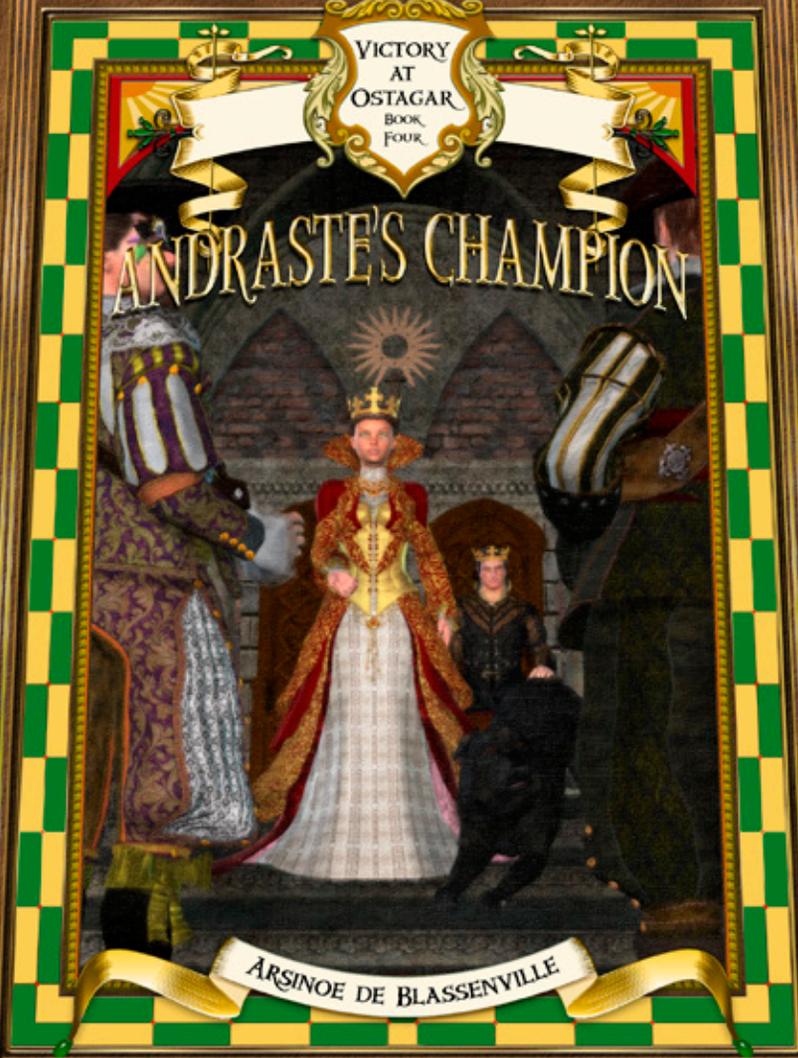


ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION



VICTORY
AT
OSTAGAR
BOOK
FOUR

ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

ARSINOE DE BLASSEVILLE

A RED HEN PUBLICATION



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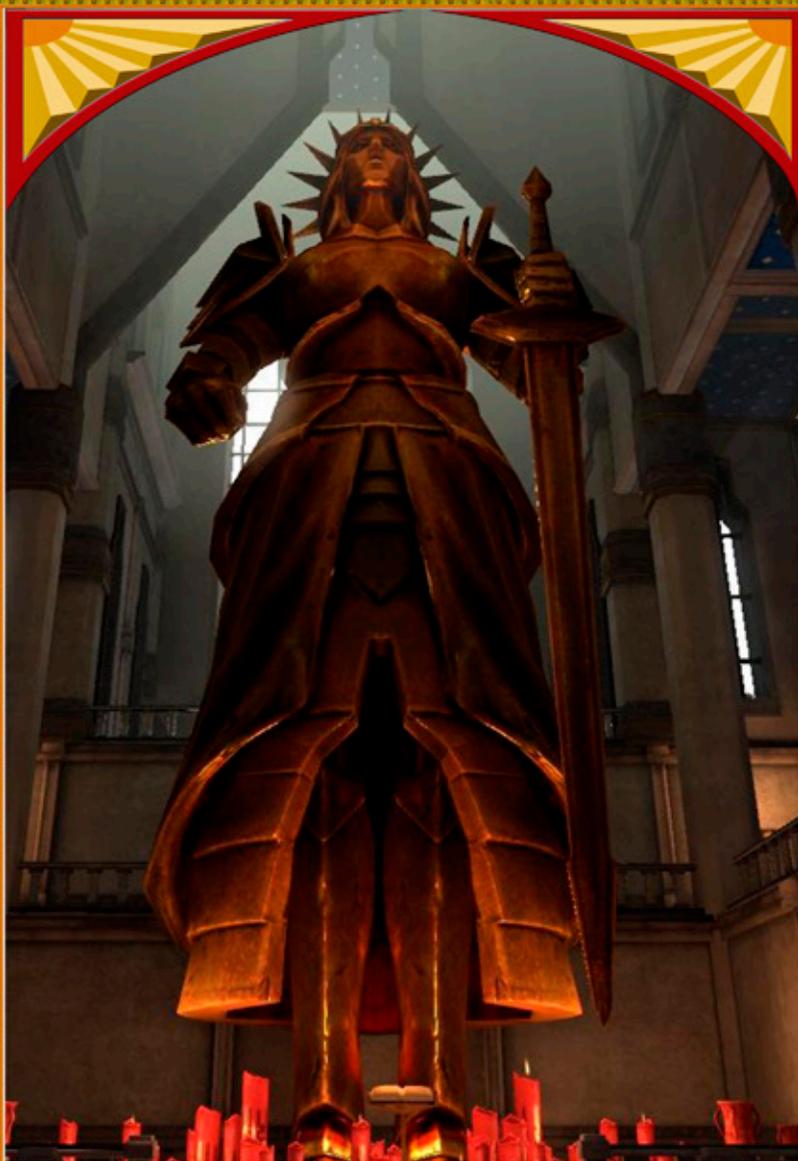
ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

VICTORY AT OSTAGAR

VOLUME FOUR

BY

ARSINOE DE BLASSEVILLE



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ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

CHAPTER I



SONGS OF LOVE AND DEATH

EDDINGS WERE SUPPOSED TO BE THE HAPPIEST DAY OF ONE'S LIFE. Bronwyn was not sure that was true in her case.

Her midday meal roiled uneasily in her stomach. It was all a little like going into battle, without the comforting feel of sword in hand. She had been pleased with her gown and jewels before, but now found them heavy and confining.

Mostly, it was all rushing and hurrying and worrying, and then being made to sit still while Leliana and Fionn arranged her hair, and then painted and dressed her like a doll. Perversely, she was annoyed at Leliana's careful application of cosmetics to conceal her scar. Others came to witness the ritual humiliation: Morrigan cynically amused, Aveline a little bemused; Idunn appraising her with the professional objectivity of a jeweler.

Then the Dalish female contingent, Danith and Nuala, came to offer her their felicitations on her marriage, and tried not to stare disapprovingly at the extravagance of her gown. Maeve, being, like Leliana and Fionn, only human,

thought it all wonderful.

"Oh, Commander! You look like a queen!"

Some polite, assenting murmurs followed. Morrigan merely cackled.

"Ha!"

She swept away shaking her head.

Leliana whispered to Fionn, "That woman is *evil!*"

Scout found the whole process tiresome, and abandoned Bronwyn to scrounge for treats in the Wardens' Hall. Fergus was coming with his knights; and they, along with her Wardens and other friends, would escort her to the Cathedral.

Actually, Bronwyn was finding the whole process tiresome too, and began to wish it was already over. She felt more than a little ridiculous, this being prepared like some sort virgin sacrifice. She could hardly blame Morrigan for laughing. It was unfair, too. Loghain would do no more than shave carefully and put on a handsome doublet, and be done with it. She wondered if he would bring Amber. That might be amusing. He ought to, really, since she was newly imprinted. She herself had absolutely no intention of leaving Scout behind. She had given him a bath this morning, brushed his coat until it shone like satin, and warned him not to do anything to dirty it. Now that he was out of sight, he would probably find a dust pile to roll in.

She would have to ride in a carriage to the Cathedral. Why had she let the dressmaker talk her into this style? However beautiful and becoming, it was quite impossible

to ride a horse in this gown, and as chilly and wet as it was, she would be likely to soil her clothing – and certainly ruin her boots – if she walked. So, yes. She would have to ride in a carriage like some sort of Orlesian princess. She should have proposed to Loghain that they both wear armor instead. He probably would have agreed to it. If there was a coronation, perhaps they could wear armor then.

Her handmaidens having done all they could do for her, Bronwyn left her room, head high. At least the men did not make her feel as absurd as her own sex did. They, indeed, seemed to think her appearance not contemptible. It pleased her: yes, it pleased her to see their admiration. Jowan, Niall, and Toliver blushing and diffident, Quinn and Carver grinning, Anders and Zevran clutching their hearts, pretending to be overwhelmed. Even the dwarves and elves had kind words, and nodded sagely amongst themselves.

"You'll do, Commander," rumbled Hakan.

Fergus arrived, looking splendid. His face lit up at the sight of her, and he embraced her gingerly, respectful of her gown and cosmetics, whispering, "Father and Mother would be so proud." Bronwyn hoped so.

Her amazing sable cloak was fastened over her gown, and Fergus, beaming, gave her his arm as they walked to the door. Bronwyn was glad of it, since she was forced to admit to herself that she would have to have some help climbing the steps into the carriage, unless she drew a dagger and slashed her skirts open. That would certainly



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make an impression, but perhaps not the one she desired.

And then, at least, she did not have to ride in the carriage alone, like a caged monkey, for there was room for Leliana and Morrigan and Scout, whose paws she hoped to keep moderately clean. The three puppies were put in a basket on the floor, and Scout was ordered to keep them there. Carver and Jowan would look after their own friends, and the little orphan, too, once they arrived at the Cathedral.

With the squirming puppies, and Scout's stern barks, and Leliana and Morrigan sniping at each other, Bronwyn was hardly aware of the crowd along the streets, and merely waved and smiled automatically. It seemed to suffice. They reached the Cathedral, and there was some sort of muddle or other, with various horses and carriages in the way, and people pushing and shoving to look. Scout leaped down, right into a puddle, gleefully splashing. Jowan and Carver quickly took the puppies and got out of the way.

In a blur, Fergus was handing her out, treating her like a piece of rare porcelain. Leliana removed her cloak, and tugged her gown to make it hang correctly. Awash with the sweet voices of the Chantry choir, Fergus escorted her up the aisle toward the front of the Cathedral. Loghain was waiting for her, not scowling, but not smiling, either. After all, he had been married before, and none of this would have the charm of novelty for him. She passed a sea of faces, some smiling, some impressed, some solemn, some crafty. In the front were the nobles, many of whom



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truly wished her well. And there were her Wardens. Leliana was hurrying up a side aisle to join them.

"Commander!" hissed a grinning Quinn, waving madly. "Over here!"

Feeling better, she grinned back at him. Maeve gave him a swat, no doubt telling him to behave himself. The dwarves were pointing out various pieces of Chantry regalia, debating their value. The elves looked ready to fend off any sudden attacks. Danith caught her eye for a moment, and seemed to be of the mind that Bronwyn was out of hers to put up with all this. Anders was winking at Morrigan, who appeared profoundly unimpressed at all the pomp and circumstance.

The Queen was in the royal pew, and Bronwyn and Fergus paused to make the appropriate obeisance. She was looking very nice, and gave Fergus a startlingly sweet and secret smile.

Sure enough, Loghain had worn black. For all that, he looked very imposing and splendid in a gloomy way, with enough metal on him for him to look normal: superb chased bracers on his forearms, and a heavy gorget at his throat. It was generally considered very inappropriate for a man to marry in armor, unless he was marrying a ruling queen. Even then, marrying in armor smacked of marriage-by-capture, which while no longer openly practiced in Ferelden, was something remembered and retold in many Alamarri legends.

Where was the puppy? Oh, one of his knights was holding her. She was much too young to be able to play a dignified role like Bronwyn's own Scout, who was trotting

along at her side, unruffled and debonair.

This marriage was something she had longed for since she was fifteen. Why was she so... unenthused?

Perhaps it was the oppressive smell of incense, or the knowledge that not all her companions thought she was making the right choice. Perhaps it was the presence of people like Habren, whom she disliked, or Kane Kendells, about whom she cared nothing. Perhaps it was the Grand Cleric's voice, droning on about irrelevancies. Andraste was certainly not the shining exemplar of a woman who succeeded at marriage. She was, in fact, a woman whose husband had hated her enough to have her killed.

Or perhaps it was the knowledge that the only reason Loghain was marrying her was that he wanted to be king.

That was certainly a romance-killer.

She felt her pleasant smile slip, and forced her face back into its serene mask. She must not allow herself to grow maudlin. The likelihood of her marrying for love had never been particularly high. After all, she could have been sent abroad to a stranger, or she could have found herself bound to that ass Cailan. Loghain at least respected her and found her desirable enough. He was making the best of it, as should she. All the same, in none of her youthful dreams had she felt this cynical weariness.

Thank the Maker, they were standing before the Grand Cleric now, with their backs to the rest of the Cathedral. It was still important to maintain her facade, though, facing

that sharp-eyed old woman and her minions.

Loghain thought Bronwyn was looking quite beautiful – very much the queen she would soon be. He approved of her restraint and dignity. She seemed quietly happy, too, having achieved the prize she had worked toward since she was sixteen. He hoped she found it all worthwhile. At least, she still seemed to want him.

That meant more to him than he would have cared to admit openly. From those first days at Ostagar, he had always thought her a remarkable girl: attractive, gifted, brave, and no fool. She often exasperated him with her independent spirit and her hot temper, but the fact was that she had grown on him. Quite a bit. He had not had a true companion since Maric died. Anora had come closest, but she was always, first and foremost, his daughter, and the best of her mother Celia lived on in her. Bronwyn, in contrast, combined much of what he had loved in the other people closest to him.

She was a strong, beautiful woman, like Rowan: a mighty warrior well on her way to becoming a shrewd politician; and still capable of great passion and tenderness. Like Maric, she knew what it was to suffer. Also like Maric, she was interested in the world, and had an odd, amusing way of looking at it. Only last night, he had enjoyed their time together – the way she had of instantly understanding what he was getting at – and her uninhibited love-making. In that respect, she resembled neither Rowan nor Celia at all. Celia was modest by nature,

and had feared losing the respect of their vassals, and Rowan... Rowan had feared wounding her father, disgracing her family, and above all, becoming pregnant with a bastard. Perhaps, since Bronwyn believed that being a Grey Warden made her infertile, she did not worry about that last at all. He hoped she was mistaken. If they had no children, they each had heirs, but it seemed to him that Bronwyn would be a remarkably good mother, and furthermore, would enjoy being one, very much.

The Grand Cleric joined their hands, and began the wedding prayer. Bronwyn's face had closed down a little. He knew she did not trust the Chantry, and given all that had happened in the past half-year, she was right. There must be some way to rein in their power, without inviting an Exalted March. His people were gathering information on the Templars even now, trying to get a handle on how many were actually in Ferelden. Of course, if they were no more competent than the Templars here in Denerim, who had let blood mages prosper under their very feet for fifteen years, Ferelden had nothing to fear from the Chantry but hard words.

They would be crowned in the Landsmeet Chamber. The Grand Cleric could say the prayers, but Loghain did not like the idea of appearing to receive the crown from the representative of the Divine in Val Royeaux. Calenhad had made the Chantry one of the pillars of his rise to the throne of Ferelden, and ever since then the role of the Chantry had been a powerful one. Was there any way of minimizing the Grand Cleric's role without egregiously insulting her and the devout nobles?

Probably not. However, holding the coronation in the Landsmeet Chamber rather than the Cathedral would somewhat emphasize the secular over the spiritual.

At last, the old woman was done talking. He and Bronwyn turned to face Ferelden together, and the choir burst into high, ethereal song once more. His eyes swept the surging crowd, glancing over to the pack of raffish outcasts that were the Grey Wardens and Their Campfollowers. They were more or less behaving. Some of them were more tolerable than others. That wretched blood mage he had commissioned to get rid of Eamon actually had a mabari!

He realized that he was smiling. Yes, things were working out well. Eamon was gone, and with him the most dangerous leader of any opposition to his plans. The bastard prince, Alistair, had been effectively neutralized by Bronwyn, and was happily – and even effectively – playing the Warden down in Ostagar. Loghain wished no harm to the lad, indeed. Perhaps when Bronwyn was tired of trying to be both Queen and Commander of the Grey, she could delegate the latter to Alistair.

Taking the throne had before seemed impossible, implausible – indecent even. Now Loghain realized that he wanted it. He wanted it more than he had ever wanted anything. How strange.

It was true, though. He wanted the power of the throne to shape Ferelden to his will: to make it the Ferelden of his mind, no longer the rather third-rate nation it now was. This coun-

try was rich with resources and fruitful land. There should be plenty for all. With prosperity would come strength and productivity. If they could be free of this darkspawn threat, Ferelden would move into the future he had always wanted for it.

The empty lands to the west and south – and yes, even in the war-ravaged northwest – could be settled anew. Loghain would offer freeholds to those willing to work and earn them. The Dalish would be granted their own territory, and relieve the constant petty banditry and strife they caused with their endless traveling. Perhaps even some of the city elves might join them there. The loss of so many to the slavers had already driven up the price of wages, which was a good thing for the lower classes. Half of these nobles were nothing more than parasites, and could well pay a decent wage instead of buying Orlesian fripperies to put on their backs.

And he would have to do something about the mages: Ferelden's best weapon, locked away in a Chantry prison and their powers stifled, except for the few kept as nobles' pets. He had sent that letter to Ostagar, and Uldred would be among the mages coming to Denerim. Torrin, too was on his way: an intelligent man. With the Chantry wrong-footed as it currently was, Loghain felt that at the very least, he could lengthen the mages' leash. The precedent of Bethany Hawke, and years before of Wilhelm, would prove useful. Some, whose service in the war was outstanding, would be declared free of Chantry supervision as a reward to them and an encouragement to the others.

The Grand Cleric was pronouncing them husband and wife; teyrn and teyrna. It was an essential step to power. How odd, and oddly agreeable, that his path to the throne should lie between a woman's legs.

"Oh, how wonderful!" cried Leliana, on her first sight of the decorated Great Hall of Highever House. "This is really old-time Ferelden on a grand scale!" A babble of happy agreement broke out behind her.

Tables were set with silver and white napery. Light from colored glass in the high windows shone down in rainbow hues. The air was sweet with herbs and the enticing scents of the coming banquet. Easily identified by the grey ribbons on the chairs, the Grey Wardens' table was soon filled. Hungry Wardens speculated on the first course, fingering their spoons eagerly. Servitors filled the cups with what one fancied, whether wine, ale, or mead, so they could drink the health of the bridal couple.

Nuala murmured to Danith, "The rite in the priest-house was not as offensive as I feared, *lethallan*. The music was agreeable, and the old woman did not reproach those who do not follow her way."

"True," agreed Danith. "It is their custom, and one must allow for shemlen peculiarities. Nevertheless, it was not an experience I wish to repeat very soon."

"I thought it was nice," Idunn spoke up, overhearing their talk. "I like to see decent people getting together, though I

don't quite see why they need those people in robes to tell them it's all right. Back in Dust Town, if you fancy a fellow, you take him, and that's that."

Aveline raised her brows. "Just... take him?"

Idunn made a snatching gesture and declared, "*Take him!*"

Hakan winked at her. "Sounds good to me!"

"Me, too," Anders agreed, speaking low into Morrigan's ear. "All the posh goings-on tempting you to make it official?"

"They do not!" Morrigan scowled at the table in general. "The inheritance customs of the nobles demand such officiousness, but I see no reason for any rational woman to wish to bind herself down."

Leliana looked at her solemnly. "It is not a mere binding. Both Teyrn Loghain and Bronwyn have made a mutual and honorable pledge of love and respect. I think it is a very beautiful thing."

"'Tis *beautiful*," sneered Morrigan, "only to the extent to which they each keep their pledge."

Carver did not like what Morrigan was insinuating about Bronwyn. "Well, I'm sure Bronwyn will keep her word. She always has."

Morrigan shrugged. "I suppose she will keep her word even if it kills her, but is it the best thing for her? Will it make her happy?"

Anders whispered, "Morrigan! I didn't know you cared. You're *fond* of Bronwyn, aren't you?"

She squeezed his thigh just enough to hurt, and hissed back,

"Perhaps I am, but you shall not make sport of me for it. I do... regard her as a friend. I had not expected it, but there it is."

"Don't be mad. I like her, too."

The hall hushed, as people took their places and Fergus Cousland rose to speak.

"A hearty welcome to you all, guests of my house! Your Majesty, Your Graces, my lords, ladies, and gentlemen, welcome! A glad day, when I celebrate my sister's marriage to the man of her choice. Let us lift our cups to the Teyrn and Teyrna of Gwaren in the good old Highever fashion." His own goblet, massive silver slished a little as he raised it on high.

"Hail!"

"Hail!" the guests echoed.

"We can do better than that!" Carver muttered.

"Hail!"

"Hail!"

"Hail!" grinned Fergus, pleased by the enthusiasm.

"*Hail!*" roared the hall, and as one, they downed their cups.

Fergus wiped his beard. "So tonight is a night to remember, worthies all! Eat and drink your fill. Dance while you still have legs for it, and set all care aside. Let the feast begin!"

An army of covered dishes surged into the hall, and were distributed amongst the tables in marvelously good order. The Wardens, by now ravenous, were soon face-down in the trough.

Habren felt some satisfaction in seeing that Bronwyn's wedding was not at all as elegant as her own. Or at least as elegant as the first part of it, before everything turned horrid.



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Highever House today was arranged to avoid the least hint of Orlesian influence, which in Habren's opinion meant a decided decline in standards of food and decorations.

She looked at Kane, sitting next to her, and was glad that everything had turned out for the best. Bronwyn could have Loghain! He was old and rather scary, and was really just a jumped-up peasant, when all was said and done. He might be a hero, and all that, but no woman in Ferelden would have a husband as handsome as Habren's!

Kane gave her a smile and a wink. She was so glad he was wearing his new doublet. Now he looked as he should. What did she care if Father married that dowdy old woman? She herself would be married at the beginning of next month to Kane, and live in splendor at the Arl of Denerim's estate.

Father had given Bronwyn an expensive present, even though Bronwyn had never given Habren one. He felt that Fergus' big silver platter counted for the Couslands, and pointed out that it would all work out anyway. Bronwyn and Loghain would probably give something when she married Kane.

Now Kane was bending to the other side to talk to Lady Amell about those grubby little sisters of his. That was really the only thing to trouble her. Just as she was able to get away from her awful little brothers, she now found she was saddled with those wretched girls. Kane *liked* them, and insisted that they would be no trouble at all. Habren had given it some thought, and decided it would be all right. She had been all over the estate when she was being



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practically kept a prisoner there after Urien got himself killed. There were some perfectly nice rooms upstairs that would do for a nursery and a schoolroom for the girls. Kane was already looking for a tutor and a nursemaid for them. They were really too young to dine in company every day. Once they had their own apartments – upstairs and on the other side of the mansion – it was likely as not that Habren would hardly ever have to see them.

At least Father's prospective bride and the rest of the poor relations had made themselves useful, hurriedly making some dresses for the girls to wear, so that Habren did not have to be ashamed of their appearance today. They were mourning their brother, so that had to be taken into consideration. Habren was annoyed that they were not left at home, since they *were* in mourning. She was still angry at Father for making her stay home an entire month! Here were the girls, their brother only a few days dead, stuffing themselves with delicacies and staring about them as if they had been in decent company all their lives. The only concession to mourning was the boring dark colors the Amell woman had dressed them in. At least the cloth was good, and someone had taken the trouble to comb their hair.

Kane, for his part, was genuinely grateful, "Lady Amell, I'm so obliged to you for all your kindnesses." He nudged Faline. "Did you and Jancey thank Lady Amell for your new dresses?"

Leandra laughed. "Of course they did! And very nicely, too!" "Yes, indeed," Faline said softly. "You were very good to



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make them. Thank you again, Lady Amell."

Jancey echoed her, "Thank you, Lady Amell, for giving me a blue dress, so I could come here today. This is fun."

Corbus and Lothar were not quite sure what to make of the little girl visitors, but Father had insisted that they had to be polite. At least these girls weren't cowards, as many girls were, and didn't scream at Killer the way Habren did. It was too cold to play outside much, and so the boys had to share their toys. The younger girl had a doll, and that was no good at all; but they knew how to play hide-and-seek, which was fairly good fun in the big townhouse. The ceiling was high enough in the schoolroom to play at battledore and shuttlecock – when their tutor was out of the room. And when Lady Amell visited, she had the strange idea that it would be a good thing for them to learn to dance together. Bethany brought her lute and played, and Charade pushed them through the steps, pointing out that they might want to dance at all the weddings that were upon them. Corbus had to dance with Faline, and Lothar with Jancey, who giggled all the time, but it could have been worse. In between the grand dances they played Musical Chairs or Musical Statues or A Cold Wind Blows, and there were treats afterward.

Lothar whispered, "Do you suppose we'll have to dance today?"

"Absolutely," Corbus whispered back. "And we'll have to dance with those girls. I heard Father talking with that Kane fop."

Lothar bubbled with laughter. "Habren likes him."

Corbus, older and more cynical, muttered, "Habren



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would like the Archdemon if he'd make her an Arlessa."

Lothar clapped his hands over his mouth and kicked the table in glee, earning a brief glare from his father.

Corbus, even faced with the prospect of dancing with girls, was in a fairly good humor. Killer had been allowed to come, as long they didn't let him wander away. It was only fair. The Girl Warden had her big dog Scout with her, and Teyrn Loghain had a new puppy that was smaller than Killer. Bethany's brother had a puppy, too, and one of the other Wardens as well. The dogs were getting along together, with Scout in charge, and who could be a better watchdog than Scout?

The guests looked up from food and drink to cheer Pol Pollen, dressed as a wooer, here to entertain them with a song and dance. With him was the pretty young thing who had played the part of the Rabbit in the Satinalia masque. She was dressed in not much more than some flowery scarves. Pol accompanied them with a big theorb, the neck of which he handled with a decidedly phallic air. The song was traditional and mildly bawdy, and half of the guests sang along with the jester.

"I sow'd the Seeds of Love

And I sow'd them in the spring,

I gather'd them up in the morning so soon,

While the small birds so sweetly sing.

While the small birds so sweetly sing.

"The gardener was standing by

And I ask'd him to choose for me.


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*He chose for me the Violet,
the Lily and the Pink,
But those I refused all three;
But those I refused all three.*

"Instead, there was a red Rosebud—"

Here he gave Bronwyn, glorious in scarlet, a naughty wink. She took it in good part, while the hall rocked with laughter.

*"—And that is the flower for me.
I pluck'd then
that red Rosebud,
And it opened its petals free,
And it opened its petals free.*

*"Come, all you false young men,
Do not leave me here to complain,
For the grass that has oftentimes
been trampled underfoot,
Give it time, it will rise again.
Give it time, it will rise again."*

Everyone was in the spirit for dancing themselves. Pol tuned up with the other musicians — for he was actually quite a good player of lute, theorbo, and flute — and people sorted themselves out for dancing. Loghain had resigned himself to dancing with his new wife, and Fergus and Anora had made their own arrangements beforehand. Bryland led Leandra to the floor, and Kane took a glow-


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ing Habren by the hand. Rothgar Wulffe asked Charade, and the little Bryland boys were frog-marched into doing their duty to the little Kendells girls.

Nathaniel Howe caused a great deal of talk by asking Bethany Hawke to dance with him. He was perfectly aware she was a mage, but she was also the prettiest girl sitting down, and it was not as if he had asked her to marry him. Nonetheless, the Grand Cleric and her priests whispered together, looking concerned.

After the next course came more entertainment, but this was a grander and more serious affair. A minstrel-scholar, Benedick Agravaine, presented himself before them. His tall harp was positioned so all could see and hear him, and the old man bowed low.

"We are not the first," he proclaimed, his voice resonant and strong. "We are not the first to face the threat of the darkspawn. Let us all take comfort in the tales of battles of old, and know that those who lived before us endured similar trials, and lived to tell of them. I shall recite to you a part — only a small part — of the LAY OF HAFTER, a great hero of Ferelden, and the noble ancestor of many before me tonight. This is the Tale of Hafter and the Darkspawn."

"Hafter?" Lothar piped up. "I like Dane better. He was a werewolf for awhile."

"Hush, Lothar," Bryland said, ruffling his son's hair. "Hafter is our ancestor, too." He leaned over to the Kendells, smiling kindly. "And yours as well. It is a fine thing to hear of the


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deeds of our forefathers. As the scholar says, we are not the first to live through hard times and the threat of Blight."

THE MINSTREL'S TALE OF HAFTER AND THE DARKSPAWN
*Hear me! We've heard of the lords of the Alamarri,
 Doughty teyrns of old, and the glory they cut
 For themselves, swinging mighty swords!
 Greatest of swords Dane gave to Hafter,
 Yusaris, Bane of Dragons, a blade of worth;
 Well-forged the steel, shining and sharp.
 And gave him eke a helm and byrnie,
 hard and hand-linked.*

Carver blushed happily, thinking about the greatsword in his quarters. Hafter had used it long ago, and it had passed through countless hands. One could hardly claim to own such a blade. It was passing through time, and he was simply a link in the great chain of its history.

*All these he had; and had beside his lady,
 Daughter of Helming, ring-bedecked teyrna,
 Often in hall to offer the jeweled mead-cup
 To young and old, the loyal retainers.*

"'Tis a translation," Morrigan remarked dismissively. "A translation only. The poem is far more impressive in the original Alamarri."

Her tablemates hushed her. Luckily the rest of the hall had not noticed the exchange.

Across the seapaths came tidings;


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the ancient evil risen and raging.

*Up rose the mighty one, ringed with his warriors,
 Shieldmaidens and thanes, bravest of bands.
 Some bode without, battle-gear guarding, as bade the chief.
 Then hied that troop where the hero led them,
 To front the fiends and fight for life,
 Foe against foe.*

*Then spoke Hafter, wise words and ready,
 "Oft luck spares a man if his courage hold."*

*Through wan night striding came the walkers-in-shadow,
 Foulest of fiends, the children of darkness.
 Wakeful, the warriors, war-weal weaving,
 Bided the battle's issue.*

*Then splintered many a shield,
 And many a worthy warrior went down to the halls of the dead.
 The sky resounded with the strain of the struggle.
 Alamarri with fear and frenzy were filled, each one,
 Who from the strife that wailing heard,
 The foes of the gods in their grisly song,
 Cry of the Tainted, clamorous pain from the
 Captives of hell.*

*Not in any wise would the hero Teyrn
 Suffer that slaughterous spawn to survive.
 Many athane brandished blade ancestral,
 Fain the life of their lord to shield,
 Their praised prince, if power were theirs.*


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They slew the foe, hardy-hearted heroes of war,
 Aiming their swords on every side
 The accursed to kill.
 To Hafter now the glory was given,
 And the death-sick spawn their dens in the Deep Roads sought,
 Noisome abode. To all the clans
 By that bloody battle the boon had come.
 Their burden of battle borne so long.
 Many at morning came the wonder to view,
 Folk-leaders faring from far and near.
 The fulsome foe, blood-dyed in death,
 On the mirksome moor lay slain.
 Then Hafter's glory eager they echoed, and all averred
 That from sea to sea, or south to north,
 There was no other in Thedas,
 Under vault of heaven,
 More valiant found;
 Of warrior none more worthy to rule!
 Then Hafter spoke, foster-son of Dane:
 "This work of war most willingly
 We have fought, and fearlessly dared the force of the foe.
 No longer live they, loathsome fiends,
 Sunk in their sin.
 In baleful bonds they bide until such awful doom
 As the Mighty Maker shall mete them out."
 There was hurry and hest in the hall of Hafter


 ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

For hands to bedeck it, and dense was the throng
 Of men and women the wine-hall to cleanse,
 The guest-room to garnish. Gold-gay shone the hangings
 That were wove on the wall, and wonders many
 To delight each mortal that looked upon them.
 Bowed then to bench those bearers-of-glory,
 Fain of the feasting, fealty received.
 Many a mead-cup raised the mighty-in-spirit,
 Kinsmen who sat in the sumptuous hall.
 Glad rose the revel, with harp and hail.
 Came forth the Teyrna Winifrith, hand in hand with the hero.
 A brimming cup she gave him, with kindly greeting
 And winsome words.
 "Kill darkspawn, and then have a party," muttered
 Hakan approvingly. "You can't improve on a classic."
 Then gave Hafter from his own rich hoard:
 Gold rings and war-steeds and weapons,
 Wished his warriors joy of them.
 Manfully thus, the mighty teyrn, hoard-guard for heroes,
 That hard fight repaid with jewels and treasures contemned by none;
 An heirloom to each that did his due.
 Home then rode the clansmen from that merry journey.
 Past and present, forever prevails the Maker's Will.
 Therefore is insight always best,
 And prudence of mind.
 For whoso endures long in this mortal life,
 How much awaits him of pain and pleasure!

Master Benedick was applauded and rewarded, and the descendants of Hafter were sufficiently flattered into a glow of self-satisfaction. Even Bronwyn felt something of the general pride in having such an ancestor. Of course, while many Feredan nobles claimed descent from Hafter, only Nathaniel Howe had the documentation to prove the links. For that matter, the Couslands claimed descent from Hafter through their intermarriage with the Howes, as did the Brylands and Wulfes.

After the last round of dancing, Fergus promised them a special treat: the Warden minstrel that many of them had had the privilege of hearing down in Ostagar. Wulffe began applauding immediately. Leliana smiled, sweeping gracefully into the center of the room, accepting from a servant the lute she had sent to Highever House earlier in the day.

"The most beautiful song I know is a song I learned from the elves," she said, her sweet voice easily filling the hall. "Tonight I share the best I have with you." She strummed her lute thoughtfully, and then her voice rose, swirling like perfumed smoke, singing in a language known to only a few.

*"Hahren na melana sahlin
emma ir abelas
souver'inan isala hamin
vhenan him dor'felas
in uthenera na revas"*

Danith hardly knew how to feel about this. How had Leilana learned such a song? Her voice was agreeable and

her pronunciation correct. Still – it was a thing of the Dalish. "She sings beautifully," whispered Nuala. "It is an honor. Still – it is odd to hear this song at a wedding..."

Steren agreed. "Perhaps she does not understand the words." Leliana's voice soared on, filling her listeners with a kind of silent peace.

*"vir sulahn'nehn
vir dirthera
vir samahl la numin
vir 'lath sa'vunin"*

Carver leaned forward, urgently whispering to Danith. "What is she singing about?"

Danith murmured, unwilling to miss a note. "It is difficult to render it in the common tongue." Seeing that the boy was still eager to hear, she relented.

*"Elder your time is come.
Now I am filled with sorrow.
Weary eyes need resting;
Heart has become grey and slow.
In waking sleep is freedom.
We sing, rejoice,
We tell the tales,
We laugh and cry,
We love one more day."*

Bronwyn leaned on Loghain's shoulder, the song working its magic on her as well. After a day of such frantic bustle, it was sweet to have a moment of peace like this.

Faces had softened with the lulling of the gentle music: the guests would depart in a glow of good spirits, happy to find their beds, but glad they had spent the evening here.

She told Loghain, "Keeper Lanaya gave me an elven songbook, and I passed it on to Leliana."

Loghain nodded. "She made good use of it."

The wedding guests, gorged and drunken and merry, cheered the bride and groom as they left for the Palace. Fergus embraced his sister, a little maudlin with drink.

"Are you sure you don't want me to go with you, pup?" he asked plaintively.

"I'll be fine. And this way I won't have to put up with anything resembling the hideous old bedding customs. It's time to put those traditions behind us. Loghain and I will retire in decent privacy, and I hope to someday do you the same courtesy."

"If that's what you want," he said, smiling fondly and smelling a bit like a distillery. He gave her another hug, and escorted the Queen out to her carriage, with Loghain giving his arm to Bronwyn.

Bronwyn was once again resigned to riding in the carriage, with small, incredibly hard pearl beads pressing into her back, packed in with Leliana, Morrigan, and the dogs. They were now joined by the dwarf Soren, strapped to the top of the carriage, completely overcome by West Hills brandy. Once secured, no one in the street would see

him, and it was really too dark for resident of upper stories to look out and be puzzled by the sight of a snoring dwarf on top of the Teyrn of Highever's carriage.

Loghain, for that matter, smirked when he was handing his lady into to the coach, their conversation nearly inaudible due to the atrocious noises issuing from just above their heads.

"Fortunate for him that that we can hear him," Morrigan remarked contemptuously. "Else he would likely sleep all night and the following day up there."

Truly, not all the guests were the highest spirits. The children were exhausted. Rather than force them to stay until the bride was seen off, they had stayed just long enough for Leliana's performance and the serving of the aromatically spiced wedding cake, and then were sent home, accompanied by their tutor and a suitable guard.

Others were made sad by too much drink, or too many memories. Nathaniel brooded over his own prospects, rather put out, now that it came to it, that Loghain should carry off such a prize. Habren was tired and sulky, loath to share Kane's attention any longer. There were those, like Aveline, who were widowed, and for whom the celebrations of a wedding brought home their own bereavement.

For that matter, Anora had had all the feasting she cared for. She liked to keep regular hours, and it was now considerably past her usual bedtime. She looked forward to returning to the Palace and the familiar comfort of her

bed. Not wishing to seem a poor sport in Fergus' eyes, she smiled graciously, but he, made observant by love, could see how her eyelids drooped and her smile faltered. He handed her into her own carriage with careful tenderness, and his arm received a discreet pressure in thankful acknowledgement.

Loghain mounted his horse and rode just in front of Bronwyn's carriage, tolerating the usual quips and drunken advice in good part. He certainly did not need the input of noble lackwits, but it would be foolish to antagonize them, and thus lose the good will the marriage had gained him. It was growing cold, and a thin, icy mist lay heavy on the city. The horses' hooves struck the cobbles with a sharp and heightened clatter. Altogether it was just the sort of night, and just the sort of scene, that one could imagine being the setting for an attack. Loghain peered into the shadows, into dark alleys and up at nearby rooftops, searching for the tell-tale glint of steel.

A pack of random beggars at the end of the Gate Bridge briefly alarmed him, but they were no more than they seemed, and the guards got rid of them without trouble. No doubt they were making for Highever House, and would be among the first in line for the remnants of tonight's feast come tomorrow morning.

Anora fell asleep in her coach; and somewhat to their later embarrassment, so did all the occupants of Bronwyn's. Even the puppies were quiet in the basket, twitch-

ing a little in soft and milky puppy dreams.

Morrigan roused first, hearing the raised voices in the Palace courtyard, as the staff (many of whom had attended the wedding at the Cathedral) came out to welcome home the bridal couple. She laughed sharply at the sight of Leliana fast asleep, her mouth open, and at Bronwyn, her ruby headpieces askew, Bronwyn heard the sound dimly, and then sensed the brighter light and sat up.

"Holy Maker!" she groaned. "I must look a sight."

"You do," Morrigan agreed helpfully.

Leliana, when awakened, went to work repairing the damage, and Bronwyn emerged from the conveyance with dignity intact. Anora's seneschal was a considerate man, and quietly awakened her and gave her time to put herself in order before stepping from her carriage.

Bronwyn, still dozy, smiled on the assembled staff, deferring politely to the Queen. Loghain, who had had just about enough of ceremony for the day, hurried things along, reaching into the coach to claim the sleepily whimpering Amber. Bronwyn said her farewells to her grinning... or smiling... or wistfully nostalgic Wardens, and entered the front gate of the Palace on Loghain's arm. In his other, he held his puppy close. Scout trailed behind, eyes half-shut, tail down, ready to sleep at a moment's notice.

"Don't forget Soren!" Bronwyn reminded them, and disappeared behind the heavy brass-bound oak doors.

The coach she had ridden in was Fergus', and the driver

was obliging enough to take the "Warden ladies" around to their own entrance.

"I wonder," mused Anders, swaying gently, "how many Wardens would fit in the Teyrn of Highever's carriage."

It was the signal for a crazed scramble. Seeing Anders lunge, Carver grabbed him by the back of his doublet and dashed in ahead of him, pulling the basket of puppies protectively onto his lap. Anders shouted, "Oi!" and fired a spark in his direction that hit Jowan instead.

"That was a mistake," declared Hakan. "He has the power to boil your brains."

"That's 'cos he's *e-e-e-vil*," said Anders.

"Am not!" Jowan shouted. He scrambled up the steps to the carriage. "Let me in!" he demanded. "Lily needs me!"

"Are too," Anders muttered, dusting himself off.

When Hakan tried to get into the carriage next, Idunn roared, "Ladies first!" and slugged him.

By this time Anders had managed to get into the carriage, his arms around Morrigan, taking advantage of the dark interior. Morrigan's throaty laughter was later agreed to be "creepy and inappropriate" by Leliana and Aveline, who had discovered that they saw eye to eye on many matters.

"I can walk," Danith said with stiff dignity. "It is but a few steps to the Compound."

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no!" Anders protested, coming up for air from a liplock. "Plenty of room, plenty of room!"

Everybody in!"

"It's a bit hard on the horses, Warden," the driver protested mildly.

"There now," Quinn interrupted. "You see? Not right to hurt the horses."

Steren thought the same. "I wish to stop at the stables and see to the halla anyway. I shall return to the Compound later."

"Good idea!" cried Quinn, looping his huge arm over the slender elf's shoulder. "I'll go with you and help!"

"Have fun!" called Carver. "Meanwhile, I would like to recapitulate tonight's fine... old... song!"

"Oh, don't!" pleaded Leliana.

*"I sow'd the seeds of lo-o-o-o-ove,
I sow'd them in the spri-i-i-i-ng..."*

Servants and officials, knights and men-at-arms waited in the entry hall of the Palace and lined the corridors to the private wing. Once inside, almost impulsively, Anora and Bronwyn kissed each other's cheeks, while Loghain looked on, inscrutable. It was a long gauntlet of bows and the reciprocal gracious nods until they bade Anora good night and were within sight of their own apartments. At Loghain's darkening scowl, the beaming or merely curious servants who did not have an extremely good reason to be there slipped away, and the newly-married couple could converse quietly in something resembling privacy.

"Well," said Loghain. "That's done."

His new wife stopped in her tracks, and threw him a look that suggested that that had not been the most tactful remark to make at the moment. Scout stopped too, staring up at Loghain quizzically. Bronwyn took a long, deep breath, and resumed walking.

"Yes," she said. "What's done is done."

He must not let her retire on that note. He walked her to her door, which opened to reveal a smiling, excited Fionn, waiting to help her remove her finery. Ignoring the maid's presence, Loghain took Bronwyn's hand and pressed a grave kiss on it. Amber whimpered sleepily.

"Soon," he said, raising his brows.

That wrung a smile from her.

"Not too soon. This wedding regalia is more complicated than my armor!"

