**Prologue**

“Oh great goddess, deliver unto us in our darkest hour, the Veiled Maiden.”

In a small room, deep underground, twelve robed figures were standing around a circle etched in the floor that was currently glowing with a mystical red light, highlighting the various runes and inscriptions drawn within it. In the center was a thirteenth person, more lightly dressed than the others in the room, thus allowing an observer to see it was a young lady. She was kneeling down, reciting what would seem to be a prayer, as the robed figures mumbled in a long forgotten language around her. As all of their voices raised to a climax, the light became brighter and brighter, until it burst in a blinding flash.

The room was silent for a moment, in total darkness as not a single light was left after the flash. Then, the sound of a man groaning was heard. “Oh come on, I just replaced that bulb.” After a bit of gumbling and fumbling in the dark, a light appears and illuminates the room once more. The robed figures are still where they were standing, with the exception of one of them holding a ball of light above their outstretched palm. However, the lady was nowhere to be seen, seemingly replaced by a man in a shabby black duster, leaning forward to untie his shoes. The man, seeing the light come back on, looked up and froze, not expecting to see what was currently in front of him. He blinked a few times at the sight of the robed figure with the floating ball of light directly in front of him, and then promptly passed out.

As ten of the twelve robed figures broke out in a panic about the arrival collapsing in front of them, and hurried to get the man to a previously prepared room, the remaining two stayed behind in silence. Once the room was empty except for the two of them, the one not holding the light turned to the other and said “Did the ritual fail?”

The figure holding the light put their other hand to their chin for a moment, before saying “The ancient texts don’t say anything about the nature of the Veiled Maiden. Maybe this is what they look like where the goddess rests. We will have to speak with the Maiden once they awaken. Until then, prepare accordingly.”

The other figure nodded, and stepped back, seemingly melting into the shadows, leaving the last figure alone in the room, with only their light for company, continuing to stand in silent thought. Finally, they looked up started walking out of the room, following where the ten other figures carried the fainted man. As the figure passed through the heavy door, they snapped their fingers and the light went out instantly, and the door began closing behind them. The last thing that could be heard from within the room as the door slammed shut was a single question: “What is the goddess’ plan…?”

Before we carry on, we need to step back for a moment to a time roughly an hour prior. Alex Donovan was just leaving work, three hours later than he was actually scheduled to. Once more, another “urgent” request came to his desk that consisted of someone from another department stalling or making mistakes until it finally reached a deadline and needed to be taken care of immediately. Alex hated cleaning up after these messes, but he was also the only person in the office who could. At least, it seemed that way, what with the number of people who clock out and vanish early, or use their own pile of work as a shield, or his supervisor always only giving this work to him. Alex was good at what he did, and was proud of that, but being good at it just means you get more work.

Tired after the long day, Alex stepped out of the non-descript office building into the darkening twilight, and got into his car. The trusty mini SUV had served him well for over 10 years, though it was starting to show its age. Maybe if he got that promotion he would finally buy a new car. But who did he think he was kidding, he said to himself. Not only was he not even in consideration for that promotion because he was “critical” to the office, but even if he did he didn’t want to give up this car for a new monthly payment so easily. He’ll drive it into the ground instead before he even thought about getting a new car.

At this time of the day, the roads were now mostly clear, well past rush hour. If there was any consolation for the extra “unpaid” working hours (being salaried, there was no such thing as overtime), it was that the drive home was smooth. Listening to a podcast helped calm him down after the long day, as did stopping at his favourite frozen yogurt place.

Finally, he made it back to the little apartment he lived in by himself. He missed his cat, but the building agreement didn’t allow pets so he had to leave her with his parents. Thankfully they still live in town, so he can visit during the weekends and see her. Walking up to his apartment, he finished up the last of the frozen yogurt and threw the container out in a trash bin in the hallway, before taking out his key and, after staring for a moment at the nameplate that reads “Alexander Donovan”, unlocked the door. “I’m home,” Alex said as he walked in to the empty apartment, and turned on the light in the hallway. He then hung his key on a hook that was by the door, and bent over to start taking his shoes off.

It was at that point that a blinding light filled the room, and when it faded Alex was gone, with there instead being a young woman, kneeling in prayer where he had once stood. She looked up and around the hallway, very confused at what had just happened. Before panic could set in, however, there was a knock at the door behind her as it opened up, revealing a man and a woman in black suits that were the exact definition of “Men in Black”.

