In Spite of All This

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In Spite of All This

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Summary

Mara Ingellvar has no place to call home, no one to bury, no lineage to continue. Found in the Necropolis as a toddler under mysterious circumstances, she struggles to find her role in anything. Luckily she has her trusty Wisp at her side.
Until unfortunate circumstances thrust her into the orbit of one Varric Tethras who needs her tenacity to track down or defeat a supposed elven trickster/god.
After losing everything she's ever known and loved, Mara becomes the Rook in Solas's game and gathers a team to finish what history started.
Then she meets Lucanis Dellamorte, the mage killer assassin with an unexpected "demon" tagalong.
And there's just something familiar she can't quite put her finger on...

Notes

Hi! This is the back up to my long fic I started the second I finished Veilguard. (a cross upload since Ao3 is down.) As a long time fan of the series, I have tried to stay true to the Dragon Age vision as best I can with research and occasional obscure references to things found in canon/on the wiki. There will be new characters and old, multiple POVs, the slowest of burns, familiar lines of dialogue and cut scene fill-ins to flesh out what my canon run of the games looks like in my head. Ideally there will be very little rehash of gaming events, and if there is it will be written with my own flavor of how it went down specific to Mara's experience.
Pull up a couch, some snacks, and your best cozy blanket.
This is gonna be a long ride.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Prologue/Meet Mara

Prologue

The dream is always the same. It's dark and a cold hand rests on her tiny chest. Light hovers above her, trilling. She feels safe, despite the yawning void around her. Then the light floats away, and she feels empty and sad.

The hand on her chest feels heavy and the chill is starting to seep into her. Her thoughts get foggier and she's so tired. Her senses start to fade and soon she doesn't care about the cold or the dark or the weight on her chest.

Just as she's about to succumb to the nothingness, she hears a clacking of bones and a hum of voices. She never can make out what they're saying, but the light is suddenly back above her, its movements erratic, seemingly determined to lead the voices this direction. Determined to move the hand off her chest. Determined to keep her attention.

She shivers uncontrollably and struggles to lift her hand up to touch the light. It's just beyond her reach. If she can just touch it, she'll be warm again.

Then she's awake in her bed, arm raised to the ceiling, reaching for something that isn't there.

Chapter 1 – Mara makes a Friend

Mara Ingellvar stared in awe at the cavernous halls that stretched out before her. She'd been found as an infant in one of the tombs housed here, but as far as she could remember she'd never actually visited until today.

The Grand Necropolis was no place for an unruly child.

At least, that's what she'd been told. As soon as she showed an affinity for magic and spirits, suddenly her guardians were eager and more than willing to allow visits. It was this or the circle and it was no secret which one they preferred. After all, the Mourn Watch accepted only the best and Mara showed great promise.

An unearthly fog surrounded vast architecture and motifs of skulls could be found in every direction. She was used to roaming the well lit streets of the more common areas of Nevarra City but today? Today she had a whole new adventure at her fingertips. The Necropolis wasn't particularly well lit, but what little light there was glinted off something high above her. Her eyes immediately spotted what looked like a storage chest, its corner sticking out over a ledge quite a ways up.

She looked around and, seeing that most of the adults seemed to be preoccupied with their various rituals, studies, or visiting mourners, she began to climb.

It was hard at first. Her small hands struggled to get purchase on many of the jagged outcroppings, and she fell multiple times. She dusted herself off and tried again and again, from different angles, sometimes with a running start, others with a barrel or box she confiscated from another room.
Several wisps floated on by, but one stopped to circle her head curiously. It trilled and she smiled at it, leaning in close to whisper.

“I’m trying to get to *that*.” She pointed up at the chest. The wisp bobbed for a moment before blinking out of sight and reappearing at a ledge slightly out of reach.

She bit her lip as she backed up, trying to get a better view. Her bright eyes narrowed in concentration as she mapped the path she needed. Taking a deep breath, she ran at the wall, using the momentum to scramble up until she grasped the bottom of the rail where the wisp waited. She grunted with the effort as she inched her way over to an open edge and threw her legs up and over. The little ball of light trilled and brightened before disappearing.

She looked up. This place was HUGE, but she wasn’t going to let anything keep her away from her goal. The wisp reappeared above her, trembling, as though in excitement, and it spurred her on. After several failed attempts, Mara finally got to the next ledge where the wisp bounced again, disappearing then reappearing a little higher. Sweat beaded on her brow as she focused on each hand hold, hugging the wall as she carefully made her way across narrow ledges. With each milestone she reached, the wisp trilled in pride.