He gave a half-smile in return, as the door shut behind her. He picked up his pace and strode into his quarters without ceremony.

His manservant, Cashel, bowed in greeting.

"Good evening, my lord. May I offer my felicitations on this happy occasion?"

"You may make me presentable to my bride, Cashel."

"Indeed, my lord. The bath is drawn and ready."

After an afternoon and evening of ornate and heavy clothing, dancing, feasting, drinking, and breathing in the exhalations of hundreds of people doing exactly the same things, Loghain thought that was a brilliant notion. He sank into the

hot, herbed water, wishing briefly that he could just sleep in the tub. Impossible. He must not disappoint his bride and scandalize the servants. To his annoyance, Cashel was proposing to shave him for the second time that day.

"One ought to put one's best foot forward, my lord. Shows respect for the importance of the occasion."

"She'd better not expect me to shave *every* night,"

The girl ought not to expect him to make love to her every night, for that matter, though she was a young thing and hot-blooded. A man needed his sleep sometimes, and they had been together only last night. Still, it was her wedding night, and she had a right to his undivided attention. Possibly he could pleasantly surprise her...

Bronwyn was so tired of her finery that it was difficult not to snap at Fionn and rip it all off. She forced herself to sit, hands folded, while the maid untangled tendrils of hair from her beaded collar and her headpiece. The jewels were removed and put aside, and then, in a tiresome reversal of the earlier process, the massive weights of corset, bodice, skirt, and underdress were lifted away.

"Let me get your hair up out of the way, your ladyship," Fionn said soothingly, "and I've got a nice hip bath waiting for you."

"Thank the Maker!" Bronwyn moaned. "I feel so grubby!"

Scout snorted and found his cushion by fire. Bronwyn smiled fondly on the dog.

"Maybe you should be next, old fellow. You're pretty ripe, too, after such a busy day. A bath would be just the thing for you."



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Scout feigned sleep – or total deafness – with the skill of a bard.

Much refreshed, Bronwyn allowed Fionn to dress her in her prettiest silk nightdress and her mother's gorgeous scarlet dressing gown. Thus washed and arrayed, she felt better about being a noble bride, and sat complacently while her hair was brushed and braided.

"And now," Bronwyn declared solemnly, "We await the enemy's next move. I'll stand the watch. You go to bed."

"I should be here to open the door..."

"I am perfectly capable of opening my own door," Bronwyn assured her. "To bed with you. We'll be busy enough tomorrow."

Fionn paused, her eyes wide and damp with sentiment. "My lady... Teyrna Bronwyn... Maker watch over you!"

Bronwyn rose, and kissed the maid's brow, and then smilingly gave her a little push to send her on her way. Did the girl imagine she was some sort of trembling virgin? It was possible, she supposed. The maid went back through the study and shut her own door. Bronwyn at last had a moment alone to reflect on the day.

Teyrna Bronwyn. It did sound very well. To be Teyrna of Gwaren was *something*.

Should she pour some wine for Loghain? No. She could not imagine that either of them needed anything more to drink. Better to get on with it right away. Or did the proper protocol demand that they talk to each other for a specified period of time? Mother would have known, but



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Mother was not here. Were they supposed to protest their affections to one another? Doing that in cold blood would make her feel very, very silly.

"Bronwyn?"

Loghain's voice was low and questioning, muffled by the heavy door. Trying not to seem pathetically eager, she slowly opened the door, and could not help smiling at the sight of him, prepared for bed in proper Palace style, in a velvet dressing gown. She looked again, and noticed that there was no sign of a night shirt underneath. Perhaps the evening had real possibilities, after all.

"Where's Amber?"

"Dead asleep in her basket. Just as well. Come."

Ah, so much for romance. No sweeping off her feet, but a practical walk, side by side, into her bedchamber, and a brief discussion about who preferred which side. Loghain, of course, wanted the side nearest the door, so he could leave when duty called.

She sniffed. "What about when *my* duty calls?"

"Then you can crawl out over me. I don't mind." With a shrug, he cast off his splendid dressing gown, and stood naked before her. Being a sensible man, he folded it carefully, and laid it on her long rosewood chest, lest it be creased.

Bronwyn wondered if she was supposed to disrobe so casually, but he had different ideas: unfastening her red wrapper with a dark smile and a searching glance; and then gently unlacing her fragile white nightdress, allow-



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ing it to pool on the floor. Bronwyn noted – in the back of her mind – that he was not so particular of her clothes as he was of his own.

But these were minor matters. She was in his arms, and he smelled very nice and clean, which was something of a surprise after today's events.

"I had a bath, too," she murmured, responding to his hands and lips.

"I noticed. You deserve a special reward for such thoughtfulness."

"I didn't really... what are you doing?"

"Shhhh..."

She was being pushed back onto the bed, onto the lovely silken pillows that were lately the property of diabolic blood mages. They were very nice pillows all the same. Loghain was intent on kissing her: his lips warm and agreeably soft, traveling from her brow and mouth and jaw, to the joining of her neck and the curve of her breast. And he kept moving down, tickling her, warming her and startling her all at once. His fingers were gentle and probing, and his tongue... She had heard of such things, of course, but they were foreign... arts... and Loghain surely would not...

"Oh!"

"Shhhh..."

Outside, the mist thickened, and as the temperature dropped, snow fell softly on Denerim. Everything sordid was masked in purest white: the open sewers of the Alienage, the filth of the streets. Even the rough stone and timber of the

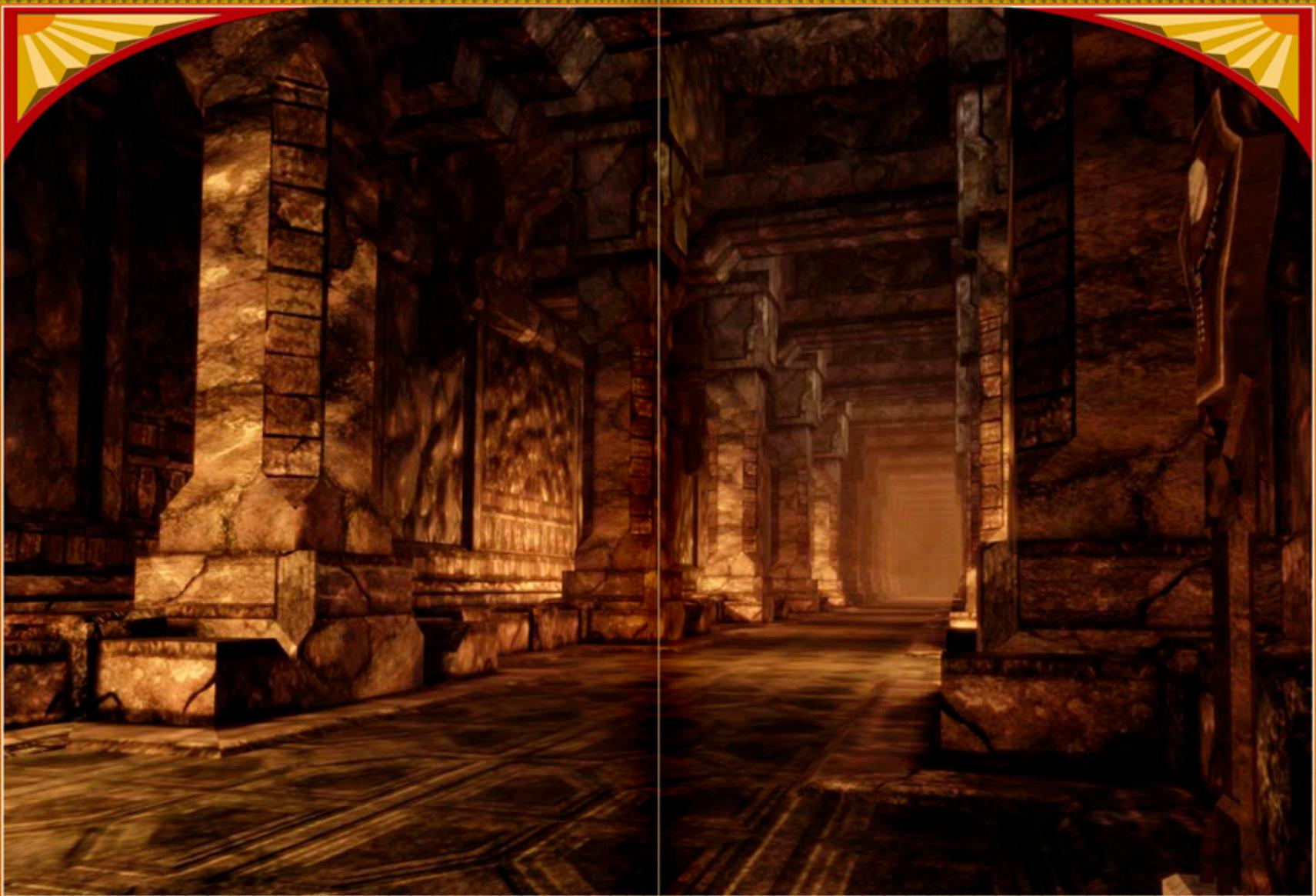


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buildings was made beautiful – if only for a brief moment in time. The snowfall grew heavier, and Denerim grew quiet: the curses of drunkards, the cries of lovers, the pleas of beggars, and the moans of the dying all muffled alike.



POL POLLEN, FOOL BY PROFESSION



IN THE DEEP ROADS



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BioWare, the developers of Dragon Age, may be found at: <http://www.bioware.com/>

The Dragon Age Wiki, source of these images (and much other information) is found at: http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Dragon_Age_Wiki



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CHAPTER 2

ALL THE WAY
TO WEST HILL

ARKSPAWN!"

Rodyk's man on point screamed a warning, just a split second after Astrid sensed the Taint the air.

They had grown complacent in the past month, seeing little of the darkspawn. In the stretch of the Amgarrak Road close to the meeting place at the tip of Lake Calenhad, things were about to change.

"Form ranks!" Rodyk roared. "Assemble the ballistae!"

The darkspawn were coming from the east, on the Amgarrak Road. Astrid had time for the ironic reflection that her ability to sense darkspawn did not mean much, since the darkspawn could sense her just as readily.

"Wardens!" she shouted. "To your positions!"

The obscene chuckling echoed from stone to stone. The darkspawn were rounding a turn, not half a league away. No one could see them, but everyone could hear them. The Wardens could feel them. Shale thundered up beside Astrid, the crystals embedded in its rocky skin gleaming richly in the dim light. Everyone moved carefully away



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from the front of the ballistae, as the explosive bolts were loaded into the grooves.

Rodyk lifted his arm.

"Archers! Make ready!"

Catriona and the Dalish Ailill stood with the Legion bowmen, their arrows on their bowstrings, drawing back... sighting down the shafts.

The first scabby heads appeared in the distance. Velanna moved up to Astrid's other side, breathing slowly and deeply, staff at the ready.

"Loose!"

Bows twanged high and the ballistae low. One of the ballista bolts scraped along the side of the wall, striking sparks. Deflected, it bounced to the left and slammed into a hurlock, and finally struck the tunnel wall behind the creature and exploded. More darkspawn surged out of the turn.

"Now, Velanna! Now!"

The ensuing fireball knocked the darkspawn down, and left everyone's ears ringing from the shock. The archers recovered and sent more arrows winging at the enemy. Swordsmen and axemen adjusted their grips.

More darkspawn rushed them, howling. It was a big band, Astrid realized. A *very* big band. The earth trembled, and an ogre charged out of the shadows. Velanna screamed out a spell to weaken it and slow it down. The ballistae got off another bolt each. One impaled the ogre through the side of the chest and then exploded, destroy-



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ing the creature's heart and lungs in a single blinding thunderclap. This blow briefly halted the darkspawn charge, but soon the battle was rejoined, and it was up to steel and magic to save them.

At the trot, Astrid led the vanguard forward to engage the darkspawn hand to hand. The archers shot high, aiming at the darkspawn shoving behind their leaders.

"You engineers!" Rodyk shouted. "Get your ballistae up on that rise and shoot over our heads!"

More darkspawn were coming: pushing and trampling in their eagerness to attack the Wardens; hopping, squealing. This was no mere band: it was a small army.

Rodyk roared commands, and the Legion formed a shield wall the width of the Road. The darkspawn surged up around the Wardens' skirmish line.

The vanguard was being mobbed. There was scarcely room to strike a blow. A human shriek rose up above the horrid grunting of the darkspawn. Astrid caught a glimpse of Liam's sunbright head, his mouth open, his eyes staring, until they dimmed suddenly, like candles blown out. The man collapsed, and the Blighted tide covered him.

"Wardens! Get back!" Astrid screamed. "Behind the shields!"

They were swimming in the flood of darkspawn, fighting to stay upright and armed. Astrid snarled as a genlock gibbered in her face, clawed hands scrabbling at her. An immense blow and the genlock and three of its fellows were flying backwards, slamming into the wall.



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"Move, Warden!" boomed Shale. The golem halted, suddenly made sluggish by the backlash of Velanna's entropy spell. The mage's face was sickly with fear. She scrambled away from a circle of paralyzed darkspawn, and made a dash for the shield wall. A pair of overlapped shields briefly parted, admitting her. From that comparative safety, she unleashed another fireball. It passed within inches of Astrid, singing the hair on the back of her neck below her helmet. It exploded further down the passage, and flames licked backwards. Unholy screams echoed from wall to wall.

Explosive bolts sailed over the squirming mass, and smashed the darkspawn. Bits of the creatures flew up to the ceiling, and then dropped heavily on all the combatants. Velanna frantically fired spell after spell, downing lyrium potions, trying to rally her mana. Gathering all her strength, she unleashed a firestorm on the rear of the tunnel. Darkspawn screeched as flames roared up from the stone floor, consuming them. More fire dropped from the ceiling, clinging to heads and arms and breastplates. As some of the creatures withered in flame and fell dead, more rushed up behind them. They too, perished horribly. The fire spread, fed by the darkspawn, tongues of flame leaping from corpse to corpse and on to the living.

Aeron was stumbling, his helmet knocked off, his hair afire, blinded by blood from a slash to his forehead. Astrid shouted, "It's me!" and herded him along with her, trying to shelter him with her own shield. A hurlock was exactly



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where she wanted to push through the shield wall. Astrid bashed the creature from behind. When it turned on her, a Legionnaire stabbed it. Astrid gave Aeron a push, and the dwarves reached out to help the man inside and smother the flames.

Askil was not far, his face intent as his axe swept away a genlock's head. Astrid shouted at him wordlessly, and he nodded slightly, and began trudging doggedly back. Falkor, she feared was nearly lost in the beserker-rage, but Shale waded through the press and tapped him lightly – for a golem – on the back of the neck. Falkor dropped behind the golem, and Shale crushed another half-dozen of the darkspawn with a single sweep.

"Come on!" Astrid shouted. "Come on now! You, too, Shale!"

The dwarves made it back behind the shield wall. Astrid slipped through. Slinging her own shield onto her back. Astrid concentrated on using her sword to stab at the enemy from under the shields; stabbing at knees and groins. Darkspawn were made like other races. If you could nick the femoral artery, they would bleed out in seconds, just like dwarves, elves, and humans.

Shale positioned itself just in front of the shields, so its back was protected. It could still lash out with its mighty arms and grab at individual darkspawn, ripping them apart, throwing them back onto their fellows. The ballistae loosed bolt after bolt and the archers poured a rain of arrows down of the attackers. Now and then someone stumbled and fell in the



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shield wall, but others were there to take their places. The shield wall strained, but held. Some of the archers moved up and shot directly into the darkspawn. When the darkspawn dead mounded up too high, Rodyk ordered a withdrawal of five paces, executed on command.

The attack slowed, the darkspawn numbers dwindled, and the unbearable noise diminished. Dying and wounded darkspawn gobbled and thrashed. The archers took careful aim and finished them off. The ballistae engineers had no more targets, and leaned on their carriages, exhausted.

A terrible silence fell. Some of the Legion slid to the floor and curled up, unable to do anything more at the moment. Astrid found Velanna, sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees, eyes blank.

"The wounded need help," she said. Velanna gave her a hot, resentful look, but got up, drank another potion, and set to work.

Rodyk strode up to Astrid. "That was... grim," he said. "We must have got soft. I lost eleven."

"I lost one dead," Astrid said, the reality sinking in. "And one may not be fit to fight for some time." She climbed over dead darkspawn, looking for Liam. It took some time to find him.

Liam *had* died. She had lost a Warden. Perhaps they had been lucky not to lose more, but this one was hers, and he had been a good fighter and a cheerful companion. She bent and tugged the young man out from under



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the stinking darkspawn. He had once mentioned some family. Catriona would know. And Bronwyn would want his service and his death recorded.

Velanna was busily casting healing spells, though Astrid noted that she had gone to Ailill first, though he was unhurt. She pressed her lips together, controlling her anger. Aeron needed Velanna's help now, and plenty of the Legion did as well.

Askill was pressing a bandage to Falkor's face, which would likely never be the same, considering the jaw wound. Aeron had lost his hair, and Astrid wondered if it would ever grow back. The minstrel, though in pain, was cheerful about it.

"I shall pretend to have shaved it deliberately, and set a new style. Maybe I'll set it off with an earring."

Catriona gave his arm a squeeze. "It makes you look like a real badass, Aeron."

A few scouts were sent to see if more darkspawn were coming. Ailill volunteered to go with them. Other unwounded warriors began opening up rations.

"Good work, Shale," Astrid said. She meant it, too. It seemed likely to her that the shield wall would not have held without Shale's support. The ballistae were good, and magic had played its part, but Shale had been crucial.

"I am always overjoyed to receive my little crumbs of praise. How does it feel? It appears relatively uninjured."

"I am quite well, Shale, though others are not."



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"Yes, I have noticed that it is not as squishy as most."

Darion Olmech had fought with them, naturally, and well, too, though for the most part his contribution had been to load ballistae. The battle left him shaken and appalled. He was taking long swallows from a stone bottle.

"How can we hope for final victory without the power of golems?" he asked Astrid, his voice low. "What chance do we have? You saw what Shale did, and so did I. It made all the difference. All the difference! The Anvil of the Void is truly gone?"

"So they tell me. The golems were made by pouring molten lyrium over a living dwarf encased in metal or stone. The process was excruciating, and Caridin pleaded with the Warden-Commander to destroy the Anvil. She did, since she needed a Paragon's moral authority to resolve the succession."

"She was wrong. The Anvil of the Void belonged to the dwarves, and the Grey Wardens had no right to make such a decision." He wiped sweat and soot from his face, and slumped on a ballista carriage. "There must be another way. What has been invented once can be invented again. We understand the principle. It only remains to find the means."

"You mean... discover another way to make golems?" Astrid bit her lip, thinking. "That could be the salvation of Orzammar."

It would be a way to go home, too. Astrid was instantly swept up in exciting new possibilities. If she could present Orzammar with a new supply of golems, she would unques-



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tionably be made a Paragon. Bhelen would not be able to touch her. A Paragon of Orzammar was greater than any king or queen. In fact, she could be queen if she so chose.

"You know," Darion whispered. "I have come upon references in the Shaperate to Amgarrak Thaig. They carried on experiments with golems long after Caridin was lost. If we could find the Thaig, something might remain."

"Ah," said Astrid, things becoming clearer to her. "So this is why you traveled with us."

"Yes. Why deny it? I'm looking for Amgarrak Thaig. It should be somewhere northeast of here, and not far at all. I have maps, but the way has been blocked for generations."

"I have my mission to complete, but after we arrive at the fortress of West Hill, we have orders to we explore the Deep Roads in the area. That might be the best opportunity."

Darion smiled slowly. "I was hoping you'd agree."

Astrid gave the scheme more thought, drawn in by the possibilities. According to the lore, Grey Wardens were not supposed to interfere in politics, but that was plainly not how it worked in practice. From what she had gathered in Denerim, the First Warden cared primarily for the affairs of the Anderfels, and his lack of support for Ferelden in this time of Blight appeared to be politically motivated by a desire to appease Orlais. Then, too, Bronwyn was not in the least impressed by the Grey Warden restrictions against holding titles. She was, in fact, clearly determined to make herself Queen of Ferelden. Astrid did not gainsay



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her for her ambition, but felt that what one Warden did, another could do. If a Warden Queen could rule a surface kingdom, could not a Warden Queen rule Orzammar?

Orzammar certainly needed something better than Bhelen. Given Bronwyn's situation, she could not blame her commander for choosing against Harrowmont, who, to be honest, was not the strong leader that Orzammar needed. Harrowmont was the traditionalists' choice, and tradition would be the doom of the dwarves. But Bhelen... Did the deshyrs know what they were getting in Bhelen? A kinslayer, a greedy manipulator, a liar and a cheat who cared only for his own power? Bhelen must go.

Her thoughts touched on Brosca, who would not like it if Bhelen fell. Astrid quite liked Brosca, and would have to make the former Duster understand that her sister and the child would be safe even if Bhelen perished. The child – who was just as much Astrid's nephew as Brosca's – would still be an Aeducan, and the mother – Rica – would keep her rank of petty noble. In fact, since Grey Wardens had trouble reproducing, it might be that the child would be her own heir. It mattered little to Astrid, who had never particularly longed to endure the inconveniences of pregnancy and childbearing. For that matter, the child would be better off without the influence of a tunnel snake like Bhelen.

She would have liked to continue the journey underground – and her very interesting conversation with Darion – but Bronwyn's orders were explicit. She was to travel to West Hill



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on the surface, while Tara's party had their own trial by fire below. There would be time enough to talk more with the scholar when they all gathered at West Hill.

Giving formal thanks to Rodyk and the Legion, Astrid led her battered Wardens to the Lake Calenhad access point. The Legion would dig in here, and await Tara and her party. Astrid hoped Tara would have better luck than her own. Catriona appeared especially saddened by Liam's death, and Astrid was gentle with her, praising the young man's courage and skill.

It was broad day when they opened the seal, and all of them reeled back, nearly blinded by the light. After the first shock, the humans and elves raced up the steps and threw themselves on the grassy earth of the surface, weeping; rejoicing at the sight of the sun and the feel of the wind on their faces. Astrid would never understand them, but it would do no good to laugh at them.

She consulted her map. "The Spoiled Princess is this way," she said. "Let's go."



Tara was not looking forward to her stint in the Deep Roads. She understood why Bronwyn felt it was important for all the Wardens to see the Deep Roads for themselves, but it was a daunting prospect, especially after Astrid's people had been so badly cut up. On the other hand, she could hardly expect them to go back and endure all the danger themselves. According to the maps, it should only be a little over two days



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march to the entrance near West Hill.

If the maps were correct. If there were no cave-ins. If the darkspawn did not attack in force. If.

While the three dwarves in Tara's party had plenty of experience, Darach had been in the Deep Roads once before, and only briefly. Walter and Griffith had been present on the day the Broodmothers were killed, but were part of the support troops on the surface. They had seen — and smelled — the condition of the soldiers who had seen the horrors with their own eyes, but not ventured below themselves. Now there was no choice.

At least they had a company of Legion escorting them. Shale, too. Astrid had told her that Shale was the key to victory. If the golem could stop snarking long enough, Tara imagined it would fight extremely well. Shale thought a lot of Astrid: not so much of a mage like Tara.

Of course, Tara had fought extensively in the Deep Roads herself, and journeyed to lost thaigs and Bownammar, City of the Dead. She had seen the wonders of the Anvil of the Void with her own eyes, something about which Darion Olmech, the dwarven scholar, asked her again and again.

He asked Brosca, too, who had been there as well. There was an edginess about Brosca now, and her temper was shorter. Ever since Cullen's death, something had gone sour and brittle in the duster. Darion was finding that out. Tara hoped he would stop pestering them with questions.

"Give it a rest, Darion!" Brosca's broad, good-humored face



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had turned hard. "It's over! Done! The Anvil was destroyed!"

The scholar was undeterred. "Do you really think a human should have taken it upon herself — "

"Branka pissed off the Boss, bonehead!" Brosca snarled. "Just like you're pissing me off right now. Branka went crazy and killed her whole house. She fucked up! Then she tried to force the Boss to get her to the Anvil. That was dumb. You don't piss off Bronwyn without consequences. You didn't see the things Branka did. Turning the women of her house into Broodmothers, trying to make enough darkspawn to force her way through to the Anvil... Letting the men be turned to ghouls! The Boss thought she needed to be stopped, and that was good enough for me! Now, if you will just get out of my *face*..."

Darion looked after her, disappointed, and then saw Tara, and hurried in her direction.

Tara raised her hands, and tried to stem the flood of words. "What she said. I think Bronwyn was right. She thinks dwarves have a serious enough population problem without killing breeders by making golems. She thinks it's morally wrong to kill people in order to make them into weapons. She thinks there's no way that such a technology would not be misused. And... well... Branka really did piss her off. Me, too, for that matter. She was so *smug*."

He huffed. "Astrid agrees with me that the Anvil should have been preserved."

"Astrid wasn't there!" Tara felt her face crinkling into a scowl



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— a scowl so tight it hurt. "Leave it alone, Darion. I don't want to fight with you about something that's done. Caridin himself begged us to destroy the Anvil. He knew he'd done wrong by inventing it. It's gone. If you want to help your people, do something for the dusters and the surfacers."

She turned on her heel and stalked away. Behind her, a frustrated Darion considered his options, and then slipped away for a quiet talk with Sigrun and Jukka, who might not be so completely under the Warden-Commander's control.

After the next march, they met another band of darkspawn, smaller than the army Astrid had faced, but still formidable. These were also traveling west on the Amgar-rak Road. What followed was grim.

There was a crossroads here of sorts. Not as big or complex as Caridin's Cross, but with enough twists and turns to allow the darkspawn to hit them from two directions. The Legion had experienced this before, and drew up into a half-circle formation with the archers in the center. There was no higher ground for the ballistae, and so once the first volleys were over, the engineers were forced to draw their personal weapons and fight in formation, stabbing out at targets of opportunity. One of the Legion went down almost immediately, a darkspawn arrow in her eye.

Tara, after hearing about the problems Velanna's firestorm had caused, decided to use lightning and ice to slow and damage the darkspawn attackers. At close range she could freeze the darkspawn outright, and Shale, stamp-



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ing up and down their lines, shattered them to bloody splinters. Astrid was absolutely right about Shale's value. A golem really did make all the difference.

But there were a lot of darkspawn, and Tara felt the terrible squeezing, as the double attack pushed at the half-circle. Behind her was Darach, his fair elven face taut as he loosed arrow after arrow at the darkspawn with astonishing speed.

Out of the mob of darkspawn came an ogre, bellowing, shaking his horns in challenge. It was massive and heavily armored; bigger than any ogre Tara had seen before. It shook off spells like raindrops, and arrows like pebbles. The darkspawn charged in his wake, roaring in triumph.

Tara knew she had to get closer. She slipped through the shield wall and rushed forward, heedless of Rodyk's orders and her people's horrified shouts.

"The Little Mage is deranged!" Shale bellowed, thundering after her.

Tara shouted back, "If that ogre breaks the line, we're done!"

Arms up and shouting, she threw out a blast of winter, freezing everything in front of her within a range of thirty feet. Shale surged forward like the outraged Stone itself, smashing as it went. They ripped a breach through the darkspawn charge, and the ogre stayed frozen long enough for Shale to reach out and punch a hole through its shoulder.

The spell faded, and the monster, torn and bloody, screamed in rage and agony, lashing out at the golem. The force of its blow rocked Shale, sending it staggering back.



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More darkspawn rushed forward, and Tara lashed them with a chain of lightning. The darkspawn danced like grotesque puppets, while Shale recovered and slammed into the wounded ogre again.

With a start, she saw that she was not alone. Brosca was beside her, finishing off a genlock that had come at them from the left. With a grin, the dwarf girl charged the ogre, daggers flashing.

Tara managed a weak cold spell that slowed the nearest darkspawn. Shale knocked them aside, while Brosca bounded up, burying her daggers in the ogre's massive chest. It made a futile grab at the dwarf with its one good arm, but the daggers were already withdrawn, and now twisted into nose and eyesocket. The ogre shuddered, and toppled back into the darkspawn behind it. Brosca vaulted away. With a scissors-like move, she beheaded a hurlock that had lingered too long.

"Run!" Shale bellowed at Tara. "Run, or I will grab it by its bird-like head and carry it!"

Tara needed no urging. "Brosca! Come on!" she shouted, and darted back to the shelter of the shields. She shot another defiant blast of lightning at the faltering darkspawn.

"Legion! Advance east and north!" ordered Rodyk. With the ease of long practice, the formation altered, and ranks finished off the darkspawn in one direction, while in the other — to the east — a small number of the darkspawn fled back down the dim Amgarrak Road. Brosca made a



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rude gesture at them.

"We win!" she declared, wiping and sheathing her daggers. "Now let's do some *looting*."

The Legion was rather impressed with Brosca and Tara. Sigrun and Jukka applauded with mock gravity. Not all the Wardens agreed. Walther was shaking from terror, fury, and a dose of darkspawn poison from an arrow wound. He vomited violently, cursing in between heavens. Griffith hovered over him, trying to wipe his mouth.

"You people are crazy!" Walther sputtered, staggering to his feet. "Crazy! There was no reason to do that."

"Yes, there was," Brosca told him, giving him a shove. "If we hadn't killed the ogre we were all going to die. Sorry you were *scared*."

Walther shoved back. Tara thought for a moment that they would come to blows. She pushed them apart, trying to be taller than she was.

"That's enough! We can't fight among ourselves. Walther, this is all part of the job. It was a lot worse in the Dead Trenches. Sometimes you have to risk yourself. Brosca and I knew what we were doing."

"You're crazy!" he muttered. "Crazy mage. Crazy dwarves!"

Tara tried to cast a healing spell, but the man knocked her hand away, cursing. Griffith put a hand on his shoulder and took him aside. The two men conversed in whispers. Walther looked over his shoulder and glared at Tara from time to time. After a little while, they joined in the



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looting, and she hoped Walther's little tantrum was over.

After a meal and a rest period, scouts were sent out in a number of directions. A warden volunteered for each of the scouting parties: Sigrun, Darach, and Brosca. Somewhat to Tara's surprise, Darion Olmech asked to go along with those heading due east, saying that he needed to make some annotations to his maps. Tara put him out of her mind, and set about healing anyone she could.



West Hill was said to be haunted.

Astrid gave herself a little mental shrug, as the huge, rambling fortress crept up over the horizon, looming on a solitary hill set in a vast, flat plain by the sea. At a distance it was impressive. On closer inspection, one saw the decaying battlements and crumbling walls.

Velanna said, in an uncommonly subdued tone, "The Veil is thin here. Thousands were slaughtered on this plain."

Astrid knew that, of course. There had been a great battle here, during the Fereldan's war against the Orlesian occupation. The Fereldans did not like to talk about it much, but Astrid had read about it in the Shaperate, back in her days as a princess. Young Maric and his army had been thoroughly trounced by the Orlesians; apparently betrayed by a spy feeding them false intelligence. The Fereldans had been nearly annihilated, and Maric had fled the field, protected by Rowan, his future queen, and by his friend Loghain. Desperate, the three of them

escaped into the Deep Roads entrance hard by the crumbling old fortress, and from there had made an epic journey to Gwaren in the southeast. Astrid was glad not to have any such prospect before her.

While their two day surface journey had been uneventful, Astrid had remained uneasy. She hoped Tara and her party would not suffer in the Deep Roads as had Astrid and her own people. They had needed their rest at the Spoiled Princess, and they rested again at the village of Three Points.

The village was indeed located at a three pointed crossroads, where the Imperial Highway ended and the Fereldan North Road began, and both were joined by the Lake Road. It was not surprising that they saw many travelers there. What Aeron had drawn attention to was the very large proportion of Templars among them. The Templars largely ignored them, other than to give Velanna – the only mage among the Wardens – filthy looks.

As a rule, Astrid ignored the human Chantry-folk as irrelevant. She knew that the mages hated them, and that the feeling was mutual. Why the humans had problems with something as useful as magic Astrid put down to the sort of self-destructive quirks all civilizations had. Humans continued to pour a huge amount of resources into their Chantry, even though the Templars did not fight the darkspawn, and even seemed to find the idea inappropriate: almost insulting. Astrid did not know how many Templars were in Ferelden, but she suspected there were

enough to make a sizable force to aid against the Blight. Bronwyn should find a way to put pressure on them.

Dwarves were no better, of course. They wasted a good tenth – at a conservative estimate – of their shrinking population. The castes would rather have a group they could look down on and despise rather than put the casteless to useful labor. In this way, Orzammar lost great warriors like Brosca to crime or the Wardens.

The elves lived on the remnants of their vanished greatness, or on the bones thrown them by the humans. City elves preyed on each other, and the Dalish sneered at them, calling them “flat ears,” though Astrid was unable to distinguish any difference whatever in the shape of their ears. Dalish arrogance was so great – and so utterly without foundation, in Astrid’s opinion – that they antagonized many who might have befriended them.

Perhaps she was extrapolating from insufficient data, but Astrid was not much impressed by the Dalish with whom she had dealt closely. Danith’s behavior during the werewolf affair had been a disgrace, and in Bronwyn’s place Astrid would have killed her without hesitation. She well understood the political reasons for tolerating such an unreliable individual, but she still considered Danith’s promotion to Senior Warden undeserved. Through the whole Zathrian affair, Astrid’s sympathies had been entirely with the werewolves.

Which brought her to consider the Dalish mages. Zath-

rian did not seem an aberration to her. Merrill, the Dalish Keeper at Ostagar, was a powerful mage, but appeared to be half-mad. Even her own people seemed to think so, having given her reliable older warriors to watch her.

And Velanna... Astrid glanced at the mage, who was walking with Ailill, a closed, supercilious look on her face. Astrid blew out a breath.

Closer acquaintance had not improved her opinion of Velanna. Velanna was haughty and difficult; she was quick to take insult where none was intended. She openly favored her own people. Astrid had not missed that Velanna always turned to heal Ailill first – even when he did not require it. Always. She was not as rude to Astrid and Askil as she was to the two surviving humans, but she made no attempt to mix with the dwarves or get to know them.

Then, too, she was careless with her magic. She was powerful, true, but did not much care whom her power hurt, as long as it did not hurt herself or another elf. And that loud voice and tactless manner would not help as they applied for entrance at the gate of West Hill, which were now before them.

"Grey Wardens?" the elderly seneschal gaped at them in dismay. "Nobody told me Grey Wardens were coming! You want to stay? Here?"

"I don't," Velanna muttered, sneering at one and all.

Astrid ignored her, and fixed the human with her

Princess-of-Orzammar stare. "Yes, we wish to stay here. Traditional hospitality is due the Grey Wardens in time of Blight. We are patrolling in this area, and are here by order of the Warden-Commander, Bronwyn Cousland."

With that, she presented her written orders to the hapless man. He took them gingerly, as if he thought they might bite, while the servants looked on in excitement and whispered to each other about "*The Girl Warden*."

Knowing that Bronwyn loathed that foolish nickname, Astrid maintained her bland expression. It would help a great deal, of course, that the lord of this rickety old mausoleum was a vassal of the Teyrn of Highever.

"Bann Frandarel's not here, Warden," the man dithered. "Gone to Denerim for the Landsmeet, he has."

"His presence is immaterial to us," Astrid said. "Are you planning to refuse us admittance?"

"No!" the man said, frightened. "No... but the bann might not like strangers staying here behind his back, like..."

"Grentold! Let the Wardens in!" A big woman strode across the puddled courtyard, pushing her sleeves back from burly arms. Her clothes were those of a commoner and her apron was filthy, but she seemed to be of some account here.

"Myrdagh, his lordship likes to keep himself to himself..."

"No one's asking anything of *his lordship*." The woman turned, and dropped a massive curtsey to the Wardens. "You're heartfelt welcome to what we have, Wardens. His lordship locks up the wine and spices when he's gone, but there's

plenty of plain food and drink, and no end of empty rooms. I'll have some of the girls put you in the Wynde Courtyard."

A series of long passages led them to an unoccupied courtyard. Leading off it were rooms that clearly had not seen use — or cleaning — in many years. They were large and commodious, though, and out of the weather. An icy hall with a soot-blackened ceiling gradually grew warm when the servants made a great fire in a circular pit in the middle of the stone floor. There was a curious square structure in the ceiling above it, which had little openings along the sides to let out the smoke. A maze of smaller rooms surrounded the hall, and some actually had what passed for beds in them. The servants brought in blankets and sheepskins to make them up with. It was far better than camping outdoors.

"Find us a bathtub or two," Astrid instructed them. "We'll want to be clean. We can fetch our own water, if you will show us where the well is."

Myrdagh stayed long enough to make sure that they had what they needed, and Astrid warned her that seven more Wardens would be coming in a day or two, along with a company of fifty or so dwarven soldiers. The woman's eyes widened at that, but she seemed determined to rise to the challenge.

"Plenty of room, Warden!" the woman said. "West Hill is three-quarters empty."

Supper was brought in: a stew mostly composed of

root vegetables. Along with it was some interesting dark-brown bread and a deep bowl of some fruit conserve. A keg of decent ale was produced. Plain, yes: but ample.

Velanna was unimpressed, "Revolting!" She examined the bread in disgust, poking at it, and then dusting off her fingers. "It looks like a great clod of mud! And what is this?" she asked, spooning up the stew. "Salt water?" The servants hurried from the big empty room, whispering indignantly among themselves.

"If you don't want it," Falkor said, gesturing at the elf's bowl of stew, "I'll have yours. I would have killed for that in Dust Town."

"It smells a lot better than what we had in the army," Catriona murmured to Aeron.

Velanna shrugged. "Poor, sad shemlen."

Astrid spoke up. "Velanna. I think you meant to have a look at Aeron's wounds before we ate. Wasn't that right? You must have forgotten."

With an enormous, put-upon sigh, Velanna strolled over to the minstrel, and set about changing the bandages. Aeron tried to roll his eyes at Astrid, and then winced in pain. Astrid longed for some time alone... before she started stabbing people.

A long walk around the fortress — mostly up on the battlements — restored her self-command. Astrid admired the twinkling stars above, studying the curious way the wisps of cloud obscured them. That was the aesthetic part



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of her explorations. When no one was looking, she did a bit of reconnaissance as well.

Much of the fortress appeared to be empty, as the housekeeper had indicated. The Bann and his servitors apparently used only one wing, with the bann's private apartments occupying a corner tower. Other parts of the fortress were used mainly for storage. From her readings she had gleaned that there had been a village nearby, in the days before the Orlesian invasion. For some reason, it had never been rebuilt.

Astrid poked into rooms and peered through windows. Like most dwarves, she had good low-light vision. She regretted that she did not have the ability to pick locks, and vowed to cultivate the skill. This was a remarkable fortress, and if properly repaired, could prove a barrier even to the darkspawn horde, should it come this way. There were foodstuffs enough here to feed the entire army at Ostagar. Below the curtain walls were eroded fortifications: ditches and works on a grand scale. A moat had once surrounded the fortress. A shame that all of it had fallen to ruin.

"A cold night for a walk."

It was Askil, his breath white puffs in the chilly air. A fellow dwarf was a welcome companion in this strange place, even a Duster turned Legionnaire turned Warden. Askil was shorter than she, with a big mashed nose and a bold brand tattoo that covered the left side of his face. He stamped his feet and rubbed his hands together, unused



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to such low temperatures.

"Cold, indeed," Astrid agreed. "What brought you away from the fire?"

"I got tired of the tension: humans on one side, elves on the other. That Velanna can't resist a chance to needle anyone in sight. It's crazy. You'd think we'd get on better after that fight in the Deep Roads, but we don't. Ailil's not so bad, though. It's Velanna who's making trouble."

"I'll talk to her again."

"Good luck. Here." Askil gave her a flask, and Astrid drank and swallowed, enjoying the brief fire in her throat.

"That's good."

"It's the last. Stone knows where we'll get more." Askill looked down at the flat plains stretching out from the fortress. "We're a long way from home."

Astrid smiled. "It's really just under our feet, if you think of it the right way."

A snort. "A long way down." A silence, and then Askil, more quietly, asked, "Why are we here, Lady Aeducan?"

She laughed, incredulous, and then saw he was serious. "Because we're Grey Wardens, and have a mission. What else do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, "that we're still dwarves, after all. So we've promised assistance to the Grey Wardens. Why? What do the dwarves of Orzammar get out of it? Do the Wardens intend to help us in return? I never heard of it."

This was a matter that Astrid had given thought to her-

self, and she had no good answers.

"In a sense, Grey Wardens already help Orzammar. When our Calling comes, we go into the Deep Roads and kill all the darkspawn we can find."

"Wardens go one at a time, and kill a handful at most. How does that compare with the entire dwarven army – plus the Legion of the Dead – marching to save the surfacers? During the time between Blights, the Wardens should all come to the Deep Roads to fight beside the dwarves. I don't understand this treaty. It's hard to believe that dwarves would agree to anything that gives us so little."

She shook her head. "I've seen the treaty with my own eyes. In it, the King of Orzammar gives his oath to support the Grey Wardens in time of Blight. There are no mutual defense clauses."

"In other words," he said slowly. "Orzammar is on its own."

"More or less. There are some golems at the Shaperate for a final defense. And Shale, I think, would stand with us. If we had an army of Shales, we'd have no need of humans or elves."

Askil's chuckle was rueful. "Even with the attitude, that golem is worth its weight in gold. I wish we had a way to replicate it."

Astrid hesitated, and then decided to confide in him. "Don't speak of this to anyone else... but... what if there is a way? Darion Olmech believes that he can find Amgar-rak Thaig. They were researching golems there. They

might have left notes at least, but he and I cannot go there alone. It is not far from here, and Bronwyn did order us to explore the Deep Roads near West Hill."

"That's the best idea I've heard... ever," Askil told her. "You can count me in. Let's tell Falkor. You can trust him."

After two more skirmishes, Tara was unspeakably relieved when they arrived at the West Hill access point. The Legion might have mixed feelings about ascending to the surface again, but everyone else was pleased. The wounded were helped up the winding stairs, and under an enormous grey sky, the party stumbled out, resealed the entrance, and formed up to march for West Hill. A gentle snow was falling, which alarmed and baffled most of the dwarves.

"What is that?" Sigrun wondered. "It's pretty, but... *weird*."

"Snow," Shale said. "Frozen water crystals. It falls from the sky in cold weather. The crystals melt at even low room temperature, so they are useless for purposes of adornment. You will notice, on close inspection, that they are all six-sided. Crystals, but ephemeral."

For that matter, Tara had not seen snow that she could remember, though she had heard about it. It *was* pretty. She tried catching the snowflakes on her tongue. Brosca stared at her.

"It's fun," Tara said. "They're cold, but they're just water, after all."

"Frozen water crystals," Brosca muttered. "Now I've seen everything."

Captain Rodyk made a face at the landscape.

"I didn't know the surface could be so... white and flat," he said. "It's... disturbing."

"It is very flat indeed," agreed Shale. "There is going to be an actual *hill* somewhere in this West Hill place, isn't there?"