“Miss Yitzaryl, I presume?” said the man, standing in the front with a briefcase in his left hand. She hesitantly nodded, a look of fear starting to show on her face at the sudden changes around her. “I know this is probably hard to understand, but we have been expecting you. May we please come in and explain what has just happened?”

As she nodded once more, the man and woman enter and close the door behind them, which now shows the name “Yita Zaryl” in the nameplate instead.

**Chapter X: Alex Donovan, Veiled Maiden**

“Bwa!”

A few hours later, Alex woke up with a start. The room was dark, and he appeared to be in a bed, still in his work clothes (but without the duster and shoes). “Ugh, I must have been more tired than I thought. I don’t even remember crawling into bed…”

Alex tossed the sheets off, not noticing that they were a much higher quality than the comforter that he has on his own bed. He walked in the direction that his window would have been to open the curtains and get some light in here, but after a few steps he realized that it was taking longer than it should have. At the same moment that he had that realization, a soft light started radiating from the ceiling, illuminating the room.

Startled by this, Alex looked around and finally realized that he was not in his room, and not even in his apartment. Eventually he saw that he wasn’t even alone; there was a man in a robe standing at the other end of the room from where he was. Behind the man was the door, which was open, and Alex could barely see a long hallway stretching into the distance through it. Though what was surprising was that he thought he saw two figures in medieval-style armour, holding spears, just beyond the door.

Realizing that Alex was confused, the robed man coughed into his hand to try and get Alex’s attention. When that worked, the man motioned to the side, towards a small table with two chairs, before walking over in that direction himself. Alex took a moment to process, and then nodded and sat down across from the man.

“Honoured Maiden, welcome to Astanzia. I hope you are feeling better,” the man started with once they were both comfortably seated. “You seemed to be quite tired as a result of the ritual, so we brought you to a room that had been prepared for your use to recover in. I am Leigh Astrid, the high magus of Astanzia, and I have been assigned to be your assistant. If there is anything I can provide or answer, then please let me know.”

At that, Leigh made a motion and a maid entered the room with a push-cart loaded with baked goods of various types, as well as a steaming teapot. While the maid quickly got to setting the table, Alex took a closer look at the man sitting across from him, and the situation he found himself in. Leigh seemed to be, to Alex, what one might consider “conventionally” handsome; straight shoulder-length ashen-white hair, a smooth complexion, blue-green eyes, and straight features. Alex estimated that Leigh was probably in his early 30s, though he knew that he had problems with judging age. Leigh was dressed in what at first glance seemed to be a plain white robe that covered him from shoulders all the way to the ground, but a closer inspection revealed all manner of inscriptions embroidered along the seams, collar, and sleeves, in a discrete silvery thread that only occasionally caught the light. He sat straight in the chair, hands clasped in front of him on the table while the maid did her work.

Meanwhile, Alex was dressed in the same clothes he was in when he got home last night; a pair of comfortable but dressy black slacks, a light blue dress shirt, and a black tie. All badly wrinkled from a day of work and then sleeping in them. His reddish-brown hair was cut short and was a mess from having just woken up, and dark circles surrounded his grey eyes from exhaustion, despite the nap. He realized he was hunching over, and straightened up to try and match Leigh’s posture, realizing he was probably dealing with someone important.

“Uh,” Alex started, glancing at the maid as she finished her duties and wheeled the cart away. “The pleasure is mine? My name is Alex Donovan. Maybe you could start at the top and tell me what is going on here?”

Leigh chuckled. “Yes, that seems like a good place to start.” He picked up the teapot and poured a fragrant red liquid into a cup that was set before him and Alex. “As mentioned, you are in the nation of Astanzia, on the continent of Lestik. I can cover the wider geography of the world later, but for now I bring this up because Lestik is also known as the ‘Magical Continent’.” Alex was about to take a sip of the beverage after cooling it down to his taste when Leigh said that, then froze in place.

Alex cut a humorous figure at that moment, hunched over and lips out, about to put the cup up to them, as he now stared at Leigh, who chuckled briefly. “Yes, I expect that this comes as a shock to you. Strangely, it is only the continent of Lestik that has the phenomenon that is commonly referred to as ‘magic’, and it is theorized that it is due to the presence of a tear in reality that exists in the center of the continent. While this tear has allowed the people who live on Lestik to make use of unnatural and otherworldly powers, it also threatens us with regular invaders from some other reality, who come through the tear and have been trying to change the nature of our reality to match theirs. People commonly refer to this as the ‘Creeping Miasma’, and we’ve been fighting against it for almost all of recorded history.”