Or that’s what she liked to think.

She soon found the object of her focus out of her reach as she stared at the chasm between her and the next ledge. It was too far to jump and there was nothing around for her to use as a makeshift bridge. Stomping her foot in frustration, she eyed the shiny box. She was so close!

Mara slumped down and racked her brain for ideas, when the wisp hurried over and insistently tugged her sleeve. Giggling, she softly batted it away.

“Hey! Don’t do that. I can’t float over there like you can, silly.” She sighed. “That would make this a lot easier, though. I wish I was a wisp! Or that I could fly. I bet you guys see a lot of interesting things, especially since you probably travel through the Fade too!”

The wisp bobbed for a bit then disappeared once again. Mara looked around expectantly to see where it would pop up next. The wait stretched on and she came to the conclusion that it wasn’t coming back. She sighed in disappointment and kicked a pebble over the ledge.

Her ears perked up when she heard the pebble hit something below. Strange. She should be too high up to be able to hear it hit the ground. Confused and curious, she peaked over the edge and gasped. There were floating stones right below her, nearly in a perfect row, leading right to a ledge across the gap.

“What….?” She glimpsed the wisp hovering near one of the floating stones. “Did you put these here?”

It started to blink in and out of the air, and Mara sensed its urgency. She clambered down and leaped across each stone, landing precariously and catching herself on each. She was almost to the other side when the final stone disappeared out from under her as she started her final jump. She caught the edge of the outcropping and scrambled to pull herself up. After a few moments of straining and grasping and pushing up with her legs, she felt a small tug on the back of her shirt as the wisp attempted to lift her. With its help, Mara managed to hoist herself up onto the ledge. She lay there catching her breath.

That was close.

Shaking slightly from the adrenaline of nearly falling to her death, Mara stood and dusted herself off. The wisp zig-zagged in front of her, eager and waiting for her to catch up. She walked over to the large chest. How it came to be here was a story lost to time, she was sure. Everything in the Necropolis seemed ancient, yet timeless. This abandoned old box was no exception.

She turned to the wisp and held out her hands to cup it and bring closer to her.

“Thanks for your help!” She beamed. ”Should we see what’s inside?”

The wisp zoomed toward the lock and vibrated slightly in excitement. After a few tries trying to pick the lock, pull the lock off, freeze it, and burn it, Mara nearly gave up until she finally jumped up and gave it a good kick. It popped open.

She stared in bafflement. She wasn’t expecting that to actually work. She felt a twinge of guilt about kicking an old relic. The feeling subsided quickly, however, when she saw what was inside.

It was an old but sharp looking simple dagger with gold filigree on the handle. Her fingers tingled as she gripped it. Remnants of magic lingered within and she realized it must be an old mage blade. Mara hadn’t had much training yet, but she’d recognized its purpose and its opportunity. With this mage blade, now she could practice melee magic without getting permission first.

Her guardians didn’t have to know.

She grinned mischievously and looked at the wisp. “I'm Mara. You and me? We’re gonna do great things. Can you summon floating rocks anywhere you want?”

The wisp circled her head and Mara chose to believe it was bobbing in approval.

Over the course of many subsequent visits to the Grand Necropolis, Mara developed a bond with the adventurous wisp. As soon as she arrived, she’d immediately look for it amongst the

others. Though they all looked like similar orbs of light, she always knew which one was hers. It had an energy about it that matched her own.

Here in the Necropolis, her running feet became a familiar rhythm to its patrons and her smile a welcome beacon to its many inhabitants.

“There goes young Ingellvar. Wonder what she’s found this time?” Some said.

“She’ll need to slow down one of these days, I don’t think the Necropolis can expand fast enough to keep up with her!” Others joked.

She became well-acquainted with the spirits that lingered and the undead who roamed the halls. Vorgoth often accepted small trinkets she found and Myrna was quick to give her tasks to keep her out of the way of visiting dignitaries. Life among the undead became her status quo and Mara’s visits were rarely marked without the sight of her wisp hovering nearby.

“YOUR RELENTLESS DETERMINATION MUST HAVE SUMMONED IT” Vorgoth commented once as they traded her a small bag of candied sage for an old compendium of the dead she’d found lying on a ledge in a ravine near the library.

But Mara had shrugged and insisted “It was already here when I showed up” before bounding off again, sweet treat already half consumed and wisp gliding along beside her.