"I really don't know, but the map says we'll be there soon," Tara told the golem. She cast a worried look at the Wardens. Walther was still not speaking to anyone but Griffith, and Griffith had taken a fairly scary neck wound during the last fight. Tara had given his healing her best effort, but it would still scar badly. The dwarves were in far better spirits, perhaps due to the comforting presence of the Legion. Darach, as always, was dependable, since he insisted on regarding her as his Keeper. At least he wasn't disoriented by the snow. In fact, he bent down, scooped up a loose handful, and showed the Legion how to make snowballs. The dwarves attempted to follow suit, and agreed amongst themselves that 'snowballs' would be more effective as weapons if they were formed around some sort of metal core.

The march was not long, and soon they caught sight of the big fortress. The dwarves found it interesting, and critiqued the defenses at length. Tara had hardly got the words, "We're Grey Wardens" out of her mouth before the doors were flung wide. There were stares at the imposing sight of Shale, but no outright terror. Their friends were awaiting them... or more properly, their fellow Wardens. Velanna's sneer reminded her that not everyone was a friend. Tara caught sight of Aeron, and was pleased to see

that his scalp seemed to be healing. There was something to be said for the regenerative powers of the Grey Wardens.

"Astrid!" Brosca shouted, waving. "Not dead yet, I see."

"Brosca, it's good to see you! Tara, Rodyk." Astrid nodded to them, relieved to see that all seven Wardens were accounted for. "And Shale! Still in one big stony piece. We arrived three days ago. The place is rambling and mostly empty. Rodyk, I've arranged quarters for you and your men. That fellow coming to greet you is the seneschal Grentold. The real power is the housekeeper Mydaugh, though, and you'll find her cooperative. Bann Frandarel is not in residence, so we have it all our own way. Don't worry about supplies. I've looked around, and the place is packed with foodstuffs."

The seneschal had actually confronted Astrid the day before about supplies and costs and proper requisitioning protocols. Astrid had fobbed him off with a promissory note and verbal assurances that the Grey Wardens would pay for what the Bann of West Hill could not afford to give those defending *his own lands*.

Tara said, "We'll need to rest for a day or two. That sound all right, Rodyk?"

The captain nodded. "My people would be better for food and sleep. Let's talk about plans tomorrow."

The seneschal arrived to lead the Legion down a long, freshly-scrubbed hall to their own quarters. Darion trailed behind, and caught Astrid's eye.



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"Just a minute, Tara..." she murmured. She caught up with Darion, and her heart leaped at the gleam of triumph in his eye. "You found it?" she guessed. "You've found the way to Amgarrak Thaig?"

"Yes," he murmured. Glorious discovery or not, he knew how to be discreet. "I'm sure of it. If there is anywhere we're likely to hear about the subsequent golem experiments, it's there. Your friends Tara and Brosca are not sympathetic, by the way."

"It doesn't matter," she murmured back. Smiling radiantly, she clapped him on the shoulder. "We have orders to explore this portion of the Deep Roads. No need to bring up exactly what we're looking for. We'll talk tomorrow."

Tara made a face at Darion's back. As soon as Astrid had returned to the group of Wardens, she said, "Darion nearly talked my ear off about the Anvil. He thinks Bronwyn should have let Branka make more golems."

Astrid made a show of indifference. "He's a scholar and loves to hash over the dead past. Arguments about 'what might have been' are his meat and drink. Speaking of which, I suspect you're all starving."

"No lie," Brosca agreed. She spoke low, letting the general conversation cover her words. "We had some trouble on the way. A big party hit us, and the Legion lost a few. Walther and Griffith were wounded, and they didn't like it at all."

Tara agreed. "I think the Deep Roads really scared them. I'm glad they'll have some rest before we go back."

"And something hot to eat," said Brosca. "They'll feel



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better after that. Me, too."

In the morning, Walther and Griffith were gone, along with their gear and loot. Aeron, who shared a room with them, was the first to notice their absence, and notified Astrid and Tara at once. When questioned, the West Hill servants could not tell them much.

"They said they had to go out on patrol, Warden," said a trembling kitchenmaid. "They left before sunrise. They said they'd be gone at least a week and needed some food for the journey, so I packed up some good rations for them. Did I do wrong?"

"No," Astrid said instantly, shaking her head just the least bit at Tara. "You did right. I didn't expect them to leave so early." She stalked away, Tara following. Once they were out of earshot, she relieved her anger. "Those useless cowards! Listen to me, Tara: we're not going to tell anyone outside the Wardens that they bolted. It would make us look weak. We'd lose face before the Legion. We'll have to tell our own people, but no one else until we report to Bronwyn."

"Where could they have gone?"

"What difference does it make?" Astrid snarled, tugging her hair in rage. "They're gone. At least they had the sense not to take what wasn't theirs. They knew we'd come after them for that. But now? With the weather gone cold and bits of frozen water coming out of the skies? Let them freeze, for all I care. They're no good to us anyway."

Tara was bitterly disapproving, and distressed that the



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deserters were from her own little command. "You can't desert from the Wardens. You can't stop being a Warden. They'll see."

A Warden council was called, and the news – that Griffith and Walther had deserted – was shared. Shale was present, but showed uncommon delicacy of feeling – and sound good sense – by not baiting the Wardens when they were feeling betrayed and very, very angry.

"I always knew they were no good!" Brosca shouted, stamping a foot. "How those two ever made it through the Joining is a mystery to me!"

"I didn't think Griffith was so bad," said Sigrun, more mild in her judgement. "Maybe he was just led astray."

"Where could they go?" Catriona wondered, ashamed that the deserters were human. "The harbors are freezing in, and the Frostback passes will be hip-deep in snow."

"Maybe they went to Orzammar!" Falkor suggested. "There's a Warden hostel there. Should we tell the King to detain them?"

"No." Astrid was not going to ask anything of Bhelen – especially something that reflected so poorly on her own leadership. She could imagine his smug, smirking face all too well.

"Deserters! Among the Grey Wardens?"

"No," she repeated. "It would only make the Order look bad."

"I don't think they'd go to Orzammar, anyway," said Askil. "I don't think it would occur to them. They like the surface."

Aeron worried at his bandages until Tara glared at him. He said, "There are some ships still crossing the waking Sea. Maybe they're hoping to get a ship in Highever or



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Amaranthine that will take them to the Free Marches. They're likely on the North Road by now. If we had horses, we could ride them down."

"But we don't," Catriona pointed out glumly.

"There are plenty of Wardens across the Waking Sea," said Astrid. "They might not have come to our aid, but they are *there*, and they'd surely sense two stray Wardens. We should go ahead with our mission. We'll notify Bronwyn when we can, and what she does is up to her."

"I hope they die!" snarled Brosca, taking a long swig of brandy despite the early hour. "I hope they freeze in the frozen water crystals! I hope they drown in the sea! Dirty cowards!"

Tara heartily agreed, feeling like a complete failure as a leader. "We're better off without them."



A swordsman and an archer traveling together excited no interest anywhere in Ferelden. Soldiers of the realm and mercenaries alike were on the march throughout the kingdom. Walther and Griffith buried their Warden tabards in a pile of snow under an oak tree, and took the North Road east to Crosby Fell, where Griffith knew a good inn. While it was snowing, it was not bitter cold, and the men had thick warm cloaks and good boots, courtesy of the Grey Wardens. They had their Satinalia pay as well, and plenty of loot.

They considered going north to Highever, and then dismissed the notion. The Warden-Commander's brother was Teyrn there, and after all that had happened, the Teyrn's



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men would be suspicious of strange warriors. Amaranthine was a better choice. In the little village of Knotwood, Walther had cousins that the Wardens could not possibly know about. They could stay there for a few days, and then go up the Coast Road to the city and get a ship that would get them away; far from the Wardens, the Blight, and being bossed by stuck-up dwarves and crazy knife-eared mages.

There were inns and farmholds all along the North Road. The weather befriended them. They made it to Knotwood without even so much as a frostbitten nose. Walther's family welcomed them kindly, pitying their wounds and horrified at their tales of being forced into the Deep Roads. The two men were well-supplied with food and drink and good wishes, and told to be wary of the Teyrn's patrols on the North Road. Another cousin in the city of Amaranthine would put them up while they looked for a ship to take them to Ostwick or Kirkwall.

Thus, not far from Vigil's Keep, they disappeared into the trees at the first, distant sounds of hoofbeats. An observer would have expected them to reappear after the horsemen galloped past, but that observer would have waited in vain. Their footprints in the light snow went in one direction only, and gradually melted away under the noonday sun, leaving no trace of the two deserters.



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CHAPTER 3



GOLEMS OF AMGARRAK

HOW DO YOU EXPECT ME TO TRUST SOMEONE WHO SET MY HEAD ON FIRE? Aeron asked.

Tara tried not to squirm.

Aeron was not being unreasonable, but his request to change units would ultimately cause future problems.

Aeron and Catriona had asked for a private talk with the Senior Wardens. The cheerful minstrel's head was still wrapped in bandages, and his good humor was being sadly tested by constant pain. Catriona was still grieving for Liam, and her face was no longer quite so youthful under her grey-streaked hair. What they wanted was to get away from Velanna. Astrid occasionally wanted that herself, but there was no chance of it. Velanna was here, a Warden, and a very useful and powerful mage. They were all going to have to find a way to get along.

"Accidents happen in battle," Astrid said, her voice steady. "It was a hard fight, and not all of us made it. Velanna's firestorm helped us survive. If she misjudged her aim, it's no more than many archers have."



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Catriona slouched in her chair and studied the toes of her boots. She had not struck either of the Senior Wardens as a trouble-maker, but she was here with Aeron, equally unhappy.

The human archer said, "We can't trust her. She'd just as soon see us dead as lift a finger. I'm not blaming you, Astrid. You were in front, fighting toe-to-toe with the 'spawn, so there was no way you could see everything. I was up with the ballistae, and I saw plenty. Velanna didn't even try to bespell the creatures when they pulled Liam down. Didn't even try! She won't back up a human. She didn't care what happened to Aeron. Since I'm an archer, I'm not in the same kind of danger as Aeron, because I can tell you I am never going turn my back on that bitch. I'll position myself behind her, and we'll all hope that I don't misjudge *my* aim —"

"Catriona!" Astrid scowled. "We're all Wardens! We can't dissolve into little cliques. That's no way to fight. We need everybody's skills and talents."

"We know that, Senior Warden," Aeron said smoothly. "It's not clear to us that Velanna does."

Astrid, irritated, tugged at her braid. It was not so simple. Proving that Velanna was deliberately withholding support from her fellow Wardens was impossible. It was not like an open refusal to follow orders, or like the kind of treachery Danith had once displayed to Bronwyn. This was subtle and insidious, and it would ruin this expedition if it were not dealt with.

"For now," Astrid said, "you're in no shape to fight anyway, Aeron. I want you to stay here at West Hill and



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concentrate on getting better. Act as our liaison with the seneschal, and see that we're supplied with everything we need. Chat up the castle servants and get a feel for what's going on in the countryside."

"I can do that," he agreed.

"Catriona," said Astrid, turning to the archer, "do you have a problem with Ailill?"

The woman shrugged. "He's all right. He doesn't have much to say to me, but he's a sound archer and he does his job. He's pretty close to Velanna and they stick together, but he's never insulted me to my face."

"Then we are going to work through this together," Astrid said. She glanced at Tara, and the elf gave a slight nod of assent.

"We'll talk to Velanna... right away," said the elf mage. "Astrid and I. We'll tell her she can't play favorites or take out her anger at humans on Warden comrades. Then we'll keep an eye on her."

"So will I," said Catriona. "Maybe both eyes, when I don't need them to shoot."

Nothing was to be gained by delay, so they called in Velanna immediately after. It was not a very pleasant conversation.

"If you're going to take the part of whining shemlens," she said, sneering, "I don't see what we have to say to each other."

Tara drew a quick, hissing breath of outrage. Astrid stared at the Dalish mage for quite some time. After a bit of this, Velanna looked away and bridled indignantly.

"What I have to say is this..." Astrid began, her voice



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ominously slow. "It was interesting to me that our party's death and worst injury were both human."

"I'm not blame for their incompetence!"

"Keep digging, Velanna," Tara muttered. "The hole just gets deeper and deeper."

Astrid maintained her most intimidating stare. "I was in the same fight, and I saw no sign of 'incompetence' in either of them. Rather, I saw a willingness to risk themselves to protect others... even you, Velanna. I also saw a mage who was rather careless with her magic, and harmed friend and foe alike. That stops now. As a matter of *competence*," she continued, with heavy sarcasm, "perhaps your aim needs practice. You are expected to help protect all your fellow Wardens, as they are expected to protect you. You are also expected to use your healing skills without having to be ordered or cajoled... and on the worst hurt *first*. Favoring friends is not acceptable, especially when they have taken no wound. I saw that, and it stops now."

Tara was getting angrier as time wore on; as she looked at Velanna's closed, stubborn face.

"I shouldn't have to take up the slack for you! You hurt Aeron, so now you heal him. It's as simple as that."

"That's what all this is about, isn't it?" Velanna hissed. "The shemlens complained, and now you pander to them!"

"That is *not* what this is all about," Astrid said with the calm of a nascent storm. "This is about you doing your duty and obeying the orders of your superior officers."



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Tara quoted Bronwyn: "*Refusal to obey a direct order will be considered insubordination. Insubordination is also conduct contrary to a superior's officer's clear purpose. Such an infraction will be punished. The first occurrence will be met with loss of pay, the amount depending on the seriousness of the offense. Further infractions will be punished by confinement to quarters, flogging, or execution, in that order. A combination of punishments may also be imposed.*" She gave Velanna a big smile. "You're making me so angry that I'm starting to look forward to you actually thinking you can get away with this kind of behavior."

"There is nothing wrong with my behavior!" Velanna shrieked. "After all the shemlens have done to us —"

Tara jumped to her feet and shot a stinging spark at Velanna. " — which is nothing compared to what the *dark-spawn* will do to us if we don't pull together and fight them!" She glared at the shocked Velanna. "What is the matter with you? Do we have to drag you out there and tell all the Wardens that you are don't want to pull your weight? Should we tell Merrill and all the rest of the Dalish at Ostagar that Velanna is a failure as a Warden?" When the Dalish elf drew breath to protest, Tara shouted at her. " — Because that's what it comes down to! If you can't do your duty, then you're no better than those two idiots who ran away!"

Feeling that Tara had actually done some good, Astrid decided to play the part of the reasonable officer. She gently pulled Tara back to her chair and faced Velanna.

"This is not open to discussion. You have your orders. We

expect you to obey them. The darkspawn are the enemy of all life on Thedas. Your people will be just as dead as everyone else if we fail. Now rejoin your comrades in the common room and attempt to speak civilly to them all."

Tara was still furious. Her fingers switched, longing to cast. Blue sparks danced over the back of her small white hands.

"Go," she said. "Now."

Velanna did not exactly slam the door, but she closed it rather hard. Tara blew out a breath and let her head loll back. Astrid looked over at the elf, and then smiled, rather grimly.

"For all the good that will do."

"I hope it helps," Tara said. "Really. Bronwyn's been really bold, recruiting from different races; recruiting a lot of females; recruiting people that a lot of humans would spit on in the street. It's not standard procedure. From what I heard from Alistair, Commander Duncan's Wardens were mostly human, and all male until he conscripted Bronwyn. Maybe he felt they would work better together that way, but honestly, we really didn't have much trouble except for..." Her voice trailed away.

"Danith and Velanna. Two particularly haughty and hostile Dalish females."

"Danith's been better lately. It's probably a huge adjustment to be around anyone but your clan, but she's changing. Velanna goes around looking for a fight."

"She's going to get it, if she's not careful. But enough of her. I had some ideas about our mission. There's a lost thaig not

far from here that might be worth looking into. Amgarrak Thaig. They did research there. I was thinking it might be worth checking out. There might be some old records there or maybe even weapons. It's the closest known thaig, certainly."

"Then we should have a look. If nothing else, the darkspawn might be nesting there."

"All right. It's up the Amgarrak Road to the east. We shouldn't all go. Why don't I take some of my people and maybe fifteen Legion and scout a bit first?"

"And Shale."

Astrid smiled, and granted the little elf a nod. "And Shale. Always."

With the exception of Aeron, Astrid took her usual unit: Velanna, Ailill, Falkor, Askil, and Catriona. The human archer was not thrilled when the mission was announced. Rodyk, his leg stiff with an arrow wound, detailed fifteen of his best soldiers to the Wardens and told them that the Grey Warden was their commander for the duration of the patrol.

Tara wanted to scout the surface around the West Hill area, but she and Astrid agreed that that could wait. If a message came requesting back-up, Tara wanted to be available. For now, Astrid would check out the old thaig, see how heavily it was invested with darkspawn, and then they could decide where to go from there.

And it was not unpleasant, rattling around the old fortress, or at least their corner of it, with plenty to eat and



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the occasional hot bath. Tara had found some long-forgotten books in their quarters, and time to rest and read sounded good to her.

"If we come across anything we can't handle," Astrid said, as the Wardens saw the scouting party to the front gate, "we'll run like deepstalkers. I should be back in three days."

Shale said, "I cannot quite see me running like those disgusting bird-like creatures, but I can move swiftly enough when necessary."

Astrid could hardly conceal how excited she was about this venture. It was always depressing, finding a thaig despoiled and Tainted by the darkspawn, but it was also exciting to retrieve lost treasures. Who knew what Amgar-rak Thaig had in store for them? If she could find the secret of making golems, it would be the greatest achievement of her life. Orzammar might have cast her out, but she, Astrid, would protect it.

Darion was as excited as Astrid, and stumbled a little on the winding staircase as they left the surface behind. He clutched his map case close, pale eyes glowing in eagerness. Falkor and Askil looked at each other and then at Astrid. Askil gave her a discreet wink.

Darion consulted his map again, and said, "The tunnel to the thaig is only four leagues to the east. Look to the left. There's a roadmarker there, but it's fallen forward."

This section of the Amgarrak Road was broad and well lit. They moved along it with cautious haste, eyes peering



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into crude holes bored into the walls here and there. Astrid stretched her Warden senses to the limit, but picked up little hint of active darkspawn. Tara's fight the day before yesterday must have cleared out most of the nearby population. They pushed on ahead and found the battle site, marching over rotting darkspawn and crackling bones. Further on, a little spring fountained from the Stone, pure and clear, and they paused there, filling their canteens.

"I passed this when I was scouting," Darion told Astrid. "This is it! The way to the thaig is just ahead."

They found the fallen marker and then the tunnel entrance. Much of the fine, ancient stonework remained. Someone must have found some high quality greenstone here, and had made handsome use of it. A golden glow reflected up on the rocks, revealing a lava stream below: a rich source of geothermal power. The bridge over it was still in sound shape.

"This was a fine place, once," Astrid murmured.

"I confess myself relieved," Shale declared. "The tunnel ceiling was made comfortably high, even for someone as imposing as me."

Darion shot Astrid a quick, triumphant glance. Of course the ceiling would be high, if one expected the traffic here to include golems.

Some Legionnaires were detailed to keep watch at the tunnel's junction, and were told to send word of any darkspawn movement. No one wanted to be trapped in an isolated, abandoned thaig, with no way out. Astrid looked



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her party over and was satisfied that she had some good people here. Catriona had positioned herself well behind Velanna, but there was nothing unreasonable about that.

"All right, follow me."

The tunnel descended on a gentle grade, and the surrounding stonework became more elaborate. A flight of broad, handsome steps, and the tunnel opened out into a natural grotto, glittering with crystals. Astrid cast an admiring eye about her. A lot of mineral wealth here. High-grade quartz of all colors. A lot of amethyst. Surfacers loved amethysts. The original masons here had left quite of bit of this cavern in its natural state; a tribute to their good taste. Before them, mist had collected, and lay heavily along the stone floor.

"Is this the thaig?" asked Velanna. "I thought thaigs were settlements. This is only a big cave!"

Her voice was a little too loud in the stillness. Dwarven armor clanked as Legionnaires shifted restlessly. Astrid grimaced, and answered, in a voice so soft that she hoped Velanna would take the hint.

"This is not the thaig proper. This is only an entrance hall."

Darion added, "The actual entrance should be... there."

He pointed into the mist. The swirling whiteness was quite impenetrable. Astrid felt a faint tickle of danger and then stopped moving.

Very quietly, she said, "Darkspawn ahead. Not a lot, but enough. They're in the mist. Let's see if we can lure



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them out. Follow me and spread out in a loose formation. Archers – stay up on those lower steps. I'll try speaking loudly once we're ready, and we'll see what's hiding here."

Their deployment was swift and efficient. By the time Astrid temptingly strode back and forth on the edges of the fog, everyone was in place, awaiting the attack. Still, there was that brief moment of alarm when the shrieks came loping out of the fog, hooning. Arrows thudded into them, and they screeched in pain and rage. Velanna caught the biggest with a paralysis spell, and the axemen waded in, hacking at Tainted flesh.

A poisonous burst of green splashed over Falkor. The dwarf groaned and swayed, his sword drooping.

"Get that emissary!" Astrid ordered. "Shoot at the spell source!"

Instantly, a half-dozen arrows targeted the shrouded darkspawn. A outraged scream told Astrid that at least some of them had found their mark. The emissary cast again and Astrid plunged into the fog, her shield raised to smash the creature. She connected, a little off-center, but hard enough to knock the beast down. It flopped, gobbling, as she thrust her sword into its rotten heart.

"Forward!" Astrid shouted. "Keep your formation and advance! We'll get them all!"

A slow, inexorable march caught two more darkspawn: short genlocks trying to find an advantage in the mist. They were dispatched by the time the party had reached the far side of the grotto.

There were two more areas to secure, and these were above the fog level. One was a deep alcove that might be an old workshop of some sort. The other turned a corner and might well be the actual entrance to the thaig. Not wanting to miss anything, Astrid led her people to the workshop first. It was proved to be much more than that. There were stone workbenches and shelves. Some carved chests and cupboards held minor treasures and fine tools.

"Astrid!" yelled Falkor. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Eww," Shale uttered, voice dripping with disgust. "A control rod. Happily, it is not mine."

Filled with hope, Astrid pushed deeper into the chamber, and around a corner, her hopes were rewarded.

A silence.

"That's a big 'un," a Legionnaire said reverently.

"Fancy, too," said another.

Shale was offended. "Well, if you are going to judge quality strictly on the basis of looks –"

"No one is comparing it to you," Astrid interrupted. "That would be impossible. This obviously is not in possession of a full – a *very* full – set of wits. It's only a tool, but a useful one... if this is the right control rod."

She kept her smile unseen. Who would have thought that Shale might be *jealous* of another golem?

Darion stepped close to inspect the still metal figure.

"This is one of Caridin's golems, from the markings, but... modified. They must have experimented on exist-

ing golems here. Maybe they even learned the secret to making new ones."

Astrid shrugged. "Maybe we'll find out more further in."

She was more impressed that she let on, and fumbled anxiously at the dusty control rod, remembering the sequence of runes she had learned in the Shaperate. With a groan of disuse, the golem shivered into life once more. Astrid was briefly grateful that its former operator had not locked it to respond only to a secret voice code.

It was quite magnificent: a steel golem incised cunningly with runes. Bigger than Shale, it loomed impressively in its dim alcove. Astrid flicked the control rod.

"Raise your arms."

Dust sifted down as the golem lifted massive, armored arms.

"Walk toward me and stop a shield's width away."

With only a slight lurch at the beginning, it walked toward her, and then stopped at what appeared to be precisely the width of Astrid's shield.

"A working golem!" one of the Legionnaires said. "That alone makes the trip worthwhile!"

"Absolutely," Astrid agreed. "We are looking for research notes and journals here. If you see anything with writing on it, bring it to Darion for inspection. For that matter, even ordinary loot should be given a once-over. It might be part of a mechanism."

They found no more golems there, though they poked into every nook and cranny. They found some scattered

armor and weapons, but clearly nothing else of importance had been left outside the thaig. Astrid sent a party ahead to see what was on the other end of the grotto, while she practiced using the control rod and making concise commands. It was a problem, she decided: did using a control rod mean that she could not fight? Did operating one golem require one dwarf? Or could a dwarf operate more than one at once? Perhaps the golem could learn to operate efficiently on voice command alone. Surely that was so. Even in its slave-days, Shale had been able to interpret very broad commands. Perhaps it might be a good idea to have Darion operate the golem, but she hated the idea of surrendering the control rod to anyone else. This was *her* golem.

"Feeling powerful, are we?" Shale murmured. "Going to order it to carry you when you're tired? Going to tell it to squish things for you?"

"The latter, certainly!" Astrid laughed, only a little embarrassed. "You've certainly shown us how expert golems are a squishing darkspawn!"

"There is that," Shale said smugly.

"Do you think we should give it a name?" Astrid asked. "I know you felt that simply being called 'Golem!' was rude. I agree. Perhaps we could call this golem 'Rune.' What do you think?"

"'Rune' is admirably concise, I suppose. We could also call it 'Forgotten Lump of Fancy Metal,' or perhaps 'Style over Substance.'"

"'Rune' is shorter."

"As you say. 'Rune' it is."

A shout caught her attention.

"Warden! Over here! It's the thaig's barrier door!" The scout's grin was visible, even across the chamber. "And it looks like it's intact!"

The darkspawn had apparently made no effort to get into the thaig. That was puzzling. Darion activated the runic sequence and the doors slid open with a low rumble. The dwarves stepped back cautiously, but no rush of stale air issued from the thaig.

"The circulation pumps must still be working," said Darion, a little surprised. "That's very good news."

Astrid shrugged. "They should work forever unless dwarves or darkspawn tamper with them. My guess is that this thaig was empty before the darkspawn reached it. I sense no darkspawn in this place... at all."

"I, of course," said Shale, "continue to function whether the air is breathable or not. So, for that matter, does my silent friend Rune here. If you have any question about the air, it would probably be the thing to send us in first."

"Very sensible of you."

"I live to serve."

The scouting party descended a long staircase and stood in the midst of a large and imposing chamber. The thaig, like most dwarven structures, was built irregularly,

allowing for the variations in stone density. It was a big place, but echoingly empty.

"Do we know how it's laid out, Warden?" asked a Legionnaire.

Astrid shook her head. "Darion couldn't find a map of the thaig. It's been deserted a long time. We'll have to chart as we go."

She suspected that the thaig was not a very large one, but the visible number of doors, passageways, and bridges suggested that it was complex in design. It was an intact dwarven thaig, whether large or small, with an intact, usable barrier door. If nothing else, dwarves could live and work here. Orzammar was dismally overcrowded. Aeducan Thaig had been largely cleared by the efforts of Bronwyn and her original party, but it would not be livable without considerable investment in coin and labor. This thaig only needed supplies... and perhaps a good dusting. This discovery, plus that the golem, *might*... might be enough to make her a Paragon. She should start writing letters to possible allies in the Assembly. Plenty of people disliked Bhelen.

Catriona looked about her, impressed. "What's the story of Amgarrak?"

Darion answered. "'Amgarrak' means 'victory' in the old dwarven tongue. It is written that before Queen Getha was deposed, she delivered the only remaining fragments of Caridin's research to House Dolvish. Legends say that House Dolvish bankrupted itself by establishing a secret research laboratory in the Deep Roads. I believe it was

located here, in Amgarrak Thaig. Fedrik, the last scion of House Dolvish, promised the Assembly a new golem fresh from Amgarrak, knowing it would raise the Dolvish clan again to prominence. But when no golem materialized, Fedrik was ruined. He died years later, and with his death, House Dolvish was no more."

"Did dwarves live here?" asked Ailill, "or was this just a place for making things?"

"Oh, quite a few lived here, but they were mostly all involved in the research and production of weapons," said Darion. "At some point the thaig was deserted, though the records in the Shaperate are unclear as to why. I presumed it was because of the darkspawn, but since the barrier door is still intact, there may be some other reason."

"Caridin," Catriona repeated thoughtfully. "I've heard that name. Didn't the Commander meet someone named Caridin? Wasn't he the one who made the golems?"

"Yes," Astrid said, "that's the one. He was a great inventor and acclaimed a Paragon by the Assembly."

She did not elaborate further on Caridin's later history, and his ultimate rejection of his greatest feat. No one here knew much of that story.

Velanna shrill voice was uncommonly silent. Astrid glanced over at the mage, and looked again. Velanna seemed ill at ease.

"What's wrong?" Astrid asked in an undertone.

Velanna pressed her lips together, looking annoyed. "Noth-



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ing," she said. "At first I thought that there must be some sort of disturbance in the Veil. It is an odd sensation. That cannot be, since you *durgen'len* have no access to the Beyond." Her mouth twisted. "Or the Fade, as the *shemlen* call it."

"Wardens do," Astrid replied stiffly. "I have some experience with the Fade."

She still found dreaming a deeply disturbing thing. Humans and elves had told her that not all dreams were as ghastly as their darkpsawn visions, but as those were the only dreams the Astrid could remember, it was a wonder to her that humans and elves were not all driven mad by their enforced time in the Fade when asleep. "So..." she added. "You think the Veil is thin here? Damaged? Isn't that a sign that we might come across demons or spirits of the dead?"

"I had not thought to find such in the Deep Roads, but yes. It is... possible. Usually it is caused by a great deal of violent death. Sometimes it is caused by immense magical energies being expended."

That was certainly something to ponder. Magical energies? In a dwarven thaig?

Further exploration disclosed a smallish chamber containing four more golems: not as large or imposing as Rune, but still golems. For some reason they were welded immobile, and it looked like some work would be required to free them. Perhaps they had been used for research templates. Their control rods were stored nearby. While Astrid would have liked nothing more than to march back to West Hill



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with a long string of golems behind her, that was obviously something for a future visit. Her prospects were looking better and better. Why was this thaig deserted? It was well built; it had rich supplies of trade goods in its greenstone and amethyst. It had good water and geothermal power. How strange that no one should live here.

Their next surprise was on entering a side chamber and finding it provided with an large, unusual, and elaborate mechanism. An odd tang drifted on the air, at once heady and metallic. A spiked and gleaming blue sphere, a wide as two dwarves in diameter, was suspended over a deep circular shaft. Everyone leaned over the edge, but no one could see to the bottom. This was a fantastically valuable device, and members of the smith caste would be clamoring for a change to live here and use it.

"A lyrium well!" Darion marveled. "I've read about them. They must have good lyrium veins here. They were doing more here than simply incising lyrium runes."

"Could they have been doing something involving magic?" Astrid wondered aloud.

"Hardly," Darion said. "Everyone knows that dwarves have no magical abilities."

"They *might*," Astrid pointed out, an edge to her voice, "have hired someone who *did*."

Large switchplates were set into the floor. Usually these were triggers for traps or secret hiding places, but that did not seem to be the case here. When Rune was sent to



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step onto one such, the atmosphere shifted, almost as if the light had changed. Objects blurred slickly at the edges. Astrid experienced a sudden disorientation, not sure for a moment if her feet were set firmly on Stone.

Velanna spoke up, her quick voice fearful. "Get that golem away! Somehow that device is affecting the Beyond!"

"Step away, Rune," said Astrid. Another moment of nauseating confusion rocked her. She found herself sprawled on the floor, and was briefly relieved she had not fallen into the open shaft. She staggered to her feet, clutching at a stone railing for support. Behind her, Wardens and Legions were pulling themselves together, shocked at the bizarre experience.

"We were in the Beyond," whispered Velanna.

"That's... interesting," she said, after the world had dizzily settled back to normal. "Someone was doing research that required the addition of magic."

Darion nodded, thinking hard. "They surely left something in writing."

"All right," Astrid agreed, raising her voice. "Everyone spread out and look for parchment — even scraps. We'll search this chamber thoroughly before we move on. Stay away from that switch plate and anything that resembles it."

Velanna seemed of two minds before she spoke, but finally said to Astrid. "We might also wish to search the room when the switch is activated. Someone might have left notes in the Beyond. It is risky, but I must raise the



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possibility now that I have thought of it."

"Could we bring the notes back to the real world?"

"No. You cannot bring objects out of the Beyond, but someone could read the notes there."

"Then we'll try that next."

Nothing turned up in the first search. Astrid sent everyone out of the room but Darion, Velanna and the two golems. Curiously, the constructs did not seem to be adversely affected by the shift in reality. She stayed herself, and Rune stepped on the plate again. This time the shift was not quite so disturbing. Walking was a bit more difficult than normal, since her depth perception seemed affected. She looked toward the door, There was an misty blue barrier, behind which vague figures shifted.

Peculiar as she felt, she and Darion made a thorough circuit of the room's perimeter, while Velanna examined the benches and tables. The room was bare. Disappointed, she had Rune step away, and endured the shift once more. She picked herself up off the floor, and slapped away the dust. Darion was wild-eyed. Velanna, accustomed to the Fade, was more concerned with her soiled robes.

"Astrid!" cried Falkor from the doorway. "You all looked *dead*!"

"We're fine," she assured everyone. "It was disorienting. In my opinion, this Fade or Beyond or whatever is a kind of alternate reality, not some sort of mystical land of the gods. It clearly has its own rules. We found nothing, however. Take a break, eat something, and then we'll move on."



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In another chamber they found dwarven bones. These were not the untidy little heaps of those who had died in battle. Instead, the bones were neatly stored and arranged on shelves: skulls with skulls, spines with spines, clavicles with clavicles. It was a curious sort of storage, or even a bizarre sort of burial. Another lyrium well was discovered, and a nasty residue remained in the shaft.

"That's organic matter, Warden," said a Legionnaire. "Not mineral. Maybe somebody had a bad accident, but there's a lot of it. The lyrium sort of mummified it, over time."

"Lovely," muttered Catriona. "I knew a fellow who fell into a rendering works once. He didn't look so good when they fished him out."

Ailill did not understand what she meant, and Catriona briefly explained some of the uses of the domestic pig, and the great demand for its fat, called lard, in cooking and soap-making, amongst other things.

"I do not see how rubbing oneself with pig fat would cause one to be clean," said the elf. "The Dalish use soapwort. The leaves create a delicate lather."

Catriona nodded. "I used to pick soapwort back home, but there's just not enough of it for all the people in the cities. Soap made from lard isn't like pig fat once they get done with it, but it's a lot harsher than soapwort."

Directly across the bridge was another chamber with another lyrium well. Another switchplate, too, glowing green. The chamber was searched without result, and



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most of the party was sent back to the main hall, while Astrid, Darion, Velanna, and the golems ventured into this version of the Fade. Shale stepped onto the trigger plate.

They had not expected a fight.

Phantoms of dwarves charged them: furious, lethal, their faces set killing mode. Shale was rocked by a heavy crossbow bolt, shot by a mighty archer. That was their only warning before the battle was engaged. It was made all the more eerie by the absolute silence of their opponents.

An axeman hewed at Rune, heedless of the fact that his blade was bouncing off the golem's massive armor. Velanna paralyzed him long enough for Astrid to move in and hack the... spirit?... ghost?... revenant?... to pieces.

Pieces that did not bleed. Dispatched, the emanation vanished. Darion was already dodging another bolt from the slow-loading crossbowman. Astrid held her shield before her, and rushed the attacker.

There were four of the spirits in all. Fortunately, they were incapable of working together, else their prowess and resistance to damage might have won the day. Instead, Astrid could direct the attacks against each, and take them out separately. The last, an angry swordsman, fetched a nasty blow against her helmet that knocked her down briefly. Shale slammed the phantom, and Rune crushed him against the wall. The warrior evaporated like the rest.

Darion was trembling, panting, clutching at his side. Velanna's eyes were wide, and her right arm was bleeding.

She stared at a moment, as if surprised, and then cast a healing spell on herself. After a moment, she took a deep breath, and then healed first Darion, and then Astrid herself.

"Thank you," Astrid said, and meant it. "That was a headache I did not need."

Very cautiously, they checked the chamber for any notes and came up with nothing. The switch was pressed, and they returned to their comrades.

"Are you all right?" Catriona asked. "You look like you've been fighting."

"We were attacked in the Fade," Astrid told her. She held up a hand for silence. "Spirits of dead dwarves fought us, but they are gone. There is nothing for you to be alarmed about. They cannot escape the Fade. We cannot see them unless we use those plate mechanisms. We will not do that again."

The Legion's sergeant, Gorling, stepped up smartly. He was holding a sheaf of old parchment in a huge and dirty hand. "You wouldn't have to anyway, Warden. Maybe these are what you're looking for. We found them on a worktable in a little room nearby."

The notes were filthy. The parchment stank of mold and was dark with age, but some of the writing could still be deciphered. Astrid took them from the man, and gave him a nod of thanks.

He led them to the little chamber, while the rest of the party crowded outside the door, full of curiosity. Astrid waved them away, and pulled up a bench to the huge

stone table. Darion sat down beside her, eyes eager. There was more parchment here: a lot more.

Astrid gave crisp orders. "Askil, continue the exploration of the thaig." With grimace of reluctance, she gave Rune's control rod to him. "Take Shale and Rune with you. Do not allow anyone to trip one of those Fade switches or play with any of the mechanisms. I want to have a look at these notes."

The notes should have been locked away in a stone box to preserve them, but had been left in a series of cubbyholes in the work table, each labeled with dates.

"Where were these, Sergeant?" asked Astrid.

"These lot here were just lying on top, Warden. I didn't want to disturb the rest."

"Good man."

Five new golems. A pristine thaig ripe for repopulation. That alone could well make her a Paragon. And now golem research notes...

Darion's research about the time period had been spot-on. There was no hint of the writer's identity, but he — or she — had much to say of great interest to Astrid. Among the earliest records that she could make out, she read this:

"Very little remains of Caridin's writings. The memories say the Paragon destroyed much of his own research. What madness would drive him to do such a thing? King Valtor preserved what he could; thanks to him we have something to work from. Nereda, my mage colleague, believes lyrium is the key."

"The writer must have been the overseer of the research,"



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Darion reasoned.

Astrid nodded, flipping over the parchment to see if she could read any more. No. Rust and time had obscured the rest. "He was working with a mage. Nereda. That could be a Tevinter name. I suspect that would have been expensive."

"We know that House Dolvish spent their last copper on this. Besides, in those days, the only really accomplished mages would have been Tevinter. This was in the days before Andraste and the Circles of Magi."

"True." Astrid wished that Tara was here. Her knowledge of magical history was vastly superior to Velanna's; unsurprising, considering how parochial the Dalish elf was. "An accomplished Tevinter mage, for I'm sure House Dolvish spared no expense. So they had the last of Caridin's research, just as you believed. And this research was supported at the highest levels."

They sorted through more of the parchment. Darion swore in vexation and part of a sheet crumbled in his hands. Very gingerly, he glanced over it, shrugged and picked up the next, and then the next.

"Here's something." Darion read, halting over some of the blotted words.

"I have ordered more iron from the Miner's Guild. The shaft-rats will deny this request, citing our "waste" of good iron, but I've prepared for this eventuality. I've come up with an alternative: the casteless. No-one will miss them, and it's far better for them to die in the service of this great experiment than to



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continue living their worthless lives. Nereda seems reluctant, but she is from the surface and doesn't understand. No matter, she wants the research to continue as much as I do, and will eventually come around."

The scholar looked briefly ill. "You don't think... *flesh* golems? They wouldn't really have tried that, would they?"

"I don't know."

Astrid felt uneasy herself. From everything she had ever heard of King Valtor, she suspected that he would have approved this, and more. The original golems had been formed with casings of stone or metal. If they could not get metal, then why had they not used stone? It was a puzzlement.

She was deeply, deeply glad that Brosca was not here. Astrid had once been as contemptuous of the dusters as anyone else of noble birth, but she knew now that now and then a jewel lay in the dust of Dust Town. The process they were speaking of was unclear. Had they meant to make the golems of flesh? to kill dusters and make use of them for their bodies? Or did they mean to use Caridin's method, only pressing the casteless into service as the cores? From what she had gathered about Caridin, it seemed that the original golems had been volunteers: giving their lives as dwarven men and women for the defense of Orzammar. That was a noble thing. To condemn the casteless to a horrible death... that... that was not so noble.

They looked through the parchments in careful order, refiling the illegible ones. There were techniques known

to the Shaperate that would bring up faded ink. Reading the notes found on the table — surely the last ones — Astrid found words that leaped out at her like lyrium runes.

"A breakthrough! Nereda bound a Fade spirit to a construct of flesh and bone, and it moved! We'll have something concrete to show to the nobles and the Shaperate, once we put it back together. Someone must have overlooked a missing seam. When the construct came alive, the head tore itself from the body, and... scrambled off. Nereda says it's nothing to worry about. She's out looking for it now. In fact, that scratching at my door is probably her."

Astrid's voice faltered. She was still a moment, and then swore. The bones in the workroom... *"No one would miss them..."*

"By the Stone! They killed dwarves for their flesh and summoned a Fade spirit? Isn't that another term for 'demon?' Who thought that was a good idea?"

As if in answer, screams rang out from down the corridor. Darion gasped, and gave her a look of wild, terrified surmise. Astrid did not have time for him.

Instead, she was up in an instant, her sword out, her shield snatched up; and she pelted toward the noise of frantic combat. Down a staircase, around a corner, through a narrowing passage. The noise grew louder. Curses, grunts, bellowed orders told her that something had gone disastrously wrong. Behind her was Darion, trying to keep up, sensibly not trying to ask questions.

She raced over a stone bridge, and halted suddenly, skidding

on a slick spot, her eyes not quite taking in what was before her. It took only an instant to realize she had slipped on blood.

A towering mass of obscene flesh loomed over everything else in the room. Legs like pillars upheld it, massive arms lifted boulder-like fists in challenge. Another, scrawnier pair of arms, dangled down over the thing's vast chest. A tiny, grotesque head was mounted directly on its shoulder. Disgustingly, a long tongue hung drooling from the hideous mouth. Astrid halted briefly, appalled.

The golems pounded at it, and perhaps were the only things making much of an impression. At least five bodies littered the room. Some were gutted, their intestines dangling like strings of sausages into the shaft of a lyrium well. The head of one, the sergeant, had been pulled completely around, so that his dead eyes looked behind him. One dwarf was unrecognizable, his head crushed to bone-splintered pulp. Legionnaires milled around the monster, looking for an opening,

Blood painted the walls and rippled over the floor. Astrid looked desperately for her own people. Falkor was lying in a corner, stirring feebly. Not dead at least. Velanna was casting futile spells that the creature did not even bother to shrug off.

Aillill was frantically releasing arrow after arrow, but Catriona had cast her bow aside in despair. Arrows stuck from the creature's swollen torso, but obviously had no effect. The woman threw an axe instead; and well, too. The axe embedded itself in the monster's head. It roared and slashed at its attackers; then the tiny, secondary arms



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scrabbled at the axe handle and worried the blade out of its head. Catriona went for another fallen weapon and threw that, too, sensibly keeping her distance.

Shale reared back for a mighty blow. It landed, but it was clearly like trying to punch a bag of wet sand. The sheer amount of flesh protected the creature's vulnerable parts as well as any armor. With everyone milling about at such close quarters, a bomb or grenade was more likely to harm an ally. Well, what about its legs, then?