“That long, huh?” Alex asked. He couldn’t imagine the idea of having such an existential threat hanging over his head not just for a short period of time, nor even his lifetime, but across his entire family tree’s lifetime.

Well, maybe there was one example, he said to himself, thinking about his job.

“Indeed,” replied Leigh. “The tide of the Creeping Miasma ebbs and flows over generations. While the influence of the tear currently is only felt on this continent, we have been able to tell over time that the range is also a factor of how much territory the Creeping Miasma has claimed. It is theorized that if the Creeping Miasma fully takes over the continent, then the power of magic and the reach of the invaders will cover the planet. To try and prevent this, Astanzia is part of what is known as the [Border Nations] **(Author Note: I want to think up a good, snappy acronym for this)**, which surround the tear and are the first line of defense against the invaders.”

“Hm…” Alex said to himself, mostly. This still didn’t seem very real, but it also didn’t seem to be a dream. The tea was hot, too hot in fact, which told him that he must be awake. He idly munched on a cookie as he tried to absorb this information.

Leigh chuckled again. “I understand that this is probably still a lot, even though I’m trying to tell the condensed version. I’m almost to the reason why you are here, so please hold on just a little longer.” Alex nodded at this, his mouth full.

“While we can prevent the spread of the Creeping Miasma by fighting the invaders, once an area has been claimed by it, it is corrupted and inhospitable to the people of this world. However, there is a way to counter this, which is where you come in.” Leigh said, after taking a sip of his tea. At this, Alex put his cup down and leaned forward. “We’re still not quite sure why, but occasionally women are born with a power to cleanse the Creeping Miasma, pushing back the invaders and reclaiming land that has been lost over years of conflict. These women are known as Maidens, and there is no known pattern to their arrivals. We can only guess that they come at the will of the gods of this world. But sometimes, there is a surge in Miasma and no Maiden has been found. At these times, a ritual has been passed down from ancient times to call upon Riesita, the Goddess of Connections, to bring to us a Maiden. And this time, it brought us you.”

“Excuse me?” Alex said, looking very confused.

“Which part would you like clarification on?” inquired Leigh.

“Uh,” Alex scratched his cheek, “the part about how the only people who can do what you’re looking for are women.”

“Indeed. Across all of recorded history, the only instances of a person capable of pushing back the Creeping Miasma have been women.” Leigh nodded.

“I’m not sure if you’ve noticed,” Alex starts pointing at himself, “but I’m a guy.”

“Hm, I was afraid of that.” Leigh rubbed his chin in thought. “However, at the same time we have already proven that a Maiden has been summoned.”

Leigh motioned to the desk next to the bed that Alex had been sleeping in, where Alex noticed a large glass box which contained a vase holding a bouquet of flowers that Alex didn’t recognize. “While it’s not as strong or as wide ranging as actively using their powers, all Maidens emit an aura that purifies the Creeping Miasma around them. Those flowers used to be corrupted, taken from a recently lost territory, which had been collected as research materials. We asked to borrow it to use as confirmation that the ritual was successful. And, well, you can see the results.”

Alex was stunned, and just stared at the vase. This didn’t make sense to him, there had to be a mistake.

“This can’t be right,” he finally managed to say.

Leigh shrugged. “I’m also confused, but the proof is there. You are clearly a Maiden nonetheless.” He takes a sip of his tea. Alex continued to look dazed, and absentmindedly put another cookie in his mouth.

“That said,” Leigh said after a moment’s wait, to see if Alex would snap out of it. He did, at that moment. “While you were out, I made preparations just in case this turned out to be the case.”

With that, Leigh clapped his hands and the maid from before reentered the room, this time pushing a large portable wardrobe. Alex was pretty impressed at how strong she appeared to be, as the wardrobe looked to be made with very sturdy wood, with ornately carved reliefs of wildlife. Including some animals that Alex had only seen in fiction. Right across the center of the two doors of the wardrobe was a very large coat of arms; a figure of a woman with a poorly defined face in a loose dress and long hair, fluttering in the wind, her arms outstretched and the hands reaching the handles of the doors, surrounded by a halo of light, shining out around her, while at her feet numerous plants and small animals could be found. It was basically like some kind of children’s animated movie princess, really.