As she left childhood behind and entered adolescence, she was sent to the Circle in Nevarra City for “foundational training” that would prepare her for the more rigorous lessons the Mourn Watch offered. It was two years before she was able to return to the Grand Necropolis itself and she worried the wisp would forget about her.

However, the day she walked back through the enchanted doors, her wisp came zipping over as though she’d never left, dropping a rodent skull and some shiny beads into her hands and trilling loudly. It was clear it was eager for the adventures to resume. She threaded the skull and beads into a necklace and, with her wisp leading the way, ran off to see how much they could explore before training took most of her time again.

Then adolescence bloomed into adulthood and for a mage as talented with spirits and as familiar with the Necropolis and its patrons as she was, joining the Mourn Watch officially seemed like the logical choice for her future. She accepted the badge with pride.

She felt fiercely protective of this place. People did important work here and she wanted to keep them safe. It housed a certainty and a mystery she knew she would never solve. Death was both a cold familiarity and a complete stranger and ultimately, the Grand Necropolis was where she began and, Maker willing, it would be where she ended.

Chapter 2: Training and Transformation

Chapter Summary

If Mara were to recount her time in the Mourn Watch.

Chapter 2 – Training and Transformation

Though it had been an easy choice, her training was not without struggle.

Late nights in the library studying texts had her tearing her hair out trying to keep all the nobility straight, memorizing the words of each distinct funerary ritual and ascertain the differences between the various sub-species of every herb used in each.

She was touched when her wisp would bring her extra parchment and ink when she ran out of room for her notes. Sometimes she'd find a little snack sitting on the corner of the table when it wasn't there before.

If a book was especially difficult to reach, she'd be on her tiptoes and stretching as far as she could and her wisp would pull the binding out just enough for her to grasp it and pull it down. Even though their days of whimsical exploration were over, it still seemed determined to help her succeed at every task.

Magic and combat training were no less challenging.

Mara often found herself getting acquainted with the ground as she had not yet found the trick to getting out of the way of incoming strikes.

"You would think," she grumbled to Wisp after a particularly nasty bout with one of the older students, "that after all those alley fights in the city, I'd be better at this part."

Wisp simply jittered in amusement as she limped to the healer's office.

"Oh you think it's funny?"

The little ball of energy nestled in her arms, feather-light and tingly, trilling what Mara thought might be encouragement.

She sighed, "Yeah, I suppose you're right. Benedici's face *was* delightfully aghast when I took him down with me. At least this time he wasn't standing over me gloating."

Wisp dimmed a little before chiming firmly.

Mara hummed in agreement. “I know, he’s a complete prick.”

Weeks of nursing bruises from poor timing lead her to seek out extra training sessions. When the instructors were busy, she recruited some of the skeletons to her cause, trading pickaxes for practice swords. A visiting spirit of Valor found the prospect engaging and heartily joined in, agreeing to live on in a recently interred army recruit who had died bravely in a battle against Orlesian trespassers.

It wasn’t perfect, but practicing in her spare time paid off and the first time she successfully dodged Valor’s aggressive swings, her confidence grew.

“You’ve successfully learned how to use your feet. Well done! Soon you’ll be conquering dragons!” said Valor, enthusiastically. Mara gave it a suspicious side-eye, uncertain whether it was a compliment or sarcasm, but it beamed back at her and joined the skeletons in clapping. Her wisp glowed brightly as it settled near her shoulder, its approval obvious.

Several more weeks of extra practice also gleaned a new trick when she discovered that if she pulled on the Fade just so, she could teleport a small distance away. She wasn’t skilled enough for a full Fade step, but her adrenaline fed into her magic enough when she had close calls that she could manage an extra few feet when she dodged. She found it gave her an edge against some of the more traditionally trained students, giving her opportunities to strike at their openings with less risk.

Every goal met only fueled her further. During training bouts, she always looked for moments to strike. Her opponents were her colleagues but she was going to WIN, no matter how many practices it took.

And always, her wisp would be floating nearby, watching. It became their little ritual after practice; Mara, all sweaty and breathing hard, would be met with a cup offered by Wisp. It was empty every time, which Mara found hilarious, but was grateful all the same. She’d fill it with water and drink, Wisp would take it back and hide it away until next time. Where it went every time was a mystery, and she half-wondered if it had a stash of empty cups sitting around somewhere in the Fade. That it had noticed her need for one after sparring was endearing.

Even after combat training ended, things were never boring.

Especially when her wisp started…changing.