"Hack at its legs!" Astrid bellowed. "Bring it down! Bring it down!"

She glimpsed Askil briefly. He was on the far side of the creature, trying doggedly to saw through unnaturally tough leg bones. What had that Tevinter mage done to make the creature this damage resistant? Astrid plunged into the battle, slashing at tough tendons.

Darion darted past her, blade raised. He stabbed the creature in the groin. Any normal being would have suffered an agonizing wound to the bladder. It did not penetrate deeply enough here. A gigantic hand grabbed Darion's arm, sword and all, and flung the dwarf away, with a ghastly snapping of bones. Darion's shrieks cut above the shouts and curses. The flesh-golem, not finished with him, lumbered after him. It raised its foot above the writhing dwarf, and stamped him into the floor.

One of the Legionnaires wielded a big maul. He ran up behind the flesh-golem and swung a crushing blow at the



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thing's knee. The joint popped forward, and the creature stumbled, surprised. Shale smashed down, and the monster's spine crunched ominously. Rune advanced with astonishing speed and rammed a metal arm through the creature's body, withdrawing it with a horrid squelching sound and a sluggish flow of dark blood. The monster trembled.

An immense, shuddering fall. The stones shook with the impact. One of the dead dwarves was lost beneath the creature, but no survivors had been hurt. Almost sobbing with relief, Astrid pulled herself up and staggered to the dead thing, rage and bitter disappointment consuming her. Not three yards away, Darion lay dead, a red smear on the polished floor. The monster twitched, and lay still.

This was the secret of Amgararak? This was the brilliant idea for which House Dolvish had beggared itself? This was going to be the salvation of Orzammar?

"Stupid!" she croaked, kicking at the dead flesh. "Worthless!"

No. Not quite dead. The flesh-golem's eyes blinked, and the unbelievable happened. The horrible tongue flapped, and with a quick, chuffing snarl, the head detached itself from the massive torso and ran across it on tiny legs. Legionnaires screamed and stumbled back.

"Kill it!" Astrid roared. "Don't let it get away!"

It was fast, the unnatural thing. Very fast. With its scrawny arms, it grabbed a legionnaire by the head and gnawed at his face. With a twist and a snap, the dwarf's neck was broken, and he was thrown aside, a bloody ruin.



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Astrid stabbed at the squirming little monster. With horrible agility, it turned back on itself and leaped at her.

Everything seemed very slow. She was flying backwards through the air, and suddenly met the stone floor with an impact that knocked the breath from her body. A misshapen head, alive, animate was in her face. She slammed at it with the edge of her shield. Her sword was too long; she cast it aside and grabbed at her eating knife, drawing and slashing in a single movement. Clawed hands snatched the shield away, and then the mouth was gobbling at her, biting at her hand, biting, biting, up to her wrist. White-hot agony exploded. Jaws clamped down with a squeal of satisfaction, and the head shook from side to side, worrying at her. With a grate of bone, something parted in her arm, and her vision was rimmed in smears of white and gray.

"Bastard!" she shrieked. "Die!" The pain burst all limits to her strength, she stabbed out with her knife, burying it to the hilt between the creature's eyes.

The creature released her, with a high, unbelievably loud ululation that tortured hearing. Astrid gritted her teeth and stabbed again. With a bound, the creature tried to escape. An axe, and then another fell, The creature's wails stopped.

Astrid was not conscious to watch. Shock and loss of blood overcame her, and she fell back, limp.



Murmuring voices awakened her. She was lying on a stone bed, on ancient and dusty bedding. She was obvi-



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ously thus still in Amgarrak Thaig.

She was aware of burning pain in her left arm. She lay, eyes, closed, trying to control her breathing, not wanting to look. The voices were coming closer. She sensed someone looming over her, probably looking sympathetic and concerned. Astrid hated pity. She forced her eyes open. The lights were dim, and the ceiling overhead very elaborate.

"I'm all right," she gruffly told Askil.

"No, you're not," he contradicted her. "But you're alive."

"That... thing..." she managed. "It is dead, isn't it?"

"It's dead, all right," he agreed. "And it took quite a few with it. Darion's dead, and seven of the Legion with him. Falkor's got a busted skull, and everyone's bruised and cut. Velanna's got her work cut out for her. What do you want done with the thing's corpse? Is it of any use to you?"

"Burn it," she ordered, her voice dim in her own ears. "Burn every trace of it. It must be completely destroyed and the ashes scattered outside. Then clean this place up. We'll give our people to the Stone at the lava stream."

Velanna must have dosed her with some sort of potion. Whatever it was made everything seem distant and hazy. "Clean it up," she repeated. "This is my thaig. I'm going to give it to the Assembly. Hope they like it."

She shut her eyes and pretended to sleep. After a moment, she heard his footsteps fade. It was time to face what had happened. Opening her eyes to the impressive ceiling, she took a deep breath, and then looked down at her arm, trying not

to whimper, her eyes not quite accepting when the forearm stopped and the bandages began. She might well be named a Paragon, but at price she would not have chosen to pay.

No one would hear her cry. Her pride would not permit it; but the tears ran hot all the same.



WARDEN ASTRID (NÉE GYTHA) AEDUCAN

CHAPTER 4

THE MORNINGS AFTER

THER COUPLES MIGHT TAKE HONEYMOONS, TRAVELING TO SOME REMOTE HUNTING LODGE OR CITY. Some might retreat to their bedchambers for a week, learning each other's every secret.

Not so Bronwyn and Loghain. The most they could manage was an extra two hours the morning after their wedding, and an intimate breakfast served in Bronwyn's study. Then it was time to get back to work.

Loghain's mind was fixed on the western border. Gherlen's Halt really needed his attention. It drove Loghain mad that the political situation in Denerim made such a journey impossible. He could not risk getting snowed in on the North Road and missing the Landsmeet. Word had come that the snowfalls out west were heavy; perhaps he could trust to them to discourage the Orlesians from making any further incursions this year — at least by land. He had sent out significant supplies to shore up the garrison at the Halt, and secretly thanked Rendon Howe for this one thing: that his vicious machinations had caused Sir

Norrel Haglin to be the right place at just the right time.

He brooded into his tea until Bronwyn broke the silence.

"I know Anora will want to see us before midday, but I've got to get down to the Compound and finish plans for the expedition to Soldier's Peak. If they're going to be on their way the day after tomorrow, I have places to go and people to see."

They walked together downstairs, where Loghain turned off toward his own office. Bronwyn felt terribly self-conscious, but kept her head high. The expressions of the servants seemed particularly curious today, which put her out of humor. She was even annoyed to have to step outside and walk around to the Wardens' courtyard today. Surely it was time to reopen the access from the Palace. Now that Loghain was actually married to the Warden-Commander, it was to be hoped he no longer felt the need to guard against a possible attack by the Grey Wardens. Knowing Loghain, perhaps that was overly optimistic.

Slipping through the Warden's entry felt like coming home. The servants here were staring at her, too, but their expressions were amused and kind. Mistress Rannelly bustled up from the kitchen to greet her.

"Well! Hail to the Teyrna of Gwaren!" The woman dropped her a curtsey, and then came close to look her over. "You don't seem to have taken any harm from it. Everything all right, Warden-Commander dear?"

Bronwyn gave her a hug, and together they walked down the corridor to the Wardens' Hall. "I'm wonderfully

well, Rannelly. Everyone nursing a hangover?"

The housekeeper laughed. "Some of them are, indeed! Some of them have not left their beds, the slugs. Breakfast is on the table. You'll need your strength, with all your new duties."

Anders was closest to the doorway, and overheard. He snorted a laugh.

"So? How were the new duties? Onerous?"

She punched his shoulder lightly, and grinned. Annoyingly, she felt her face grow hot. She hoped the blush was not visible.

"Hush, Anders!" reproved Leliana. "We all wish the very best to you in your marriage, Bronwyn."

"Indeed we do, Noble One," Zevran said. There was gruff agreement from some and kind smiles from others. Morrigan merely raised a brow. Bronwyn gave her a wink, feeling generous.

"Tea! Lovely." She poured herself a mug and looked over her people. "Where are Aveline and Idunn?"

Carver looked up from feeding Magister treats to answer. "Already sparring up in the practice room. An example to us all, I suppose."

Bronwyn said, "Finish your breakfast, and then I'd like to talk to everyone here. Toliver, fetch Aveline and Idunn. Quinn, rouse anyone who's still abed. Danith, I need to discuss something with you. Let's go into the study while everyone gathers."

Danith followed her into the study, wondering what

was on Bronwyn's mind so early in the morning after her marriage. It was laudable, certainly, that she did not seem to have forgotten her duty amidst all the celebrations.

When the door was closed, Bronwyn said at once. "I know that you and your Wardens have hardly had a chance to catch your breath, but I wondered if you would be up to accompanying the Soldier's Peak party tomorrow."

Danith frowned in thought. "I do not see why we could not. The halla will have rested. Nuala and Steren are used to frequent travel. Quinn, Maeve, and the dwarves are hardy, and Niall has become stronger with exercise."

"Good." Bronwyn sat on the edge of the desk, and leaned forward, speaking quietly. "I did not tell everyone all the details of what we discovered there. Anders and Jowan know, but this is a very important matter that should be restricted to only a few. We did indeed find an old Warden mage living at Soldier's Peak. He survived the battle against the King's forces two hundred years ago and has lived at the Peak ever since. Yes — it's astonishing. He has created a Joining potion superior to the one we know: one that makes the Wardens stronger and renders them no longer vulnerable to the Calling —" She saw the spark of hope and interest in the Dalish girl's face, and smiled in response.

"Yes, and that's not all. Avernus — the mage's name — believes his potion will also prevent the infertility that has been the Warden's lot."

"That will be happy news for Nuala and Steren," Danith

said instantly. She could not but feel flattered that Bronwyn was confiding in her. And this discovery would indeed much improve all their lives.

"And for others," Bronwyn agreed. "Jowan took this potion when we were at the Peak, and has suffered no ill effects. Indeed, it seems to have given him greater power. Jowan will study with Avernus. It is important that we learn all the old sage has to teach. I have given orders to take our stored darkspawn blood up to the Peak and there brew enough of this improved potion for all of us. Avernus also has some Archdemon blood, which will enable us to recruit yet more Wardens. I want Jowan, Leliana, Hakan, and Soren, to remain up at the Peak through the beginning of next year. There will be much work for them. However, I want the improved potion brought back to the Compound as soon as possible. Besides, once there, your comrades will probably think of additional supplies they need."

"You are the best choice to lead the return party. Furthermore, it would be good to have the aravel so you can transport the potion safely. How long you would stay is up to your discretion. I don't know how long it takes to brew the potion. You might also want to wait until Leliana and the dwarves have done a preliminary survey of the situation."

Danith thought it sounded extremely interesting. Such a journey would be more to her taste than loafing in the fleshpots of Denerim.

"We can be ready by tomorrow, Commander. I would

not need all the party that came with me to Denerim. Let Ketil and Idunn rest here, and Maeve also. She has spoken of wishing to visit shops. Nuala, Steren, Quinn, and Niall would be sufficient."

"I think you're right. We're already sending a very large party as it is: Jowan, Leliana, Hakan, and Soren, and the Dryden and Wolf families. That will amount to a caravan of six wagons, plus the aravel. I'll tell everyone the plan. After our meeting, you'll want to get your aravel stocked and your people equipped."

The council was conscientiously polite and friendly when Bronwyn and Loghain joined them. The Queen actually blushed when she greeted them. Fergus came close, his arm about Bronwyn's shoulder, peering at her to see if she was well and happy. Bronwyn blushed in her turn, and then gave Fergus a grin. He gave her arm a squeeze, and then a pat, as he relinquished her to Loghain.

"I'm *fine*, Fergus," Bronwyn whispered.

As usual, there was much to discuss. Fergus had reports from Ser Adam Hawke and the merchant guilds of Amaranthine. The city was settling down, and a serious smuggling problem had been dealt with. Ser Adam had discovered an underground tunnel leading from a tavern to a hideout past the city walls. He had slain or imprisoned the gang operating out of it. The guilds were pleased with the outcome, not wanting the competition of cheap

foreign goods. Ser Adam had also much improved the discipline and efficiency of the City Guard. Amaranthine's taxes would be paid to the Crown in a timely fashion.

"Sounds like he's doing all right up there," Wulffe remarked.

"Very well indeed," agreed Bryland, pleased that Leandra's son should be such a credit to her. He hoped that Corbus and Lothar would be just such fine young men as Adam and Carver when they grew up. As for Habren...

Due to the loyalty of an faithful servant, he had been able to prevent her from slipping into Kane Kendells' bedchamber last night. Talking to her did no good at all, of course.

"But we're practically married!" Habren had whined.

Explaining the difference between 'practically' and 'officially' was useless. Bryland set his own people to watch her, and then talked quietly with Kane himself. That young man, at least, had the sense to understand the importance of not betraying Bryland's trust in him.

"Nothing happened, my lord. I would never take advantage of her like that!"

With other couples, such enthusiasm might be indulged. Bryland, however, had no confidence in Habren's discretion or good sense. He occasionally wondered what Kane actually thought of Habren. The handsome young man was always polite and attentive to her, but now and then Bryland had thought he could see his patience fraying. And, understandably, Kane was very protective of his sisters. Habren really should moderate her tone with them.

Corbus and Lothar were used to her, and understood that that was just her way; those nice little girls, however, might be hurt by some of the things Habren said to them.

The council moved on to reports from the Bannorn. The harvest was finally tallied, and had not been at all bad, despite the labor shortage. Requisitions for the army had met with a bit of resistance. Trying to feed an army of the current size for another year might prove problematic, unless the Crown started paying market prices for the grain. Granting furloughs to some of the militiamen had been a popular move. Those men were not eager to go back south, however.

Fergus sighed. "It all depends on whether we're fighting darkspawn next year, or not."

Bronwyn felt the eyes turning her way, but had no predictions for them. "It's beginning to seem like we won't be fighting them at Ostagar, at least."

The talk turned to the fishing fleet, which around the kingdom had had an excellent year. The army would be eating a great deal of fish: smoked, dried, and salted. That seemed no great hardship to Bronwyn, but Wulffe pointed out that many inland folks would find it trying. After awhile, Bronwyn's mind drifted a bit from the details of cod, herring, smelt, sardines, corry, and shieldfins.

She had not yet had the opportunity to really look at her wedding presents. They had been transported to the Palace, and locked in a chamber near her own apartments.

She must write her thanks to everyone as soon as possible, but secretly she looked forward to just clutching her hoard to herself, like a greedy dragon. Loghain was uninterested in the details, and had left it all to her. She had spotted an Antivan silk carpet in the pile, and wanted to pull it out and see if it were really as gorgeous as she hoped. Who had sent it to her? Right after the midday meal, she would go there with Fionn, and start listing and disposing of her wedding loot. It should be great fun.

The following day, amidst farewell kisses, cheerful insults, and best wishes, the expedition to Soldier's Peak assembled in the courtyard outside the Wardens' Compound. Bronwyn was rather concerned about it. Snow had fallen again, though lightly. If the weather turned bad, the whole party could be stuck in some dismal inn or at Vigil's Keep for the indefinite future. She did not like the idea of that group of individuals forced into close proximity for any length of time.

Those chosen for the expedition were eager to go, however, and all the supplies were ready and the wagons loaded. Chickens clucked in coops, protected by the canvas wagon tops. Resigned cows were tied behind the wagons. It was a very well-equipped expedition.

Levi Dryden was as proud as any patriarch should be. He was leading a train of three wagons, two small carts, and thirteen members of his family. More would be join-

ing them in the spring.

"A grand day, Warden-Commander!" he called. "A grand day!"

The Wolfs had two wagons of their own. Having quite a lot of coin left from the treasure Bronwyn had given them, they had taken care to prepare themselves well for their new home. They had been warned to be very discreet about their origins, and they had been, throughout their residence at Highever House. Before they left, Bronwyn reinforced the warning, since Danith was going with the expedition. As Bronwyn passed their lead wagon, Dirk Wolf gave her respectful greetings, and one of the little boys shrilled out his thanks for his Satinalia toy. Bronwyn gave them a smile and a wave.

"Oh! This is so exciting!" cried Leliana, kissing Bronwyn again. "An adventure of my very own! You won't recognize Soldier's Peak when next you see it."

"I hope not!" Bronwyn hugged her back, laughing. Leliana grinned, and vaulted easily into her saddle. Bronwyn wanted at least two horses up at the Peak, so Quinn would ride the other, and then walk back to Denerim with Danith. Besides, riders with the caravan would make it even more intimidating to bandits.

Jowan was riding in the Wardens' wagon, on the front seat with the driver, one of the Dryden nephews. The mage was huddled in a hooded cloak, holding his small black puppy on his lap.

"Good luck, Jowan," Bronwyn said, reaching up to shake

his hand. "I'm counting on you."

"You won't be disappointed, Bronwyn. I promise."

Bronwyn walked down the wagon to the back, when Hakan and Soren were playing cards. She wished them good luck, and was glad that they seemed in good spirits about the change of duty.

The aravel was ready too, and a number of Palace servants had gathered around it and the halla, curious and some of them even admiring.

"The halla are glad to be traveling today, Commander!" said Steren.

"I hope you like Soldier's Peak. The way up to the castle is something of a climb, but the highlands are quite beautiful."

Danith said goodbye to Cathair and Zevran, and approached, herself in good spirits at the prospect of the march. "I have never been in that part of the Coast Mountains. It will be interesting."

Bronwyn nodded, almost sorry she was not going herself. "It's very secluded; very wild. It's hard to tell at this time of year, but it looks like good grazing land."

They both turned to stare at Niall, who had found himself some new light armor in the stores, and looked... not much like a mage. He did not have a sword-shaped staff, like Jowan, but the head of his staff had been modified to resemble a spear. In this he was unlike Anders and Morrigan, who made a point of flaunting their appearance as mages. He had also sensibly provided himself with a



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good cloak and some fine, fur-lined boots. He blushed and grinned.

"You look very nice!" Maeve called to him. "Have fun storming the castle!"

"You're not sorry to be staying?" Bronwyn asked her.

"I'd like to see the place someday, Commander, but maybe after Leliana fixes it up. I've never had the chance to see the shops in Denerim before, and I love the Compound. Mistress Rannelly's letting me help with the knitting. It's so relaxing."

She ran after Quinn, interrogating him about the number of clean socks in his saddlebag. Bronwyn smiled, once again struck by how different people could be. Nan had tried to teach her to knit, and Bronwyn had hated it so much that she had hid under the kitchen table whenever Nan pulled out her work bag.

Danith gave her a slight bow. "*Dareth'n arla*, Commander."

"A safe journey to you, Danith."

Bronwyn was pleased by the civility of their parting and worked on recalling the words Danith had said to her. She moved over to Cathair, who was a little melancholy to bid farewell so soon to his fellow Dalish, and asked him what they meant.

"'Dwell in safety,' Commander. It is a courteous farewell. The correct reply is '*Dareth shiral*,' which means 'Safe journey.'"

"Really?" Bronwyn asked, pleased that she and Danith had at last said the right things to each other. It gave her quite a bit of hope for the future. "*Dareth'n arla*," she



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repeated. "If it is convenient for you at some time, Cathair, I would very much appreciate it if you could teach me more Dalish. Especially the courtesies."

"That would please me as well."

So the party ventured forth together: a long line of horsemen, carts, and wagons, made exotic by the presence of a Dalish aravel pulled by delicate-looking halla. People crowded at the gates to see them, wondering at the sight. Those remaining at the Compound waved until the gates closed, and then returned to the tasks at hand.

"We're the lucky ones," Ketil told Toliver. "there's nothing like the Pearl up at the Peak!"



Once the expedition to Soldier's Peak was gone, life took on a different aspect. Bronwyn had to struggle to insert her sword practice into her day. Like Loghain, she found the only way to do it was to get up quite early in the morning before most other nobles were stirring. So it was down to the Compound at the crack of dawn, a hearty breakfast and then practice. And then, the rest of the world awaited her.

There were some consolations. Sleeping with Loghain was very pleasant – in addition to the activities that preceded and succeeded said sleep. He was quite tolerant of her occasional nightmares. Proximity had led to him being more forthcoming about his ideas and plans. She, in turn, confided her own.

"If you want to play Lady Patroness with the Alienage,

you want to be quiet about it," he advised. "The Arl of Denerim won't like his toes stepped on — especially a new Arl, unsure in his holding. Start with what can be done, and don't talk people's ears off."

He was right, of course. Pushing too hard would cement resistance, especially from those who liked keeping elves in what they considered their places. On the other hand, there were things that were well within her power.

She now had from Valendrian the list of Alienage buildings, and thus knew which were royal properties, and which belonged to the Arling of Denerim. Other owners were listed, and that was revealing: the Bannorn of South Docks was a large owner, of course, but a number of owners were under assumed names or were business or guild associations. She had brought up the squalor of the Alienage in a casual way with Kane Kendells, but in his bland smiles she had sensed no real interest. It would be the royal holdings, or nothing. She was pleased to find that the derelict orphanage was a royal holding, currently generating no income at all. She should go have a look at it. Possibly it could be renovated. Possibly it should simply be knocked down, and something else constructed in its place. Perhaps a decent apartment building... She arranged a time to go to the Alienage with Zevran and Cathair to look things over... and to look in again at little Amethyne and hear how she liked her lessons. Yes, there were practical things she could do to improve Alienage

life when she was Queen.

Anora cornered her about a pet plan of her own that she hoped to interest Bronwyn in.

"A university?" Bronwyn asked. "Oh! I believe I know what you mean. That place for scholars in Orlais that the Chantry is so unhappy about."

"Ferelden needs to take its place among the civilized nations of Thedas," Anora declared. "A library and a university would attract the best minds... and keep our own best at home."

Bronwyn could see the value of such an institution — in theory, but was not sure how it would be paid for. It would generate no income, and would require heavy investment. It would offend the Chantry. On the other hand, she had no desire to offend Anora, either.

"I don't know anything about the University of Orlais," she confessed. "I need to understand more: how they operate, what they learn, how the funds are arranged."

Anora beamed, and promised to send her a prospectus and an armful of scholarly treatises. Bronwyn forbore to groan with horror. The promise was kept, and Bronwyn glanced through the works on higher mathematics, astronomy and the history of Tevinter bridge-building when she had a free moment or two. She did not want to refuse Anora outright, but this would clearly have to wait until the Blight was over and won.

"I knew I would be busy when I married," she confessed laughingly to Anders, one morning at the Wardens' Com-



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pound. "But not this busy! And it's mostly fluff: dinners and dances with the nobles; chats with the Queen. Important fluff, of course, but one longs for more substance."

"You only have to get through the Landsmeet," he consoled her. "Once you're safely Queen, you can grind them – and us – under your bootheel."



"The officer of the day found quarters for them in Fort Drakon, ser. They were pretty worn out from travel."

Loghain was pleased to hear that the mages he had summoned from Ostagar had arrived at last. From the soldier's report, the weather had been unpleasant, and the oxcarts had moved slowly up the West Road. The Templars had made some difficulties, too. The soldier produced the regular dispatch from Cauthrien for Loghain and a letter for Bronwyn from Alistair. That was a thick packet that probably contained more than one message.

Loghain instructed the man to tell Uldred that he and his second were to report to the commander's office at the fort after their noonday meal, and then dismissed the fellow with his thanks.

He opened Cauthrien's letter at once. Good news, mostly. The darkspawn continued to diminish in strength. Patrols continued and swept out ever farther. The darkspawn they found were inferior sorts, and no darkspawn mages had been seen in nearly a month. The Wardens and dwarves had explored the tunnels underneath the area, and con-



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firmed the darkspawn retreat. Only pockets remained. There was debate among the dwarves about the feasibility of collapsing the big openings that the horde had issued from. Some felt that barrier doors in the Deep Roads might be the answer, but the closest choke point would be northeast of Ostagar, near the entrance at Lake Belen-nas. The general consensus was that the horde had moved north. There had been no significant casualties since last she wrote, and no deaths at all.

There had been some confrontations between mages and Chantry at Ostagar. Mainly, the mages felt that Templars were arrogant and superfluous: they risked nothing, as they did not themselves fight against the darkspawn; but they tried to use their authority to control the comings and goings of the mages. There had been an ugly incident involving a Templar and a female Tranquil. It had roused the mages to real anger. The Chantry had done its best to quash the matter, and the Tranquil had been returned to the Circle. The Templars and priests, on the other hand, were angry about the growing fraternization between soldiers and mages. A soldier and a mage had asked permission to marry, and the priests had refused to perform the ceremony. There was an attempt to send the mage back to the Circle, but Cauthrien had intervened, since the mage was serving with the army. She had sent the mage to Denerim with Uldred's band, since otherwise there was a real chance that she and her sweetheart might desert together.

The dwarves were getting bored, which was not a good thing. Warden Alistair had proposed an exploration of the Deep Roads from Ostagar to the Lake Belennas access point. It seemed a good scheme to Cauthrien, and would be put into action within the next three days. If that was successful, the dwarves would return to Ostagar and attempt a similar probe of the Deep Roads route to Gwaren.

The elves were not exactly bored, but were unhappy with the cold of Ostagar. Their leaders wished to withdraw at least a portion of their forces north into the Brecilian Forest. They were not leaving the war, they said, but it looked like the war was leaving them.

Loghain considered Cauthrien's letter, and then decided that Bronwyn should be at the meeting with the newly-arrived mages. She, too, had mages under her command, and might have insights to share. Besides, the mages were technically Warden allies, rather than allies of the kingdom of Ferelden. As soon as the Queen's Council finished for the day, he gave her the news, along with Alistair's letter. She tucked it away, promising herself the pleasure of reading it later.

"We can get a bit to eat at the Fort," he told her. "Let's go there now."

Bronwyn had a fairly good idea what he had planned for these mages and was glad enough to be included. She fell into step beside him on the chilly walk to the looming fortress, rather pleased at the outing.

"Anders doesn't much care for Uldred," she remarked.

"It was my impression that he didn't much care for anything about the Circle."

"He had some good friends there. Still does, I gather. Uldred's a bit older, and in his student days Anders found him haughty and unhelpful."

"Then I suppose it's a good thing they won't be working together. Uldred's a powerful mage. He proved useful during the Redcliffe affair, and he certainly didn't shrink from a fight."

"I remember the first time I saw him. He was making a perfectly reasonable suggestion when Revered Mother Clarine put her oar in. Sister Justine sent word that she's back in Denerim, and angry as a scalded cat at being replaced. Horrible woman."

"I agree. The Grand Cleric would do well to keep her muzzled. Send her to a cloister perhaps."

Bronwyn had never visited Fort Drakon. It was very much the citadel of the Fereldan Army, and she was not part of that at all. Even on her visits to Denerim as a child this had not been part of the tour – not hers, anyway: she knew that Fergus had gone there with Father on a number of occasions, and of course he had been there often since. She hoped there would be time for a proper tour of the place.

The guards showed off their best drill for the General of the Army, and goggled discreetly at the General's new wife.

The commander of the fortress greeted them, of course: a business-like professional soldier. Loghain treated him

with the ease of established confidence and mutual respect. They joined the officers' mess — decent, plain food — and Bronwyn could see that it was not Loghain's presence, but her own, that inhibited some of them. To them, she was here as "Teyrna Bronwyn" rather than as the Warden-Commander of the Grey. It seemed best to play the former part to some degree, and she was friendly and civil, rather than forcing them to accept her as one of them. The meal broke up with some general talk. Loghain clearly knew all these men and women quite well, and their families, too. A soldier entered and whispered in the commander's ear.

"The mages are awaiting you in the parlor, my lord," the commander said. While they headed in that direction, Loghain quickly gave Bronwyn a brief summary of Cauthrien's news.

Bronwyn remembered Gwyneth, the pale blonde woman with Uldred. She was one of the mages that Bronwyn had recruited at the Circle. The woman remembered her, too, and her face relaxed into a slight but genuine smile. Both mages looked exhausted. Uldred, however, was his usual ingratiating self.

"Teyrn Loghain," he bowed. Turning to Bronwyn, he bowed again, "And Teyrna Bronwyn. May I offer my felicitations?"

"You may." Bronwyn granted him a smile. "It is good to see both of you. We heard your journey was difficult." With that, she retreated to let Loghain take the lead. She wondered how much the mages knew about the recent events in Denerim: the poisoning of the Queen; her heal-

ing by a mage; the ransacking of the Chantry and its current lack of influence. Knowing how mages gossiped, she suspected they knew quite a bit.

Loghain wanted their report about the situation in Ostagar and the south of the country. The mages were pointed to chairs, and could tell an interesting, coherent story. It largely agreed with Cauthrien's report.

Darkspawn sightings in the vicinity of Ostagar and Wilds had continued to decline in frequency. Soldiers, Wardens, and mages continued to patrol, and it was the consensus that the horde was no longer in the area. No one thought the Blight was over, but they hoped and prayed it had gone somewhere else. Loghain asked about specific locations and numbers, and elicited quite a bit of useful intelligence.

"And how would you describe morale at Ostagar, Senior Enchanter?" Loghain asked.

Uldred and Gwyneth glanced at each other. Gwyneth looked like she wanted to talk, but subsided at Uldred's frown. With a positively oily smile, the Senior Enchanter said. "I am happy to report that that relations within the army and its allies are for the most part very good. Soldiers think well of those who stand with them and heal their wounds."

"Of course," Loghain agreed.

Thus encouraged, Uldred went on. "Elves and dwarves have no problems with mages at all. Quite the contrary. Some of the elven mages of the Circle have made good friends among the Dalish Keepers, and both groups are



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enjoying a very fruitful exchange of knowledge and lore.”

Loghain grunted noncommittally.

“— In fact,” Uldred paused. “In fact, the only significant differences involve the Chantry’s continued attempts to control every aspect of our existence. The Templars find their safe and easy existence in camp rather dull, and enliven it with abusing those in their power.”

“All of them?” Bronwyn asked.

“No,” Uldred said, with a judicious show of fairness. “Not all. However, even one rotten apple can make life very difficult for those of us in the barrel with him. The Tranquil cannot protect themselves from predators. They are not capable of refusing even the most depraved demands. There was an egregious episode, and the Templar is still in our midst.”

Loghain raised his brows. “I am glad to hear that you mages have shown restraint.”

Gwyneth burst out, “And not just that! Poor Vivien had to be sent north with us for her own protection! Just because she wanted to get married!” She blushed, and ducked her head. “Sorry, my lord... my lady. And we heard that Wynne was dead.”

Loghain glanced at Bronwyn, knowing how upset that always made her. Uldred also took notice of Bronwyn’s expression.

“No doubt you will find some of the recent events here in Denerim extremely interesting,” Loghain said, his face impassive. “You may also have heard that a young apostate was given her freedom from Chantry control due to



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her signal services to the kingdom. That is not going to figure in our conversation today. You are here because you have proved your worth. If the soldiers at Ostagar can learn to live with mages, so too can the rest of the army, and the city of Denerim as well.”

Uldred was practically on the edge of his seat.

Loghain said, “You and I have discussed more freedom for Ferelden’s mages in the past. I am not precisely offering you freedom at this point. What I can offer is a much longer leash. As the Blight continues, it might be that the mages’ situation will evolve.”

Uldred’s brows went up. Past Blights had lasted for decades. If they could accustom those in power to accepting mages, then who knew...

Loghain interrupted his thoughts. “Make no mistake: this is conditional. If mages abuse their new positions... if we have demons and abominations running rampant, then the mages will be shut back up in the Circle, and the key thrown away.”

“My lord, I can assure you — ”

Loghain put up his hand for silence. “You will act as liaison with your mages, and help in placing them in various companies. A mage will receive pay equivalent to that of a sub-lieutenant, and will be under the orders of his or her company commander. No Templars will be permitted to interfere. Choose a particularly good Healer to be assigned to permanent duty here at Fort Drakon. Our soldiers deserve the best.”

Uldred was looking almost giddy. "My lord! I will do everything you – "

"You will serve in my personal guard, and will be paid a captain's wages. As officers, you mages will all be expected to conduct yourself appropriately. You will obey the orders of your superior officers and perform your duties to the fullest extents of your powers. It would also be extremely prudent to do nothing to provoke the Chantry further."

Bronwyn said, "Some of my Warden mages have chosen to wear armor when on duty, rather than robes. You might consider it."

Gwyneth blinked large blue eyes, and told her, "The Templars don't allow us to wear anything other than robes. And we've no coin of our own."

Loghain was nodding. "Wearing armor is actually quite a good idea. Give some consideration to the matter, Senior Enchanter. Robes offer little protection when in combat against darkspawn... or anything else. We have large stores of various kinds of armor here in the fortress."

After more talk, the mages were dismissed, clearly excited about their prospects. Bronwyn could no longer wait to read her letter from Alistair.

"I've just got to," she told Loghain, and used her belt knife to pop the seal of the parchment packet. A number of folded notes tumbled out.

"Here's a letter from Adaia to the Alienage hahren and a bit of money... for her father. It looks like Alistair wrote it for

her. I'll have to get that delivered. A letter from Emrys to his uncle Stronar. That's sealed, of course. A letter from Petra to Anders... Here's Alistair's letter to me. Want to hear it?"

"Does he have anything pertinent to say about the military situation?"

She made a face at him, and began reading:

Dear Bronwyn—

How are you? I am fine. The weather here is really, really cold. Adaia's been nice about mending my socks. And shirts. And pants."

Loghain rolled his eyes. Bronwyn cleared her throat.

"Things are pretty good, considering. We find fewer and fewer darkspawn all the time. Yesterday I was all over that part of the Wilds west of Flemeth's hut, and you'd hardly guess that the darkspawn had ever been there. Petra wonders if freezing the Taint doesn't work just as well as burning it. She's doing some experiments with it. That could be good down here in the south, where the ground freezes hard. Maybe next spring won't be so bad after all. I wish I knew more about how recovery from a Blight works. Petra asks me all sorts of questions, and sometimes I feel like a complete idiot. I wish there was a Grey Warden Manual somewhere. "THE COMPLEAT GREY WARDEN." Ha-ha. I could use it. Really. Not kidding."

"I know exactly how he feels," Bronwyn said, a little bitterly.

Loghain cocked his head. "Interesting idea about hard frost. Other Blights were farther north, and of course it never freezes in the Deep Roads. We'll hope there's something in that."



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Bronwyn went on:

"I had an idea, and some people didn't think it's ridiculous. We – I mean Wardens and the dwarves – are going to see how far we can get going up the Deep Roads from here in Ostagar toward Lake Belannas. I promise that if things get hairy, we'll turn back. We might also check out the Gwaren Road. That way, when you come back, you can walk all the way to your new teyrnir and never get rained on! Admit it, I am a true friend. Hello to Teyrn Loghain, by the way. And I mean that really, really respectfully."

Bronwyn smiled archly at Loghain, who grunted in response.

"Everybody's doing great here. Pretty much. Sten has never been so cold before, but of course he's all stern-faced and stoic about it. When we don't have darkspawn to fight, sometimes we go to the workshop and make bombs. Master Dworkin has come up with some pretty weird stuff. Then we take them out away from the camp and see what they do."

"What a pack of children," scoffed Loghain.

"Speaking of weird stuff, Oghren found a barrel of apples and used them to make something he called ale. It was strong enough to kill the Archdemon. People paid him for it."

Our new Wardens are working out great. Emrys is really smart and friendly. He's something like you but with a deeper voice, naturally. Nevin never loses his temper about anything. Siofranni's made good friends with Adaia, and the dwarf girls help Petra boss me around all the time. All the time. I am surrounded by women



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who boss me, including Ser Cauthrien, who is pretty scary."

That made Loghain smile a little. He had helped raise Cauthrien, after all.

"We've heard some wild stuff out of Denerim. I hope the Queen is all right."

If I get rid of all the darkspawn around Ostagar, can I come back to the Compound? Please? That would be great.

*Your friend and brother,
Alistair"*

"Poor boy," Bronwyn said. "Really, Loghain, it looks like we'll have to wrap up operations in Ostagar eventually. A garrison should stay, but not the force we have there now. At least I could furlough my Wardens, a few at a time. Alistair deserves a rest."

"After the Landsmeet, perhaps," said Loghain. "Now, what about seeing Denerim from the top of Fort Drakon?"

On the the twenty-fourth, the soon-to-be-official Arl of Redcliffe finally made his appearance. The prospect of meeting Teagan Guerrin, a person whom she suspected would prove a political opponent, filled Bronwyn with a certain unease. Word was brought to them that morning, in the course of the Queen's council. From the quick glances in the room, she could tell that she was not the only one who looked upon Teagan's arrival as a harbinger of challenge and dissent. Arl Wulffe instantly took the initiative and invited everyone on the council to join him

for their midday meal. A message was sent to the Arl of Redcliffe's estate, urging the Arl and Arlessa to join them. When they had a moment alone, Bronwyn unburdened herself to Loghain.

"So Teagan has finally made his dramatic entrance," Brownyn said acidly. "Clever of him to time it just after our wedding, lest he seem to give tacit approval by his presence."

"He'll be coming to the council tomorrow," Loghain said, shrugging. "We'll see what he has to say. I was wondering if he meant to put off his arrival until the night before the Landsmeet, though that would hardly have been politic. If he wants his own marriage recognized, he has to recognize those of others."

"Even my cousin Leonas' wedding," Bronwyn said primly. "So shocking! A woman who gave birth to a *mage*. Hardly something any proper Guerrin would countenance." She saw Loghain's expression, and laughed lightly. "Don't worry! I won't throw his late sister-in-law in his face, though I'll be tempted if he gives trouble."

"I would think," Loghain said grimly, "that your sympathy for the mages would cause you not to mention the events at Redcliffe at all. That was exactly the sort of thing that proves the Chantry's point. A mage outside the Circle went berserk, became an abomination, and slaughtered half a village. Killed his own mother, too. Doesn't help you make the case for mage independence."

Bronwyn made a face, but had to agree. "I suppose not. Though Arlessa Isolde's hypocrisy and and secrecy are

largely to blame. She's the one most at fault, in my opinion."

"Of course she is," Loghain said, "but she's *dead*."

"Very well," Bronwyn sighed. "I shall try quite another tactic. I shall be sickeningly nice to Arlessa Kaitlyn – who really seems quite a sweet girl – and also to her little brother, thus making a flank attack on Guerrin family unity."

"Sounds good to me."

The Guerrins accepted Wulffe's invitation. Bronwyn's flank attack appeared to work well. Either Arlessa Kaitlyn was a brilliant actress and accomplished schemer, or Teagan did not confide his political views to her. Bronwyn tended to think the latter, though she did not dismiss the idea of the girl, even as young as she was, being a dissembler. For now, at least, she would try friendship.

Teagan himself treated her with bland courtesy, saying all the proper things. She could not but sense his deep suspicion and disapproval of her. He did not mention Alistair to her.

Loghain's puppy was a pleasant topic of conversation, and the talk, while guarded, was not hostile. Talking about dogs always brought out the best in Fereldans. For that matter, Bronwyn was a little amused at her new husband's high standards of behavior for little Amber, but she was his dog, and seemed to thrive on his measured doses of affection and discipline. Had he tried that with Anora? Unlikely. From what she could gather, Loghain had had little hand in raising his daughter – at least in her early childhood.

They rode back to the Palace, and discovered that they

could steal a hour or so for themselves. It was rather pleasant to slip out of their finery and then into bed, for love and some quiet talk together while they lay in each other's arms. Bronwyn loved these times. There was something to be said for conversing with a naked man, even if the man tended to talk mostly of the kingdom's affairs.

"I should be out at Gherlen's Halt, seeing what the Orlesians are up to. No help for it. Teagan didn't show his hand today. I wonder what he has planned for the Landsmeet?"

"I don't see how he can really plan much. He has to be confirmed himself and have his marriage recognized. He's not in a very good position to make trouble. I confess I was afraid he'd go to Ostagar and demand that Alistair come to Denerim with him. That doesn't seem to have happened though. Poor Alistair. All he wants is to be a Warden. I hope Teagan leaves him alone."

Loghain grunted agreement. "Listen here. If the vote goes our way – and I have no reason to suspect it won't – let's have the coronation right away. You don't have to have some sort of fancy new gown, do you? Wear your wedding dress or that thing Teagan gave you. That's nice."

"I had thought..." Her voice trailed away, and then she smiled. All things considered, there was absolutely no way she was wearing a gown given to her by Teagan Guerrin to her coronation. He would likely take it as a smug slap in the face.

"Loghain, why don't we both wear armor? You in your River Dane plate and I in my Flemeth suit. We're at war,

and that should be acknowledged. Let's just show up at the Landsmeet in armor, but with no helmets. They can crown us in armor, and then we can get on with the rest of the Landsmeet."

He mulled that over, liking the idea more and more. "You're sure you wouldn't mind?"

"Absolutely! My armor is spiffier than any gown. Do let's be crowned in armor, Loghain."

"All right! We'll just have the seneschal put out both thrones in the Landsmeet chamber, and then have the ceremony there. Think you can put up with the sneers of the Orlesians?"

That made her laugh. "As if I care what they think! Actually, there will plenty of Fereldan ladies who'll think I'm unwomanly. Too bad for them. At least in armor it's harder for the ladies to stare at my stomach, trying to see if I'm pregnant."

He sputtered. "After – what? Ten days? Not even Habren Bryland could be that silly."

"How little you know women. Especially women like Habren Bryland. Being silly is what she does best."

Someone knocked at the door. Bronwyn thought it must be Fionn, though it was harder than usual. The voice accompanying it, however, was not Fionn's.

"Your Grace! There's trouble at the Warden Compound. Warden Danith is back and her party was attacked. She says she needs to speak to you right away!"



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"Is she with you?"

"Yes, Your Grace. She was sure you'd want to hear the news at once."

"Steady on. Let me get up and throw on a robe." She pushed the curtains aside. What had Danith seen? She snatched up her scarlet robe and tied it securely, and then tossed Loghain's through the curtains. A sinewy hand reached out and caught it deftly.

"Of course," he pointed out, "there's probably no need for me to dress. I could quietly eavesdrop from within the bed."

"You don't get off so easily, and you can't eavesdrop on Wardens' business," she said flatly. "It would be bad for morale."

"Not for mine."

"Besides," Bronwyn hissed, "She can undoubtedly hear your voice, if not understand your words. Therefore she knows you're here, unless you wish her to believe that I talk to myself like a lunatic, and in two different voices, at that."

"I'm up, I'm up. And out, if need be."

She let him get up, and even let him put on his sheepskin-lined house shoes before calling "Enter."

The door opened, and Danith came in. After so many days living the luxurious life of a Fereldan teyrna, Bronwyn instantly caught the reek of travel and battle. Danith's face was bruised, and there was a fresh cut on one fine cheekbone.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "Come in and sit down." She raised her voice to the servant. "Bring us all some tea. And something to eat, for Maker's sake."



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"Should I leave?" Loghain asked. "Does this involve Warden secrets?"

