. I had not wanted this, yet at the same time, I felt so liberated.

A stack of dishes rattled in the cupboard then shattered onto the floor. The energy dissipated from my arm, and the sparks subsided. I heard a crunching noise behind me. I spun around and found my brother slinking away through a wasteland of ceramic shards. Crimson gushed from his left foot. Once our eyes met, he seemed unable to remove his gaze.

I took a step toward him and he backed up. I took another step and he retreated once more. He no longer saw his sister standing before him. I had become a monster that donned his sister's skin. No torture could ever compare with the pain of knowing that a momentary lapse in judgment had cost me my brother's love.

I turned back to check on my mother. Propped up on her elbows, she took in deep, rapid breaths. Her jaw had dropped open like she wanted to scream but couldn't, and fluids leaked

from her eyes and nose. What had I done? I had only wanted to feed our family, but within moments, my world had been torn asunder.

I ran to my room through the crunchy plate fragments and slammed the door shut behind me. I climbed into my bed and leaned against the wall, feeling the cool, bumpy texture against my cheek. I began to cry, something I had not done in many years, but I could not refrain. Had it all just been a bad dream? I squeezed my arm, which was still warm to the touch. No, it had not.

The sound of pounding against my bedroom door jolted me awake. My heart thumped in my throat as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and attempted to collect my wits. With each blast from the other side, the metal door handle bent forward until the lock could no longer withstand the force. The wood splintered as the door ripped clean away from the frame. At the opposite end of a grand mace, there he was: the hooded man. The very man of legend described in my mother's stories. And as I would soon discover... the man of nightmares.

He and his men bound me at the wrists and ankles like a common thief and marched me through the streets of Redcliffe as the townspeople looked on and jeered. Some even threw rotted fruit. The inhumane treatment moved him not at all. I was his trophy on parade, serving as a warning to others like me that still roamed free. My persecution delivered a message: Obey or be punished.

Flecks of dead skin lined the holes in my robes from his studded cudgel. He'd shown no mercy, and I did not assume he would think twice about striking me again. He demonstrated no remorse and clearly felt nothing about roughing up a woman.

Our journey was savage and cruel. He and his men rode on horseback, whilst I was leashed and forced to travel on foot. If I walked too fast, he'd yank the rope slack and choke me to the ground. If I grew tired, he'd jab the butt of his cudgel into my back to keep me moving. I understood our relationship perfectly and was not about to push its boundaries. Should I display the first sign of resistance, my fate was clear.

He lit our path through the pitch-black forest with a flaming torch. The thick tree canopy kept the moonlight and stars from finding a way in. He thought it unsafe to continue and decided to camp for the evening. He and his men rested within the comfort of tents while I was bound to the trunk of a mighty old tree with my arms cinched at my sides. I labored for breath under the constricting rope and hoped that each gasp would be my last.

As I was about to lose consciousness, I heard a male voice say my name. I had thought myself delirious at first, perhaps even slightly mad, but his words continued.

"You must be patient, girl," he said. "You may suffer now, but you will have your retribution soon."

A shadow moved through the forest, darker than the blackness of night. It sent a chill through my body even as it calmed me. I knew, somehow, that the man's words would come to fruition. Everything would be all right. I was going to be all right. My survival depended on me believing that.

Several days passed before we reached the final destination of our voyage: A stone keep, abandoned for several generations and lost to time as nature threatened to reclaim it. The cold winds bit at my exposed skin as my teeth chattered. As raising my arms above my waist caused me great anguish, I could not shelter my body from the extreme temperature. I did not require a healer to know that several of my ribs had been broken.

The hooded man led me down the stairs into a dungeon below, the path lined with empty suits of armor standing watch. He uttered no words, merely affixing his torch to a cradle on the wall and pointing to an open cell. I complied and sat down on the floor with my back pressed against the wall.

He entered the cell and secured my wrists with chains that hung from the walls. He gripped my chin with his thumb and index finger and turned my head from side-to-side. Satisfied with whatever inspection he had performed, he let go and backhanded me across the face. I smiled.

“Your manners do not become a Templar,” I said.

He looked down and ran his hand over the deformed emblem on his armor.