Over time, she noticed her wisp was becoming more than just a small ball of light. When they were alone, off in some of the more remote areas of the Necropolis, it would grow tendrils, like veins of light, and Mara often caught it trying to mimic her gestures. She thought it looked more like a spirit than a wisp in these moments. And there were times when she could swear she heard whispers or saw concepts in her mind, forming a kind of communication between the two of them. It worried and fascinated her.

“Do wisps ever…evolve, Professor?” Mara asked one of her professors after a particularly interesting presentation.

He looked at her, lost in thought, before answering. “Well now, that is an interesting question! I would like to believe that wisps can become more than what they are. It’s commonly believed that wisps are a sliver of a thought that once was. Others posit a wisp is a demon that has lost its power; either it has existed in our world for too long without finding a true host or it has been destroyed.”

He began to wander the room, hands behind his back, as he pondered. “If wisps are indeed a sliver of thought, perhaps that thought can grow to become a memory? Then a series of feelings? Then, perhaps, a full-fledged creature? If it used to be a spirit or demon, it stands to reason that, like spirits, they could be drawn to those that reflect their former nature!”

Mara nodded absently, thinking out loud, “And maybe by being around their former nature, they could remember and then eventually return to or become themselves again?”

“What a marvelous thought!" The professor beamed, "Sadly, I don’t know of any instances of that happening, but surely it’s possible? For example, I’ve always believed my assistant is more than just his curiosity. He shows so much more awareness than many of my colleagues give him credit for!”

He motioned to one of the working skeletons but Mara wasn’t really paying attention. She had already formed a plan in her head and gathered her things.

Mara lead her wisp to a currently deserted area of the Necropolis. Mid-day meal would end soon, so she quickly washed her hands of the juice from the blood orange she’d saved from that morning. Its sticky sweetness had lingered on her fingers and she used the last of the water in her cup to wet her handkerchief.

"That’s better. Now.” She held out a hand, palm out and fingers spread. Her not-quite-a-wisp-anymore looked at it then at her and sent the concept of a question to her mind.

Mara nodded encouragingly, “I want to try something. Can you…make a hand? Like mine, I mean?”

The wisp reached with its tendrily arms and firmly wrapped three offshoots around her palm. It wasn’t unpleasant. Each tendril felt like cool water against her skin, tingling with energy.

Mara watched, fascinated, as three turned into four, then five offshoots, each climbing slowly up her fingers as though following a mold. It was strangely beautiful, seeing each tendril eventually form into a recognizable finger, mirroring hers.

Once it formed a full hand, Mara gave a little gasp as the wisp grasped her hand, holding it firmly. She giggled softly, pleased with the results and slowly shook her hand up and down. The wisp caught on and shook it vigorously. A little too vigorously as she felt a sharp pain in her shoulder from being pulled too hard. Mara winced and the wisp immediately let go and vibrated in alarm.

Hurt. Mara?

She froze for a second as she registered that, for the first time, she was hearing its voice clearly in her mind. It was hard to describe the sensation. The echoey words were quiet but, like an intrusive thought, came to the front of everything else. Hard to ignore.

Yet another development that had Mara in awe.

She chuckled as she reassured it. “I’m ok! Just be gentle, like this.”

Mara held out her hand again, but the wisp immediately returned to its ball form as several Necromancers walked around the corner.

One of them recognized her and called to her as they passed. “Ah! Ingellvar, I believe Myrna was looking for you. Some wisps have been scattering bones again.”

Mara sighed then nodded. “Thanks, I’ll take care of it.”

Yet another job to be done.

Once they were out of sight, Mara cupped her hands so the wisp could settle into them.

“What are you afraid of?” she asked, curiously. It never seemed to be anything but a normal ball of light, like every other wisp, around everyone else. It was only when they were alone that its other form would take shape.

The wisp scoffed indignantly. Or rather, Mara thought that’s what it felt. Non-verbal reactions weren’t as easy to understand.

“Ok. Not afraid. Then...why do you hide your...new...self?” She struggled to put into words the concept of what she observed.

Do not want. To become. Something I am not. Others may. Interfere.

Mara stared. That was more complex than anything she’d gotten from it before.

“I know many of my colleagues and professors would be very interested to track your progress in becoming….whatever this is. Maybe they could help?”

Do it myself. No one else, the wisp stated firmly.

Mara smiled softly, “You’re really determined to find out on your own?”

The wisp said nothing, but its glow seemed brighten.