Danith blushed and looked away, away that she had stared at the imposing sight of Loghain in a dressing gown and bare ankles for a little too long.

"No... no... Teyrn Loghain," she added conscientiously. "You must hear this as well. We were attacked today on our way through the Wending Wood. By darkspawn."



The news that darkspawn were half a day from Denerim was shocking enough. What Danith had to report about them was even more disturbing.

"We were on our way back from Soldier's Peak. We spent the night at Vigil's Keep, and the seneschal was most civil. He had something of concern to report to us. Had we not been ordered to return as soon as soon as possible, we would have stayed to investigate his claim that his men had discovered a connection to the Deep Roads with his dungeons."

Bronwyn blinked. "That's not good. We'll have to tell Nathaniel right away. Go on."

"I have traveled through that forest before without harm, so it alarmed me that it was so still. As the road curved past the entrance of an old mine, I sensed darkspawn. Almost immediately we were set upon. The darkspawn leader..." Danith hesitated. "Talked."

"Spoke actual words?" Bronwyn asked, appalled. "It really was a darkspawn? What did he say?"

"His voice was hoarse and unnatural, but I am sure he



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said. "Take the Grey Wardens! The Architect commands it!" Niall heard him, too. Actually," she admitted with a touch of embarrassment, "I did not know that word, 'Architect.' Niall told me what it meant. Then a strong warband fell upon us: seven with the talking one, who was a mighty warrior. If Niall – and Quinn – had not been with us, we would have been killed or taken."

"Were any of your people hurt?"

"Nuala was badly wounded. The darkspawn wanted to take her alive – take us all alive. It seemed that their plan was for us to vanish, and for no one to know what became of us. It is good that we had the aravel. The darkspawn misjudged our numbers, for Quinn and Niall were riding in it. It is a marvel that Quinn was not killed. He fought most bravely, and... saved my life."

"He's a good lad," Bronwyn agreed, her mind racing with the story. The Architect? Hadn't she heard of someone called the Architect?

"Tell us the rest," said Loghain, eyes fixed on the elf.

"The darkspawn we slew. Other than the speaker, the darkspawn were very ordinary. We dispatched them easily. The one who spoke was cunning and dangerous. Niall froze him repeatedly and leached away at his power as we struck our blows. Finally, Quinn hewed off his head. Before that, the creature told us he was called "The Disciple," and that we were fools to defy the Architect. I could sense more darkspawn in the wood – not a large party –



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but enough, but we were too weakened to linger. I thought it best to report this at once, instead."

"You did absolutely right!" Bronwyn explained. "I'm glad to see you alive." She turned to Loghain and saw that he was frowning, lost in thought.

"The Architect..." he murmured. "The Architect..."

Bronwyn had a most uneasy feeling. Was this the same Architect that featured in Fiona's story? How much did Loghain know about it? "Have you heard of such a being before? Seen it?"

"No, not seen it, but I overheard Duncan and Maric on occasion..." He thought quickly, and decided that truth was best. He had put this out of his mind years ago, but who knew how long darkspawn could live?

"About twenty years ago, as you know, the Grey Wardens came back to Ferelden. The Warden-Commander, Genevieve, had lost her brother in the Deep Roads. Originally, they asked me to help, because I'd been in Ortan Thaig during the rebellion. I refused, and then Maric decided it would be a lark to go. He ran off, without telling me – without even saying good bye to his little son. Duncan was in the party; a young Warden then."

He snorted. "It was all a ruse by the Orlesians, of course. Maric ended up being taken prisoner at the Circle and was nearly killed. I had to haul his chestnuts out of the fire. As usual. When I found him, there was this strange darkspawn that begged us to kill it."



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"It spoke? In actual words?"

"Yes. And Maric allowed it to be killed. I wanted to question the bloody thing."

"It mentioned a being called the Architect?"

"Yes! It's been a long time, but I recall it talking about something called the Architect, who was apparently an intelligent, talking darkspawn. It was trying to recruit Grey Wardens for some purpose of its own. Maric said that the darkspawn I saw was the remains of the Warden that Commander Genevieve was searching for. This Architect creature had tainted him further, and the Warden now looked entirely like a darkspawn. Maric was a fool to get involved with the business at all."

He saw the stricken looks on the two women's faces, and said gruffly. "The affair was over. Maric was saved, the Orlesian plot thwarted, and Genevieve and her brother were dead. Maric didn't tell me anything else, citing 'Warden secrets,' but Duncan stayed in Ferelden afterwards as Commander. I know they had private little chats, but they volunteered nothing else to me. I suppose I thought that whatever this Architect was, it was dead, too."

It was all coming back now. Riordan and Fiona, months ago at the Joinings in the Frostbacks, had told her their own version of this story. It had never occurred to Bronwyn that she might actually come across this Architect being herself. The details involved Grey Warden secrets, and she preferred not to share them with Loghain, who



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would be angry that she had kept them from him earlier. She had already told him enough.

Calmly, she said, "I must confess that any hint of talking darkspawn is news to me. Worrying news, at that. I'll gather my people and we'll head up the Pilgrim's Path immediately."

"Not alone," he said. "I'll go with you."



Obviously, the Queen and her council must be informed. There was general consternation at the news.

"Do you think that the Archdemon is upon us?" Bryland asked, face drawn.

"I do not," Bronwyn assured them all. "I would sense the presence of the Archdemon. This Architect being is in some sense a renegade, commanding a small band of his own. Somehow, he is not subject to the song of the Archdemon. The reason I think that he has only a small band is that he would not wish to attract the attention and enmity of the Archdemon. That is why he withdrew so far away from where the horde was seen. That does not mean he is not dangerous. He must be dealt with swiftly, and without hesitation."

Nathaniel was horrified to learn that there were darkspawn in his arling, and vowed to stand with the Wardens. Fergus, too, could raise a substantial force on short notice. Loghain, of course, would take the companies of Maric's Shield here in the capital, each with their own mage. And Uldred, of course, would accompany him.

"Darkspawn like to hide in caves or tunnels," Bronwyn said.



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"Danith said they passed a large mine. Nathaniel, do you know of any place along the Pilgrim's Path that fits that description?"

"There are a number of mines in the general area. In the part of Wending Wood where your people were attacked?" He thought a moment, and then gave a quick nod. "Yes! There's a big silverite mine not far from there."

Loghain rolled out a map of Amaranthine, and Nathaniel found the spot, "There. It's been closed a few years. The owner lost everything in a business venture gone wrong. Father was thinking about taking it over. It goes deep, from all accounts."

Then Bronwyn had to give him the disturbing news that Varel had discovered a link between the dungeons of Vigil's Keep and the Deep Roads. She had brought her own maps of the Deep Roads and pencilled in a dotted line. The maps of eastern Ferelden she had found in the Shaperate were old and smudged. However, the Amgarak Road clearly connected old Kal'Hirol with the rest of the dwarven empire. They knew of the access point near the Dragonbone Wastes. Kal'Hirol was not far at all from Vigil's Keep. That there was a branch of the Deep Roads, or at least a connecting tunnel, was not surprising.

"This Architect," she said, "this master darkspawn, would not be traveling overland. If he is in the Wending Woods, he got there underground. If we attack him at the mine entrance, he will flee below and then our chance of catching him will be compromised. If, however, we can divert his attention while preparing an attack from the rear, we



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might deal with him quickly. I shall take a party and leave tonight, and we don't want the Architect to see us. Instead, I propose that my party goes west to the East Hafter Road, and then follow the river north to Vigil's Keep. From there we will travel the Deep Roads to the mine. I'll have dwarves in the party, and their stone-sense will guide us."

"And I," said Loghain, "will take the main force tomorrow and march up to the entrance to the mine and dig in there. We'll not be in any hurry, but we'll be in position by mid-morning. The creatures won't be able to escape. I'll order a general advance at noon."

Nathaniel had an idea of his own. "I'll go with you to Vigil's Keep, Bronwyn. And better than riding all the way, we can commandeer a couple of the river barges on the East Hafter. That will give your people a chance to rest. We'll be at Vigil's Keep by dawn."

Plans were made and troops rallied. Bronwyn gave some thought to who she would take with her. Loghain must have some Wardens, too. Anders had healed the worst of Nuala's wounds, and the rest must be left to time and the care of Steren. Those two, then, would remain at the Compound. Everyone else was going north.

Danith must obviously go with Loghain, and direct him to the exact spot where the attack took place. He would send out additional scouts to hunt down any darkspawn haunting the Wending Wood. With her would go Niall, Quinn, and Maeve. They were used to working together.



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though Quinn was less interested by their battle in the Woods than he was in babbling about the wonders of Soldier's Peak to Maeve and anyone else who would listen.

There was only a moment to take Danith aside.

"Did Avernus succeed in brewing the potion?"

Danith actually smiled. "He did. We all drank it, with no ill affects. Indeed, I believe our success against the strange darkspawn was largely due to our greater powers. Nuala would be dead without it. The creature underestimated not only our numbers, but also our skills."

Very pleased and relieved, Bronwyn put a hand on Danith's forearm. "You've done very well. I'll call the Wardens in before we leave for their own doses. It's too good an advantage to forego."

A brief conference was called in the study. The door was locked, and the potion distributed to every one of them: Anders and Aveline; Carver and Cathair; Idunn, Ketil, Toliver, and Maeve. Bronwyn downed her dose with the rest.

A brief, intense pain; a sudden burst of life and energy; a new understanding. Bronwyn straightened up and looked at her Wardens, they looked back, astonished and grinning.

"That," Anders declared, "is good stuff. That is the real thing. If feel like I could run all the way to Vigil's Keep without boots."

Bronwyn said, "Avernus has been working on improving the Joining formula for years. Jowan tried it first, and it seemed to do him good. Not only does Avernus believe that this frees us from the the Calling, but that we will no



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longer be infertile. For that reason, I suggest everyone be *prudent*. He thinks we'll have increased strength, stamina, and dexterity. Our current adventure will be the test of that."

"Damn," muttered Idunn, "Guess I'll have to brew that stinking contraceptive tea again. Not turning into a ghoul is good, though."

"Damn straight it is," grunted Ketil. "This gives a fellow a real boost."

They had enough time to arm and armor themselves, while the staff packed them each some rations. Those Wardens such as Idunn and Ketil, who did not know how to ride, sat behind those who did. Little baskets were arranged for Magister and the other puppy, so they could ride with Carver. Within the hour, the Wardens and the Arl of Amaranthine and his men were in the saddle and on the move, galloping on the West Road and then up the connecting lane to the nearest boat landing, at the tiny village of Upperhafter.

It took all of Nathaniel's authority to rouse the boatmen and get a pair of barges moving. The moon was bright enough for navigation, and once they understood who they were conveying, the boatmen did their best to make their passengers comfortable. Bronwyn accepted their hospitality in the spirit it was offered, and knew herself lucky to catch four hours sleep in a cramped little cabin. Late as the hour was, Bronwyn fell asleep quickly, even in full armor, lulled by the slow gurgle of the water as they floated downstream to Vigil's Keep.

CHAPTER 5



ARCHITECT OF NIGHTMARES

WE ARE HERE."

Morrigan's voice had never sounded more soothing and melodious. The boat was swaying, tied up at the river docks at Vigil's Keep. Bronwyn blinked awake to see the witch already dressed and leaning over her. Idunn was sprawled, still fast asleep, at the foot of Bronwyn's little cot. Just past the curtained doorway, she could hear Aveline and Carver, conversing in whispers. Outside the filthy little window, dawn was pink and pearly in the heavens.

She felt... alive. No, not merely that, but nearly bursting with life and strength. Would she always feel like this? That would be... marvelous.

"I'm awake. Where's Scout?"

"Already ashore, and about his business. Your devoted arl, too, has dashed off, rousing his castle folk to give us breakfast. 'Tis a delay, but not an unwelcome one, perhaps."

"Not at all. I'm starving. And Nathaniel is not my arl."

Morrigan only chuckled. "Anders slept uncommonly

peacefully. I noticed that in the rest of you. The secret medicament is a success, then?"

Bronwyn could have wished Anders to the Void for his blabbing tongue. She raised an ironic brow Morrigan's way, and the witch laughed outright.

"I dreamed," Bronwyn said, "but it was nothing I could not master."

"Well, 'tis to be hoped that is your motto in all your endeavors. Come, the arl longs to impress you."

It was all very nice: porridge and eggs and bacon; hot fragrant tea or small beer for those who preferred it; quickbread with plenty of honey. Adria, with her dog Topaz, promised to take care of the two puppies. Nathaniel gave Bronwyn the place of honor at his right, while he tried to persuade her that he should accompany her.

"It's not safe, Nathaniel!" she said. "You and your men could be Tainted. We should show you what it looks like down there, just so you'll know not to touch it. Any signs of Taint need to be burned away. And wear heavy gloves, for Maker's sake! But don't think of coming with me. It's just too dangerous."

"It's not too dangerous for *you!*" he shot back, his voice urgent. "It sickens me, what you've had to bear while most of the nobles pamper themselves in Denerim! Why should you be the one to suffer all this alone? Let me help you!"

Men and their pride, she sighed to herself. At that, he was right. He was trying to do his duty, which did not surprise

her at all. Seeing him now, sitting so close to her at breakfast, reminded her sadly of what might have been. She did not regret marrying Loghain for a moment; but Nathaniel had once had her love, and it was pleasing to see that she had not chosen poorly, even when very young.

"I need to speak privately with my people before we leave," she said. "May we have the use of a room?"

"Of course."

Not everyone was eager to be dragged from the breakfast table, but after thinking it over, Bronwyn decided they needed to know what she could remember about the Architect. Could she include Morrigan and Zevran? Perhaps she should. King Maric had known it, and so could they. They knew so much already...

They gathered in a small parlor, some still munching, some with steaming mugs in their hands.

"Shut the door. This is private, and not to be discussed with anyone else. *Ever*," she emphasized. "I am including Morrigan and Zevran, because if we actually meet this Architect creature, they need to understand the kind of threat we're facing. I'll tell the other Wardens later. There was no time last night, and to be honest, I needed time to put my thoughts in order."

"So he's a talking darkspawn?" Carver blurted out. "is that even possible?"

"It seems so. A talking darkspawn *mage*." She paced a little, trying to remember details of a story she was told

several months ago, in a time of high stress and distractions. Loghain's version had recalled some details to her.

"Save your comments until I finish," she said. "The fact is that I was told about the Architect the night that two Orlesian Wardens came to our assistance and arranged the Joining for you, Anders, and the others who joined with you. Senior Wardens Riordan and Fiona had secretly come the border to help us," she told the others. "That, too, cannot be revealed, or it could cost them their lives. Morrigan... Zevran... I am entrusting you with Warden secrets. Don't look scornful, Morrigan. This is *dangerous information*. We don't want the Weisshaupt Wardens coming in force to hunt you and Zevran down. Believe me, it could come to that, if anyone else found out that you know what I'm about to tell you."

She saw the solemn faces before her, and went on. "All right. It was a hectic night. The two of them were trying to tell me — and Alistair, too — everything that we needed to know about the Wardens in an hour or two. Our duties, how to kill the Archdemon and what it meant to the Warden who did it, The Calling, the daily physical needs of Wardens... all that loomed larger than the story Fiona told, but now that story is in our faces, and has to be dealt with. It goes back twenty years, to the time the Wardens were first readmitted to Ferelden. Loghain knows part of this story, but only the bits that affected King Maric. He doesn't know the darkest, most disturbing parts."

She took a deep breath. "King Maric went on an expe-



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dition to the Deep Roads with the newly readmitted Grey Wardens early in Dragon 9:10. Senior Warden Fiona was one of the party, and could tell me all the details. Duncan, a young recruit in those days, was there, too. The Orlesian Warden-Commander, Bregan, had heard the Calling, had departed for the Deep Roads, and was captured... by a talking, thinking darkspawn emissary, who called himself the Architect. His sister, Genevieve, newly-appointed Commander of the Grey in Ferelden, was determined to rescue her brother. She originally asked Loghain to go, since he had Deep Roads experience in the place where Bregan was last seen, but he refused. King Maric, however, was eager for the adventure.

"So the Wardens, along with King Maric, descended into the Deep Roads, and eventually found the lost Warden. This Architect creature had at least temporarily won Bregan's trust. Bregan told the Architect some of the most guarded secrets of the order: among them the various locations of the sleeping Old Gods."

This stopped the show. Even Morrigan's eyes grew wide. Then they narrowed, no doubt wondering how to get hold of this information.

Ketill stood up and bellowed. "The Wardens know where the Old Gods are! Why the bleeding Stone don't we just go get 'em?"

"Quiet!" Bronwyn shouted. The angry, frightened, or bewildered shouts subsided. "Let's not give the rest of



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Vigil's Keep something to talk about. No, obviously I don't know such things. After the fiasco I'm describing, I doubt that the information is given to Warden-Commanders any longer. Bregan was taken in by the Architect, who claimed to have a scheme that would end the Blights forever. It was nothing less than a plan to meld the darkspawn with the other races of Thedas by forcing the Joining on every human, dwarf, and elf. If the darkspawn took us for other darkspawn, the Architect thought we'd no longer have any reason to fight."

A deep silence. "That," said Cathair, "is the silliest, ugliest, most impractical idea I have ever heard."

"It would kill at least two-thirds of the population," Idunn pointed out. "And sterilize the rest. Yeah, brilliant, if you mean to give the darkspawn the world."

"And what about the Qunari?" asked Toliver. "I mean... are they part of the deal, or not?"

"How were you supposed to get people to take the Joining, anyway?" wondered Carver. "With fancy talk and a big punchbowl? What about children? It'd kill them!"

Bronwyn put up her hand. "Did I say I thought it a good idea? It's not my idea, and I'm giving it to you fourth-hand anyway. I don't think this Architect really understands anything about us. Fiona said he was an immensely powerful darkspawn emissary who could talk and reason. That doesn't mean he has practical knowledge about how the races of Thedas live and think. Imagine a scholar,

living alone, building castles in the air... or creating pure theories with no basis in fact. However, in Bregan's state of deterioration, it might have seemed a beautiful dream. At any rate, he knew the location of the Old Gods, and told the Architect. Fiona thinks it possible that the Architect actually *began* the current Blight with a misguided attempt to free the Old God Urthemiel. Obviously, things did not go according to plan."

"Or maybe they *did* go according to plan," Aveline pointed out shrewdly. "The Architect may not realize how subject he is to the Old Gods' call himself."

"Or perhaps," Morrigan suggested, "he imagined that he would somehow be allowed to share in the Archdemon's power. And was quickly disabused of the notion. Hence the hiding on the other side of Ferelden. I see no reason to take anything the Architect said at face value."

"I agree," Bronwyn said. "I think that if we are confronted by this creature, we should be wary of its promises. Bregan, once his sister was also captured by the Architect, repented of his collaboration, and both he and she were killed. By the time Loghain saw Bregan, the Architect had done things to him that made him look completely like a darkspawn. Some of the other Wardens were also drawn in by the Architect. It ended at the Fereldan Circle of Magi. The Architect had been in contact with the the Orlesian First Enchanter there, one Remille. Remille cared nothing for the Architect's grand schemes, but saw a chance to

murder King Maric and destroy Ferelden — "

"I *heard* about this!" shouted Anders. "I wasn't there when it happened, but Niall was, and he told me about the Orlesians attacking King Maric at the Circle. A lot of good mages were killed trying to fight Remille, who was a complete snake. Teyrn Loghain turned up just in time to save the King. I never heard about any darkspawn, though."

"They feared to create a panic," said Zevran, thinking it over. "And the Wardens, too, would want to keep the scandal quiet, since one of their own was so grievously at fault."

Bronwyn thought that more than likely. "Loghain saw the transformed Bregan, and wished to question him, but the man begged to be put to death, and Maric allowed it. Apparently the Architect made his escape — "

Anders' face was white. "— which means that there is a link between the dungeons of Kinloch Hold and the Deep Roads!"

"These sodding darkspawn buggers are *everywhere*," grunted Ketil.

It had not occurred to Bronwyn to make that deduction, but of course Anders was right. Another thing they would have to check out. "Possibly," she suggested, hoping to calm him, "the Architect made use of a tunnel known only to himself. Perhaps he devised it, long ago. Very likely he closed it off, when he made his escape, in order to prevent pursuit. No one has seen any sign of darkspawn there."

"But what it also might mean," Zevran pointed out, "is that this Architect is a cunning fellow who always has an

escape route planned. It would be wise to watch him carefully, if we meet."

"An excellent point," Bronwyn said. "If we cross his path, we won't let him get away. But that's enough story-telling. It's time to hunt him down. Follow me outside. The entrance to the dungeons is in a building just outside the Inner Keep."

"You mean the entrance to the dungeons isn't inside the castle?" asked Aveline. "That's... peculiar."

"It is," Bronwyn agreed. "It's one of the quirks of Vigil's Keep. Of course, over the thousands of years that a fortress has stood on this spot, there have been many Vigil's Keeps. Probably some of them *were* over the dungeons and crypt."

Off they went, out the main entrance, across the inner courtyard to the place where Nathaniel and his twenty picked men were waiting. Then they descended ramps and staircases that took them deep into the earth. Bronwyn would have to rely on Idunn and Ketil's stone-sense to keep track of time and direction. Nathaniel was a quiet presence at her side. He was not wrong to support them, of course. She had no idea how powerful this Architect being was. If he got past the Wardens, someone else would have to stop him.

Nathaniel smiled at her as they passed an iron-bound door. "Do you remember that?"

She laughed. "The entrance to the family crypt. Your mother didn't want us playing there. Did you disobey her?"

With a shrug, he admitted. "Now and then. I got in a few times, but only to the first level. Mostly I explored the

dungeons. I never went very deep, but I did go past the cells and storerooms. I never saw any connecting tunnel to the Deep Roads."

Varel's map, however, was accurate. The Arling of Amaranthine was a land of caves and mines. Deep below the surface, in the lowest and most ancient of the dungeons, they found where a rockfall had collapsed a wall of stone. Beyond it they found a system of minor caverns: no large chambers, but tunnels large enough for getting about.

"These are mines, Commander," said Ketil, his fingers running over the chipped stones. "Ancient mines. I guess they dug for iron here. Probably this was originally worked out of Kal'Hirol. The humans didn't know the dwarves were here, and the dwarves didn't know... or at least didn't care... about the humans. When Kal'Hirol fell, these tunnels were left to the darkspawn."

Yes, darkspawn had been here. They found foul black patches of Taint. Bronwyn pointed them out to Nathaniel and his men.

"Don't touch this with your bare hands. It has to be destroyed by fire. If your armor comes in contact with it, wash it with strong liquor."

After a very long walk, Bronwyn sensed darkspawn. Scout stiffened, his ears pricked up. Moments later, a gibbering band of hurlocks rushed at them from a side-tunnel. Nathaniel's bow twanged in Bronwyn's ear before she could turn to face them. Between their archers and their

mages, the darkspawn were down and dead before they could cross blades with them.

There were other dangers: cave-spiders and deepstalkers. Nathaniel's men found the spiders more immediately alarming, but soon learned not to underestimate the nasty little deepstalkers with their clawed hind legs.

"Are these things edible?" a soldier asked, holding up a brace of limp bird-like bodies.

"I've eaten them," Bronwyn replied, "but they're not my favorite."

"Deepstalkers can be tasty," Idunn disagreed. "You need to marinate them in ale for a long time. Then you roast them quick over a really hot fire."

Zevran laughed. "We could have used your cooking tips in Ortan Thaug!"

Anders agreed. "Someday you could write 'THE GREY WARDEN COOKBOOK.' You'd be famous."

The laughter died as the Wardens sensed more darkspawn at a distance. Wherever they were going, it must be the right direction. They stopped for food and water, and refilled their lanterns. Then they trudged on, now and then puzzling over the direction. Not often, though. Their path was marked by Taint. Ketil examined the stone walls with a critical air.

"Did you see that layer, Idunn?" he whispered. "Silverite!"

The mining tunnels were opening out here and there. They came to a large cavern with signs of recent darkspawn visitation.

"How close are we?" Nathaniel asked.

Ketil eyed his map. "It's hard to say, my lord. Another hour like this to the mine entrance, but we're bound to hit the mine itself before them. I'd say we'll want to stay sharp."

Bronwyn had paused, and put up a hand. She pointed before her and a little to her left. "Darkspawn that way," she said quietly.

This proved a much larger band than the last: at least twenty mixed hurlocks and genlocks. Two powerful alphas led them, and roared as they charged the Wardens. Nathaniel's men held, but they were not enjoying themselves.

...Until after it was over, and they could congratulate themselves for being genuine darkspawn slayers. Bronwyn called another break, and some of the men talked quietly amongst themselves, with an occasional sharp, nervous laugh. They moved on once more.

The air was changing, becoming better circulated, less stuffy. There was a new smell in it, too; an elusive odor that Bronwyn could not quite catch past the reek of darkspawn. Darkspawn spoor and the relics of ancient mining led them on.

Bronwyn sniffed the air again. She *knew* that smell: musty, fusty, a little like the thousands of gull nests along the Cliffs of Conobar. Something else there, too: blood... and...

Dragons. It smells like the place where the cultists bred their dragons. How can that be?

Clambering up a slope, they found themselves in the mine workings proper.

"This is a rich mine," was the opinion of Ketil. He produced a small rock hammer from his belt and tested a crystal. "And in prime condition. You get some good miners in here, my lord," he said to Nathaniel, "and in no time you'd be bringing in profits from silverite, malachite, and copper. A fine place. I wouldn't mind settling down here myself. There's some lyrium here, too, though your Chantry might go after you if you tried to sell it to anyone but them."

"Very likely," Nathaniel agreed dryly.

Bronwyn put up her hand for silence. The smell of dragon was very strong, and the sensation of darkspawn as well. How could darkspawn breed dragons? And for what purpose?

For the same purpose that the cultists had bred them, of course: to make themselves more powerful from the ingestion of dragon blood. If this Architect were truly intelligent, it might well have learned something about that old lore. This was very alarming. Drinking dragon's blood might account for the very powerful warrior Danith and her party had fallen afoul of. Scout growled softly, at the very edge of hearing.

She whispered. "There might be dragons ahead, or dragon young, at least. They are bigger than mabaris, and vicious. Be on your guard."

Zevran's nostrils dilated as he sniffed. "I, too, smell dragons. After the dragon cultists, I cannot be mistaken."

Nathaniel's men look worried, but they followed her, all the same. As for Nathaniel himself, his grey eyes nar-

rowed in determination.

The tunnel took a sharp turn to the left, toward the dragon stench. Being attacked from behind by dragons would be an extremely bad situation. Better to face them now. Ahead was more light: a lot more.

Beyond the sharp turn, someone had dug through a masonry wall, leaving a large hole. Bronwyn stepped through it onto a splendid high gallery. Below her was a vast chamber. The ceiling was almost lost in shadows, but the lighting hinted that it was magnificent, vaulted and carved in low relief. Above her head were decorative window embrasures, admitting patterns on slanting sunlight into the space. Traces of paint remained, and exquisite old lamps hung on long chains. This did not look like dwarven construction, but like Tevinter work. In fact, it resembled some of the ancient halls of Fort Drakon. Perhaps the mine had first been delved in Tevinter days. A small spiral staircase at the side led down to the main floor.

"Stay up here with the archers, Nathaniel," Bronwyn murmured. "You'll have a clear vantage. Cathair, you too. I think something unpleasant is close by. At least it can't be a High Dragon. We'd see it by now."

Deep in the shadows, there was a ominous rumble. "When it shows itself," Bronwyn whispered to Anders and Morrigan. "We'll hit it with some bombs. Then freeze it. Do everything you can to immobilize it or slow it down."

A shadow unfurled itself from the rest, and glided



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to the floor. A dragon, young and active. It glared at them, stretched its long, long neck, and then uttered a bellowing challenge. Nathaniel ordered the archers to loose, and in seconds the dragon was feathered with poisoned shafts. It shuddered and clawed at itself, trying to dislodge them. Aveline, Carver, and Toliver, who had the best throwing arms, threw Dworkin's blasting grenades at the creature's feet. Three quick flashes and explosions sounded almost as one. The dragon flinched, screaming, its hide perforated and its muzzle bloody. Working in brilliant concert, Anders and Morrigan ran out and caught the creature in with intersecting arcs of frigid air. The dragon halted, temporarily turned to ice.

"Stop shooting!" Nathaniel ordered. "We don't want to hit the Wardens!"

"Follow me!" Bronwyn shouted. A rush and a scramble. There was not a moment to lose. Within moments the dragon would shake off the hex, and lash out fiercely. They knew to go for the vulnerable spots: joints, eyes, mouth, the softer hide under the legs and behind the wings; the wings themselves. Carver's greatsword tore through a wingsail, grounding the beast permanently. Ketil's axe hacked at the tendons of a hind leg, crippling it. Scout darted in front, distracting the dragon's attention so completely that it had no idea which enemy to fight first. They were doing well – really well; right up to the time the second dragon alighted behind them. In the noise of



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battle, Bronwyn did not hear Nathaniel's cry of warning.

She heard the roar, though, and looked over her shoulder, into the other dragon's menacing stare. It snapped at her, and she cuffed at it with the hilt of her sword. Morrigan saw it, wide-eyed, and shot a paralysis spell at it, which the dragon shrugged off.

Nathaniel ordered the archers to follow him. The only way they could be of further use was to shoot at close range. They rushed forward, bows drawn. Nathaniel put an arrow in the dragon's eye. It screeched, and turned his way, inhaling deep to roast these foolish upstarts.

"Oh, no, you will *not* ignore me!" Bronwyn muttered. Dancing in front of the dragon, she grabbed at its neck with her arm, and stabbed it in the throat with her dagger, twisting the blade. The dragon flapped its wings, knocking her aside like a toy. It withdrew with a hoarse squawk to the ceiling. The archers tracked it even after it was no longer visible. Nathaniel loosed an arrow and smiled grimly at the answering squeal.

"Finish this one!" Aveline bellowed, stabbing at the first, wounded beast. "Finish it!"

Before they could manage the killing blow, the other dragon dropped down on them again, spewing flame.

The injuries would have been worse without helmets. Scout squealed, his fur sizzling. Morrigan was burned, too, and instantly shape-shifted to a hawk. She took wing, creeling, seeking the safety of the vaulting. The dragon hesitated,

intrigued by the flying prey, but also eager to avenge its nestmate, now in its last throes. It shot an inaccurate, half-hearted blast of fire in Morrigan's general direction, and then its head swiveled to confront the warriors before it. The hole Bronwyn had dug in its neck glistened wetly.

Morrigan alighted on the high gallery and resumed human form, casting a constricting hex at the dragon that slowed and weakened it. It shrieked its outrage, the noise echoing from the stones. While its head was up and its wing out, trembling for balance, Bronwyn vaulted over its shoulder, and leaped onto its back as she would a horse's, wrapping her legs around the neck and hacking at it with her blades. Morrigan ran down the spiral staircase, waving her staff, utterly appalled.

"Bronwyn, are you crazy?" Idunn bawled out. Scout barked wildly.

The dragon, torn with pain, gathered itself and its wings beat down, knocking Carver to his knees. Even with the added weight, it managed to get airborne. Enraged, sluggish, it sought to free itself from its burden, but Bronwyn clung on, digging her dagger in for stability, while she sawed at the neck. It was an awkward angle, and she longed for one of the clever dragon-hunting spears she had commissioned from Master Wade. Never again would she leave Denerim without one!

It was wild, delirious, *thrilling* to fly through the air, looking down at her friends below; soaring up within

feet of the ceiling. The dragon veered close to the wall, trying to scrape her off, but flinched away when Bronwyn stabbed it again, this time on the other side of the neck. For a moment, Bronwyn imagined what it must have been like to be a Warden of old, mounted on the back of a griffon, flying to meet its mortal enemy in midair.

Nathaniel gritted his teeth, his bow tense in his hands, shaft still on the string. He dared not loose the arrow, and like everyone else on the floor, he watched Bronwyn's mad dragon ride with in wretched suspense. The creature was weakening, but if it fell, it would injure or possibly kill Bronwyn with it. At last, it squalled horribly, with impotent, sluggish flappings. It skimmed along the wall and then scabbled with its claws at an overhang. With a curious whine, it slowed and then convulsed. Bronwyn's legs lost their grip. She dropped her sword and clung to the bloody neck with both arms, while the rest of the party scrambled out of its way as the sword clanged on the floor. A last feeble downbeat, and the dragon came to rest on the gallery where she had entered. Bronwyn rolled away, groping for her belt knife. The dragon raised its head for one last protest and then collapsed, dead.

A ragged cheer rose from the chamber floor. Bronwyn was still frozen with shock, hand clutching the hilt of her knife. The dragon lay still, with her dagger sticking out of its neck. Still dazed from the sensation of flying through the air, she cautiously groped for the dagger, hardly

aware when her friends rushed up the little staircase to see to her. Scout squirmed through the press and nearly knocked her down.

"Let me through!" Anders shouted. "I'm a Healer!"

Morrigan reached her next, however, and grabbed her by the shoulders. She gave her a furious shake, and then stalked away.

"Madness! Absolute madness!"

But the rest were laughing and cheering, patting her on the back, giving her hugs. In the shoving and crowding, Nathaniel found himself in front of her, and instinctively took her in his arms. It was a brief embrace, for all the other Wardens were grabbing at her, hauling her away, while Anders shouted at them to give him room.

"I'm fine!" Bronwyn insisted. "Oh, poor Scout! Anders! heal those burns!"

It took more than a few minutes for the shock and elation of killing two dragons to die down. Actually, she felt very well. Her cuts and bruises were already healing, and she was not in the least tired. Bronwyn had everyone eat something, walked around the dragons to admire their size, retrieved and cleaned her weapons, and tried to decide which way to go. A quick glance down the corridors told them that one was a small door that led outside to the Wending Wood. It was a back door, of sorts, shrouded by vines. Knowing about both this and the Deep Roads entrance gave her some confidence that the Architect

would not easily slip away from her. The other corridor led down, toward the darkspawn she could faintly sense. That decision made, she ordered them to get moving. She hoped Loghain was moving into position by now, but it was as important as ever to find the Architect.

Loghain traveled with the vanguard. The Wardens were with him, along with Uldred and the three mages he had chosen to serve in the three companies of Maric's Shield that were participating in the action. Fergus had been upset at Loghain's insistence that he stay in the capital, but they could not strip Denerim of all its defenses. His job was to guard Anora and make certain that no foreign assassins staged another surprise. By now the Empress must know that her attacks had failed. She very likely had heard that Bronwyn and Loghain planned to marry, and she would understand instantly what that meant. No, someone reliable must stay in Denerim with a strong force.

Loghain hoped that Bronwyn had found her way through the dark of the Deep Roads to join him, but whether she had or not, he was going through this mine from end to end. He would prefer to catch and kill the Architect. However, he might have to settle for destroying his base and his supporters.

"So this is the Pilgrim's Path," said Quinn. "It's famous, innit?"

Maeve gave him an absent nod, watching the trees on either side of the road. "It's the most heavily traveled road



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in Ferelden. That's one of the reasons why it's got to be made safe as quickly as possible."

Ordinarily Danith hated asking questions, feeling it diminished her dignity. However, these were friends.

"How did it get its name, this Pilgrim's Path?"

"The Chantry says," Maeve told her, "that this is the way Andraste marched from Denerim to take ship when she and Maferath invaded the Tevinter Imperium. It was on the current site of the Chantry of Our Lady Redeemer in the city of Amaranthine that Andraste first revealed the Chant of Light to the world. Then she sailed across the Waking Sea, and swept the Imperium with fire and sword."

Danith certainly could not argue with anyone who fought the Tevinters. The Tevinters were the worst of all shemlen: even worse than the Chantry and their Templars that had conquered the Dales. The Tevinters had destroyed Arlathan; they had destroyed the culture of the elvhen. To this day the elves had recovered only fragments. It was also well known among the Dalish that the woman Andraste had had at least one close elven friend: the hero Thane Shartan. Andraste had not founded the Chantry after all. That had been done long after her death, by others making use of her name and deeds. Danith knew for a fact that Bronwyn and many of her fellow nobles were no great friends of the priest-folk.

"Warden!" called Loghain. "Is this the place where you were attacked?"



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"Near here, Teyrn Loghain. A little past that next curve in the road, and uphill a bit. We shall soon be there."

"As soon as you sense darkspawn," Loghain said, with a grim smile, "we'll set about giving them a surprise."



Down Bronwyn went: along magnificent staircases, only a little defaced by time; down elegant Tevinter corridors, complete with elaborately carved pillars and fine stonework; through yet more splendid bronze-and-lyrium double doors. Bronwyn sensed darkspawn ever more strongly.

A side door admitted them into a bedchamber.

"Don't touch anything if you are not a Warden!" Bronwyn hissed. "it's all Tainted."

"Was the man who lived here killed by darkspawn, do you suppose?" Carver asked.

Morrigan chuckled darkly. "Not at all. 'Tis clear that this room is *inhabited* by a darkspawn. Who then, but our mysterious friend the Architect himself?"

"She's right," Bronwyn said, studying a piece of parchment. Written on it were instructions to someone named Utha: a dwarven name.

Utha —

I know this has tested your patience. You first gave your blood years ago to further our common dream. I know at times it seems we're going nowhere. Trust me, Utha, I echo your frustration. The Blight has been a setback, but it will not last forever. I intend to keep my promise to you.



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Perhaps you should venture above ground. The greenery and fresh air would do your spirit good.

This was horrible. The Architect had supporters, and not just among the darkspawn. Who was this Utha? One of the Wardens who had traveled with Fiona and Duncan?

Nathaniel was repulsed. "A darkspawn that sleeps in a bed?" he asked, pointed to that large and grubby furnishing.

"Maybe," suggested Anders, "He likes to pretend he's not really a darkspawn."

There was quite a bit in the Architect's quarters to ponder. It was very neatly kept. Three tall bookcases contained works on magic, history, geography, and healing. Poetry and novels lay in a stack on a little table. A bottle of fine Antivan wine and a pewter mug had been left by an open volume of *THE DRAGONS OF TEVINTER*. By the bed was a little wooden horse on wheels. Bronwyn wondered if her head would explode before she vomited, or vice versa.

Neither, thankfully. She kept her countenance.

"Come on. Let's go."

They climbed through a hole in the rocks, and abruptly found themselves in the mining tunnels again. These were unoccupied, but Bronwyn sensed darkspawn beyond another set of double doors.

"Beyond these doors," she whispered. "I feel it strongly. Based on the placement, I believe the next chamber is large. Nathaniel: it would be best that your archers position themselves just inside the door. It will give the rest of



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us room to fight whatever is next."

A drake flamed at them as they entered the chamber. Beside him a powerful darkspawn mage cast nauseating hexes. For a moment Bronwyn thought they had found the Architect, but this was a strong but ordinary genlock emissary and his supporting minions. No words were exchanged.

Having only vestigial wings, the drake could not escape into the air, and the cavern ceiling was too low to permit flight, anyway. Once immobilized, it was not that hard to hack the drake to pieces. The mages concentrated on the genlock emissary, and after a few exchanges, it was down. Looking around after the fight was over, it was clear that they were back in the mines. Ketil scraped something shiny from the wall, and raised his brows, impressed.

Further on, they were drawn by the distinctive cries of dragons. They bore to the right, and were confronted by a powerful darkspawn wielding a maul. Dragonlings scampered past him, rushing at the Wardens.

"I'd say we've found the nest!" Bronwyn called to Nathaniel.

The big hurlock was dangerous. So too were the aggressive, squeaking young. Bringing up the rear was a furious drake, ready to defend his nest. Everyone ducked the first blast of dragonfire. Morrigan slipped past the maul's deadly arc, and managed to freeze the drake. Idunn was not so lucky, and was struck a glancing blow that knocked her against the wall, winded and bruised. The archers moved in and shot the dragonlings at close range.



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Dying hard, the hurlock lost his maul and resorted to grabbing at his enemies, trying to bite them with savage brown teeth. Even with a cracked skull, he fought on. A pair of dragonlings, seeing him down, rushed to him with piteous squeals. The Wardens turned on them, chopping, chopping, until they stopped moving. The drake, helpless and spellbound, was beheaded very messily.

At the back of the cavern were the nests: heaps of straw. One had eggs in it. Bronwyn put her hand on one, and then flinched away as she felt movement within. Carver pulled her away as Ketil's axe crashed down, killing the embryo. The dwarf kept hacking, shattering eggshell and splashing viscous fluid on them all. For some reason, Bronwyn found the sight of the unhatched dragons disturbing – infants who would never know the world – and walked away from the triumphant shouts.

"Enough of this," she said, pulling at her friends. "No, really. Let's go. We still have the Architect to find."

Nathaniel called his men to order. Two of them had been badly burned, and Anders was busy healing them. The burns would scar, but not enough to cripple them.

The tunnels forked again. It was impossible to guess which was the best choice, since Bronwyn sensed darkspawn in both directions.

"Which way?" wondered Nathaniel.

It was essentially a coin toss. "We'll go through those impressive doors," said Bronwyn, "but we can't risk an attack



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from the rear or the Architect escaping. Nathaniel, stay here with your men and keep watch. I think that the way we came through was the only way to the Deep Roads, but we can't be sure. We'll leave the doors open behind us. If we come across something that's too much for us –" she gestured to the dragon horn on her belt – "I'll sound the call."

Nathaniel disliked the idea of staying behind, but the fork in the tunnel was worrying. He agreed, rather than fight about it. Bronwyn smiled, and touched his arm, and then led the Wardens through the doors.

They were abruptly back in ancient Tevinter work: finely fitted stone and the remains of polished floors. The lighting was of dwarven design, and excellent. At a turn they found a place where the wall seemed to be deteriorating.

"There's a false wall here," Zevran said. Bronwyn, concerned about yet another hidden exit, had her people pull out the masonry so she could see what lay behind it. Afterwards she wished she had not.

They peered in to see bones. Something had died here, walled in. Part of the remaining inside wall were scarred by repeated, futile blows by a broken dagger. A misshapen human skeleton was propped up against the wall.

"It had two heads," Anders said. "Lovely."

For some reason, a treasure chest had been walled in with the wretched creature. Golden cups and bowls of antique make, fine jewels, and faded manuscripts were heaped there. It was all very much worth taking with them.

"This is a mystery that antedates the Architect," said Bronwyn. "We have no time to unravel it now. I sense more darkspawn this way."

"Take the Wardens!"

The hoarse shout came from a big hurlock in the van of the darkspawn. A group of them poured out of the front entrance to the mine. The huge and heavy doors stood wide open. An ogre emerged over the threshold, massive horned head down, tiny eyes blinking at the sunlight.

Maeve danced and waved, while Niall grinned and tossed a rock at them. Danith thought the mage threw like a little girl, and tossed a better-aimed rock herself.

"Obey me, the Seeker!" the darkspawn urged his minions. "Take them, and do not kill!"

"Oi!" yelled Quinn. "You! You there, big and stupid! Come on and get us!"

