

Ruination

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Ruin

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Summary

Shianni is raped by Vaughn's lackeys, but takes her revenge by way of a dagger in the back. In the aftermath of the assault, she agrees to go to Ostegar with Duncan and her cousin to work as a camp servant. But along the way, Duncan notices a few interesting qualities about the young elf he somehow managed to overlook before.

Vaughn's Bedroom

There were three of them. She might have been able to take on one. Even two, if she'd somehow smuggled in daggers. Her aunt had taught her enough to protect her honor, or so she'd thought. But three of them, and all lords. She stood no chance.

The nearest man shoved her to the floor and she landed hard. The other lackey caught hold of her wrists, pinning them awkwardly behind her back. She tried to struggle, but his grip was like steel.

They moved slowly. They had all the time in the world, and they knew it. The Arl's son, Vaughn, in particular seemed intent upon savoring her. She should never have struck him, but how was she to have known who he was? The trio of humans began to touch her, fondling her breasts, reaching beneath her skirt. She wanted to cry out, but it would do no good. They would only laugh, and somehow that would make it even worse.

One of the men began undoing the lacing of his breeches. Shianni shut her eyes tight. She had never so much as seen a man before, but she knew instinctively what he was about to do to her. She prayed he would not break her, would not tear her apart, but she understood how hopeless such a prayer was. He was a human: stronger, crueler, larger. She was just an elf.

The pain, when it came, was unimaginable. It radiated outward, down her legs and up into her belly. The scream that had been building in her throat died at once. No sound could capture the agony she felt.

There was a slam as the door was thrust open. The human withdrew from her body, leaving her with an aching soreness between her legs. Dimly, she heard voices, and the hands pinning her wrists disappeared. Turning her head, she saw a pair of elves standing in the doorway. She recognized them at once: her cousins, Kallian and Soris. Both bore swords and were spattered with blood. They were speaking to Vaughn, or rather, listening. Shianni didn't bother paying attention. Her eyes were drawn instead to the dagger that hung from the belt of the lord who had held her down. Carefully, she pushed herself up into a seated position. No one seemed to notice. Vaughn's voice was starting to rise impatiently, and she could tell that a fight was imminent. Making up her mind in an instant, she threw herself at the lord, snatching his dagger and stabbing him between the shoulder blades. The lord emitted a choked gasp. Letting her weight hang from the blade, she dragged the weapon downward. Blood sprayed from the man's body, staining her bare skin and torn bodice. The lord collapsed in a heap, and she fell beside him.

Realizing what had happened, Vaughn turned and roared with rage, drawing his sword. Shianni waited for the feel of a steel blade slicing through her neck, but it never came. The pair of cousins had taken care of both Vaughn and the man who had raped her, running them through. Shianni saw Soris hurry to the room where the other maidens were being held captive. A second later she felt a hand on her arm. Kallian had knelt at her side, brown eyes full of concern. "Are you alright?" she murmured, her gaze drifting to Shianni's torn clothes. "Can you walk?"

“I...think so” Shianni managed. “You killed him.”

“Vaughn?” Kallian asked. “Of course. He did this to you?”

Shianni shook her head and motioned to the other lord without looking at him. “Not Vaughn. That one.”

Kallian’s eyes hardened. “I should have made him suffer for longer,” she growled.

There was a commotion as Soris returned, a pair of young women in tow. “Maker, Shianni!” the bridesmaid Enara exclaimed. “You’re covered in blood.”

Shianni looked down at herself. “Oh,” she murmured. “It’s not mine.”

“You killed him,” Valora said in a shocked half-whisper.

“He deserved worse than he got,” Kallian replied before Shianni could speak. Rising to her feet, she offered Shianni her hand. “Come. We still have to make it out of this place alive.”

Shianni accepted the proffered hand and rose, biting back a moan of pain. Her whole body felt battered, and the ache between her hips had not subsided. That said, she was alive, which was more than she could say for her abductors. “Let’s go home,” she said through clenched teeth.

The others nodded, and together they left the room, and its corpses, behind.

The Alienage

Shianni stood passively by while Kallian spoke to the Grey Warden, Duncan. The Alienage, her home for so long, now felt foreign and oppressive. She dreaded what would happen when the news spread about what had occurred at the Arl's estate. The others could claim that they'd been safely locked away the whole time, but Shianni could already feel the bruises forming on her face and bare limbs. The state of her dress alone was enough to cause scandal. And of course, the gossips would be right. She was no longer pure. Her maidenhead had been claimed by a filthy human in the cruelest way possible, and there was nothing she could do to change that. Her future, her reputation, everything would be ruined by what an unnamed lord had done to her out of lust.

She heard her own name and her mind returned to the present with a jolt. Valendrian was speaking, but to Shianni's shock her cousin cut him off. "You don't understand, Elder," Kallian insisted. "If anyone heard, if anyone looks closely, they'll realize that Soris and I weren't the only ones there. They'll come after Shianni."

Valendrian glanced worriedly at Shianni before turning to Duncan. "Is there no way she could join you as well?"

Duncan shook his head. "I'm afraid not. While Shianni has shown bravery today, Wardens are true warriors, ready to battle the darkest forces of evil and corruption. She is not suited for such a fate."

"But she could still leave with us," Kallian insisted. "I spoke to Nessa earlier, and her family is going to Ostagar to find work with the army camp. Shianni could do that too, couldn't she?"

Though the prospect of serving hundreds of human soldiers was not an appealing one, Shianni still felt a glimmer of hope within her chest. Duncan still seemed reluctant, so she took a cautious step forward. "Please, ser," she said quietly. "I'll be no trouble."

Duncan's expression softened as he looked at her. "Very well," he agreed. "Say your goodbyes and change your clothes. We'll leave in an hour's time."