She nodded. “I get that. I’ve never enjoyed others telling me what to do either.”

She released the wisp and looked at her hand, deep in thought as she realized, guiltily, her plan was exactly what the wisp didn’t want. If it was indeed trying to return to a previous

form, then teaching it to mirror her was an unwelcome interference. She dipped her head and took a deep breath. “Sorry.”

The wisp silently bobbed about before she heard *No. I...like what you be. Maybe I am. What you be.*

Mara didn’t fully understand what it meant, but her heart warmed and her face flushed as she shook her head. “Only be what you are. Because I think you’re remarkable. I can’t wait to see what or who you become.”

The wisp glowed brighter and warmer and a few tendrils peaked their way out, forming a semblance of a hand.

Maybe I be... Yours.

And it carefully, tenderly, grasped her hand, lifting it up and intertwining their fingers. They stayed like that for the briefest of moments, before it dropped her hand and zoomed off, giddy with energy, off to do what, Mara could only wonder.

Clasping that same hand to her fluttering chest, she gazed after it, silently fiddling with her necklace, a tender smile forming at the corners of her lips. Once her heart slowed down, she spun and ran off to take care of the wayward bones, remnants of her smile still lingering.

Chapter 3: Let's Go See the World

Chapter Summary

Mara makes a decision

Chapter 3 – Let’s go see the world

(Several years later)

“Spirits of Mischief are aggravating little tyrants.” Mara muttered to herself, annoyed. Her job that day consisted of retrieving and rehoming a restless spirit wreaking havoc in one of the lesser tombs.

It had taken most of the day, primarily because the enchanted vessel that originally housed it had been shattered, and she needed to acquire a new one. Which couldn’t be found anywhere. So, improvising, Mara had grabbed a similar vessel and tricked the spirit into occupying that one while she put wards on it to keep it trapped. Then she gathered up the shards of the old one and brought both to a more experienced colleague and dumped them on the desk. In her haste to be rid of it, the vessel cracked and the spirit of Mischief escaped. Again.

Thus she was forced to endure its endless pranks and violations of personal space as a distraction, while the other Watchers hastily fused the old and new vessel together with more intricate wards. In the end, it was all handled, but Mara had quit for the day and headed to her quarters. She wanted a treat and some rest and some quiet.

She hadn’t expected to find Myrna and Vorgoth waiting at her door with bad news.

“What do you mean I have to leave?” Mara was taken aback.

“Just to travel," Myrna insisted. "See the world for a time, until their tempers cool. ”

Mara’s felt like she’d been punched in the gut. “See the – Myrna this is my home! All I did was protect it, I don’t -”

Myrna nodded. “What you did ultimately saved lives and no one is disputing that, however-”

THE DELICATE BALANCE IS UPSET, Vorgoth rumbled.

Mara glared at them both, furious. Her mood hadn’t been great to begin with and this news only darkened it further. She was unwilling to give up the fight. “Upset? You can tell the nobility to go f-”

“It’s not permanent,” Myrna interjected firmly. “But we must insist. For your safety, if anything else.”

She softened when Mara stilled into stony silence. “See this as an opportunity for new adventures. You’ve always had a spirit of determination about you, a drive to be more than what you are. Put it to the test.”

YOU MAY FIND WHAT YOU SEEK, Vorgoth offered before disappearing.

Myrna gently put a hand on Mara’s cheek. “The Mourn Watch will always have a place for you. But right now that place is elsewhere. Say your farewells. You leave tonight.” And with that, she was gone.

Mara just stood there, absently toying with the beads on her necklace as she felt panic worming its way up to the surface. She was torn. Myrna was right. She had always wanted to explore the world, but Nevarra was all she knew. The Necropolis had been her home. It was where she’d been found as a baby, it was where she met her wisp, it was where she studied and trained and worked. Her life was here.

But she could never be still. Something else called to her.

She enjoyed doing the rituals and honorific traditions for others—it was one of the nicer parts of her job—but she felt no real connection to it. Celebrating and honoring a dead ancestor for herself wasn’t something she had any experience with. Being found in a tomb as an infant wasn’t exactly normal and as far as she knew there were no clues to her parentage or how she’d ended up there. She had no one to mourn. No one to bury. She was a blank slate with only the future to honor. But a future where she was made to leave? She’d wanted to make that choice for herself, not have it thrust upon her.

Her mounting panic turned back into anger. This shouldn’t be happening. Her role in the Mourn Watch took on many forms, but the one she took personally was protection.