With an indignant snort, the ogre thundered past, pounding up the path to the Wardens on the hill. Squawking genlocks and hurlocks swarmed after him.

"No! No!" bellowed the Seeker. "Do not kill! The Architect wants them alive!"

Distracted by the Wardens, the darkspawn never noticed the soldiers who slipped through the underbrush from the sides. The doors were open and would stay open.

And then the archers stood up from cover.

"Loose!" roared Loghain.

Only the ogre and the Seeker survived that volley. The Ogre was caught in Niall's ice spell and turned into a porcupine. A hammer-like blow of energy struck full on and the ogre blew apart.

Uldred, more subtle and even more powerful, targeted the Seeker, catching it in a web of magical energy that slowly constricted, choking the creature. The other mages joined in. The Seeker briefly broke free, but was caught again, and was miserably, magically suffocated. He crumpled to his knees and then fell on his face. A final desperate tremor, and the Seeker lay dead.

"Don't touch the creatures!" Loghain ordered. "First company, secure the doors. Wardens, with me!"

The next set of doors Bronwyn went through led to a large chamber in which a grand staircase was blocked by an enormous tangle of tree roots. A handful of darkspawn burst out of a side tunnel, and the fight was on. The room was large, but the number of combatants made for close work. They were nothing beyond the norm, and were down in short order.

A voice, mellifluous as thick, dark oil, sounded above their heads. By the stone rail of the vine-choked staircase, a creature eyed them with serene curiosity.

"So you are the commander of the Grey Wardens."

This then, must be the Architect: more human-like than any darkspawn they had ever before seen, yet bizarrely

attenuated. His body was long and scrawny; his arms sinewy and tipped with claws. Across his face was a mask-like headdress of gold and lyrium. His clothing was at once fanciful and ragged, with tall open work pauldrons of stiff metal ribbons. Rib-like bands protected his chest.

Behind him was a dwarven female: a warrior, and long-tainted, from her glazed eyes and dark-blotched skin. She drew her sword, and fell into a fighting crouch without a word.

"No, Utha," the Architect murmured. "That is not how this must begin."

The Architect opened his arms wide, and floated down to them. It was an impressive display of magic. Scout whined and backed away a little. Bronwyn had heard that the Architect was a powerful darkspawn emissary. It made him a far more dangerous opponent.

"I sent my disciple to contact your people in order to begin a useful dialogue and to seek your help. I should have anticipated that you would perceive this as an attack. I am rarely able to judge how your kind will react. It is most unfortunate."

"Help?" Bronwyn repeated, baffled and alarmed. "What do you mean?"

"My kind has ever been driven to seek out the Old Gods. This is our nature. When we find one, a Blight begins. We do not attack you because we crave power and destruction. We obey the call of the Old Gods, without choice. Each time we attack your surface lands, and you fight

back until we are defeated. Hundreds of thousands of my brethren are slain. To break this cycle, my brethren must be freed of this compulsion. For this, I need Grey Warden blood. Things have not gone as I planned. I only wish that you hear me out. Should you still wish to slay me afterwards, you may try."

"How would Grey Warden blood help free the darkspawn?"

"In order to become what you are, you drink the blood of my kind – to transform. Similarly, we must transform. I have created a version of your Joining that uses the blood of Grey Wardens. You take the Taint into yourself. What we take is your resistance. That is how my brethren are freed. In your blood lies the key to their immunity to the call of the Old Gods."

Anders remarked, "I like my blood where it is. In my veins."

Aveline shot back, "If we could stop the Blights, wouldn't a little blood be worth it?"

Bronwyn suspected there was far more to the story than this. Clearly, this creature could not be trusted. The dwarven woman, Utha, had joined them, coming down through the side tunnel. She had not sheathed her sword, and watched them intently with her filmy eyes.

Warily, Bronwyn asked, "And how do the darkspawn change afterward?"

"Once they are freed, the darkspawn think for themselves. They speak; they act."

Idunn burst out, "That doesn't make me feel any safer!"



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Why would *smart* darkspawn be a good thing? You think we'd all be *friends*? They'd likely still want to claim the Deep Roads for themselves! Let's kill this creature before it makes more like itself!"

"Are you crazy?" countered Toliver. "We can't pass up the opportunity to have an ally among the darkspawn!"

"An ally?" Bronwyn wondered. She was inclined to agree with Idunn. Would it be possible to ally with a darkspawn in any real sense? Ending the Blights would be a great thing. Allowing intelligent darkspawn to multiply – creatures who might swarm up onto the surface for reasons of their own – that did not seem like a wise choice. And it would further endanger the dwarves, their long-time allies. "Would you aid us against the Archdemon?"

"No, but when the Blight is over, I will urge my kind to go far below, and no longer trouble the surface. I will go with them, and continue my work. I do not seek to rule my brethren. I only seek to release them from their chains."

"And how did *you* become free?" asked Carver.

"I was born as I am, an outsider amongst my kind. Why? I do not know. Why do some of your kind become Grey Wardens?" Why do some of you possess magic? I have no answers."

Bronwyn thought it likely that it really did not. That did not exactly inspire confidence. The creature said it did not wish to rule its kind. It spoke of urging them to go below. Presumably, it could not promise obedience. What was to prevent the darkspawn from staying on the surface,



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spreading Blight disease, tainting the landscape?

She said, "I find the idea of giving my blood for this purpose perverse and revolting."

The Architect was only mildly surprised. "Why? I had thought it was no different than your order's use of darkspawn blood in your Joinings. We both do what we must in response to the Blight. The first blood came from Utha, freely given."

Silently, the dwarven woman made a formal bow.

The Architect said, "She was a Grey Warden, as you are, and joined us many years ago. Will you accept me as an ally?"

Anders broke in, "What if he's wrong? What if this doesn't stop the Blight, but makes everything worse?"

"This could change the world," Aveline breathed. "A world without Blights? Think of the lives saved."

"You are a fool," sneered Morrigan. "Why should we believe anything this creature says? This ghoul," she gestured at Utha, "might have allied with him, but others did not, and most were slain at his orders. And ask him how he proposes to make more 'of his kind?' Will he next expect a regular tribute of females to swell his numbers? A regular harvest of Warden blood?"

"The witch is right," Ketil grunted. "This thing promises to get rid of your Blights. Maybe he can and maybe he can't. He certainly can't end the Blight we're in now. Anyway, getting rid of the Blights is fine and dandy for you surfacers, but it means shit to us dwarves. We've stood with you against your troubles: it's only fair that you stand

with the dwarves against ours. I say kill him now."

Bronwyn paused, really and truly on the horns of a dilemma. Ending the Blights would be a glorious gift to all Thedas – at least on the surface – but could this creature actually achieve that? And the dwarves' position must be considered. And then, based on Fiona's conjectures...

"It is curious," Bronwyn said slowly. "Very curious... that twenty years after you obtained the location of the Old Gods, we have a Blight. Did it take that long to dig through to Urthemiel? And why Urthemiel, anyway? You won't deny, will you, that you located the Old God?"

"Urthemiel was the most accessible," said the Architect, perfectly calm. "I sought only to free the Old God, but it reacted... poorly."

Morrigan looked smug. "You mean," she said, sharp and shrewish, "that in your bumbling you or one of your minions touched it and thus Tainted it? And then, oh, dear, dear... you had an Archdemon on your hands."

Carver shook his head. There were different reactions around the room. Zevran's hands had never left his weapons. Bronwyn had already made her decision, but she explained it, not for the Architect's benefit, but to help her people understand and support her.

"And I daresay you will try again, hoping for a better outcome," she said. "I think you've done quite enough. I don't think you can really deliver on your promise to end the Blights, because I see no way you could actually dose all the darkspawn in Thedas with Grey Warden blood. Is there

even enough Grey Warden blood to do it? I don't know how many darkspawn there are. The dwarves, too, have right on their side. How do we know that that thinking darkspawn would no longer be their enemies and rivals for the Deep Roads? And then there is your history of impractical, unacceptable plans: what became of turning all humans, elves, and dwarves, into Wardens? We know that was impossible. I suspect your idea of dosing all darkspawn is likewise absurd. So... no. I think the time for talk is at an end."

The Architect opened his mouth to speak, but with a triumphant shout, Morrigan cast her strongest freezing curse at him. Cathair, too, had been ready, and shot a poisoned arrow into the Architect's unprotected throat. Others threw themselves into combat, focused on downing this extraordinarily dangerous opponent. Scout moved at the same moment Bronwyn did: head down, teeth bared.

But the Architect was ready, too. Only frozen for a few seconds, he broke free and lashed out instantly, with a firestorm that left them singed and gasping. Bronwyn's mages fought fire with ice. The cold patches gave the warriors a path of attack, and a way to cool the magical burns. The dwarf Utha fell on them with her longsword, knocking Toliver down.

"Carver!" Bronwyn shouted. "You and Aveline deal with that ghoul!"

Cathair had already shot an arrow in that direction. Utha yanked the shaft from her jaw, oblivious to pain. Bronwyn had too much to do at the moment to follow



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that fight. Her sword was slathered with the vilest poisons brewed in the Ostagar workshop. While Anders' curse distracted the Architect, Bronwyn lunged at him.

The Architect flung up his arms, and a blast of magical energy scattered his enemies like dry straw. Some struck the stone walls head first. Even the thickest helmet could not cushion the impact completely. Scout, lower to the ground, missed most of the blast, and skidded into a corner, fairly unharmed. Bronwyn hit the stones so hard she saw stars. The Architect was gathering up for another spell. Bronwyn limped toward him, sword raised, when the creature's casting was interrupted by Zevran's thrown dagger in his face. The Architect plucked it out and dropped it, resuming its chanting.

There was a scuffle behind her. With any luck, Utha was down.

Anders, wiping blood from a split lip, raised his staff to cast. The Architect instantly paralyzed him. Furious, Bronwyn lunged again, plunging her sword into the Architect's belly. Whether it was the substance of the robes or the Architect's unnaturally tough hide, there was real resistance before the point penetrated. Bronwyn was knocked down again, her sword still stuck in the Architect.

It was a grueling fight. Some of her people were still unconscious or worse, and Architect was a fast and powerful spellcaster. He used the blasting hex again — though it was less powerful this time — and Bronwyn staggered back, feeling as if she had been hit by a hammer. The Architect still



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had her sword, so she stumbled forward, determined to get it back. Morrigan, her energy flagging, tried to freeze the Architect again. It gave Bronwyn just enough time to grab her sword hilt. Instead of pulling, she pushed with all her strength, screaming in the Architect's face. With a horrible scrape, the point emerged from the creature's back.

The Architect howled, his voice so longer languid and compelling. It was a dreadful sustained roar that pressed like cruel fingers at her ear bones. Bronwyn screamed again and sawed at him with the Keening Blade, only pausing when she was caught briefly in the wash of a paralysis hex. It was growing noisy in the chamber. People were crowding her. Scout had the Architect's wrist, worrying it like a favorite toy. Nathaniel had unaccountably appeared, and was trying to coax Bronwyn to pull out her sword. Bronwyn realized that the Architect's roaring had stopped. When the paralysis hex dissipated, the Architect fell to the floor, blood gushing from his gutted belly. Bronwyn looked around, puzzled. Morrigan was slumped against the wall, pale with exhaustion. Anders was tottering between injured soldiers, trying to heal what he could. Who had cast that paralysis hex? Oh, here were Danith and her people.

"Hold still, Bronwyn," Niall said softly, sounding like he was underwater. "Those burns must hurt." Cool blue light washed over her in a soothing ripple. Was she burned?

Bronwyn looked at Niall in surprise, not expecting him to be here. Everyone was, though. Nathaniel was talking



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to Carver, who seemed to have lost his eyebrows. Now Nathaniel turned to her.

"I thought you were going to call me if you needed help!"

"Er..." She swayed. It was very difficult to speak. "I guess we were caught up in the moment. Hello, Maeve. Wait til you see the dragons!"

Scout was whimpering nearby. Niall should have a look at him. And there was Uldred, looking very smug. Someone was pulling Bronwyn away from Niall's grasp into his own.

It was Loghain. Bronwyn had a little trouble focusing on him, but she was pretty sure from the light blue eyes looking her over that it was Loghain. That and the big hands gripping her upper arms.

Bronwyn tried to smile, but her mouth hurt. "We won," she croaked. "Did you see the dragons? I rode one of them. It went up really high!"

Loghain's voice was slow and slurred. Or was there something wrong with her hearing?

"What's the matter with her? Did she crack her skull?"

Niall had her helmet off, and was feeling her head. "Not fractured, but she got hit pretty hard." Another healing spell, and his voice began to sound normal. "You're going to need some rest," Niall said to her. He turned to Loghain, and said, "She shouldn't ride back to Denerim. Have her rest in one of the wagons."

"Did you take care of Scout?" she managed to ask. "Is he all right?"



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"He's fine, Bronwyn," Niall assured her. "I already healed him. He'll just have some strange hairless patches for awhile."

"She really did ride that dragon," Carver told everyone, adrenaline still pumping. "All the way up to the ceiling! You should have seen it!"

"I did see it," Nathaniel said, rather testily. "I was *there*."

"How did you get here?" Bronwyn asked Loghain. "Where—"

"We came through the front door," Loghain said briefly, reaching down to pat Scout. "We met up with Howe and his men, and then followed the dead darkspawn."

Nathaniel added, "The other tunnel at the fork led to the surface."

"Ah," Bronwyn nodded, trying to picture it. She supposed she could. Danith was offering her canteen to Idunn. Bronwyn waved at her wearily.

"Glad to see you all safe and accounted for!"

Danith gave her a brisk nod.

"We swept the woods for darkspawn. We killed many, including the speaking one called the Seeker."

"Well done."

Maeve and Quinn were helping Ketil with his armor. Some of the straps had snapped, and it was hanging on him crazily. Cathair was trying to retrieve his arrows. Or any usable arrows.

Anders reeked of lyrium already, but he downed another flask. Giving Bronwyn a manic grin, he said, "How about a nice rejuvenation spell?"

"Yes, please," Bronwyn said. "I'm not done here."

Zevran was burned too, and was lying down, eyes shut. Toliver was bleeding and looked distraught. He was holding Aveline's hand. Furiously, he snarled up at Bronwyn, "We shouldn't have fought him! We should have taken his deal!"

Aveline was unconscious. Two of the army mages were working on her. From what Bronwyn could gather, her skull was fractured and she had a spinal injury as well. There was more to be done for her before the mages felt she could even be safely loaded into the wagon.

Bronwyn put her hand on Toliver's shoulder. "We were never going to take his deal. He was a liar."

"Deal?" Nathaniel asked. "What deal?"

"My lords!" shouted a soldier from the doorway. "We found two dead dragons in a big chamber!"

"Yes, I know," Bronwyn said, feeling better by the minute. "We did that. We'll want to harvest them."

"One of them's the dragon Bronwyn rode!" Carver repeated, grinning, unable to get it out of his head. "It was so neat!"

Loghain and Nathaniel rolled their eyes at each other.

"Really?" Loghain asked Nathaniel in an undertone.

"Really. I thought every moment she was going to fall to her death."

Loghain shook his head, trying not to dwell on the image. To change the subject, he gestured at Utha's mangled body.

"Who's that?"

"Her name was Utha," Bronwyn told him. "A renegade..."

she whispered in his ear. "...Warden. Don't you recognize her? She was in Maric's party."

Loghain grimaced. "Time... and the Taint have not been kind to her."

"Commander?" Ketil leaned out of the side tunnel. "You'll want to have a look up here."

"This is a prison," Nathaniel whispered. "That *thing* kept prisoners there."

This place smelled of Taint, death, and decay. There were a number of cells. In one they found the remains of what had been a dwarf. In another, they found... Griffith, one of Tara's Wardens.

Carver hissed. "That's him! I know it is!" He turned shocked eyes to Bronwyn. "Were they attacked? How did he end up here?"

This was terribly alarming. Bronwyn had absolutely no idea how a Warden scouting West Hill had ended up in a darkspawn cell in Amaranthine. "Get Anders."

With a little time to recover, Anders was not quite so high on lyrium when Bronwyn asked him to have a look at the body, and see if he could determine how long Griffith had been dead. The condition of his naked body bespoke horrible suffering.

Anders' cheerful mood vanished.

"He hasn't been dead more than two days, but he was drained nearly dry of blood, Bronwyn."



THE DISUSED SILVERITE MINE



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"One of your Wardens?" Nathaniel asked.

"Yes. One of the newest. He was scouting west of here. I'll have to send a courier to West Hill and see if the rest of the party made it there safely." Thinking a little longer, she said, "Anders. Go get Toliver. I want him to see what the Architect really had in mind for us."

She could not tell them every detail, but Loghain would plague her until she gave him something, and Nathaniel had stood by her.

"The Architect must have realized he was trapped. He tried to talk his way out of it by offering us a grand promise to end all Blights – or at least the Blights after this one – if we'd let him go. Except even that wasn't enough. He wanted to do blood magic using Grey Wardens in order to create more talking darkspawn."

"How did he come to be... intelligent?" Nathaniel asked.

"He claimed to have no idea. A pity we couldn't question him longer, but he was a liar, and just too dangerous." Bronwyn's head was clearing, and it was time to take charge. "Hear me! If you are not a Grey Warden, do not touch the bodies or the artifacts in these rooms. They are Tainted. We will take charge of them and uncover the secrets."

"We heard a darkspawn talk!" yelled one voice from behind a knot of soldiers.

"Yes, you did!" Bronwyn said calmly. "That creature downstairs called itself the Architect. It claimed not to know why it was different from other darkspawn. It was



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trying to teach other darkspawn to speak and think. But it's dead, and so are its disciples."

Further exploration discovered a workroom near the cells, filled with notebooks and incomprehensible equipment. There was a large metal tank that contained preserved blood. Morrigan said it was human blood.

"Do not ask me how I know. I just do."

Actually, it was part workroom, part torture chamber. A bloody rack was placed near a neatly kept writing desk. On the rack was a flayed human body. Or at least they thought it was human. It was quite unrecognizable. A notebook kept track of events in an eccentric but legible hand.

Anders picked it up and glanced through it. He paled.

"This is bad, Bronwyn," he said softly. Bronwyn took the notebook from him and read:

...The Seeker has collected two Grey Warden specimens, both male and human. They exhibit fear and anger and claim that they have left the Grey Wardens, and are thus no longer what we want. One has promised to lead us to a large group of Wardens, including females, if I will release them. Curious. I will question him further before moving on to the tests.

...One of the Wardens is accommodating, allowing me to take his blood for my work. Perhaps he thinks I'll release him if he cooperates.

...What happens if the Old Gods perish? Does the song die with them?

...My Disciple Acolyte reports that a large party, including



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Wardens passed through the Wending Woods today. Some of the Wardens were female. I shall have them keep watch in future, with orders to capture the Wardens if the party is under four in number.

...Unfortunate. The second Warden has died under questioning. I cannot always predict how hardy the specimens are. Perhaps I pressed him too hard. However, I have a general idea where the female Grey Wardens are. I will lead the Seeker and the Disciple Acolyte there. It would be interesting to see what a thinking Grey Warden Mother could contribute to our cause...

...The blood is the key. The blood is always the key.

Bronwyn thought she was going to vomit. At least she had something she could read aloud to her people, just in case they complained about not making friends with the Architect.

"Well, gentlemen," she said to Loghain and Nathaniel, with a forced smile. "We now know what the Architect really wanted. A female Warden. Perhaps Utha was too old." When they did not quite understand her, she explained. "In order to reproduce his kind. That's what darkspawn do. They steal women of all races. Apparently, the Architect thought a talking Warden Broodmother would be particularly useful." Briefly, for Nathaniel's benefit, she recounted what she had seen in the Dead Trenches. The soldiers overhearing her — above all the women — were properly horrified.

But they were impressed, too. Bronwyn could hear them talking about her; about killing two dragons; about standing toe-to-toe with a talking darkspawn mage that seemed to the



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soldiers the personification of an ancient magister. Some of the Wardens joined in; telling their own tall tales.

Not everyone cared to gossip, of course. Morrigan, her hands carefully gloved, pawed through a stack of books. Some of them were ancient manuscripts, some were printed. One in particular caught Anders' eye.

"PHYLACTERIES: A HISTORY WRITTEN IN BLOOD.' Isn't that the truth?"

On a stand was a dog-eared grimoire, written in Arcanum. Morrigan clearly coveted it. Uldred was edging closer. Bronwyn hoped there wouldn't be a tacky fight over plunder.

"Niall, collect that grimoire please. We'll put all the loo... er, evidence... in a single wagon so that it can be cleaned as far as possible. We have no intention of keeping secrets that do not pertain specifically to the Grey Wardens." She muttered to Morrigan. "We'll probably have to share, but you can have first look, once it's safe."

Morrigan shrugged. "Very well." She possessed a very sharp knife, if she came upon a page or two that she wished to keep to herself.

Loghain steered Bronwyn away from the throng, and tilted her head back, trying to see under the blood and filth. "Are you really all right?"

Bronwyn knew she must look like nothing human. "Considering what a hard day this has been, I really don't feel all that bad."

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CHAPTER 6

OPENING
GAMBITS

DAM HAWKE RETURNED TO DENERIM TWO DAYS BEFORE HIS MOTHER'S WEDDING. In fact, on his way he came upon

his brother at Vigil's Keep. A small party of Wardens had returned to pick up the puppies and report to Varel. Carver was there, and the two brothers had a pleasant reunion. Rather than spending the night at the Keep, Hawke decided to travel with Carver. Besides, their mother's wedding was almost upon them, and Adam had much to discuss with Fergus, with Nathaniel, and with his own family, too.

Carver now had his own mabari, a cute little fellow he had unaccountably named 'Magister.' Adam's own Hunter sniffed approvingly. There was another puppy of the same litter that had not imprinted yet. Still waiting for just the right person, it seemed.

Carver introduced him to his fellow Wardens: a nice looking woman named Maeve and a big and healthy red-haired boy named Quinn. They had been chosen, apparently, because they could ride horses and make better time

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than the others. They told an extraordinary story. They had confronted a talking darkspawn in a big mine in the Wending Wood, and Carver could hardly talk about anything else. The ride was enlivened by Carver's recounting of the adventure, complete with gestures and sound effects.

"And Bronwyn rode a dragon. *Zooom!* She flew! It was the neatest thing ever! You know, since we don't have griffons anymore, maybe we should raise dragons. If darkspawn can train dragons, we can!"

Quinn liked the idea. "The Dragonriders of Thedas! I'm with you. Maybe there's room up at Soldier's Peak for them."

Adam shook his head. "Surely you've heard the rumors that crop up from time to time? The ones about the Grey Wardens worshipping demons in secret, depraved rites? If it got out that the Wardens were raising dragons, they'd have the rest of the world marching on them."

Maeve shot him a cool look. "Maybe so. Maybe if we had *dragons*, we wouldn't care. People are always finding something to criticize, even when the Wardens risk their lives every day for them. I suppose no good deed goes unpunished."

Adam changed the subject to their mother's wedding, and what Carver thought of Arl Bryland. The two of them rode a little ahead of the rest so they could talk privately.

"He's nice," Carver shrugged. "He thinks a lot of Bethany. It'll be strange to have a stepfather, but he's a decent man, and it's not like I'll be living with him. He's got two little boys, and I think he feels he needs help with them. There's that daughter,

too, but she's getting married the day before Mother, and if all goes well for her at the Landsmeet, she and that pretty-boy husband of hers will be moving to the Arl of Denerim's estate."

"I've missed a lot while I was in Amaranthine," Adam said, "I never met the older brother — what's his name — and before I knew it, there was a message that he was killed in a hunting accident and his younger brother was inheriting and marrying Lady Habren Bryland instead. Her head must be spinning with all the different betrothals."

"Mother thinks she really likes this one. His name's Kane. He's all right, I suppose, but nothing much other than being really, really handsome. Bethany and Charade aren't taken in by him, though. They make faces behind his back and pretend to swoon. Mother told them to stop it, since Habren going to be our 'sister.' Step-sister, I always make a point of saying. So I guess this Kane Kendells will be our step-brother-in-law. Oh, and Charade's got a suitor."

"Really! Who?"

"Arl Wulffe's oldest son, Rothgar. He's all right. Charade likes him."

"Does Arl Wulffe know that Charade has no dowry? Or maybe he thinks Arl Bryland will cough up the coin."

"Don't know," Carver said cheerfully, pleased this once to be the younger brother and *not* the head of the family. "Maybe he thinks you will."

Adam blew out a breath. Maybe. A lot of things would be expected of him if he were confirmed as Bann of the City

of Amaranthine. He certainly wasn't rich yet — or not as nobles usually understood it — but he had done well so far.

All it had really taken was determination and a strong sword arm. The smugglers had flourished because that bitch Esmerelle had tacitly supported them. She took a fifth of their profits, and even so they were still making far more than they could if they had been legitimate traders, paying the royal tariff and all the harbor fees. Esmerelle might have scarpared off to the Free Marches with her slaving and smuggling fortune, but Adam had found the smugglers' hideout and their treasure hoard. It had been quite a payday. It was almost a shame he had to put them out of business.

Some of it had to be turned over to the Arl, of course; but the Arl was not there to see the whole of it. Nathaniel Howe's fallen fortunes would be significantly mended by the thousand-odd sovereigns Adam had sent him, along with a load of loot and the smuggler's high-quality ship seized in their sea cave. Adam had skimmed discreetly, but skimmed he had, and he now possessed a nest egg of six hundred sovereigns, along with chests full of jewelry, fine weapons and armor, luxurious furs, rich fabrics, and silk carpets. Some of these things were on his pack horses, to be given to his family.

He felt not the least guilt about it, either. It was easy for those born noble to tut about greed and dishonesty, but they had never wondered where their family's next meal was coming from. Mother would have a fine wedding present from him, and Bethany and Charade would have



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all the pretty clothes and trinkets they wanted. Carver? Maybe something for his room at the Wardens' Compound – an Antivan carpet or a set of silver cups. Carver was a Warden now, and pretty much set for life; but Adam still wanted him to share in his own good fortune. And their new stepsister, Lady Habren, must be given a notable gift, to celebrate her marriage and commemorate the union of their families. The smugglers had found just the thing for her: a double-handled loving cup of silver and rose quartz, designed for two to drink from simultaneously. It was costly and fantastical to the point of vulgarity, but Adam had heard rumors of Lady Habren's temper, and perhaps a rich present would keep her sweet.

So Mother and the girls would *not* be coming to live with him in Amaranthine. Adam felt a bit sorry about that. The City Keep was large and fine, and Esmerelle had been forced to leave most of the furniture. His own bedchamber had a broad balcony draped with long, gauzy curtains. He could step out there and survey the whole city below him.

Better yet, he could walk right up to the roof, where there was a lovely little garden and pleasure ground, and from there look out over the deep blue of the Amaranthine Ocean, right where it blended into the silver of the Waking Sea. He could see Fair Isle and Brandel's Reach stretching out to the north, and on a clear day he could look east, and see Alamar. The air was fresh and clear up there, and at night the stars shone down like a great bowl



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of diamonds. If only Mother could see it!

Probably she and her Arl would be going to South Reach, of course. Maybe, after the Landsmeet, Bethany and Charade could come stay with him. Stay as long as they liked, for that matter. There was plenty of room, and he'd see they had a good time. Winter was coming, but Amaranthine was on the ocean, and the sea breezes so moderated the temperature that it never froze hard there.

First, of course, he had to get through the Landsmeet. Fergus would back him, and Nathaniel Howe was not in any position to oppose him. In fact, it seemed to Adam that he was getting on well with Howe, who was not at all a bad fellow. Now that Mother was marrying Bryland, he could reasonably expect support from that quarter. If Wulffe's son was interested in Charade, the canny old arl would have every reason to support Adam as well.

A teyrn and three arls, all of whom commanded the loyalty of many associated banns. Probably more than enough. Adam did not think that Teyrn Loghain was any great admirer of his – and there was no reason for him to be, since they scarcely knew each other. Bronwyn, however, had been a good friend to the Hawkes, and Bronwyn was now Teyrna of Gwaren.

The new Kendells fellow might not even be voting until later on, but he was being sponsored by Bryland, and so it was unlikely he would oppose his father-in-law. The only wild card was the Arl of Redcliffe, and Adam could think

of no reason at all why the arl of a distant southwestern realm would care about who ruled in Amaranthine.

As far as Adam could see, the only downside to being a bann of Ferelden is that everyone would be hounding him to marry. Adam had no objection to matrimony – in *theory*. His parents had been married and very happy. No one, however, was going to strong-arm him into taking on some chinless, inbred noble wallflower. There was nothing wrong with marrying to one's advantage, but when he did marry, he would uphold the family tradition, and please himself.

Not even the Wardens could believe how quickly they recovered from their injuries. Ordinarily, Anders would have given Aveline little chance of surviving her skull fracture and damaged spine. He certainly would never have expected her to walk and talk within three days. Holding her own in battle would take more time, but Anders and Niall agreed that Aveline was disciplined enough to make it, given proper care. For now, Bronwyn employed her for an hour or two a day as an administrative aide, which gave Aveline new insights into the workings – or not-workings – of the Grey Warden order.

Bronwyn's greatest worry was for Astrid and Tara and the party they had led. She considered sending a group of Wardens to West Hill, but Loghain proposed a simpler solution.

"Frاندarel is here in town, and no doubt has a courier

going back and forth to his estate. Have him take a letter."

So Bronwyn immediately composed a letter to her friends, asking for news, and telling them of finding the body of Griffith and another unidentified Warden in the cells of a darkspawn emissary in Amaranthine. She gave them some background on the Architect, with the consolation that there was no longer anything to fear from the creature.

"...Have this courier bring me a message from you as soon as possible. We can march immediately if you need our assistance..."

There were more letters to be written, as the days went by. Bronwyn wrote to her Grey Warden correspondents in Nevarra and Antiva to tell them that the Architect was dead. After further consideration, Bronwyn finally broke down and wrote to the First Warden. It was a frosty missive.

"The Architect is dead. This might be of some interest to you. I killed him in his hiding place in Amaranthine, which is an arling of Ferelden to the northeast. He had taken refuge in an abandoned mine, and was conducting experiments. His latest notion was to use a female Grey Warden for breeding. He had lately been using Grey Warden blood, originally donated by the Grey Warden Utha, to make darkspawn resistant to the call of the Old God, and thus able to speak and reason. We tracked down these "disciples" and slew them. Before his death, the Architect admitted that it was he who sought out the Old God Urthemiel and inadvertently Tainted it, thus beginning the Blight.

...it is unlikely this will ever cross your desk, as I under-



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stand you are completely controlled by your Orlesian handlers. That would certainly seem evident from the way you have consistently pandered to Orlais in your orders to me to desert Ferelden and leave it to the darkspawn. Perhaps it seems no great matter to you if a country you have never visited is destroyed, and no doubt it would give the Orlesians a great deal of spiteful satisfaction. How sweet it would be to them if a country that threw off their invasion were to fall to inhuman monsters, and how despicable the sort of minds that would find sweetness in something so vile.

That will not stand. I was told by Duncan that Grey Wardens fight the Blight wherever it may be found. It was found here, in Ferelden, and so my comrade Alistair and I saw no point in scampering away like cowards to an enemy nation that has ever worked both in open and in secret against us. Indeed, while we have fought the Blight, attempts have been made on our lives by Orlesian agents. While you may not care to hear it, the struggle against the darkspawn is actually going rather well. Furthermore, the dwarves, mages, and elves have honored their ancient treaties and are working with us to defeat the Blight.

Bronwyn Cousland MacTir

Acting Commander of the Grey in Ferelden.

Aveline raised her brows when she proofread the letter. "That's strong language to use with the head of the order!"

"I meant it to be. It's true that he's unlikely to even see the letter. More likely it will be read and discarded by his



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Orlesian secretaries. Hector Pentaghast, the Warden-Commander of Nevarra, told me he is surrounded by them, and they act as gatekeepers for the information he is permitted to receive. The Antivan commander phrased it more gracefully, but it is clear that there is a great deal of dissatisfaction in the order with the conduct of the First Warden. Apparently, he is far more interested in the politics of the Anderfels than anything else. Another reason to take the supposed apolitical nature of the Wardens with more than a grain of salt."

The letter to the First Warden was enclosed with that to Hector Pentaghast. The packet was put in the diplomatic pouch for Cumberland, and put on a ship that was still braving the Waking Sea. In her letter to Pentaghast, Bronwyn had asked that he see that her letter to the First Warden was delivered. She had decided not to tell either of the men that the Archdemon apparently had withdrawn the horde from Ostagar. The Archdemon was very likely playing with them, and could return when they least expected it. Worse, it might decide to attack somewhere else: at the access point in West Hill, for all she knew.

Aveline had been one of those who had placed some hope in the Architect's good faith, so Bronwyn made a point of having the red-haired Warden read the creature's notebooks. Bronwyn admitted that the schemes and plans might well have been made in good faith. The Architect had not been a being of pure evil. It had felt concern for the condition of his fellow darkspawn, and had wished to

give them a better existence. It had not wished to slaughter the other races, but to find a way to live with them. However, its ideas still seemed hopelessly impractical to Bronwyn; impossible to put into action and with no guarantee of success. There was still the insuperable problem of attempting to ally with the darkspawn while already being the allies of the dwarves.

"Even if all his hopes had been achieved," Bronwyn said, "Even if the darkspawn could be made rational, there was no reason why they would not fight the dwarves to the death for the control of the Deep Roads. Indeed, where else was there for them to go? We can't expect them to have been more high-minded and pacific than humans! Look at the Tevinters, or the Orlesians and the Nevarrans, with their never-ending war. For that matter, look at what the Orlesians wanted to do to Ferelden! Besides, they would still be Tainted, and thus a threat to all life on Thedas. Now if the Architect had found a way to cure the Taint..."

Aveline grimaced at the reference to the Orlesians. Bronwyn did not know about her Orlesian heritage, and thus did not know that Aveline was herself the daughter of an expatriate chevalier. Benoit Du Lac had fled Orlais and made his home in Ferelden after losing his patron to assassination. He had dreamed his daughter would be a knight, and raised her on a diet of adventure and derring-do. Even her name was a tribute to that image of female heroism, Ser Aveline, the Knight of Orlais.

Poor father. He was dead, and she was not a knight yet, nor likely to become one. He had sold everything he had to purchase a commission for her in King Cailan's service, but in many ways, Ferelden was not so different from Orlais. Without a patron, there was only so far one could go. Aveline, despite good service and brilliant skills, seemed likely to spend her career as a junior officer, supporting noble numbskulls with her sword arm and her experience. Rather than accepting the advances of men who had hinted that they would use their influence on her behalf with the right incentive, Aveline had chosen love, and had married a Templar with no more money or influence than herself. And now Wesley, too, was gone.

Still, she was a Grey Warden, and that was an honorable distinction. There was no greater danger than the Blight, and no greater service than combating it. And Bronwyn was noble, but hardly a numbskull.

The other major order of business was to sit down with Danith, and hear her report about the expedition to Soldier's Peak. Danith brought Niall with her.

"Niall obviously understands more of the magic, but he also understands Leliana when she speaks of 'decorating.'" Danith admitted, "I sometimes do not."

Plainly the expedition had gone well, though that had been pushed to the side in the alarm caused by the Architect. Now Soldier's Peak was once again on everyone's mind.



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"The Drydens quickly set to work repairing some of the buildings in the courtyard. They seem comfortable and content," said Danith. "The head of their clan, Levi, will go to the nearby towns and villages for anything they need. The Wolves, too, are glad to have a place to live. They chose some rooms in the lower wing of the castle and cleaned them. They cleaned ours, too. It is their intention to eventually live in outbuildings or in cottages nearby, but they felt there was much to be done in the castle, and that building or repairing anything else must wait until spring."

Bronwyn nodded. "Very sensible. That is exactly what I wished."

"They are strange folk, and keep to themselves, but they appeared to be diligent workers. It is they who began work cleaning the interior of the castle, as it is a filthy place."

Everyone laughed a little. "So true," Niall agreed. "I could hardly stop sneezing at the dust!"

"The old mage did not like them coming into his tower, but Jowan and Niall were able to persuade him that it was necessary to maintain the place. He did not allow them to enter his private room, however, nor his workroom."

Niall snorted. "I think Avernus got up to some pretty gruesome things, though I couldn't prove it. It'll probably be up to Jowan to get the place in order, though I did what I could to help while I was there. We'll need a glazier, and I talked to Leliana and Master Dryden about that. There's a window in the workroom that has to be fixed, and the



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sooner the better. At least Jowan's room is decent. The women scrubbed it out and made the bed with fresh linen and a clean mattress. Jowan brought some of his things from the Compound, so it wasn't at all bad by the time I left."

"He's living in the Tower, then?" Bronwyn asked. She was not sure she liked that.

Niall nodded. "Avernus says that the mages always lived in the tower. It was sort of a Grey Warden Circle. I told Jowan that it was important that he come to meals, and he said he would. We put a big table in the main hall downstairs. There's room for everybody. Lita Wolf needed all the space in the kitchen to cook, she said."

His face was bright with the memory. "They're making good progress, Bronwyn," he told her. "We found all sorts of things around the castle. There was a big iron chandelier in an upstairs room and we hung that from the ceiling. We found some good chairs, too, and even some hangings that weren't too threadbare. I'm glad the civilians are up there, too. There's a lot of work to be done, and it would have been too lonely for the four Wardens otherwise."

He handed her a very old document cylinder. "I brought you this. In it are the original grants made to the Grey Wardens by the local teyrns when Commander Asturian first set up shop. Avernus knew where they were, and threatened death if I lost them. They're in Arcanum, but Jowan and I did a translation. It's a nice piece of land. The map is original, too. The Grey Wardens were given that

whole lip of land that swells north. The south border is just below the entrance to the tunnels, and then east to the Coast Road. West it goes... there. Still in the mountains. Avernus says it goes all the way to the Highever border. It's as big as a bannorn. The lands changed a bit over the centuries. Depending on the how you read the map, the Wardens might be able to claim that little village on the Coast: Breaker's Cove. Avernus insists that we can. Jowan said that they'd make a point of visiting and looking the place over when they could."

Bronwyn nodded, fingering the parchments very carefully. Of course the border between Highever and Amaranthine had gone back and forth over the ages. It was annoying that there were no copies in the Royal Archives. Perhaps they had been destroyed by King Arland. They would have to match this map with an official current one. there was plenty to work with here, nonetheless. She would fight to keep the village. That could be very useful.

Danith had lengthy notes and lists, detailing what Leliana thought would be needed to renovate the second floor. She was very much of the opinion that it would not be prohibitively expensive to enclose the space into six sizable bedchambers. The staircase would have to be moved, but as it was a rickety wooden affair, it needed rebuilding anyway.

She loved the chapel, but decided that its third floor location was impractical. Andraste had been moved downstairs to the far end of the east hall, just outside the library.

Everyone could see her there. Levi's cousin had forged a pair of tall and lovely votive candlestands to be placed on either side of the statue. Leliana hoped Bronwyn would not mind, but Leliana had thought that the big, out-of-the way, open space might be just the place for a council chamber. The room attached, where they had found the remains of Commander Sophia, Bronwyn might perhaps want for her own bedchamber. It was a very nice room, now that there were no demons in it. It would need a bed, of course. Perhaps Bronwyn could send her some specification for the kind of furniture that should be commissioned.

In fact, Bronwyn thought those changes all very sensible, and said so. She was not sure when she would ever be actually living at the Peak, but surely she would spend some time there eventually.

Her imagination balked at showing her a picture of her there with Loghain. She simply could not visualize Loghain visiting the Peak. His jaundiced view of the Wardens was such that she would have to push merely to get the land grant recognized. That he would voluntarily be a guest of the Wardens was difficult to believe. Of course, they would be busy. Noble couples were often separated by their duties.

Danith was saying, "Hakan and Soren have also been very industrious. They believe that it will be possible to use dwarven runic devices to create a bathing room in the lower wing that will have hot water."

Bronwyn perked up quite a bit at the news. Danith continued.

"They concur that work is required on the foundations on the north side of structure. They recommend that in the spring we hire dwarven masons. They say they are needed anyway, for the castle should have stone stairs and a new floor in the front halls. They will make drawings of what is needed, and list the materials. They say it will take some time."

No doubt it would. Bronwyn was glad that the project was already underway. Hmm. What kind of bed *would* she like in her room at Soldier's Peak?

Danith had left her meeting rather pleased with Bronwyn, and went to a late breakfast in a good mood. She and the Warden-Commander had not clashed much recently. She was not so pleased when she discovered that Bronwyn had taken charge of something – or someone – that Danith thought should be the purview of elves. She might not have known about Bronwyn's arrangements for the child Amethyne so soon, had she not overheard Cathair and Zevran discussing the matter.

"She is sending the child to a *shemlen* to learn music?" Danith's displeasure vibrated throughout the Wardens' Hall.

Zevran attempted to soothe her. "The child loves the lessons, my halla. Bronwyn has been generous in paying for them. For that matter, Leliana was generous in taking the time to arrange it all. See the child for yourself, and you will see that she is happy."

Cathair, who had found his visits to the Alienage inter-

esting, said, "Music is always an honorable craft, *lethallan*, and there are none remaining in the Denerim Alienage adept enough to teach it."

Danith scowled. She often amused herself making plans for Amethyne. It gave her great pleasure to look forward to taking her to Marethari, to the clan, showing her the wonders of the natural world, far from the stink and noise of cities. She wanted to teach the child to name the flowers; to name the stars. Amethyne was an orphan. To give her a new attachment to the Alienage was not something in Danith's scheme for her.

"I do not wish the child brought up to be a plaything of the *shemlens*."

Nuala was enjoying her porridge. The *shemlen* woman who managed the housekeeping was very pleasant and friendly, and seemed not to care whether a Warden was of the *shemlen*, *durgen'len*, or *elvhen*. It was very unusual. The lodgings here were clean, and the food wholesome. Danith had mentioned the pretty child, and Nuala sympathized. She had felt sorry for the children in the Gwaren Alienage herself.

"Danith, you said that the *hahren* of the Denerim Alienage was far wiser and more understanding of the Dalish than the woman in Gwaren. Steren and I would like to visit the Denerim Alienage to see how it is the same – and different – from the one we saw before. Let us go there today, and visit the child, and you can judge for yourself if she is being treated well, or not."

Zevran thought Nuala a very sensible young woman – and very attractive too. Of course, it was necessary to admire her from a respectful distance as she was very much spoken for.

"An excellent suggestion. Let us go this morning. I believe... yes... I am certain that today is not the day the child goes to her lesson, and thus she should be at home in the house of the hahren."

"It is a great misfortune for our cousins in the Alienages," said Steren, "that while they have hahrens, they have no Keepers. It seems... wrong."

"The priest-folk steal all those who could be Keepers away," Danith said bitterly. "Like Tara. They hate magic and those who have the power to use it. Jowan told me that the priests killed the old woman who was sent to care for the shemlen Queen. She was a healer and meant well, yet no one speaks of punishment for the murderers."