“Oh, yes. I recognize it.” I rattled my chains against the wall. “Your attempt to camouflage your allegiance is rather poor.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, witch,” he said. “But you are not as perceptive as you think. We are not Templars... not anymore.”

“What?”

“This here?” He thumped his chest plate. “Painted over. We have renounced our old ways and started something better outside the eye of the Chantry.”

“That’s preposterous!” I said. “If you’re not taking me to the Circle, then what are your intentions?”

“The Chantry allows your vile brand of filth to pollute the world. It believes that given the right training, you can still become productive members of society, but you and I know differently, don’t we?” The hooded man knelt down beside me. “The Maker did not bless you with these gifts. You have chosen to become a practitioner of evil, and we will not allow it to continue. You can either forfeit your powers and pray for forgiveness, or you can rot away here in this cell. The choice is yours.”

“You’re mad!” I yelled. “I cannot forfeit my powers any more than you can forfeit the grotesque face under that hood! I did not ask for this!”

“Then you shall die here.”

The hooded man walked away and left me in total silence.

I had no window to the world on the other side of those walls. I did not see sunlight in what felt like an eternity. Something festered inside me, boiling to the surface. It grew hard to tame the rabid animal that thrashed against its cage—as time continued to pass, I found myself giving in to it more and more.

While imprisoned, I had contact with only the hooded man and the guard whose duty it was to bring me my meals. During each visit, the hooded man forced me to look into his eyes, as though he were searching for something hidden behind them. He never told me what it was.

“Are you ready to repent, witch?”

“No.”

If he was feeling charitable, he would hit me only once.

The guard fed me by wooden spoon once a day. Much like his commander, he was neither kind nor gentle. He pried my mouth open, shoved spoonfuls of hot stew into my mouth, and then covered my airways until I swallowed it down. He refused to ever make eye contact with me or even speak.

“If you will not even address me, I shall relieve you of your tongue one day,” I warned.

Although the guard did not offer a verbal reply to my threat, he responded by relieving himself on my clothes.

I used to keep track of passing days by counting the number of times I'd been fed, but I lost track once I reached the thousands. My guard, once chestnut-haired and muscular, had greyed around the temples and started to sag. I knew the years were wasting away, and my hope of that promised retribution dwindled.

I wondered what was so special about me. There must have been others, I thought, but every cell around me sat empty. Perhaps others had met a different fate. Perhaps others had not survived the journey at all.

How I craved the sound of another person's voice, if only to block out the screaming that echoed inside my head. I fought to ensure those sounds never passed through my lips. I refused to give the hooded man the satisfaction of hearing my suffering.

He seemed to have lost interest in me. I had not seen hide nor hair of him in quite some time. I knew that even if I were to give in to his demands and "surrender my powers", I would still never see the Circle. No, whatever he had planned for me was far less than noble. The life of an apostate was hard and full of never-ending danger, but I began to see the appeal.

Finally, after years in his dank dungeon being feasted upon by both rat and spider, I lost control. The rabid animal within broke free from its cage. Instead of "curing me", the hooded man had instead given life to something else. Something sinister. Something that he and his band of ex-Templars all feared.

I closed my eyes and focused as much energy as I could summon into my right arm. I trained my ear on the squeaks of a rat gnawing on my foot. I visualized the rodent in my mind's eye until I had a clear image of the little bugger. I transferred the image of the rat to the palm of my hand and held it there. Once I had achieved maximum focus, I squeezed my hand into a fist and popped the rat like a balloon. The rat uttered one last squeak before its insides splattered against my skin. If they wanted a monster, so be it. A monster they would have.

The guard visited me a second time one day. He stood over me and said no words before filling his mouth with saliva and spitting it in my face and hair.

"Urchin," he growled under his breath.

As he turned to walk away, I began to sob. He stopped and turned back to face me.

"Quit yer moaning," he snarled.

"I'm sorry." I rattled my chains. "It's just that these shackles are chaffing my skin. The bone must have poked through my flesh by now. I beg you, show mercy. Allow me a few seconds of respite to soothe my wrist."

The guard scratched his head and took a few steps closer.

"I'm not supposed to," he said.

"I know, but please, sir," I told him. "Have pity on a tired and weak woman."

The guard pulled an iron ring of keys from his hip and knelt down beside me. He inserted the key into the cuff and it fell open, freeing my right hand.