“What… is that for…?” asked Alex, starting to get a bad feeling about this.

“It’s quite simple, honoured Maiden,” Leigh said, giving Alex a very serious look. “The citizens will not be relieved to hear that their saviour is not a woman, and will think that we are trying to trick them. So, for the time being you will have to pretend to be one.”

Alex blinked at this. Then again. And once more, before finally the weight of what Leigh had said finally landed on him.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?????”

In case I ever want to come back to this and flesh it out more, here is my broad strokes plot concept:

**Arc 1**: Alex starts training to be a Maiden and a lady of the upper class. The setting is not medieval, per-say, but is a little more… Victorian? Think steampunk but with less gears and steam and instead magic. I want this to be semi-modern, but still stratified. Rifles, saber charges, magic, all that jazz.

Anyway, the progression of this arc is about Alex learning about the world and the powers he has while here. It may not be specifically stated, but my idea is that he gets them from what is basically a Superman kind of situation; exposure to another world’s environment (plus the Rift’s own magic) results in special powers that just happen to be what the world needs to push back the Miasma. Otherworlders needing to lead the fight against a different category of Otherworlders.

Alongside that, he practices being disguised as “Alexis”, the Maiden, for when public performances are needed. Alex’s cover story is that he gets hired as an attendant for Alexis. Along the way, Alex moves along the spectrum to enjoying and really getting into the role, but I want to try to make it clear that he finds different kinds of solace in either mode; the idea is that he’s genderfluid, not binary trans.

**Arc 2**: The establishment of the romantic pursuit. A man of some importance, and has been a main character in Arc 1 (not sure the direction I want to run with this part) realizes he has fallen for Alexis. His efforts are frustrated by Alex/Alexis swapping back and forth, not realizing the affections, or realizing the affections and being scared they are “tricking” the man in some way. Caution needs to be made here to limit the chance of it feeling like an actual trick to readers. I already have fear about this, I don’t want to be causing harm to others. That said…

**Arc 3**: The climax of Arc 2 will be the love interest somehow realizing/discovering that Alex and Alexis are the same person. Alex will take this hard and run away, scared of further harming a person they started to care about. Meanwhile, the love interest will be less interested in that, and be more questioning what this means about their sexuality (“Wait, does this mean I’m gay?” -> “Whatever, I’m pan for my boy/girlfriend, however they want to present today”). The love interest hunts Alex down, and after a fight and/or some misunderstandings, finally proposes. I’m probably seeing this as Alex/Alexis working at some frontier town as a mercenary or something? Still helping fight the Miasma, but trying to do it on the down-low, probably as some local Maiden? It’s unlikely that Alex(is) could continue to deal with the invaders and have it not be seen that they also purify the Miasma while out there. Alex(is) and the love interest make up, and return to wherever they were previously stationed or whatever.

**Epilogue**: Many years later, Alex(is) is retired, having passed the torch on to the next generation of Maidens (this has been going on forever; it’s not going to end with a single person), and has settled down with the love interest to raise their children. Where did the kids come from? Doesn’t matter, not gonna talk about it.

What might not ever come up, but I want to make sure I put down for future reference, is that the term and designation of “Veiled Maiden” is because the specific ritual was passed down by Riesita to summon in-denial transgender people who need a change of environment in order to discover themselves. This specific fact was never associated with the ritual, but it may be brought up at some point that there are different rituals that are used by different nations or organizations, and no one is quite sure what the differences mean.

Other rituals:

* Summons in-denial trans women
* Summons girls who become an idol unit, cleansing Miasma and encouraging the soldiers with song and dance
* Summons girls who become a magical girl team
* Summons a Maiden into what might as well be Escaflowne or Rayearth
* Small nation whose summoned Maiden is chosen as head of state; maybe something like Twelve Kingdoms or Realist Hero

**Side Stories**: Short stories about Yita settling in to her new life.

**Chapter X: Alexis Agisa, Wandering Maiden (Fragment)**

(Author Note: At some point earlier to this scene, I would have described Alexis’ mercenary outfit. I’m thinking some form of toughened chaps over a jean-like pair of pants, sturdy but comfortable boots, and a loose-fitting green shirt under a reinforced leather vest. A Van Helsing-esq hat is optional, but would probably look pretty badass. She would have a twin holster on her left hip to hold both a saber and a sidearm [pistol or revolver; I want it to be more modern then a flintlock, but it’s not gonna be a M1911 either], and would be carrying a bolt-action rifle on her back (closer to a Lee-Enfield). A bag on her right hip would hold her ammo, while there would be another small bag on the small of her back that would carry supplies.)