"The Templars wear helmets that conceal their entire head," Zevran pointed out. "No one can identify the killers, and the Chantry is not being forthcoming. Besides, many in this city do not consider the killing of a mage to be murder."

"From what Adaia told us," Danith said tartly, "they do not consider the killing of an elf to be murder, either."

"Some do not. That is so," Zevran agreed. "And for that reason, prudence and preparation are vital when exploring the delights of this city. I myself shall be ready presently. Who wishes to go with me?"

All the elves did, and as soon as breakfast was over, their party set out. Danith was not so stubborn as to not take Zevran's remarks about prudence to heart, so all the Wardens wore their griffon-embroidered tabards. Cathair, mindful of his host's slender means, took along a fruitcake, donated by the Wardens' kitchen, and a bottle of sweet wine.

Five armed elves attracted quite a bit of notice on the King's Way. The wealthy owners of the fine homes lining the wide street huffed and puffed and whispered amongst themselves. Their servants and guards were more forthright about 'uppity knife-ears.'

"Do you suppose, *lethallin*," Nuala inquired with feigned innocence, "that they are speaking of us?"

"Of course not," Steren assured her gallantly. "They would never speak so of Grey Wardens and allies against the Blight that threatens us all."

The guard at the Alienage gate eyed the bottle and parcel in Cathair's arms, licking his lips, apparently inclined to exact an entry toll. His fellow guard muttered, "Don't be stupid," and the gate was opened without further conversation.

Valendrian was welcoming as always, and very appreciative of the gifts. They spent some time in pleasant talk, introducing Nuala and Steren.

Little Amethyne was brought forth and greeted Zevran and Cathair as old friends. It made Danith a bit wistful that the child hardly remembered her at all.

Amethyne, when asked, was charmed to tell them all

about her music lessons. Mistress Zoe was wonderful, and said she was a very good singer; Mistress Zoe was teaching her to dance and to play on the mandore; Mistress Zoe was helping with her reading. Mistress Zoe had pretty things in her house: a carved screen and draperies of lavender gauze; cups of dark-blue glass; brightly colored rugs and hangings. She had a whole box of different kinds of flutes; and drums and lutes of all sorts. She had a chest full of clothes she wore to perform in. Amethyne had a green hair ribbon and green stockings she wore to her lessons, and she had a tambourine, and would they like to see it? Without waiting for a reply, the child rushed to her chest to retrieve it, and then danced about them, jangling out a stirring rhythm, twirling around the grownups with the grace of a falling leaf.

Too soon, Valendrian gently quieted her, and told her to put her tambourine away. Zevran, thinking about the gate guards, felt a little concern.

"She does not go alone to her lessons, surely."

Shianni, spoke up, full of hot indignation. "Of course not! I go with her every time, and I wait until it's time to take her home!"

Danith, very sensibly, said nothing to denigrate the child's pleasure in her lessons. Music was indeed an honorable craft. Perhaps, when Amethyne had learned all the shemlen had to teach, her curiosity might be roused by the chance to learn the music of her ancestors. The clan would be delighted by this talented little girl.

The wedding of Habren, daughter of Leonas Bryland, Arl of South Reach, and Kane Kendells, heir-presumptive of the Arling of Denerim, was celebrated quietly, in the privacy of the family chapel at the townhouse of the bride's father. The wedding guest list was small and select: The bride, her father and brothers; the groom and his two young sisters; the father of the bride's betrothed and her sons, daughter, and niece. After that, the guest list became a little more political: the Brylands' near cousins, the Teyrn of Highever, and the Teyrna of Gwaren. Naturally, the Teyrn of Gwaren accompanied his young wife. Nor could the Teyrna of Gwaren's stepdaughter be forgotten, especially since she was Queen Dowager and current administrator of the realm.

A planning difficulty arose when Habren declared that she wanted no dogs at her wedding: no dogs at all. That was obviously a slap at little Killer and the dogs of the two Hawke lads, but Bryland was forced to point out that if she insisted on excluding them, she would offend both the Teyrn and Teyrna of Gwaren, and he could not permit that.

For most Fereldans, a bridal party of sixteen – or twenty-one, when one did indeed include the dogs – would not be considered a particularly small, private wedding, especially since the guests included some of the most powerful people in the kingdom. However, it was certainly not at all like Habren's first, disastrous wedding in Harvestmere. Bryland

still wished he could erase that day from his daughter's memory. From his sons' and his own, for that matter.

The marriage ceremony was held in the late afternoon, followed by a sumptuous but private dinner. Bryland himself was exhausted by the end of it. Leandra had been an immeasurable help at pulling it all together, but Habren had resented every suggestion she made. Bryland had been forced to arbitrate their discussions. Leandra managed to keep her temper, under the worst sort of provocation. Bryland could only admire her for it, and swear to himself to make it up to her, once Habren had gone to her own household.

"She's so rude," Bethany whispered to Charade, angry for her mother's sake.

"I guess that's only natural," Charade answered, with dead-pan sarcasm, "when you're extra important."

"Mother told us to give her a chance, but she's had all the chances she's going to get from me. It's going to be horrible, living here for the next few days. I hate to leave Mother to deal with her, but I'm liking more and more Adam's suggestion to go stay with him for awhile."

"It's only five days until the Landsmeet," Charade pointed out. "I hope they vote about Denerim right away. The sooner they go away the better. I'm sick of that smarmy nancy-boy, too."

Carver overheard them, and snorted a laugh. He absolutely did not care what Habren thought of him. She had no sort of power over him whatsoever. She might make things unpleasant for Mother, and that was rotten, but

Mother could have put off her marriage to the Arl until Lady Snot was out of the house. By now, he suspected Mother wished she had.

The gifts helped... a little. Habren could hardly be got to say a word of thanks to Ser Adam, handsome and pleasant as he was. For that matter, he was the only member of the Hawke family to wring a civil word from her at all. Habren really liked the loving cup he presented to her, especially since part of it was pink, her favorite color. Unfortunately, she added a remark about how much handsomer it would have been had it been of gold, rather than silver. Ser Adam's composure was unruffled; he had his mother's good manners. Habren liked Adam's present, really. In fact, she liked it so much that she ordered it placed on the table so she and Kane could drink from it. It harmonized nicely with her pretty pink gown.

There was no dancing. There was some pleasant music played through dinner by a lutenist and flute-player. The meal was very fine, and the three courses sufficient entertainment in themselves. With such a small number of dinner guests, the cooks could be fanciful.

Too fanciful. In honor of the recent victory in the Wendling Wood, Bryland had ordered the creation of some remarkable... objects. Were they cake? Were they even edible? They were pink and green, and very nice little statues of dragons they were: necks outstretched, wing spread as if to take flight.

Loghain stared at the offending dessert in front of him, wondering how the bloody hell he was supposed to eat it. Bite its head off first? That sounded fairly barbarous, even for him. Bronwyn rose to the occasion.

"How exquisite!" she gushed to Bryland. "Really, it's just too pretty to eat! Oh, almond paste? How clever. The wings are particularly fine. This may sound odd, but if they're almond paste they likely could last forever if one covered them with a varnish. Would you be offended if I preserved mine as a keepsake?"

"Not at all!" Bryland replied, pleased that she was pleased. "I'll have it sent on to you when its ready. Anyone else want to keep theirs?"

This offer caused some anguish in the hearts of the younger guests. All the children wanted to have little dragon models to play with, but they also wanted to eat as much marchpane as possible.

Seeing this, Bethany and Charade looked at each other, and then Charade whispered to Faline Kendells, "Go ahead and eat yours. You can have mine and Bethany's later."

Carver was not so discreet. He said to Bryland, "Why don't you have mine treated as well, my lord?" He wagged his brows at Lothar. "It would be just the size to fight your toy soldiers!"

Adam agreed, "That's a fine idea. Let me contribute mine to the war effort, my lord."

Bryland was pleased with how kind and generous Leandra's family was. Kane Kendells liked anyone who paid

attention to his sisters. Habren, on the other hand, made a point of slicing through the neck of her own dragon. She then daintily stuck it with her little two-pronged silver fork and ate it, humming with satisfaction.

Fergus had been on the point of offering his own dragon to the children. Now that they each had one – and Bryland or Leandra should have anticipated that wish – he desisted. The dragon was actually quite tasty, and he reflected that the one on Habren's plate was the only kind of dragon she would ever slay.

What a tangle it all was. The more he saw of Kane Kendells, the worse he felt about the man being given the Arling of Denerim. Kane and Habren ruling Denerim? How could that be a good thing? Kane would be an Arl because of who his great-great-grandfather was. And now, because so many other issues were interdependent, Fergus could not vote against him without offending Bryland. He would just have to hold his nose, vote for Kane, and hope for the best. His eyes met Anora's, and he knew without words that she felt exactly the same.

"My lord... my lady. Let me offer my congratulations."

Leonas and Leandra offered their own, answering bows. "Thank you," said Leandra, Arlessa of South Reach. "We are so happy, Bann Warran, that you could join us today."

Leonas added, "My daughter Habren you know, of course. This is her husband Kane Kendells, the heir of Denerim. My boys Corbus and Lothar... and I don't know

if you've met my stepdaughter Bethany or our niece Charade. And here are my stepsons: Ser Adam Hawke, and the Grey Warden Carver Hawke."

More bows and compliments.

It was quite the line of well-wishers. Leonas Bryland winked at his bride. She, poor woman, was trying hard to remember the name of each and every guest. She had actually been rather good at this sort of thing, back in her youth in Kirkwall, but this was her first real test in the political fields of Ferelden. Even Habren understood the importance of seeing and being seen — and being moderately pleasant — for the success of Kane's bid for the arling of Denerim.

Habren looked radiant — blissfully happy — uncommonly pretty. Dressed in a gorgeous rose-pink gown made for the occasion, she clung to the arm of her handsome young husband, gazing adoringly at him. People were inclined to be indulgent of the newlyweds. A number of women nodded, agreeing that Habren had just needed a husband, after all. And such a husband! Most, though not all, thought him the best-looking man in the room.

"The new arlessa's sons are both very fine men," Bann Bonnam's younger sister said. "Particularly Ser Adam. Of course, I prefer dark hair to gold. And then there is Arl Nathaniel..."

"Eww," one of her friends expressed her disgust. "How can you find him attractive? That great beak of a nose! He's the son of the Wicked Arl, and probably just like him."

"Don't be stupid. The Couslands are getting on with him,

and they certainly wouldn't if he were 'just like his father.' There's Teyrna Bronwyn talking to him right now. I think he's very striking in his own way, and so tall and well-formed. And he's certain to be confirmed in Amaranthine."

"Well," another young lady said, "if you want to talk about attractive, eligible men, there's Teyrn Fergus. Doesn't he have the nicest smile? So roguish."

"He's taken."

"No!"

"Of course he is. After what he did for the Queen?"

Though not on the scale of Habren's first wedding, Bryland's celebration of his own included every noble present in Denerim. To the feast, at least: he insisted on having the ceremony performed by the family priest in the family chapel. Truth be told, Bryland was still angry and suspicious of the Chantry. It was one thing to have faith in the Maker and his Prophet. It was quite another to kowtow to a lot of Orlesian rigmarole. And it would take a great deal to wipe away the impression made by Knight-Commander Tavish and his Templars, as they trampled wedding guests in their determination to put the Grand Cleric's safety first and foremost.

Hence the only priest present was their own Mother Carenagh, a white-haired, self-effacing old lady perfectly happy to sit with the lesser noblewomen and listen to them natter about grandchildren. It was well-known that there was a great deal of frustration and teeth-gnashing in Chantry circles about being excluded from such an



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important political event as the Arl of South Reach's wedding; Bryland simply did not care about it.

Leandra was more nervous about such defiance. It was all very well for Leonas to declare Bethany free of the Chantry supervision and for the Queen to second it. That the Chantry felt in the least bound by secular authority seemed to her more than doubtful. In the current atmosphere, perhaps they would not pursue the matter. Leandra was quite sure, however, that they had not forgotten about Bethany Hawke.

But no one was questioning Bethany's right to be here — at least openly. A few brows had been raised. A few women had blushed and looked confused. Bethany had not had to endure anything worse than that. Even a Chantry ally like Teagan Guerrin had spoken kindly. He was a good man, Leandra understood, and while he might think that all mages belonged in a Circle under Templar supervision, he would not think it necessary to be rude to them if they were not.

Young Arlessa Kaitlyn needed his support, anyway. She was a sweet, shy girl, and obviously in awe of her husband. Perhaps it was the age difference. On the other hand, there was an even greater age difference between the Teyrn and Teyrna of Gwaren, and nobody had noticed Bronwyn being particularly timid in Loghain's presence. There she was, in her signature red, laughing. Well, people were different. There seemed to be real affection between the Arl and Arlessa of Redcliffe, but Leandra thought there was a certain lack of balance, since Teagan Guerrin had bestowed wealth



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and a great title on her, and she had brought nothing to the marriage but her youth, beauty, and gentle nature.

Then she rebuked herself. She had no claim to such a marriage as she had made today. Leonas was bestowing everything on *her*, and she had not even youth to give him. Of course, that they were not distant in age was also a good thing. It was easier to understand one another; easier to be friends. And what a good friend he was... how kind to her children.

She looked at her own family with a great deal of joy and satisfaction. Such a good-looking family, and rising every day in prospects. The boys were so handsome, though Carver would insist on wearing gloomy black. Adam was fine as a peacock in peacock blue. She had told the girls to keep back their beautiful new gowns for today, and they were wonderfully becoming. Adam had brought them all wonderful jewels, too; the amazing amethyst earrings she herself wore today were one of his wedding gifts to her. Bethany had a lovely sapphire necklace, and Charade one of yellow topazes that made her eyes snap.

Leonas had given her a opulent pearl necklace as well as her diamond wedding ring. Amazing jewels — the sort of jewels she would have had if she had married the Comte de Launcet, so many years ago. She was so glad she had not.

Things had been a bit touchy, a few days before the wedding. Habren had inherited most of her mother's jewels, which was only right and proper. However, the South Reach Cirlet had been in the Bryland family for many

generations, and was always worn by the Arlessa. Habren had fussed about it, until Leonas had promised Habren a tiara, since Habren thought the Cirklet old-fashioned and 'tacky,' now that she could no longer have it.

Leandra was wearing the Cirklet now: a delicate confection of gold wire, pearls and amethysts that resembled a wreath of violets. If she did not feel like a queen, it was because she felt like something even better: a woman honored by the love of a kind and generous man; a woman who now never need fear for the security of her children.

"Has the world turned upside down?" Teagan wondered to himself over breakfast.

"I beg your pardon, my lord?" Kaitlyn asked softly. "Is the porridge not to your liking? Do you have a headache?"

"No, no — I'm quite all right. Simply puzzled at all the changes since I was last in Denerim. I hardly know the place."

Kaitlyn thought Denerim the most wonderful place on earth, and the Redcliffe estate undoubtedly the loveliest house in it. She tried to say something cheerful.

"It was a nice party last night, wasn't it? I have never danced so much in my life! Everyone was so kind to me."

"Very nice," agreed Teagan, though with an edge that Kaitlyn took as a warning to say nothing more about it. Seeing her shrink away, Teagan was ashamed of himself.

"Where's Bevin? Still asleep? *He* certainly had a good time."

Kaitlyn bloomed anew. "Oh, yes! Arl Bryland's sons were

such good company for him, and the darling little girls, too! I hope he can see more of them."

"I hope so, too."

He certainly did. It would entertain the lad. Teagan had learned that a bored Bevin was a diabolically mischievous Bevin. It would be unfortunate if political differences spoiled a chance at friendly companionship.

Who would have thought Bryland so anti-clerical? Teagan was deeply shocked that the wedding had not been held at the Cathedral, with the Grand Cleric officiating. In fact, the Grand Cleric had not even been invited. Granted, he had not been in Denerim for Lady Habren's ill-fated first wedding, and he had heard enough to be somewhat understanding of Bryland's anger at Knight-Commander Tavish. It was clear that the Templar officer, in misjudged zeal, had not risen to the occasion, and had in fact made things worse. The attack had been a horrible experience for all concerned, and Teagan completely agreed that it was probably funded by someone high in Orlesian circles. And then there were those two priests, hirelings of the Orlesians, who had tried *Maker-knows-what* with the Queen...

That was no reason, however, to blame the Chantry. The priests should have been turned over to the Grand Cleric for punishment, especially since Her Grace had also suffered from their treachery. And Bryland's step-daughter was openly an apostate, and countenanced by all the nobles of Ferelden! The Queen's declaration of her freedom

had no standing in canon law at all. Yes, the girl seemed sweet and pretty and good-natured, but laws were laws for a reason, and it was wrong to put a single individual above them, no matter how important her stepfather was. After all, wasn't that what had caused the disaster at Redcliffe? Isolde putting Connor above the Chantry's law?

But Bryland's marriage... Teagan did not know the lady. He did not know any of this Hawke family, and had never heard of them until he arrived in Denerim. The mother was from a noble Marcher family, they said, but had married a Fereldan commoner. Amell. Teagan had vaguely heard the name, but had no idea if the woman's claim was genuine or not. The elder son had been knighted by Cailan, and from the talk in Council, was being seriously considered for a bannorn. The younger was a Grey Warden, and Teagan suspected that was how they had got their foot in the door. The niece was being pursued by Rothgar Wulffe, who had danced with her a scandalous five times at the wedding feast last night. A very lively, spirited girl. And that left the daughter. The apostate. Both Wulffe boys had danced with her. Nathaniel Howe had danced with her. Twice. Had the world gone mad?

Worst of all, Teagan was chagrined to find so little debate going on as to who should next wear the crown of Calenhad. He had expected more tension in Denerim. He had expected anxiety in the Royal Council over the changes that must take place with a new, unknown monarch. He had readied his opening moves, only to find that

the game was all but over. Those in the know – even those who merely claimed to know – seemed to believe that the succession was settled. Loghain Mac Tir and Bronwyn Cousland would be the next King and Queen of Ferelden. Leonas Bryland spoke of it with calm certainty. Teagan nearly fell out of his chair when he first heard the words.

Loghain Mac Tir! King Loghain! Teagan did not think of himself as one mired in tradition, but the whole concept of the son of a freeholder, not even a generation away from the farm himself – that such a man would sit on the throne of Ferelden...

Words failed him. Thought failed him. There was somehow a positively demonic alliance between the Couslands and MacTirs to seize control of the kingdom. Who could have foreseen it? Teagan certainly had not. The noblest of the nobles and the farmer? For that matter, Loghain had never even been a freeholder himself: his father had been dispossessed before his death. Eamon had had plenty to say about Loghain in private: about his mysterious, unsavory power over Maric; about his arrogance and presumption; about his origins, common as dirt.

Yes, Loghain had done a very great deal to aid King Maric in restoring the rightful line of Calenhad. For that, he certainly deserved rewards. Eamon had thought that a knighthood and a fine manor would have been sufficient for such a man. If Loghain had had the least shred of decency and modesty, he would have expected no more. Instead, he was raised to Teyrn of Gwaren, elevated above the heads of all

but one of the ancient nobility, Ferelden's natural leaders. Eamon had waxed particularly wrathful that the man's daughter should be Queen of Ferelden. Teagan had not been quite able to echo him there. Anora had been brought up a nobleman's daughter, and her education and conduct had always been satisfactory in every way. Cailan had been fond of her, and personally — though Teagan did not brave his brother's anger by saying so — he preferred that Cailan marry a Fereldan girl he liked rather than some foreigner who would drag Ferelden into foreign disputes and foreign wars and foreign ways unacceptable to the majority of Fereldans. But it now seemed to him that Loghain was using his daughter's bereavement and her status as Queen Dowager to seize that to which he had no rightful claim.

And Bronwyn Cousland! What an artful schemer she had turned out to be! No wonder she was determined to suppress Alistair's claim. When they had spoken of the matter, Teagan had presumed that she wished to see her brother on the throne. While he thought her wrong, he could at least understand it. He had thought it was natural affection that was behind her dismissal of Alistair's rights. Not so. It was her own vaulting ambition: an ambition so fierce that she was ready to set aside her duties as a Grey Warden, set aside her own brother's superior claim, set aside the blood of Calenhad, and set aside her own decency, and marry Loghain Mac Tir, a man old enough to be her father!

And what did Fergus Cousland think of being put aside

like this? What did he think of his sister's degrading marriage? Teagan had tried to draw him out a bit. Fergus seemed the same open-hearted man Teagan always had believed him to be, but either that was a pose, or the man truly had no pride at all. He must have been offered something to make it worth his while, but Teagan had not yet grasped what it was. Wulffe had mentioned that Fergus was Bronwyn's heir, but what difference did that make? Bronwyn was young and presumably fertile, and would no doubt produce a half-dozen scowling, black-haired little Mac Tirs, spreading that upstart blood throughout the noble houses of the kingdom!

Teagan could have kicked himself all the way back to Rainesfere. He should have gone to Ostagar and forced Alistair to attend the Landsmeet. Even if he could not win the crown, he should be given some sort of official recognition. Teagan had loved his brother, but now felt that Eamon had been disastrously and shamefully wrong in his treatment of King Maric's natural son. For that matter, Maric himself had been wrong. He had visited Redcliffe. He had seen the boy himself: seen his shabby clothes, seen his relegation to the stables. How could a man not value his own flesh and blood? If one was careless enough to beget bastards — and Teagan himself had always been very careful — one ought to provide for them decently.

It did not help that Alistair himself had written, assuring Teagan that he had not the least desire to be King. He did not *want* to attend the Landsmeet. He was happy

as a Grey Warden: happier than he could make Teagan understand, because he felt that his life had meaning and purpose it might not otherwise have had. It hurt, because Teagan knew that Alistair's rejection of the Landmeet and the nobles in general had everything to do with the way that nobles had treated him. Alistair had seen their true face, and it had not been pretty.

But could he, in good conscience, swear fealty to Bronwyn and Loghain? That was a vexing question; a dire moral dilemma. He would have to seek counsel, and now that he was in Denerim, there was no better place to go than to the Grand Cleric. The Cathedral was only on the other side of the Market from the Redcliffe estate.

"My dear," he said to Kaitlyn, "I'm off to see the Grand Cleric. Then I'll be going to the Council meeting. Don't expect me at noon. There are some men I must meet."

"But you will be back before dinner?" Kaitlyn asked anxiously. "We are invited to dine with Lady Rosalyn and her sons."

"That's right: Ceorlic the Third is back from Markham to claim his father's bannorn. We'll probably talk about him in Council. I'm glad to have a chance to meet him after all these years. His brothers, too. Don't worry, I'll be back in plenty of time."

"Would it be all right," Kaitlyn asked timidly. "If I went... out? Out to the Market?"

"It's cold," Teagan said absently. "Of course you should go if you like. Have a good time. Buy something pretty. Take Musgrove and Pasco with you — and your maid. If you take Bevin..."

he snorted "...Maybe Musgrove should keep him on a leash!"

He threw on a cloak and stalked across the Market, wanting to collect his thoughts. He glanced up and saw the new window in the tower chapel. Fergus Cousland had crashed through the old one when 'rescuing' the Queen. Teagan wished he had been there, so he could gauge the actual degree of danger in which she had been. The stories being told were absolutely absurd. He found it hard to believe that those two wicked fools would have been allowed to harm her. Bann Alfstanna's brother, for that matter, a Templar of good repute, had led the opposition to the plotters.

It was not surprising that the Grand Cleric Muirin agreed to see him at once.

"My lord... such a pleasure. You did not bring your bride with you today?"

Teagan almost blushed, somewhat taken aback. He should have... certainly... but his mind was in such a whirl...

"Perhaps tomorrow, Your Grace. I wished to speak privately, and to seek your advice on a matter that troubles me deeply."

"Then sit, my son, and tell me. I shall have some tea brought to us."

The story came out in a rush: not simply his current anxiety about the succession and the general state of the country, but twenty years of repressed worries and regrets. The story of Alistair and his wrongs loomed large in all of this.

Muirin knew perfectly well who Alistair was, of course. She had fought hard against Duncan to keep the poor boy.



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Alistair was not particularly devout, and certainly not a serious-minded lad. His inappropriate levity was clearly a defensive response. Still, his trainers felt he had genuine potential as a warrior, for he had picked up the skills of a Templar with remarkable ease. For him to devote his life to the service of the Chantry had seemed to Muirin a beautiful thing. It would have purged the dishonor of his birth and mitigated his father's sin. He would have had a knight's standing, and been respected and honored wherever he went. On the other hand, for an innocent, good-natured boy to be condemned to the brief, ferocious existence of a Grey Warden, fighting Tainted monsters in the bowels of the earth — that had seemed cruel and ugly to her. The Rite of Conscription, however, was absolute. Muirin had been saddened and somewhat bewildered at the boy's manifest joy in being carried off by Duncan. Where had the Chantry failed him?

With a sigh, she understood why being relegated to the Chantry to get him out of the way would have prejudiced him against it from the first. To be sought as someone of value, as Duncan had sought him, rather than be given away as something useless to be got rid of — as Arl Eamon had ... Well, of course Alistair would be flattered by that. And Duncan had always had a way about him... swaggering, mysterious — romantic, even. Alistair had immediately fallen prey to the man's charisma. The boy had longed above all for a father, and had at last found one.

Not that Muirin had not worried about Duncan's motives,



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in seeking control of the King's natural son. Duncan had come from Orlais, though he claimed Highever birth. Who knew what he had in mind for the boy? However necessary the Grey Wardens were, they were definitely a necessary *evil*, in Muirin's opinion. They had clearly done great harm to Bronwyn.

Furthermore, Eamon had felt it was extremely important that Alistair not marry and beget children who could challenge the legitimate royal line. Now, of course, that was a moot point; but at the time it had made sense. What an irony that all of Eamon's efforts had resulted in the direct line of Calenhad being cut off from the succession.

For that was Teagan's other trouble.

"I feel tricked, Your Grace," he said frankly. "I had no idea that Bronwyn Cousland was seeking the Crown for herself. She said nothing about it when she visited me some months ago. We discussed Alistair, and she gave her reasons why she thought he ought not to be considered. Most of them involved the lack of hard evidence supporting his claim. But if people only looked at him, they'd see the truth in his face! Then, too, she urged the lad's own disinclination. That, too, was Eamon's doing. He drummed into Alistair's head from the first that he must never seek the throne, or even put himself forward in any way."

"My lord," Muirin asked, "do you believe that Alistair is happy as a Grey Warden?"

"He says he is. Bronwyn says he is, and that he's doing well. I suppose if she becomes Queen, he'll eventually be

made Warden-Commander. That's something."

"It is a very great thing. And he is a Grey Warden in the very time of Blight. Perhaps the Maker is His wisdom saw farther than all of us when he made his plans. Perhaps Alistair was needed as a Grey Warden just as much as he needed to be a Grey Warden. Can you answer me this: if you brought Alistair to Denerim, and forced him to seek the Crown, do you believe that there is any likelihood that he would gain it?"

"No. Things have gone too far. Bronwyn and Loghain have too much support. I'd have to prove them guilty of some great crime in order to undermine them. I can't understand it. Everyone seems to *want* Loghain to be King. Bronwyn at least has the royal blood of Calenhad, but... *Loghain!*"

"Remember, my lord, that Calenhad himself did not have royal blood until he was crowned. A Blight is the most terrifying of mortal dangers. At such a time it is natural that people look to a hero to save them. Whatever else you may think of Teyrn Loghain, a hero he certainly is."

"And Bronwyn. The Girl Warden. The Dragonslayer." Teagan shook his head and clasped his hands before him, not quite wringing them. "I don't gainsay that Bronwyn has done a great deal: raised armies, fought in the Deep Roads, even taken part in killing a dragon or two. That makes her a good diplomat and a mighty warrior. Will it make her a good Queen? And she's a Grey Warden herself! I am not afraid to speak my mind before the Landsmeet. I only wish I knew what my mind was!"

How could she comfort him? Bronwyn Cousland's ascension to the throne seemed inevitable to her, too. She had prayed about it, feeling that the young woman had made her share of mistakes. The marriage to Loghain, so obviously a political ploy, seemed one to Muirin; and one likely to cause Eleanor's daughter a great deal of heartache. The pursuit of the Crown was another. Her stubborn championing of the outcasts of the world, elves and mages alike, was evidence of a generous heart but not proof of sound judgement. However, Murin could not oppose her.

"Bronwyn Cousland," she said slowly, "is, I believe, smiled on by the Maker. Yes. I believe He regards her with favor. I cannot tell you why, for I have sworn certain oaths, but I have had seen proof that both the Maker and the Prophet have found her particularly acceptable to them. If they so regard her, then it is not for me to denounce her."

"I have heard rumors." Teagan stared at her, in suspense. "I heard rumors that she had somehow found the Urn of the Sacred Ashes. That the Queen was healed by them. Do you believe this to be true?"

"I have seen what I have seen. Personally, I wonder at Bronwyn seeking something so commonplace as an earthly crown, but perhaps she is the Queen that Ferelden needs now, in this crisis."

Bronwyn decided that today was the day to present the Warden's old claim to the Council. She had gone over

it with Loghain, who did not like it, but understood. It was a good piece of land, though underpopulated these days. The only settlement was the village of Breaker's Cove, which Bronwyn insisted had always been part of the grant. Records indicated that the Wardens' lands had been made part of the Drake's Fall bannorn, which was currently vacant. Fergus had considered one of his men for it, but was unlikely to refuse his sister the old Warden lands. Ser Giles would simply receive a smaller bannorn. As he was a landless knight, and the grant would be a surprise to him, he was not likely to be put out.

Nathaniel Howe also assented, as the grant was actually Amaranthine territory. Bronwyn's Wardens deserved whatever they could wring from the Landsmeet, in his opinion. The horror of the Architect had not made a brief impression. Comprehending the creature's plans was a nightly burden in his dreams. Anything that could be done to stop the darkspawn must and should be done.

It was a tricky legal question, Teagan pointed out. While the old grants seemed genuine, the lands had been confiscated when the Wardens were exiled. The question was, did the King have the right to confiscate lands granted to the Wardens? Or did the Warden's right supersede the power of the Crown of Ferelden? If the latter, was that a precedent they wanted to set?

"I think," said Anora, "that rather than basing the claim on these documents, we should simply use them as a ref-

erence to determine the extent of the holdings. The Wardens are in the midst of a Blight and deserve some reward for their service and sacrifice. And since the bannorn of Drake's Fall has been vacant since the Orlesian occupation, there is no one to be deprived. Why not simply make a new, royal grant of the same lands?"

Loghain was proud of Anora for so neatly disposing of the matter. He added an addendum of his own: that Fereldan Warden-Commanders must be Fereldan indeed. It would not do to put such a fortress in the hands of the kingdom's enemies.

Fergus grinned at his sister. "It looks like Soldier's Keep is yours. When do I get to see it?"

The last, frantic deals were made; the last promises, the last horse-trades. All that remained was to see if they would hold good.

The Sixth of Haring dawned at last. Snow fell on Denerim in great feathery flakes. In the Landsmeet Chamber, huge fires roared into life early in the day. The seneschal hoped that they would take some of the clammy chill from the air. If people were uncomfortable, they were more likely to quarrel.

He muttered to his assistant, "And from quarrelling it leads to fighting; and fighting leads to killing; and then Maker knows what at the end of it. On the other hand, if we keep them cozy and not too drunk...with luck, we'll have a repeat of the One-Day Landsmeet in Good King Darlan's time!"



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Nobles and their families poured into the Landsmeet Chamber, eyeing each other warily, like dogs establishing precedence. For that matter, their dogs were much the same. Some nobles were confident, some were anxious, some were hopeful. All were dressed in their best: either their best doublets and gowns, or their best trappings of war. In the cold of winter, the nobility of Ferelden was a garden of garishly bright flowers, interspersed with gleaming metal.

Bronwyn and Loghain, both clad in armor, clanked into the Landsmeet, their faces stern and serene, but their minds whirling. They were not only ones prepared for battle. Bryland, too, wore his plate, and Howe and Wulffe their archers' leathers. Fergus Cousland wore his grandfather's elaborate silverite armor, the same armor his father Bryce had worn when he refused a kingdom. Teagan Guerrin was impressive in his new dragonbone mail. Kaitlyn drifted in at his side, her hand on his arm, looking about her in wonder, unaware of the admiration she excited in her ethereal blue gown and her silver-fox cloak.

The trumpets rang with the royal fanfare. Anora, dressed in magnificent but sober dark blue velvet embroidered in gold and pearls, appeared from the rear hall and made her way with great dignity to the throne.

The seneschal bawled out, "Your Graces! My lords, ladies and gentlemen! On this sixth day of Cassus, the thirtieth year of the Dragon Age, the three hundred and eighty-sixth from the founding of the kingdom, by command of Her



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Majesty, Queen Anora, I declare this Landsmeet in session!"



ARL TEAGAN GUERRIN OF REDCLIFFE

CHAPTER 7

THE GAME
OF KINGS

THE LANDSMEET

CHAMBER VIBRATED WITH TENSION.

The stakes were high: lordships were in the offing, Landsmeet votes

for the taking. Fates of entire families depended on the outcome today. Under their finery, nobles were sweating.

Anora stepped forward. She must begin the Landsmeet with a speech, the oration that laid out the issues and set the tone for the Landsmeet. Beautiful, grave, and no fool, she had the attention of everyone in the chamber.

"Lord and Ladies of the Landsmeet, we come together in a time of troubles. A Blight claws at our lands, foreign powers seek to stab us in the back, and we have been attacked where we thought safest. My husband, your King Cailan, is dead, killed in battle defending this country. We meet here by his will to choose who will succeed him. Who will lead this country through this crisis? We must all choose wisely, or the power of choice might be lost forever. Personal differences and petty greed must be set aside for the good of the kingdom. Ferelden needs

strong leadership – leadership from top to bottom – never more than now. We must choose a ruler, my countrymen: a ruler able to defend this kingdom!"

Sage nods, and murmurs of approval. One man in the back shouted, "Let's vote for Loghain, and get it over with!" Anora put up her hand for silence.

"Nor is our king the only loss we have borne. Many friends and relations we saw last spring are now gone forever. Friend has turned against friend, misled by great evil or malign trickery. A teyrnir, three arlings, and ten bannorns have been deprived of a strong hand to protect and guide them. We must make good these losses, and work together to defend our people and uphold order throughout Ferelden!"

A great deal of applause. Everyone was in favor of getting land and a title for themselves or a near relative. Anora paused, and spoke bluntly.

"This is no time to hide the truth behind soft words. We are in danger. The Archdemon is a threat to all life on Thedas, but it is in Ferelden where the horde first erupted.

"And while we have been engaged in fighting the Blight, our ancient enemy has taken advantage of the threat. Orlesian assassins were sent to kill my father, Teyrn Loghain, and the Warden-Commander. They were foiled by our allies and punished, but there is no doubt who sent them. I myself was poisoned by a trusted servant – an Orlesian – who planned to make my death appear to be from natural causes. Orlesians have even infiltrated the Chantry, for a



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pair of priests from Orlais held me prisoner in the Cathedral until I was rescued by Teyrn Fergus Cousland – ”

A cheer, growing in volume. Eyes turned Fergus' way. He grinned, and made the Queen an elaborate bow, hand on heart. Anora smiled at him, and continued her speech.

“I must speak of the ghastly events of the 7th of Harvestmere, when Lady Habren Bryland's wedding was infiltrated by Orlesian agents who murdered Arl Urien and Banns Loren, Reginalda, and Ceoric. Many were wounded and injured in the attack, and it is clear that the agents hoped to kill many more. Thanks are due to Arl Leonas Bryland for leading the defense that drove the assassins away.”

Yet more applause. Leandra turned to look at her husband, sincere admiration shining in her eyes. He waved the applause away, trying to smile, remembering the panic and horror of that day.

Anora went on. “And yet, amidst all these vicious and cowardly attacks, we have not stood alone. Our allies, bound by ancient Grey Warden treaties, have supported us in battle: the dwarves of Orzammar and the Dalish elves. Mages from Ferelden's Circle have served bravely with the army, saving many lives. Above all, Ferelden's Grey Wardens have stood firm against the Blight, gathering all the races together against our ancient, common foe.”

Bronwyn got her share of applause, but the rest was a little more problematic. Most Fereldan nobles had nothing against dwarves – especially Orzammar dwarves, conve-



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niently out of sight. Many, however, did not care for elves, and definitely did not like Dalish elves traveling through their lands, poaching game and making trouble. Some others feared mages, and thought they should be locked away securely. This point of view was hotly contested by others, especially by nobles who had actually served in the south. Anora's clear voice carried over the gossip.

“We shall begin, as is customary, by recognizing new lordships, inheritances, marriages, and births; the strong foundation of family in which the nobility is rooted. Once the Landsmeet itself is complete, it will be our duty to choose who will lead this kingdom to victory against its enemies!”

The seneschal shouted, “Long life to Her Majesty!”

Prolonged applause for the Queen's Speech. Anora had decided to be brief, and not tease and infuriate the attendees with a long-winded peroration. People wanted to get down to business. So, for that matter, did she. She took her place on the throne, wondering if it would be the last time, while the seneschal recognized the premier noble of Ferelden – or rather his heir.

Fergus stood tall in the gallery. He would have to clarify what had happened to his family, or he would be bogged down by painful questions.

“Your Majesty... nobles of Ferelden... my friends, comrades, and countrymen! My father, Bryce Cousland, died last Cloudreach. He was not alone. My mother, my wife and son, and many of our loyal retainers died as well. A



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ruthless Orlesian agent and a band of foreign blood mages manipulated Arl Rendon Howe into attacking Highever. Arl Howe is dead now, having paid in blood for whatever share of the guilt was his. As my father's first-born child, and long recognized as his heir, I put myself forward to be confirmed as Teyrn of Highever."

Fergus had always been popular. The rumbles were favorable. Anora, as arbiter of the Landsmeet, said, "Is this the will of the Landsmeet? Can Fergus Cousland be accepted as Teyrn of Highever by acclamation? If not, let his opponent declare himself!"

Some mutters, mainly from people who were intrigued by the hints of scandal and conspiracy. No one, however, wanted to declare themselves in opposition, at least not now, with so many lordships to be had. Nor did anyone have the nerve to cry "Question!" Not so early in the day. Fergus' right to inherit Highever had long been recognized.

Anora smiled, "Then let us proclaim the Landsmeet's decision. Let those who recognize Teyrn Fergus Cousland say 'aye!'" "Aye!" roared the Landsmeet.

Once recognized as teyrn, Fergus was free to transact a great deal of business. In fact, it was he who had the greatest number of lordships to fill. He had previously agreed with Nathaniel Howe that he would present the Highever banns for confirmation and Nathaniel, after his own confirmation, would present those for Amaranthine.

Fergus made clear that he was going to continue to



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hold the city of Highever himself; and his candidates for Darkencombe, Loren's old domain, and Greenleaf were quickly passed without comment. There had been enough preliminary talk in the month before the Landsmeet to make clear that there were no blood heirs surviving in those two bannorns. As customary, the two new banns did homage to Fergus in the sight of all, kneeling before him with their hands in his.

"I swear before the Maker and his Prophet that I will in the future be faithful to Fergus Cousland, my rightful lord, in matters of worldly honor."

Following usual precedence, Loghain spoke next, and submitted his recent marriage to Lady Bronwyn Cousland for recognition by the Landsmeet.

There was general good will toward the couple, but a call of "Question!" from Bann Babcock of White Hills.

"What is your question, my lord?" Anora asked coolly of the old man, Teagan Guerrin's vassal and relation by marriage.

"Well... damn it all... the girl's a Grey Warden. The Girl Warden! Isn't that what everyone calls her? Is it legal for a Grey Warden to marry?"

No one would have liked to have the expression on Loghain's face turned in his direction, but the old bann bore it manfully enough.

"Warden-Commander," Anora called. "As the head of the order in Ferelden and the resident expert, what say you to Bann Babcock's question?"



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"Your Majesty," Bronwyn said, looking down her nose, but speaking with deliberate sweetness, "there is nothing to prevent a Grey Warden marrying. We swear no oaths of celibacy or continence, as the Chantry does. In fact, I have heard of a number of Grey Wardens being wed... sometimes to one another. It is in no way proscribed."

Bryland and Wulffe exchanged discreet smirks.

"Does that answer your question, Bann Babcock?," asked Anora, with equal sweetness.

"It does, your Majesty," said the old man, and then muttered something in an undertone to his one of his sons.

Anora said, "Then may I hear the assent of this body to the marriage of Teyrn Loghain with Lady Bronwyn Cousland, that their union be legally binding and their children recognized as legitimate?"

That was done. Neither Bronwyn nor Loghain looked at Teagan, whom they suspected had arranged that little caltrop.

Next in precedence was the arling of Denerim, and here Kane Kendells, carefully coached by Leonas Bryland, put himself forward for arl. A great many women – and even a few men – swooned at his good looks.

"...While I have no previous experience before this august body..."

Some questions were called by people trying to understand the family tree and the exact way that Kane Kendells was related to Arl Urien. Kane had notes on the matter. Better yet, he had his father-in-law Bryland to support



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him and to deflect one annoying old lady's queries about the second son of Arl Paladoc.

"That line is extinct, Lady Gwynnyfar..."

There was a call for a recorded vote; so in order of precedence, each member of the Landsmeet had to declare his or her vote openly. It did not appear that many people wished to vote against Kane. Rather, they wanted to know where the great nobles stood on the subject, and once that was established, the rest of the Landsmeet fell into line. The recognition of Kane's marriage to Lady Habren was quickly accomplished by acclamation. Kane Kendells was now the Arl of Denerim. Habren preened in triumph, clinging to his arm.

Nathaniel Howe was next, and there things got ugly. There was never any real danger that he would not be confirmed. However, there were plenty of questions, some directed at the Couslands, as to how they felt about this son of a traitor. There were even more pointed questions as to how they could think of leaving the murders of their parents unavenged. The last questioner was Lady Rosalyn, the widow of Bann Ceorlic. Fergus made clear that he thought such a question rude and tactless of her. Imprudent too, as he pointed out.

"No amount of blood could suffice to make me..." he sneered "...*complacent* about the deaths of my mother, my father, my wife, my son, and so many good friends. If blood could make it all not have happened, your question might have some validity. Arl Howe is dead, as are two of

his innocent children. Lady Delilah above all was blameless in everything. Do you imagine that her death gave me any pleasure?" He grew angrier as he spoke. "Do you think me a *monster*?"

Lady Rosalyn reddened and stammered, and her sons closed around her, murmuring sympathetically.

Fergus had more to say. "Nathaniel is not his father, and had no part in the crimes against the Couslands. Why should I blame him, when sons of the men who murdered Queen Moira — " here he stared hard at Rosalyn and her children — "were permitted to inherit? Nathaniel and I were friends from youth. I trust him to be the arl that Amaranthine needs in this difficult time. Only days ago, he dared to defend the arling at the side of my sister, the Warden-Commander, when a party of renegade darkspawn was discovered lurking half a day from Denerim!"