Ending the undead rebellion was part of that. The war had been stifling everything from trade to travel. Funerary preparations were backed up for months. Construction on new tombs was halted. Studies and normal assignments had to be put on hold just to handle all the restless spirits they’d dredged up. The past was getting in the way of the future. The undead nobles’ political spat and desire for power threatened everything she cared about and waiting for the upper echelons of Nevarran society to finish their own politicking and handle the problem was costing lives with every passing day. All she'd done was take matters into her own hands and hit the problem head on. Her methods may have been unorthodox, and definitely above her pay grade, but it had worked.

Who knew the aristocracy didn’t appreciate their delicate toes being stepped on, even in their afterlife?

Groaning in frustration, she grabbed her travel pack, mostly unused before now, and started to toss in bare essentials. Each item she put in was tossed with more force than the last. Mara felt defeated and bitter as she looked around her room at the many books and trinkets she’d collected over the years. Posters of anatomical sketches she'd done of bones and various

creatures covered the walls. Ancient coins she'd collected sat in a decorative bowl. A potted flower wilted in a worn copper mug engraved with a hanged man—an odd treasure Wisp had dropped into her lap a long time ago.

She'd made the effort to make this room hers, and now she didn't know if or when she'd ever see it again.

She should take something to remind her of home. When her gaze settled on an old mage blade, propped neatly against a book about wisps, her anger melted into dread.

And what of Wisp? It had made so much progress; it was nearly her size now, beautifully formed like a spirit, with branches of tendrils starting to become something more coherent. Its face was not yet solidified, but a semblance of features was starting to form. She couldn't imagine not being there when it finished. It was her confidante. Her oldest and dearest friend.

Well, her only real friend, if she was honest with herself. It pushed her and supported her and appeared whenever she was on the cusp of success and celebrated with her when she succeeded and comforted her when she failed. It never let her give up. They had spent nearly her whole life together.

How could she leave it? How long would she be gone? What would happen to it while she was gone? Who could she possibly entrust its care to?

Mara. Leave?

She whirled around. Her wisp was there, floating in the corner, just a glowing ball right now.

It floated toward her, insistently. *Mara. Stay. We are together. I am what you be!*

She bit her lip, tears threatening to spill. Mara still didn't understand what it meant, though it had tried to explain many times.

She held out a cupped hand, but the wisp ignored it and vibrated in anger. Tendrils creeped out, forming limbs, then hands. Hands that gestured wildly and a body that shimmered in its frustration.

Salt. And regret. Mara. STAY.

She dropped her hand and backed away, shaking her head. "I can't. I have to go. I don't get a choice."

As quickly as it had formed, her wisp lost its spirit shape, returning to a ball of light, quivering, agitated, insistent. It didn't understand and she couldn't help feeling like she'd betrayed it.

She turned away, hands clenched as she shoved down the guilt. She didn't want to be the cause of its suffering. Dejectedly, Mara decided on the blade and the book and stuffed them into her pack. She had been provided with a newer, nicer blade when she'd been fully instated to the Mourn Watch, but she couldn't bear to give up the reminder of their first adventure together.

“It’ll be ok.” She said, unconvincingly as her voice broke. “I’ll be back soon! I’m sure undead nobility don’t take long to get over grudges.”

The wisp threw a shoe at her. *Smells like LIES.*

Mara choked out a laugh that turned into a little sob as she picked up the shoe and put it into her pack as well. The wisp brought her its mate, which she accepted gratefully. She offered her hand again but it flitted away, still upset.

Stricken, she wrapped her arms around herself, hoping it would ground her. “Maker, this is so stupid. I know there are things happening out there in the world, I’ve heard patrons talking about it: Rifts in the Fade, cultists raving about gods... I should be excited to finally get out there. I just…” *don’t want to go alone.* The words went unsaid.

That was the true source of her conflict. Her fear of being alone. It was a rare sensation since her wisp had practically been with her every single moment. But there were times, at night, especially during her short time at the circle, when the fear settled into her chest and the walls had not closed in but opened up too wide. Floating in the void with no one, and intrusive thoughts pounding away: Poor little orphan. Too busy running around to make real friends, too restless to connect. No history. No lineage. No traditions. A nobody that no one will love.

Wisp must have seen her distress. Lost in her spiraling, she hadn’t realized she’d begun shaking, and it zoomed over to her lifting a blanket.

Her sweet, reliable wisp. She took the proffered blanket, taking the time to feel its textures and keep her in the present. Then she folded it and set it aside as she realized there was no way she could possibly leave her friend behind.