Calling the settlement that Alexis arrived at a “village” was a very generous descriptor. Established at the end of the last great push back against the invaders some 20 years ago, [Name]ton was named after the Maiden who gave her life in the battle to recover this region. While the land was cleansed, it is still close to the front line of the Creeping Miasma, and so was a harsh and dangerous place to live, and only a handful of people answered the call to settle here.

Walking through what used to be the village gate, Alexis looked around and saw the marks of corruption everywhere; faded and distorted wood and stone, unnatural growths on the fauna, and the scars of a recent battle. She double-checked that the pistol and saber on her hip were ready for action, before taking the rifle off of her back and loading it. Her mission was primarily recon this time, but if she could take out a few invaders and cleanse the Miasma while she was here then that was a bonus.

Feeling ready to begin, Alexis closed her eyes and steadied her breath. After a few seconds, her heart rate settled and she began the incantation to activate a search spell. Instantly after it was cast, she put a hand to her forehead to brace against the pain of all the information that came flooding in.

“Ugh, I never did manage to get this part right. Come on now…” she complained through gritted teeth, focusing the spell narrower and narrower until it only showed her what she was looking for: the telltale signatures of corruption. While it was clearly visible around her, she wanted to know where it was at its densest in order to make the cleansing the most efficient, as well as to stay alert for any *moving* sources, which would indicate invaders. The pain having now faded, Alexis brought the rifle up to a ready position and began her patrol.

The worst part of moving through a corruption zone isn’t the threat of the corruption itself, but instead the utter silence. The only sounds Alexis could hear were her own; the sound of her breathing, the creak of her equipment, the crunch of her footsteps. Not even wind blew through the empty streets to break up the tension.

Along the way to the densest corruption in the village, Alexis took the time to make detours and check out blind spots and hiding spaces to search for invaders. The further she got, the more it seemed that this place was utterly deserted. Finally, she made it to the village square, and had seen no indication that any invaders were still around. Alexis was relieved, as she had picked this place to travel to today because it was recently involved in a battle to push back the front line. The army had set up the new defensive line about a dozen kilometers to the east, which she took to mean that there should have been little chance of running into any invaders.

Now that she had arrived, Alexis made one more sweep of the square before returning to the fountain in the middle of it. Convinced that she was alone, she put down her rifle and began to prepare for the cleansing ritual. However, what Alexis didn’t account for was that, just as she was on the hunt for invaders, there was an invader on the hunt for her.

(Author Note: Invaders are not mindless monsters. At least, not all of them are. The overall idea is that they are another nation, trying to forcibly expand their territory and terraform other planets. The invader that is stalking Alexis is a commander that she had fought alongside the love interest at an earlier point in the story, probably as part of a major campaign, and it is looking for revenge.)

(Author Note: Invaders appear to be constantly “shifting” or “glitching” in form, like they were some kind of animation error. The idea is that the reality they come from is so wildly different from this one, or the one that Alex came from, that they cannot even properly perceive their true form.)

(Author Note: This next bit is being written to provide context for this specific scene, but may end up being told much earlier in this arc)

In complete and utter silence, Raxxath stepped out of the shadows of a building next to the village square, their figure glitching even more than normal. Their prey had arrived, and soon they will have their revenge for the humiliation they received. It was supposed to have been an easy campaign; Astanzia had just lost an accursed Maiden and appeared to be in disarray as it withdrew to re-establish a strong defensive line. Raxxath had just been given their first command, and was eager to prove themself. But what should have been an easy victory turned into a crushing defeat as it turned out that Astanzia had another Maiden, and the withdraw was entirely to collect her and resupply. Raxxath returned in shame, having been utterly routed. The Expeditionary Commander was not impressed, but gave them a single chance: Find and kill the Maiden that humiliated them.

For months after that, Raxxath searched for any and all signs of the Maiden, but everything they saw indicated that she had returned to the capital after the battle. However, just as they were convinced they would need to return in shame once again, they heard the most surprising news: The Maiden had run away from the capital, alone. Not knowing or caring why this was the case, Raxxath redoubled their efforts to track her down. And finally, these efforts have come to fruition, as now she was right in front of them, completely defenseless.

