

Sebastian – Short Story

Princes aren't meant for chastity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The irony hits me and I stop. It's not that I don't believe. I've been faithful in my own way. I learned the Chant as a boy and can still jump in on any verse. I've tithed faithfully, what little coin I've ever called my own. I've stood up for what is right: I've fought against Tevinter's slavers setting foot in Starkhaven, I've been kind to our elves. And in return, Andraste's gotten me out of a good number of scrapes. It never seemed strange before today to ask Her aid in winning a lady's heart or a bar brawl. But can I truly ask Her to help me escape Her service?

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

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

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

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

I run lightly and silently down the woven Antivan rug. I'm used to moving in darkness. At the end of the hall, a large window is shuttered against the winter chill. The wood is stiff with the dampness and

difficult to move, but a hard shove of my shoulder gets one side opened to the night. There are no trees outside the Kirkwall Chantry, but I'm in luck. One of the outbuildings is wood, and tall enough to use.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I see you got my note."

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

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

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

The templars leave and we are alone in the darkness.

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

"I wrote because I understand how you feel."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But why?"

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

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

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

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

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