She asked, hesitantly, afraid of the answer. “Could...could you come with me? Is that possible?”

She didn’t know if it even could travel outside the Necropolis. Here the veil was thin, allowing wisps and spirits to cross back and forth with relative ease. But out there? She wasn’t sure. Wisps existed in many places in Thedas, but not everywhere. And she was almost certain Vorgoth would disapprove. Myrna definitely would. Wisps and spirits of the Necropolis were to be protected. They were an integral piece of the system.

I GO. WITH MARA. Her wisp crooned and grew tendrils that grasped at her hair, her hands, her face. It seemed offended by her tears and frantically swiped at them.

Mara gave a watery chuckle and wiped her face, looking more determined as she stood.

Fuck the rules. Fuck what others thought. She was already in trouble, at least she could do one thing to make it bearable.

“Alright." She put her hands on her hips. They were really doing this. "You and me. Let’s go see the world.”

Chapter 4: The Job

Chapter Summary

Mara meets Varric and Harding

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 4- The Job

It didn't take long for Mara to realize that traveling with her wisp was going to be far more dangerous than she'd originally anticipated. Even when it seemed the lack of closeness to the veil proved not to be an issue, she was dismayed to find that Venatori were everywhere she went. Having never left Nevarra City, she'd not known how prevalent nor how audacious the cultists had become. Rumors of blood rituals and increased demon sightings passed in hushed whispers amongst the people of every town and market.

Mara was grateful she'd brought her book of wards. She had a feeling she'd need to brush up on the higher level ones if they were going to make it very far. At her request, her wisp had agreed to hide whenever they were in a city or town, choosing to stay near her dagger, both hoping its magical energy would mask its presence and the cloak would hide the glow. Historically, cultists got weird ideas about creatures from the Fade. She didn't want to risk anything happening to her friend.

She stopped at a tavern, a week's journey away from Nevarra City, heading toward Tevinter. She froze as she realized it was full of Venatori soldiers, drinking and laughing. Pulling her cloak closer and keeping her hood up, she mumbled an order to the bartender and sat near an exit, keeping as inconspicuous as possible. Two dwarves were chatting at the bar; the red-head looking around as cautiously as Mara felt, the other older gentleman seeming at ease though his hand stayed close to his giant crossbow.

Careful. Those two. Looking for trouble.

Mara tensed, but forced herself to ease into a polite smile when her food arrived. She grabbed the mug and downed a gulp right as a fight broke out. She wasn't sure what started it but the Venatori seemed particularly interested in the dwarves as they brandished their curved blades, yelling threats and taunts. The older gentleman cocked and fired his crossbow, taking out the closest one. The sound of it reverberated throughout the small room. It was like no other

crossbow Mara had ever seen, its sheer size and weight seemingly too much for the old man. The redhead turned and shot a cultist to her left with her short bow.

“You’re not looking good old friend,” she said, stealing a glance at him as she let her arrow fly, concerned teasing in her voice.

The man turned and leaned on the bar for support, grabbed his drink and as he turned back to retort, the redhead stole it out of his hands.

“This will take more than you and me,” she grunted, back handing another soldier in the face with it.

Hmmm. Good trouble. Her wisp hummed in approval.

Mara didn’t agree as she eyed her surroundings. So far none of them had so much as glanced her way, maybe it wasn’t too late to sneak out.

The older gentleman was still trying to catch his breath as he asked “Ok, what are you thinking?”

The redhead shot another one, but Mara didn’t get to hear her reply.

One of the soldiers had tried sneaking up behind the older man and Mara wasn’t going to let that happen. She entered the fray as she stood up and disarmed him. Two others ran at her, and she bashed their heads together, stealing one of their blades and using it to punch the next one in the face. She felt herself get grabbed from behind and kicked against the bench to give herself momentum, pushing her attacker into the bar behind them then threw her elbow back into their face, dropping them to the ground. The rest of the Venatori charged at her all at once.

Mara! Above you! Her wisp trilled, urgently.

She stole a peripheral glance at the ceiling, saw the chandelier, then turned and threw the blade at the rope suspending it. She ducked and protected her head as it crashed down on the cultists swarming her, knocking them to the ground. Both dwarves stared at her as she stood back up and looked around. The older one had a glint in his eye and the redhead looked rather satisfied.

“Get out of my bar. All of you!” The bartender barked, looking around disgustedly at the mess.