Inching ever closer, Raxxath withdrew their weapon, and prepared to run the Maiden through right where she stood. But moments before they could do so, she suddenly turned around and shot them with her sidearm. While the calibre of bullet that the pistol could fire wouldn’t even scratch Raxxath’s armour, the action stunned them enough that Alexis could take a step back and grab her rifle.

“I knew that one of you had to still be in town”, she said, looking down the sights at Raxxath. “The level of corruption was too high otherwise”.

“A fine deduction, Maiden”, Raxxath growled, “but it will do you no good. You couldn’t defeat me before, and your guardian is not here to protect you again. I’ll have your head and take my place in the Expedition again!”

“Before?” Alexis was confused for a moment, trying to parse the constantly glitching form in front of her, before remembering the first battle in the campaign, the one where she was nearly killed by a terrifying invader. The memory caused her stance to waver, blurring her vision. “No… no!” Alexis yelled, taking an unstable shot at Raxxath, missing them completely.

Raxxath laughed. “I see you do remember me. All the better, I was hoping to see the look of terror on your face in your final moments.” They approached slowly, calmly, menacingly, as Alexis fired round after round from her rifle. Most missed entirely, but a couple landed and did deal damage to Raxxath’s armour, but not in critical locations. Eventually, all that could be heard was a “click”, as the rifle ran out of ammo. It was at that point that Raxxath pounced, slashing at Alexis. It was all she could do to raise the rifle up in the path of the blade, deflecting most of the strike. However, the rifle was cut in half by the blow, and the very tip of the blade dug into Alexis’ leather vest, though did not pierce through. It did, though, start spreading corruption, but not very quickly as Alexis’ aura was able to keep it at bay.

A few kilometers away, [love interest] was following on a lead he had received about Alexis’ location. Having heard stories about a mysterious unaffiliated Maiden operating in this area, he made his way here as quickly as he could. After arriving in [Region], and asking around the mercenary liaison office, he found out that the Maiden was doing a recon mission to [Name]ton. Thanking them for their assistance, [love interest] got back on his magicycle and sped off in that direction, feeling a sense of dread. The reason is because, on his way out, he overheard a couple of the mercenaries talking about an unusual invader that had been seen in the area, and the description sounded suspiciously close to the commander that nearly killed Alexis during her first battle.

“Please be safe,” he whispered into the wind, as he got closer and closer to [Name]ton.

Meanwhile, Raxxath was laughing as they kicked Alexis again, sending her flying to the other side of the village square. The impact caused her to lose her grip on her saber, leaving her with no other weapon. “If only I had taken those magic lessons a little bit more seriously”, she thought as she staggered back to her feet, the corruption spreading further with every blow she took. She felt she could handle any normal invader she came across, and was generally right about that during her operations out here in the frontier, but she was careless and thought that those would be all she would encounter this far behind the front lines.

Now weaponless, Alexis tried to concentrate enough to use Maiden magic against Raxxath as he walked towards her again, but she could barely think through the pain in her side. That last kick probably broke some ribs, and she should be lucky that she was able to even stand at all. After a moment, the pain became too much, and she collapsed. “I guess this is the end, then,” Alexis thought, her consciousness starting to fade. “I wish I could have seen [love interest] one more time so that I could apologize to him…”

At that moment, as if it was arranged, a loud rumbling filled the air. Raxxath turned around at the noise, just in time for [love interest] to slam into him with his magicycle. Alexis, seeing this, went “Yeah, this is the end. Now I’m starting to hallucinate.”

That was the last thought she had before passing out.

(Author Note: Fight scene here? Fight scene here.)

Some time later, Alexis woke up in the outpost’s medical bay. She looked around, confused for a moment before recognizing where she was. Her side still hurt, but not as much as it did, so she was able to start concentrating on her Maiden magic to mend the broken bones and torn flesh. When it felt comfortable enough for her to be able to sit up, she was then able to see that she was not alone. Sitting at the foot of the bed, next to the curtain that was separating Alexis’ bed from the others in the room, was [love interest], looking deeply asleep.

“I guess it wasn’t a dream,” Alexis said, quietly climbing out of bed. Out from her sheets, she could see that someone had removed her clothing, and she was now in a standard hospital gown. “And I guess the cat is out of the bag now.” Looking around, she saw that her clothes were neatly folded on a table near [love interest].