The Road to Ostegar

He knew he never should have brought her along. It had been a moment of weakness. The elven girl, Shianni they'd called her, had quite obviously been raped, and the thought of her waiting, terrified, for the Arl's guards to come arrest her or worse, made him shudder. He ought to have kept his thoughts on the impending battle, but in that moment there seemed to be no harm in bringing the girl as far as Ostegar.

The journey from Denerim lasted four days. During that time Shianni took every opportunity to interrogate Duncan about the Wardens, the impending Blight, and his own travels within Ferelden and beyond. He didn't know what he'd expected – a cowed, traumatized child, perhaps – but this outspoken young woman was unlike any elf he'd ever met. His new recruit stayed silent much of the time, and Duncan sensed that this was their normal method of communication: Shianni asking questions, Kallian listening closely nearby. Their dynamic was endearing, but worrisome. Wardens could not afford to rely on the help of family. When they reached Ostegar, the women would separate to begin their new lives. Shianni would become a servant, and Kallian would join the Wardens, provided she survived the ritual. Such was the way it had to be.

It was on the evening of the third day, when sunset had colored the world red, that the bandits surrounded them: half a dozen men, all armed to the teeth and certain of their victory. Duncan sighed inwardly as he listened to the bandit's leader give the usual speech about handing over their money. He'd hoped not to leave a blood trail, but there was no help for it.

It was as he prepared to draw his weapons that it happened. The bandit's leader, so cocky and sure of himself, suddenly choked, his eyes bulging. A moment later blood sprayed from his neck and he fell to the ground, lifeless. Behind him stood Shianni, twin daggers clutched in her hands. Her eyes were like ice as she gazed scornfully down at the fallen ruffian. As the other bandits howled with rage and attacked, she moved in, daggers flashing in the dying light. She was quick, striking from behind when she could and evading the weapons that the various bandits swung in her direction. Kallian was by her side a moment later, and Duncan could only watch as the two girls moved in tandem. Kallian, with her greatsword, would cause a distraction, while Shianni would come up behind the enemy and stab him in the back. It took less than three minutes from the time the leader fell for all six bandits to lie dead on the dusty road. When the last enemy had fallen, both elves looked to Duncan for instruction. He said nothing, only tilted his head in the direction they'd been travelling and set off once more.

That night he could not sleep. He watched the pair of cousins as they curled up together in one bedroll, wondering whether perhaps he'd been wrong. It was rare for a rogue to join the Wardens. Most of their order fought more, well, honorably. But there was certainly precedent. And small-boned as she was, she had a certain fire within her. He would hate to be wrong, to see her fall during the joining, but that was no reason to forbid her the chance, if she wanted to take it.

They reached Ostagar after nightfall on the following day. Duncan sent Kallian away to become familiar with the camp and seek out Alistair. Shianni he ordered to follow him. The girl nodded silently. She'd grown quiet the moment Ostagar came into view, no doubt dreading the inevitable separation from her last remaining connection to her family. Duncan led her to his tent, lifting the flap and ushering her inside. There he directed her to a chair and stood across from her. "Shianni—" he began.

"I know," she interrupted. She was staring at him almost defiantly. "This is it, isn't it? This is where you send me to the Master of Servants. It's not a surprise." She looked away. "I know you didn't even want to bring me, but thank you. These past four days... well, they've been an adventure. I won't forget them. I hope..." her voice grew softer. "I hope Kallian serves you well as a Warden. Take care of her."

"About that," Duncan told her. "I believe that there may have been a mistake, on my part."

Shianni inhaled sharply. "No," she whispered. She leapt to her feet, eyes wide and accusing as she stared at him. "You bastard shem," she yelled. "I should have known you'd betray us. You brought Kallian here, made her think she could join your order, only to throw her away at the first opportunity. She deserves better than a life of servitude, being manhandled by drunken soldiers. You promised her!"

"And I shall fulfill that promise," Duncan said calmly. "Kallian will be a Warden, provided she survives the Joining. And so, should you choose to follow that path, will you."

Shianni's anger vanished, her lips parting in surprise. For a long moment there was silence. "You think..." she murmured. "You think I could be a..."

"I think that you could become one of the greatest Wardens of this generation," Duncan told her solemnly. "But you must understand. The Joining is difficult, and not all may pass. You could die."

Shianni smiled bitterly. "I could have died on the floor of Vaughn Kendells' bedroom, too. I do not fear death. Not if it is for a greater cause." She swallowed, looking away. "Ser Duncan, about what I said before..."

"You have been betrayed many times by humans," he said gently. "It is natural for you to expect more deceit and lies. It would be unfair of me to punish you for that conviction. I would only ask that you give some humans a chance. We are not all the monsters you believe us to be."

Shianni nodded, biting her lip. For a brief moment he saw a shadow of the girl he'd first met: shaken, cowed, unsure. Then it was gone, replaced by a warrior's determination. "What now?" she asked steadily.

Duncan felt an odd swell of pride as he took in her changed manner. "Now we wait for the others to return, and the first task of your joining can begin."

Epilogue: The Joining

The chalice clattered to the ground. Visions of an enormous dragon snapping its jaws filled her head, along with pain that flooded her limbs and settled in her chest. She knew she ought to scream, but somehow she didn't feel the need. There was a barrier around this pain, even as it ate at her. She'd felt worse when Vaughn's lackey had been on top of her. This pain was like fire: pure, with no trace of humiliation or mockery. She knew that even if she allowed it to overwhelm her, her death would be honorable and not a source of derision. But she had no intention of dying just yet.

Opening her eyes, she forced her mind back to the ruins of Ostagar. The pain faded, slowly at first and then quicker, until she felt well enough to move. Looking up, she saw Duncan smiling at her like a proud father. "It is finished. Welcome, Shianni."

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