Mara made a quick exit, stuffing the food into her pockets before she left, hoping her wisp was keeping up. She felt a tendril grasp at her small finger in reassurance.

The two dwarves chased after her. “Hey wait!”

Mara didn’t stop until she’d made it several streets away. Footsteps behind her told her they were persistant. She paused and faced them, nervously, shifting from foot to foot, her eyes glancing around for danger. “What do you want?”

The older gentleman leaned over and tried to catch his breath. The red head shook her head at him, a knowing look on her face as she reached for him. He waved her away as he looked at Mara. “You really handled yourself back there, kid. What’s your story?”

Mara shrugged, pulling her cloak closer. His appraisal made her uncomfortable. It was like he could see right through her. “Just a Watcher, trying to find her way in the world. What’s yours?”

“A Watcher, you say?” He rubbed his beard and smiled at his companion, who shrugged. He walked toward Mara, hand extended. “I’m Varric Tethras, and this is Lace Harding. We’re on a bit of a mission to stop an elven god from destroying the world.”

“An elven god.” She repeated, doubtfully. Here? In the physical world? Not likely.

“There’s going to be lots of demons and undead to deal with, which if I recall correctly should be right in the Mourn Watch's wheelhouse. Interested? ” He asked nonchalantly, like this was casual conversation.

His kind eyes and easy demeanor belied his sharp wit and obvious cunning, and she ignored his offered hand as she crossed her arms and eyed him with distrust.

Varric held up his hands in surrender as he chuckled, “Look I know what you’re thinking: why should I risk my neck for the crazy schemes of a total stranger? I get it. If I hadn’t been there, I’d have thought we were nuts too. But here’s the thing. You’ve got the talent of someone who’s destined for something big. And I know talent. We need someone who can think on their feet, analyze a situation and make a decision in the moment, adaptable. Someone he won’t see coming. That’s you.”

He leaned in and looked Mara deep in her eyes. She could tell there was more to the story. His non-chalance felt protective, like the history was heavy and he needed to keep things light so as not to be crushed beneath the burden. “So what do you say, kid? You in?”

Despite her curiosity and interest, Mara hesitated. “I...don’t know you. Why should I trust you?”

Harding put her hand on Varric’s shoulder before stepping in. “If it helps, we could hire you officially in a Mourn Watcher capacity. I know they don’t usually take jobs outside the Grand Necropolis, but would you consider it worth taking on?”

Varric huffed, “Harding, that ruins the story! Where’s the adventure or the plot twist in just hiring a mercenary to do a job?”

“Didn’t stop you from hiring Hawke back in Kirkwall, now did it?” Harding shot back.

Varric snorted and backed off, “Ok, You got me.”

Mara put her hands on her hips and pondered this strange opportunity while Varric and Harding continued their friendly bickering. On one hand, if what Varric said was even half

true, this was a big job that she wasn’t even sure of the details on. What exactly did it entail? Fighting demons and tempering spirits and settling undead she could handle, it was part of her job description. Facing down an elven god bent on world destruction? That was a little out of her depth. On the other hand, she really had nothing else waiting for her. She had no idea how long her forced break from the Necropolis was going to be and she needed a consistent job. Something to keep her going, if not financially, then to keep her from sheer boredom. And traveling in a group would probably be safer, now that it was clear things on the outside were not going well.

Beneath her cloak she felt Wisp give her a little nudge. She blew out a breath. “Mara.”

Varric and Harding went silent and looked at her, confused.

Mara offered her hand. “My name. It’s Mara. I’m in.”

Varric laughed and clapped Harding on the back, “See? What did I tell you? Eye for talent.”

He reached forward to shake Mara’s hand, but she held it away and added “As long as you’re okay with my friend coming along too.” She moved her cloak away, revealing the wisp. It unwrapped its tendrils from her mage blade and hovered over her now cupped hand.

Harding’s eyes widened, but Varric grinned. “You really are full of surprises, kid. We’re off to a great start.”

Chapter End Notes

Since the game wasn't entirely clear on how Varric actually met the Mourn Watch Rook, I took the liberty of recreating part of the teaser trailer and using that as Mara's first introduction to my favorite dwarf.

End Notes

These first few chapters may feel a bit rushed as I tried to briefly summarize Mara's journey from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. There is some narrator unreliability, missing time, and rose-colored glasses going on, so if later on something seems non-cohesive that is why.

Also: there may be slight variations from the Ao3 version since this is an older copy, but they will be in the form of very minor edits and not actual story content.

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