“There’s no way I can show my face again after this. I’m sorry, but this really is the last time we will ever meet,” Alex said softly towards [love interest] as he reached over to grab the pile of clothes. Just as his hand passed by [love interest], though, it was suddenly grabbed.

“Did you really think I was going to just accept that?” [love interest] said, eyes open and looking straight at Alex. “I didn’t come all this way and fight off an invader commander just for you to run away again.”

Alex pulled his arm out of the grip. “Why? Why are you even here?” he said, angrily. “I lied to you, to everyone! I hurt you! Worse of all, I started to think I could even get away with it! That it would be ok to live that lie.”

[Love interest] stood up and put his hands on Alex’s shoulders. “And why wouldn’t it be ok?” he asked.

“Why? WHY? Look at me!” Alex shook himself free. “I’m a fraud! Ever since the first day, I’ve been lying to everyone, giving them false hope.”

[Love interest] shook his head. “What do you mean, false hope? Was it a lie that you went out and cleansed the Miasma around this area, letting the people move back into homes they thought lost?”

Alex looked down and turned away. “No, but men can’t be Maidens. Everyone knows that.”

“I’ve seen how happy and confident you look as Alexis.”

“But I don’t want to be her all the time. It feels… good, but not in every case. There’s times I still want to be Alex.” He shook his head. “That’s why it’s a lie. I can’t be her if I can’t be her all the time.”

“But do you have to be her all the time?” asked [love interest].

Alex turned around. “What?”

“If you don’t feel comfortable being Alexis all the time, then you don’t have to?” [love interest] shrugged. “I mean, I guess there’s times where you need to be, but you were already dealing with that, right?”

“Y… yeah, I guess.” Alex scratched his cheek and looked off to the side.

“So, what’s holding you back?”

Alex turned around again, wanting to hide his face. “It’s… it’s you”, he whispered.

“Huh?”

Alex turned around again to face [love interest]. “I said it’s you, alright?! I think I love you, and I would hate to see me cause you trouble because of it. You don’t deserve me.”

Now it was [love interest]’s turn to scratch his cheek. “And here I thought you were too good for me. I mean, what am I next to our nation’s saviour?”

“What?” Alex seemed surprised at this.

[Love interest] hands Alex his clothes. “I’m saying that I feel the same. And, uh. I have a question, but do you want to be Alex or Alexis for this?”

Alex nods and turns around. As he is about to take the gown off, he looks back over his shoulder at [love interest].

“Ok, I got it. I’ll be waiting just outside,” he said, before leaving.

A few minutes later, Alexis walks out of the medical bay building, wearing her (somewhat torn and bloody) mercenary outfit, to find [love interest] sitting on a bench nearby. She walks over and sits down next to him.

There was an awkward silence between the two of them for a moment. “Uh, so,” they both say at the same time, then they both chuckle at their awkwardness. “I guess we have more in common then we might think,” says [love interest]. “You go first. I feel like I need to hear it before I ask my question.”

Alexis nods. “I… am sorry. Sorry for tricking you, sorry for lying, and most importantly, sorry for running away. After everything you’ve done for me, I thought the worst of you. I didn’t think you would understand.”

Alexis takes a deep breath. “Where I came from, folks like… I guess like I am. Folks like me don’t get treated well. There’s always a risk that we’ll run into someone who won’t understand. Who will find out and think we tricked them. Who think that they’ll become ‘one of those people’, and not even know what that means.”

She leans back into the bench, staring up into the sky. “I don’t know enough about myself. About what any of this means for me. I… reacted. Scared of what you would do to me, but more then that, scared of what I would do to you. When I realized what you meant to me, the last thing I wanted was to hurt you. So, like a coward, I left. I came out here to hide, because I couldn’t face you.”

Taking another deep breath, Alexis shakes her head. “That’s my story. Will you forgive this foolish woman?” Alexis pauses for a moment and puts her finger to her chin. “Person? What is the right term for me?”

[Love interest] chuckles, before pulling a small, but long, box out of an inner coat pocket and places it on his lap. “You know, I had the same question on my mind for weeks, while I was searching for you.” He opened the box, revealing an intricately designed necklace [insert a description here. I’m getting a bit tired…]. “Alexis Agisa, Alex Donovan, would you do me the honour of becoming my… wiiiiife? Husband? Spouse? And we can figure it out together?”

Alexis didn’t even wait a moment before throwing her arms around [love interest].

“Nothing would make me happier.”