"Thank you." I brushed the side of his face with the tips of my fingers. "How can I ever repay you for such kindness?"

My hand emitted a bright blue glow. I thrust my fingers into the guard's mouth and felt his moist, fleshy tongue beneath my grasp. His eyes grew wide and watery, but I cinched down and ripped his tongue clean from his jaw.

The guard bellowed and covered his mouth, but the blood trickled through the cracks in his fingers like a failing dam. I aimed an energy bolt at the cuff around my other wrist and freed my left hand. I crawled over to the guard, looked him in the eyes and studied his face. I wanted him to be sure he had met the "witch" that brought him to his end.

"Perhaps you wish that you had addressed me properly when I gave you the chance," I said.

Malnourishment and expending my magical energy had left me in a weakened state. Disoriented, I fumbled my way through the dungeon, made all the more difficult by the extinguished torch. However, I would allow no amount of darkness to hinder my escape. I would accept no other outcome than my prevailing. I found the staircase that led from the dungeon of misery to freedom above and began my ascent.

My legs burned as I climbed the stairs. I slid my hands along the stone walls to keep my balance. I refused to let my body give out on me before I could reach the top. Every muscle ached, every joint squealed, but I refused to die that day and there would be no surrender.

The hooded man waited for me at the top of the stairs. Him and about a dozen of his men, all with the same red glow in their eyes, and each aiming the tip of his sword at my throat. As two of the guards rushed towards me, I summoned a ball of lightning into my hand and unleashed it, sending the entire pack flying back. The smell of charred flesh filled me with delight, but I had little time to savor it before I was overwhelmed and detained by the rest of the guards.

They wrapped heavy braided rope around me from my shoulders to my waist. The hooded man sheathed his mace and walked toward me. He tapped the repurposed insignia of the Templars engraved into his armor and then dragged his thumb across his throat. I had been sentenced to death, and I welcomed it.

He barked orders, instructing his men to back away and let him handle me on his own. He took the end of the rope, threw it over his shoulder, and pulled me behind him toward a clearing with practice dummies. I did not resist him. My heart felt no sadness. Instead, I took comfort in seeing the outside world one last time and not perishing alone in a prison.

The snow crunched under my bare feet with each step. Frostbite had long ago claimed my dry, cracked skin and I no longer experienced sensation below the ankles. He took me to a spot between two tall trees and kicked me in the gut. I dropped down to my knees and coughed, watching the steam billow from my exhaled breath. My insides convulsed and my mouth filled with the salty taste of blood.

The hooded man dropped the rope and pulled an ornate blade from his waistband. Too long to be a knife, but too short to be proper a sword, the curved blade was unlike anything I had ever seen. Engraved markings adorned the red and gold handle, and the blade appeared too clean to have ever tasted blood.

"With this ceremonial blade I shall collect the debt that you owe to the Maker, witch." He ran his finger from the hilt to the tip. "You shall pay it with your head."

"I accept this death, but know this... I will hold my gaze upon you from the Fade," I said. "You and I will see each other again."

I closed my eyes as the hooded man raised his weapon overhead. I visualized the last grains of sand spilling out from an hourglass. My time had come to an end. Then, my ears rang from the sound of metal colliding against metal.

"Enough." a stranger's voice said.

When I opened my eyes, a monstrous sword held the hooded man's blade in check, mere inches from my head. The former Templar grunted and applied more pressure, but the stranger fended off his attempt to strike me down with a single hand. The hooded man gave up and stared at the stranger with contempt.

"What is the meaning of this?" The hooded man roared. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"I offer my sincerest apologies, honorable warrior." The stranger sheathed his sword. "I mean not to interfere, but I have come to collect the girl, and it is preferred that her head remain intact."

"Wha--? The girl?" The hooded man spit out in disgust. "And by whose authority do you lay claim to this witch?"

"Why, friend, now it appears as though you do not have any idea who *I* am," the stranger replied.

I looked up and saw my rescuer in full view. His long, raven hair curled and was pulled back into a ponytail that dropped between his shoulder blades. His eyes, the deepest of greens, were hypnotic pools of full of confidence and vigor. A more handsome man I had never before seen, yet, I recognized him instantly.

"Baby brother?" I whispered.

The stranger winked at me, then threw his shoulders back and invited the hooded man to study the griffon emblazoned on his chest.

"But..." The hooded man lowered his blade. "Then you're—"

"Yes," the stranger interrupted. "I have come to conscript this young woman. As a *Templar*, I trust that you have seen to her fine treatment and that I will have no reason to return and investigate you further?"

"I have no quarrel with you, Warden." The hooded man backed away a few steps. "Take her, but I hope you realize the magnitude of your decision. I hope you can live with the malevolence that you are about to set free on the world."

"Duly noted, friend." The stranger untied my bindings and let the rope fall at my feet. "We should be going, Miss. There is much for us to discuss."

The stranger turned his back on the hooded man and walked away. He moved toward a black steed tied to a post just outside the keep in the distance.

"Wait!" I called out as I followed behind him. "I must get something I left behind."

"All right." The stranger mounted his horse. "Fetch it quickly and let's be on our way."

I doubled back to my stone prison. The guards allowed me to pass, and I made my way down the stairs and back into my former cell. I knelt down over the expired guard and snatched his leather coin pouch from his waist. I emptied out the gold coins and collected his severed tongue off the ground. I placed the tongue into the deep pouch, closed it up, and tied it around my neck.

"Thank you," I whispered into the dead guard's ear. "I will gladly accept this generous donation toward a future potion."

I reconvened with the stranger as the hooded man looked on from afar. He wore his anger like a second suit of armor. He still wanted to kill me, but had lost his chance. The feeling was mutual.

"Did you get what you needed?" The stranger asked.

Yes, I did." I patted the pouch around my neck with a gentle touch. "A little going away present of sorts."

“Oh?” He said. “And what little treasure was too tempting to resist?”

“Nothing special,” I said. “Just an old conversation piece.”

The stranger reached into his pack and dropped a pair of boots onto the ground.

“These may not be the right size, but they will at least protect your feet until we reach Amaranthine.” He scooted forward on the saddle to make room. “The markets are bound to have more suitable attire for you, but we can’t very well have you freezing to death before we arrive.”

I slipped my feet into the boots. They were large and fit comically, like a father’s shoes would fit a child, but I was grateful for the protection nonetheless. I had always fancied something a bit more Orlesian in design, but was content to let fashion come at a later date.

The stranger extended his hand to help me climb up. He clicked his heels against the muscular sides of the horse and we were off. I wondered what the future would hold for an outcast like me, but in that moment, I felt something that I had not felt in years: happiness.

“Baby brother, is it really you?” I said.

“I suppose there’s no longer a need to keep up the charade.” He cracked the reins to speed up the horse. “It is good to see you, my dear sister. I would much prefer to address you as ‘Schala’ than ‘witch’.”

“You’re all grown up, brother,” I said. “How long has it been?”

“Well.” He paused. “It’s been seven years since you were taken.”

“Seven years?” I brushed my hair off of my face. “Can this be true?”

“I’m afraid it is, Schala. I am sorry that it took me so long to find you.” He reached back and took my hand. “I never stopped trying to find you, sister, but I was just a boy then. I know that you will probably never be able to forgive our mother, but... well, I’m not sure that I can either.”

For the first time in my life, I shed tears of joy. I had assumed the incident from my youth had left me without a family. But my baby brother had been out there all along.

“Seven years,” I whispered. “That must make you a man of twenty years now.”

“Twenty-one, to be exact.” He squeezed my hand once more, and then returned his grip to the reins. “We will have many missed birthday celebrations to catch up on once we get to Amaranthine.”

“That sounds lovely.” I leaned my head forward to rest against his back. “So, why Amaranthine?”

“Because there is someone there that wants to meet you,” he said. “Is very anxious to, in fact.”

“Meet *me*?” I said. “I am but a peasant. A farmhand. A nobody.”

“Aye, you may be a peasant and a farm hand, but you are far from a nobody.” He grinned. “You will see that for yourself in time.”

“It is so good to see you, baby brother.” My eyelids drooped as the lull of the horse’s gallop filled my ears. “I have so many questions to ask you.”

“I know, and I look forward to answering them,” he said. “But for now, why don’t you try and get some rest? We don’t have many days of peace left. Best to savor them whilst we can.”