A panicked babble, rising in volume. The seneschal had to call for order. Ultimately, Anora called Bronwyn to the speaker's gallery to give a quick report of the events in Amaranthine.

"..Thus, while the Architect could have been a serious threat to the kingdom as a whole, he was at the moment hiding from the Archdemon, and had not collected a large band of his own. He was most interested in capturing females for breeding purposes, but had not yet succeeded in this."

Bann Frandarel asked, "Darkspawn females?"

"No, my lord," Bronwyn replied. "Women of any race: human, elven, or dwarven. Qunari, too, for that matter.

There are no darkspawn females. Soldiers in Denerim could tell you of the horror we discovered near Ostagar. As you have no doubt heard, darkspawn capture and violate women, who then grow huge and misshapen and give birth to more darkspawn."

She had thought that surely they all knew this by now... she really had... but apparently a great many noble lords and ladies had not been paying attention. A few women left the chamber, looking sick. There was quite a lot of discussion.

"Then why," Bann Frandarel challenged, "are we sending women into danger? Why do we expose women to these creatures? Why did you become a Warden, Your Grace, knowing what you do?"

Such ignorance was more than irritating. "First of all, my lord," Bronwyn said sharply. "I did *not* choose to be a Grey Warden. I was conscripted by Duncan, the prior commander. I was given no choice whatever. Furthermore, darkspawn must be faced and fought, and not run away from. Darkspawn don't care if women don't fight: it just makes it easy for them."

She had frightened them, she saw. More than a little. Really, how could they not have heard about this? Were they so completely occupied with hunting and dancing and gaming and wenching that they had not heard the news from the army in Ostagar? That was troubling in itself. She decided to give them an example.

"On a ride north from Ostagar, I stopped at a farmhold.

The farm wife there was no warrior, and neither was her toddler daughter. That did not prevent the darkspawn from bursting from the ground in an attempt to seize them. Had I not been there, their fate would have been sealed. I admit at that time, however, that I did not know as much about the darkspawn as I do now. I had never seen or heard of a Broodmother until I was in the Dead Trenches in the Deep Roads east of Orzammar. I saw one there for the first time: pitiful, terrible, mindless. She was a dwarf woman taken prisoner by the darkspawn. People even knew the woman's name! That is the kind of monstrous enemy we must fight and defeat."

"Thank you, Your Grace," said Anora, "for your compelling words. I hope you find the answer sufficient, my lord. Let us return to the business at hand. Nathaniel Howe claims the arling of Amaranthine."

Another recorded vote, and some absentions: Teagan and a number of his banns among them. It was enough to register qualms, but not enough to prevent Nathaniel's confirmation. He was then recognized as Arl of Amaranthine, and immediately swore allegiance to Fergus in a strong and manly voice. He too had vacant bannorns.

"Amaranthine needs a number of new lords," he declared. "In consultation with my liege lord, Fergus Cousland, I hereby propose the following candidates..."

Adam Hawke's heart skipped a beat. Leandra clutched at Bryland's armor, hardly feeling the plate under her fingernails.

"For bann of the City of Amaranthine, in place of the disgraced and self-exiled Bann Esmerelle, I propose Ser Adam Hawke, whom many of you who served at Ostagar would know as the man who was knighted by our King Cailan for services on the battlefield."

Some applause, more murmurs, more talk, and an excited squeak forced from Bethany. Carver's jaw fell open. He swayed, feeling like he had been knocked silly by a bolt of lightning. Bronwyn caught his eye, wishing that Adam had prepared him for this. Perhaps she herself should have, but it had not been her secret.

Some of the young women who had admired Adam earlier took a second and even a third look at him. Others whispered behind their hands, and pointed at Bethany.

Before the vote could be taken, Anora pointed out that the current bann of the city was very much alive, though fled to the Free Marches.

"Bann Esmerelle," she said, "has proved herself a traitor to Ferelden and a criminal, selling free Fereldans for gold. I put it before you, lords and ladies: do you assent to the will of the Crown in stripping that unworthy woman of her title and lands?"

No one sought to defend her. Her allies in the Landsmeet were dead and their kin fled. The vote was passed by acclamation. The bannorn of the City of Amaranthine was declared vacant, and claimed by Ser Adam Hawke, as proposed by the Arl of Amaranthine.



ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

Bann Oswald, an independent spirit from the Bannorn, asked baldly what many people only whispered. "Do we want the blood of mages in the Landsmeet?"

Bryland bridled, and glared at the man.

Fergus shot back, "I want a brave and capable man in the Landsmeet!"

Nathaniel, more calmly, said, "Ser Adam has been serving as castellan in the city, and has routed out a gang of smugglers that the previous bann could not. His brother Carver Hawe is also serving his nation as a Grey Warden."

Carver was luckily still too dazed to say anything of what he was feeling.

Bryland was about to burst out in the Hawkes' defence, but Bann Alfstanna forestalled him.

"Yes, His sister Bethany Hawke, is indeed a mage. A mage who came forward, risking personal danger, to save my life and the lives of many others. Yes, I do think we want someone with that blood in the Landsmeet!"

Lady Seria Mac Coo pinched her nephew until he too spoke up. "Boskydale supports the Hawkes, Your Majesty. We are grateful for Mistress Bethany's selfless act in saving my aunt."

Oswald was not to be put down so easily, and appealed to the Grand Cleric. "Your Grace, what do you think about this?"

Muirin, who was not enjoying herself particularly that day, said quietly. "I see no impediment to Ser Adam. There is no text that excludes *relatives* of mages from the business of ruling. That would set a precedent that I believe no one would want."



ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

"But what if his children have magic? We wouldn't like anything else like that business in Redcliffe... secret mages going mad and murdering half the countryside! And everyone admits that girl there is an apostate!"

Teagan was red with anger and sick with the memory. He was ready to vote for Ser Adam, merely to shut up Bann Oswald.

"I can speak for myself," Adam declared in his rich and resonant voice, stepping out in front of them all. "I know, better than most, the perils and power of magic. I have lived with magic all my life, and I am proud that my sister is an exemplar of one whose magic serves that which is best in her, not that which is most base." He lifted his arms in a graceful, expansive gesture. "But I am not a mage. I must rely on good steel and the strength of a my sword arm, both of which I have offered gladly to king and country. If that is not enough for the nobles here present, I shall continue as I am, a soldier of Ferelden, who serves in whatever capacity he can."

He had won them. Anora called for a vote, and Fergus, looking about with more than a hint of challenge, moved that it be a vote of acclamation. No one demurred, and thus, Adam Hawke became a bann of Ferelden.

No one had a word to oppose to the other candidates for Amaranthine, and thus Blayne Varel, Dan Seyforth, Giles Bliss, and Conn Marfarythen joined the Landsmeet. The five men swore fealty, the largest number to do so at once time in recent Fereldan history. Bliss had been warned

that Drake's Fall has lost some territory to the Wardens, based on ancient land grants. He accepted that calmly, having never expected a holding of his own, much less a bannorn. Besides, he had heard that the ancient Tevinters had collected dragonbone there. Perhaps they had missed a few bits, here and there: perhaps enough to make a go of the place.

This act of the drama completed, people began to shift and fidget and think about their midday meals. Anora was not about to release them., since that would be an outright affront to Teagan Guerrin, who was up next to claim the arling of Redcliffe.

He was the only possible claimant. Not even an unreasonable person could object to him, and Nathaniel Howe made a point of voting for him, which had the effect of making himself appear noble and above petty revenge — and made Teagan seem small in comparison. Teagan was exasperated, since he felt there were strong objections to Nathaniel Howe, and now wished he had gone ahead and raised questions about the young arl's activities in the Free Marches. However, due to precedence, he was unable to do so himself, and had been reluctant to use a proxy who might have suffered for his impertinence.

Nor could any reasonable person object to his new bride. Kaitlyn herself trembled, afraid that some great lord or lady would thunder disapproval of such an insignificant person. It all went by very quickly, though, and the vote

passed by acclamation before Kaitlyn had quite grasped that it was happening. Teagan smiled fondly at her, and there was applause. Kaitlyn had no idea what to do, and turned very red. Her modesty did her no harm with the better-natured members of the Landsmeet.

She was so glad Bevin was playing at Bryland House. He would have started talking and asking questions, and it would have annoyed Teagan no end. She gave a great sigh to herself. She was really and truly an Arlessa! If only Mother were still here to see this! She hardly heard the next order of business... Arl Bryland's marriage to Lady Amell... until it took a loud and unpleasant turn.

Arl Bryland was shouting, "You forget yourself, my lady!" Murmurs, titters, astonished talk was rising. The old lady, Bann Fredegunda, was unembarrassed.

"Don't tell me what I forget and don't forget, my lord!" she growled back. She was stout and white-haired, with a bit of a white beard and moustache as well, and her voice was deep, like a husky bark. "I repeat my question. My lady Leandra, do you still have your courses? Are you still able to conceive children? Your tall lads there can scowl all they like, but this *matters!*"

Carver was distracted by the unspeakable horror that was Adam Hawke, Bann of the City of Amaranthine, by his mother's distress. Bethany wished she could disappear into the floor. Adam resigned himself to a duel, while Leandra was redder than Kaitlyn Guerrin.

"Yes, Bann Fredegunda. While I think it unlikely, I am still technically able to conceive."

Uneasy looks were exchanged. Leonas Bryland took a threatening step forward. "I have a grown daughter and two sons! I *don't* see that this matters. Even if we were to have a child, the odds of having a mage are simply not that high. It was Leandra's first *husband* who was the mage!"

Leandra's blush deepened. She had never told Leonas the story of the Amells and their own history of magic. Now and then an Amell was born that way. Such a birth had ruined her grandfather's prospects of being named Viscount of Kirkwall. Adam, Carver, Charade, and Bethany knew the truth, but were resolutely silent on the matter.

Bann Fredegunda, however, was satisfied. "Oh, the father, was it? Never mind, then."

Some deep breaths of relief, and a few sighs of disappointment. No Landsmeet was quite complete without a trial by combat. The marriage was recognized by acclamation.

Of the high nobles, only Arl Wulffe was left, and his only matter of succession-related business was to present Rothgar to the Landsmeet as his declared heir-apparent. This aroused no opposition and only a little interest. Charade felt a little self-conscious when Rothgar gave her a wink.

"With that, my lords and ladies," said Anora. "Let us adjourn for the midday meal. We shall convene again in two hours."

"Watch out!" shouted Corbus. "The axe is going to fall on

your head!"

A crash of metal against of stone, followed by the delighted squeals of children and a puppy's loud barks.

Bryland House was alive with young Brylands, Kendells, and a Merton at play. The tutor had retired to his room with a headache. The grownups had gone to the Landsmeet, and that had left five children with a large mansion to plunder.

Bevin had the idea of playing Landsmeet. Corbus had led them to a forgotten storage room he found out how to get into, and they pulled out some of Habren's old clothes and some of the arl's clothes and armor. Dressed in somewhat oversized splendor, Faline was Queen, and Jancey, Corbus, Lothar, and Bevin her Court.

"Don't step on my train, Lothar!" Jancey complained. "Look! You tore it! Habren will kill me!"

"No, she won't," Corbus assured her. "We won't let her. She forgot about that chest, anyway. It's not with the others she's taking with her. She's outgrown all those clothes. Aunt Werberga only kept it because she always kept everything of Habren's."

"Really?" Jancey admired the pink and green gown. It made her feel like a rose. It was wicked, but she wished she could keep this dress forever and ever. She told her sister so.

"Don't be greedy," Faline rebuked her. "Nobody likes greedy girls," she whispered, "like horrible, horrible *Habren*."

She and Jancey had beautiful new dresses for tonight, and were even allowed to choose the colors they liked.

Hers was light purple, because purple was her favorite color. Arlessa Leandra said she was 'sweet as a bunch of lavender' in it. Jancey's was pale yellow, and was told she was 'pretty as a primrose.' Faline knew she would miss Bethany, Charade, and dear Arlessa Leandra when they went to live at the Arl of Denerim's estate.

Everyone was sure that Kane would be made an arl. That was a very great thing, and Faline was happy for him, but she wished he had not married Habren. Habren did not like her. She did not like Jancey, either. Kane said they had to be nice to her, no matter what, but of course Habren never looked at Kane in the mean way she did at his sisters.

"Corbus can be Arl of South Reach. Who are you, Lothar?"

"I'm the Warden-Commander of Ferelden," declared that young hero.

"You're not a girl," Jancey pointed out. "How can you be Warden-Commander?"

"The Warden-Commander doesn't have to be a girl," Lothar said. "I heard of one that wasn't. I'm the Boy Warden."

"Well, I'm Ser Bevin the Bold," Bevin said, noisily dragging a longsword strapped over his shoulder. "I have adventures. The Queen's is going to knight me for killing all the Orlesians."

The other children thought this an admirable scheme.

"All right," said the agreeable Faline. "I'll knight you, but you must swear fealty to me forever and ever,"

"On my honor, I promise to be loyal to the Queen, or may

I drop dead in my tracks, and rot!" swore Bevin. The children found the oath very impressive.

"What are you, Jancey?" asked Lothar.

"I'm a mage like Bethany!" said the little girl, waving a broken chair leg found in storage.

Bevin, a little worried, said, "Mother Hannah says it's bad to be a mage."

"Huh!" scoffed Corbus. "That's all she knows. Who's going to heal us when we slay dragons and Orlesians, if we don't have a mage along?"

The meal shared by the great nobles of Ferelden with their Queen was not nearly so pleasant and carefree. One could even describe it as awkward, but it was something to get through. Bronwyn refused to let the tension affect her appetite, which was fairly prodigious after the events of the morning. And she did not have to sit by Habren, which was always a gain. With her husband to her right and Nathaniel to her left, she was happily situated. When he was not conversing with her, Nathaniel was attending with studious courtesy to young Arlessa Kaitlyn. Bronwyn smiled quietly throughout. Nathaniel had always had a talent for quietly needling people in a relentless, passive-aggressive way. Teagan's pleasant demeanour was looking a little strained.

The Grand Cleric and Knight-Commander Harrith were among them, and Anora was diligently keeping the topics of conversation general and innocuous. The cold weather,

everyone's health, the delightful prospect of tonight's ball were gone over in considerable detail. Some knew Anora's game; some were oblivious. Bronwyn realized that she could not see where Habren's hands were, but that her father, on Habren's other side, was blushing and trying to catch his son-in-law's eye.

So Habren was utterly besotted. That could be a good thing. It would certainly keep her occupied. Kane Kendells had said nothing about serving in the army, and indeed had never been trained for it. It was better, perhaps, for him to leave it to the professionals, while he learned something about managing the city of Denerim. He certainly looked very happy, and not at all abashed at Habren's public displays of... er... affection.

Loghain whispered, "Everything's taking longer than I anticipated. We may not get to the Crown today."

Bronwyn agreed, feeling rather glum about it. They had to get through the notoriously contentious Bannorn now, and who knew what they would want to bring up? Technically, new business was supposed to wait until the new monarch was seated, but banns often ignored that. Teagan had shown his hand a bit, wanting to bait them, wanting to display his independence, but she could see no real threat from any of that. It only meant that Anora would be Queen yet one more day.

Even after they rose from the table, they remained in the intimate dining parlor, lingering and talking, sipping wine.

Bronwyn gave Kaitlyn an encouraging smile, not realizing that it took all the young woman's nerve to smile back at the tall and terrible Warden-Commander. Kaitlyn found Bronwyn nearly as frightening as Teyrn Loghain himself.

Bronwyn was actually quite unaware of this. "My congratulations on your official status, Arlessa Kaitlyn. And how is Bevin? Does he still love stories? I hope he will be at the ball tonight."

Kaitlyn, happy to speak of Bevin, realized only belatedly that she should have congratulated Bronwyn in her turn. She stammered, trying to backtrack, and then gave it up.

"Bevin is at Bryland House today. He's been making friends with the Arl's little boys. It's such fun for him. Master... I mean... Arl Kane's sisters are there, too, of course. They're such dear little girls. They're all coming to the ball tonight, and it will be nice for them to have each other."

Kane overheard someone speaking kindly of his sisters, and smiled in Arlessa Kaitlyn's direction. Habren, her eyes fixed on him, noticed it, and dug her fingers into his arm, Kane, not at all discomposed, turned his most charming smile on her. She bloomed like a rose, and pressed indiscreetly against him. Kane smiled even more brightly.

He was an arl now. He was Arl of Denerim, and no one could take it back now. Faline and Jancey would have everything they wanted, and would never go back to that rotten school Aron had sent them to, where the priests and sisters slapped and humiliated them. Kane had made clear to his

sisters' new maid and the young governess that no one was going to lay a hand on his sisters. They were good girls, and if they gave trouble they could be sent to their rooms or be put in a corner; but no one was going to hurt them ever again.

The biggest problem, as he saw it, would be Habren. She was a spoiled bitch who hated his sisters on principle. He had seen it right away. She hated pretty much everyone but her father and Kane himself, as far as he could tell. He kept the smirk from his face. He had always heard that there were noble ladies who would do things that whores retched at, and it was certainly true of Habren. She would do anything – really, absolutely anything – that he wanted. It was good enough sport for now. As long as she kept her hands off Faline and Jancey, he would play his role of devoted young husband. If she didn't... well... he would teach her the same lesson he had taught his brother Aron. It never paid to get in Kane Kendells' way. And no one was allowed to hurt his sisters.

The tumultuous business continued as the Landsmeet reconvened. There were other banns to be confirmed: Bann Grainne's minor son under his uncle's guardianship; Reginalda's daughter and Ceorlic's son. There was a great deal of trouble in the latter, because the younger brother had claims on a certain manor, and the elder brother said he did not, and it took a deal of sorting out, with neither of them satisfied at the end. Their mother,

Lady Rosalyn, stood between them, anxiously looking at one and then the other,

And then the lady burst forth with business of her own. It was quite inappropriate and entirely out of order.

"I want to register a complaint," she huffed, "about the high-handed behavior of the Teyrna of Gwaren, who last Bloomingtide made off with all the horses in the stable of our manor in Lothering!"

Bronwyn felt herself blushing, not expecting to be attacked in such a place over a matter long settled. She stood forth, glaring at the bann's widow.

"Those horses," she said angrily, "were duly requisitioned in the course of an urgent mission necessary to the war against the darkspawn. They were paid for last Solace – and a handsome sum it was. Nor did I take all the horses, since I was especially begged not to take your daughter's pony. Furthermore," she continued, "I fail to see that the loss of the horses has discommoded you in any way, since I know for a fact that no member of your family has visited Lothering since the beginning of the Blight!"

"They were *our* horses!" Lady Rosalyn spat. "You had no right to them!"

"And yet you accepted the payment for them," Bronwyn replied coldly, "for I have the receipt for the payment. Shall I send to Wardens' Compound for it?"

Fergus, also displeased, spoke up. "I remember when you left Ostagar to enforce the treaties. We were short of horses,

and you were hoping to recruit. We were requisitioning and levying all over the kingdom. No one was exempt."

There were some mutters about that. The requisitions were not popular, but no one wanted to see anyone else let off.

"Did Bann Ceorlic receive and accept the payment, Lady Rosalyn?" asked Anora.

Lady Rosalyn's face creased with resentment. "He did, You Majesty. But I know he didn't like it."

"If he wished to register a complaint and ask for a judgment, he should have done so at the time of payment or before," Anora said. "As he is not here, the point is moot."

The family was silenced, nursing their injuries, sulking amongst themselves.

There were a number of marriages and births, all of which required attention. Some property quarrels had to be arbitrated, including one that took over an hour, and had the rest of the Landsmeet yawning. Here and there, a lady or two began slipping away, wanting to have the time to make herself splendid for the night's feasting and dancing.

Another tiresome case of right-of-way dragged on and on. Some of the parties' close neighbors grew restive, demanding that they settle their differences, preferably by combat, so everyone could get on with the actually important business of choosing a king. The parties to the dispute, however, thought nothing as important as the path through the lower water meadow and the offending locked gate, and stood on their ancient rights as lords of Ferelden.

At last it was settled, and an eclectic thrill of anticipation shivered through the Landsmeet. With all the pieces in place on the chessboard, they could at last undertake the great matter of the royal succession. Bronwyn and Loghain exchanged quick, burning glances. Fergus grinned fiercely, and those of the Cousland-Mac Tir party unconsciously readied themselves for a battle of wills and words and whatever else was necessary for victory. Grand Cleric Muirin whispered a brief prayer, hoping that all might yet be well; hoping that there was anyone listening to her.

Anora was about to begin the proceedings, when a disturbance at the door of the Landsmeet Chamber drew everyone's attention. The seneschal hurried up, and with a quick bow, whispered in Anora's ear. She did not frown, but her face grew hard as marble. She nodded, and gave the man a brief command.

"My lords and ladies," she said, admirably composed. "It appears that we have a pair of notable guests."

Wondering, puzzling, speculating, noble voices rose like chattering magpies. Who was important enough to interrupt the Landsmeet? The great double doors were flung wide. The seneschal announced the visitors.

"Your Majesty, an ambassador from Orlais is here, and with him a Knight-Divine of the Grand Cathedral. They demand present audience before you and the Landsmeet!"

CHAPTER 8

PAWN TO
QUEEN

UNINVITED, UNWELCOME,
AND UNINTIMIDATED, THE ORLES-
IANS STALKED SLOWLY THROUGH
THE CROWDS OF FERELDEN NOBLES.

"Your Majesty!" the seneschal called out. "Your Graces! My lords, ladies, and gentlemen of the Landsmeet. I present to you Duke Prosper de Montfort, Ambassador of Empress Celene of Orlais, and the Knight-Divine, Ser Chrysagon de la Crue."

Fergus scowled, and moved closer to the throne, unconsciously protective of Anora. For her part, Anora was enraged at the seneschal. How could the man be so weak-kneed as to admit these intruders? But of course, it was the presence of the Knight-Divine. Cleverly, the Orlesians had sent a figure whose religious prestige gave him entrée everywhere.

Bronwyn was not the only noble present whose first impulse was to reach for her sword, but she was one of the angriest. "How did they come here?" she whispered urgently to Loghain. "The Frostback passes are reportedly closed."

Loghain's eyes blazed the eerie hot blue of burning metal. "What I want to know is why should we allow any

Orlesian intriguer to address the Landsmeet!"

Bryland burst out in anger. "How dare they come here to interfere?"

Wulffe did not like it either, but said, "All the same, we'd better hear what they have to say and get it over with. Otherwise, they'll go behind our backs. And we've got to let the Knight-Divine in."

"Yes," Nathaniel agreed, his voice soft. The Orlesians were almost upon them. "We must hear them. Then we'll understand what we're dealing with."

Teagan was as nervous as the rest. He was a faithful son of the Chantry, but did not want to be put in the position of seeming some sort of Orlesian sympathizer. This embassy was clearly playing on people's devotion to make palatable a presence that otherwise would be unacceptable to the Crown and unlikely to be received until the Landsmeet was over.

To Muirin, the coming of the Knight-Divine was as the footsteps of doom. The Divine must have heard of the troubles in Denerim; must have heard of the sacking of the Cathedral by the angry nobles and soldiers. Who knew what else she had been told? She did not know Ser Chrysagon, not even by reputation, which made him an unknown quality. There was so much going on that she was shut out from. The Queen had mentioned Rendon Howe being enthralled by Blood Magic. Why had nobody informed her of this? Loghain would very likely not listen to her. Perhaps Bronwyn could be persuaded that the Chantry had experience

with such things... that they could *help*? Her fingers sought her pocket and the tiny packet of now-familiar warmth. Reassured, she made an effort to slow her breathing.

Duke Prosper de Montfort, the ambassador, was something quite exotic indeed: the sort of sight not much seen in these parts for the last thirty years. He was a true grand seigneur of Orlais, magnificent as a bird of paradise — or more likely, a fighting cock. The fashionable among the Fereldan nobleman sighed enviously at the sight of the splendid wolf-skin cloak, lined with azure satin and the subtle, many-colored doublet, puffed and slashed and gusseted; cut unlike any doublet in the room. The exquisite white linen of his shirt emerged at collar and cuffs like a swan in foam.

He was older than the Templar: perhaps in his fifties. He was very Orlesian in appearance, with his oiled, forked beard and his thick, sensuous, startlingly pink lips. An air of conscious superiority armored him like the finest dragonbone, for a faint smile curved up irrepressibly as he surveyed the Fereldan great. He leered discreetly at the Queen in what was apparently courtly admiration.

His eyes fixed next on Loghain, and a light appeared in his pale eyes that would have been excitement in a less supercilious man: perhaps it was the joy of the hunter at the sight of his prey. He looked further and saw Bronwyn. He eyed her up and down and smiled faintly. Bronwyn could not tell if he was expressing compassion, condescension, or contempt. Perhaps a combination. When

his smirk broadened at the sight of Scout at her side she wanted to cut him down where he stood.

The Knight-Divine was not so alien. Bronwyn studied the man: tall, dark, not unattractive, perhaps about forty. He was in the impressive armor of a Templar, made more impressive by decoration never seen on that of a mere Knight-Commander. Chrysagon de la Crue, for his part, looked about him with some interest, his eyes seeking the faces about him, searching for and then finding the Grand Cleric, who would have been carefully described to him.

The two men reached the throne and bowed elaborately, with foreign grace.

Anora, drawn up so straight and unyielding that she appeared taller than usual, was absolutely expressionless.

"Greetings, Duke Prosper, and to you, Knight-Divine. Your arrival is an unexpected... pleasure."

It was Duke Prosper who first replied, bowing yet again.

"It is my honor," he said, "to see with my own eyes the renowned Queen Anora, the one that my own Empress has described as a 'rose amongst the brambles.'"

Some uncertain looks amongst the Landsmeet, as the nobles realized that they had just been described as 'brambles.'

Anora's expression did not alter. "I thank you and your empress for such compliments. However, we are engaged in settling the internal affairs of Ferelden. Perhaps in a day or two, when we are at leisure, the Crown will have time to entertain you appropriately."

Ser Chrysagon spoke up. His Orlesian accent was thick, but not impossible to understand.

"Our business here permits of no delay."

"That is true, alas," said Duke Prosper, with a careless shrug. "Our ship labored through foul winds and hard weather, and we were almost too late to prevent our Fereldan neighbors from committing a most tragic mistake."

Loghain scowled, thinking it over. A ship. He could see how they had arrived now, with no warning at all. They had put far out to sea, away from the usual trade routes, and had come into Denerim Harbor without alerting any of the agents he had stationed along the coast. When the ship arrived, the Knight-Divine had taken the lead, and no one had had the nerve to oppose him. With a gesture, Loghain summoned a captain, and gave quick, whispered orders to find that ship and take the its company into custody, with no exceptions — not even for Templars.

Anora's blue eyes searched the Landsmeet, silencing the gossipers, seeking out those who seemed pleased at the unexpected presence. There were not many, but there were some. More appeared intimidated and anxious. Slowly, her eyes returned to Duke Prosper, and rested there, contemplating the man.

She had heard of him as a great noble of immense wealth, close to the Empress. However, this would be viewed as a hazardous mission, since he was clearly here to threaten and insult a nation that had no reason to love Orlais. Had

he fallen from favor? Or was he trusting to the ancient traditions that protected the person of an ambassador? Was this a mere adventure for him... a mission that would make amusing dinner-time small talk once safe at home? For all she knew, this Duke Prosper was a great gambler.

She let him wait for some time before she spoke. He was a good player and did not shrink or flinch. The same calm smirk was on his lips throughout. Done with him, she let her eyes rest on the Knight-Divine. He also seemed unperturbed, armored in righteousness as well as in silverite.

"You will hardly be surprised," said Anora in a cool, distant voice, "if we are wary of the intentions of Orlesians. Our most recent experiences have been... how shall I put it?... disagreeable. Assassination attempts, however clumsy and incompetent," she sneered slightly, "are hardly the way to win trust from your neighbors. Having failed in numerous schemes, it is clear that you have decided that it is time to try something different. Speak your words, and then you shall be escorted from the Landsmeet Chamber, and your comfort seen to."

"You dare to accuse us of collusion with assassins?" The Knight-Divine scoffed. "We left Orlais unsure if a brutal attack might not had slain the Grand Cleric herself! We have rushed to her assistance, determined to protect her from heretics and maleficar!"

"Grand Cleric," Anora said crisply, addressing the older woman. "Have you been in danger from the Crown of Ferelden?"

"On the contrary, Your Majesty," said Muirin. "I was in danger,



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as you were, from the plotting of renegade priests. Both of us were drugged, and then rescued by the same good people."

Duke Prosper was soothing and sympathetic. "We quite understand your situation, Your Grace, surrounded as you are by so many swords."

"And where are these 'renegade priests?'" demanded Ser Chrysagon. "I wish to question them."

"In due time, that may be possible," said Muirin, putting a brave face on her defiance.

"Perhaps," Anora said. "However, their crimes were not only against the Grand Cleric, but against the Crown of Ferelden. No doubt something of the disturbance was related by those murderers and bandits who were not killed on the spot during their cowardly attack on the Arl of Denerim's wedding. No doubt they had colorful tales to tell when they returned to those who had sent them. Incomplete tales, but colorful. At least they had more to tell you than those we captured, and those who were sent to murder the Teyrn and Teyrna of Gwaren. Their tales, alas, were shared only with us... before their executions." She smiled at the two visitors with poisonous sweetness.

"Your Majesty," Loghain growled. "We are wasting time on these... gentlemen. They know what happened, and we know that they know. If they have something to say, let them say it, and then get out." He murmured to Bronwyn, "I've sent an officer to see that the ship is impounded and the crew locked up."

"Sensibly spoken, my lord Teyrn," Anora agreed. She



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wished it were possible to dismiss the rest of the Landsmeet, and hear the embassy out with only the Council to witness. That could not be done. It would infuriate the Bannorn. She could well guess the Empress' game here. These men had come to threaten them. If the Fereldans were cowed, the Empress won. If the Fereldans defied her, or harmed her ambassadors, she might well still win, and have a suitable reason for war as well.

She addressed the Orlesians, not mincing words. "We expect that the two of you have had considerable time to rehearse your message. Speak then, but speak prudently... and to the point. We are not well-disposed to Orlais at the moment, and are uninterested in delaying tactics."

"Fereldans," sighed Duke Prosper to his companion. "So very blunt. So lacking in subtlety."

"Watch your tongue, my lord Duke," Anora said coldly. "You are here on sufferance. We have more important matters at hand today than playing games with you. Speak, and we shall judge your words."

"Then I shall begin," said Ser Chrysagon, "for the needs and duties of the Chantries far outweigh those of mere mortal kings and queens. I came here as soon as I heard that the Grand Cleric was in danger. threatened by maleficar running rampant in the streets. Is it not true that a known blood mage was seen leading the rioters in the Grand Cathedral? An apostate by the name of Jowan, a dangerous creature capable of any evil?"

At the rising murmurs from the Landsmeet, Anora flicked a quelling glance about her, and replied to the Templar.

"I know nothing of a maleficar named Jowan. A Grey Warden of that name saved my life after I was poisoned by an Orlesian bard who had infiltrated amongst my servants. Yes, my servant Erlina – sent to me by the Empress when I was first married – was poisoning me. If the Warden-Commander had not sent Warden Jowan to me, I would have died. Warden Jowan is a gentle and scholarly man, devoted to his duty and courageous in his service. He is indeed a mage, fortunately for me. Calling a mage a maleficar is, of course, a cheap and easy accusation. Do not waste my time. I'm sure you have had plenty of opportunities to fabricate all sorts of "proof" against him."

Offended, the Knight-Divine said, "Do you deny that this Jowan is an apostate?"

"Of course I do," Anora replied calmly. "He is a Grey Warden. Thus, he cannot be an apostate."

"But he is not the only mage openly defying the Chantry, I believe. There are dozens of mages among the soldiers in the army, insufficiently guarded and supervised, wandering at will through the country. The Divine is deeply alarmed at this situation."

"Teyrna Bronwyn," said Anora, "as Warden-Commander, perhaps you could best speak to this matter."

"Gladly, Your Majesty," said Bronwyn, stepping closer to the Templar.

His brows knit in surprise as he saw her eyes. The unnatural color was obviously a sign of some malevolent influence.

Bronwyn saw the expression. While it was unclear to her exactly what the man was thinking, it was certainly not approving. Was it the scar? Was she not dainty enough or painted enough to suit an Orlesian? Well, sod that.

She said, "The mages are bound by ancient treaty with the Grey Wardens to serve against the Blight. It is their duty to fight the darkspawn and heal the wounded, not to sit at their ease in a Circle Tower while good men and women perish. The mages have saved hundreds of lives. Every soldier who has served at Ostagar knows this. Those here present who have so served – " she flung a gesture out to encompass Loghain, Bryland, Wulffe, and banns like Stronar and Hawke " – know this. While it might suit Orlais for our soldiers to die in anguish or live crippled, it does not contribute to the security of Ferelden. However, practical concerns aside, the mages are obligated. I presented the treaty, which both the First Enchanter and the Knight-Commander accepted as valid. The mages, with their Templars, then traveled to Ostagar to fulfill their obligations. Some of them have subsequently become Wardens, and all have served with honor."

"And by what authority," snarled the Knight-Divine, "did you present those treaties? The Warden-Commander of Orlais has no record of the First Warden appointing you Commander. You appointed yourself."

"I am not answerable to the Warden-Commander of Orlais," Bronwyn shot back. "And I do not intend to bandy words with you about a subject of which you are completely ignorant. We Wardens have secrets, Knight-Divine, and I am not sharing them with you."

"Fair enough," grunted Wulffe, loud enough for the Chamber to hear him. There were answering mutters of assent. Not everyone liked the Grey Wardens, but everyone knew that Chantry had no authority over them.

The Knight-Divine, understanding that this argument carried no weight with the Fereldans, changed his attack.

"This is all a questionable matter, and must be threshed out at the highest level," he granted. "Higher than you, my lady; higher than me. What is not open to question is the outrageous conduct of another Fereldan noble, who declared an apostate free of Chantry supervision. This apostate was no Grey Warden; no Circle mage serving on even the thin pretext of an antiquated, badly-translated treaty. I call this Arl Bryland of Southridge to account for his criminal protection of a female mage, purported to be his mistress! We demand that she be turned over to the Chantry for examination and disposition!"

The Chamber erupted like a volcano. Most of the nobles were outraged. A few were delighted at the scandalous nature of the accusation, especially as the mother of the mage had married the Arl only a few days before. Habren was pink with glee, until she understood clearly that it was her father

who was implicated. That made the matter... awkward.

Muirin tried not to drop her head into her hands in despair. Whatever rubbish the escaped assassins had told their employers, it was inevitable that the intelligence would be either outdated or wrong. Bryland would never forgive this insult, and his fellow high nobles were likely to support him.

Bethany's face crumpled. Her mother took her in her arms. Charade put her arm around her shoulders and glared at the Knight-Divine. Hers was not the only angry face.

Leonas Bryland stepped forward, but not alone. His stepsons were on either side, as the arl stood toe to the toe with the Templar.

"I'm Bryland. Of South Reach. In Ferelden, a man is held accountable for his words. Sometimes one can make allowances for someone who is drunk or a child, or too half-witted to understand that's he's given insult. Since you're none of those things, I'll have to assume you meant to be insulting. You've defamed an honorable young girl, who happens to be my stepdaughter, I hope out of ignorance rather than malice. Bethany Hawke saved my son's life, the day a sneering, masked Orlesian shot him for a bit of sport. She could have stayed safe and hidden, but she came forward, asking for no reward, and used her gifts freely and without stint."

"That she did!" Lady Seria MacCoo declared, her old voice high and fluting. "Saved my life, too!"

"And mine," said Bann Alfstanna, studying the Knight-Divine with a look of grave disappointment.

"Knight-Divine," Anora said, her clear tones cutting over the rest of the noise, "I have confirmed Bethany Hawke's freedom due to her services to the kingdom. There is a precedent, established in King Maric's reign. A mage named Wilhelm was given his freedom for his services in the war against Orlais." The slight emphasis on the last word was subtle, but the implication was clear. "And as to your insulting words... they are unworthy of your office. If you cannot speak civilly, then you will be ejected from the Landsmeet."

Ser Chrysagon glared at her, eyes narrowed. "The Divine will not endure such defiance!"

Murin had had enough. "Your Majesty, may I speak?"

"Of course, Your Grace." Anora was gracious but watchful as the older women turned to the Templar.

"Knight-Divine, it is apparent that in your zeal to protect the Chantry you have come hastily, with faulty information as to what has been transpiring here in Ferelden. Perhaps it would be best if you and I were to meet privately. I can give you a true account of events since the beginning of the Blight, and a factual account of the poisoning of Queen Anora and her subsequent cure. I shall also tell you of how the priests drugged me during their foolish attempt to imprison Queen Anora. Before you offend the nobles of this kingdom beyond hope, I beg you to listen to me."

"An excellent suggestion," Anora said. "Perhaps, Knight-Divine, you should heed Her Grace."

"And then," Bryland said ominously, "My family will

expect an apology."

Ser Chrysagon drew himself up, nostrils flared in contempt, but he gave the Grand Cleric a curt nod, and a slight bow to Anora.

"Your Majesty."

The faintest of smiles appeared on Loghain's lips. He caught Duke Prosper's eye, all but saying, "Check."

But Duke Prosper was not about to surrender.

"Of course we wish to hear from the Grand Cleric herself of her sufferings and difficulties. As dutiful sons of the Chantry, we will do everything possible for its greater glory. That, however, is only a part of our mission. While the Knight-Divine occupies himself with the great affairs of the spirit, I am left with mere worldly cares. The Empress, alarmed for her good friends and neighbors in Ferelden, has sent me to offer advice and support in this crucial hour. Ferelden has choices to make, and perhaps some choices are available that you have not considered."

He turned slowly to the nobles, gesturing grandly in what Loghain thought an insufferably Orlesian way.

"The Empress wishes only the best for Ferelden. Is it not a land that would have been part of her Empire, had not the valor and spirit of King Maric taken it on another path? She has heard much of the beauty of Ferelden: of its wild landscapes, of its fertile soil, of its sturdy, independent folk. It is a land of unceasing interest to her. She has met many Fereldans, and respected them for their keen

minds and courageous hearts. Only a year ago, the noble Teyrn Cousland visited us, and was much admired by all at Court... even by the Empress herself! It is a particular pleasure to see his son among you today, and judge how well he measures up to his father's example."

That could mean anything – and nothing – but there were fools in the Landsmeet who were pleased by it. Fergus was not one of them. Bryce Cousland's mission to Orlais had ultimately cost him his life. Bronwyn, reminded of Marjolaine's patronizing words, tasted bile in her mouth.

"Your father was a charming man, and not unskilled; but he played the Game, and lost."

"The Empress," said Duke Prosper, "has heard disturbing rumors. By the will of your brave, martyred young King, you must meet to choose a new ruler today. Queen Anora... so excellent, so wise... alas! ...is now only the Queen Dowager, and power must be vested in new hands. These rumors speak also of how the wind blows from Ferelden, of a new name on the throne – the name of one without royal blood. This name would prove a disaster and a disgrace to the name of Ferelden amongst the family of nations."

"And what name would the Empress prefer?" Fergus growled. "We're all eager to know to know her favorites."

Teagan experienced a brief thrill of horror. If Duke Prosper named him as a favorite of the Empress, he would never live down the shame; not until the day he died. Even if all the world forgot, he would still remember.

"Your unfortunate country," Duke Prosper said, voice oily with sympathy, "is poor in all but honor. It is under attack by a monstrous enemy. How can it hope to survive, with the darkspawn lurking under our very feet?"

There was a murmur of concern. Bronwyn's tale of darkspawn in Amaranthine had frightened a great many people.

The Duke spread his hands in a gesture of open-hearted sincerity. "The Empress is merciful and compassionate. Legions of chevaliers stand ready to protect Ferelden from this ancient evil. The power and wealth of Orlais will render unnecessary your burdensome levies of men and supplies. Come, my friends, shelter yourself under the banner of the Lion of Orlais, and fear no more. Choose who you will as king... or queen," he added carelessly, "but let that choice then pay homage to the Empress as her viceroy in Ferelden! Gold will pour into this country like a river; trained warriors will take the place of hungry, frightened peasants. Retain your domains, retain your fortunes, retain your loyalty to Ferelden! Recognize the sovereignty of the Empress and free yourselves from the wearisome tasks of government. You will find that the yoke of Orlais, after all, is sweet."

Ruffled, furious, bewildered, frightened, contemptuous: there were as many responses as there were people attending the Landsmeet. The noise swirled up in a cacophony of indignation and anxiety. Duke Prosper's smirk widened at the chaos he had unleashed.

Loghain snarled at Duke Prosper, "You've delivered your



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message. Now get out of my country."

The Orlesian shrugged, "Ah, but it is not 'your' country yet, is it, my friend?"

Noisy as it was, Fergus made himself heard throughout the room.

"I will *kill* anyone who moves that we offer homage to the Empress! *Anyone!*"

Anora had had enough of the disturbance. She beckoned an officer of her personal guard to her and gave orders. Then she gestured at her seneschal to call the Chamber to order.

"Peace for the Queen's word!" bellowed that leather-lunged functionary.

Other nobles added their shouts of "Peace!" to his. Reluctantly, the Landsmeet subsided into attention.

Anora said, "Duke Prosper, you are a brave man to suggest such things to our face. Our thanks for your trouble. Now, take your rest after your strenuous journey. My guards will see you – and you, Knight-Divine – to your quarters. After the business of the kingdom is settled, the Grand Cleric will have time for a meeting, and we will, in good time, compose a suitable answer for you to present to the Empress."

Enraged, the Knight-Divine's hands moved to his greatsword. "You dare to make us your prisoners?"

Bronwyn, who was closest to him, spoke softly. "Don't touch your sword. Just don't. You do not seem to understand with whom you are dealing. We are not unarmed children; neither are we terrified, starving apostates on the run. If you



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draw your sword here in the Queen's presence, you will die." She gave him a quick, humorless smile. "And I may be the one to kill you. The Queen is offering you hospitality. Take it."

Duke Prosper shrugged elaborately. "As for me, I am all gratitude for the Queen's gracious care. *Allons-y, de la Crue.*" He put his hand on the other Orlesian's shoulder, reminding him to bow, and the men left the Chamber, under heavy guard.

A voice from the crowd jeered at them. "And you can kiss my noble, hairy Fereldan arse!"

Laughter: some genuine, some a bit forced. Anora, wisely, chose to hear neither the gibe nor the response.

Once the doors closed behind them, Fergus turned to Anora. "Your Majesty, I think everyone could use a drink."

She smiled at him, and ordered the seneschal to have wine served all around.

It was a welcome break, and the wine was of the best quality. Bronwyn moved to Loghain's side, wanting to vent a little at the unwelcome interruption.

"This is maddening," she hissed. "Just as our chess game is set up, these Orlesians come and knock the pieces helter-skelter!"

Loghain shrugged. "In real life, the pieces are *always* knocked helter-skelter. I'm a fairly good chess player myself, but I've never been taken in by the metaphor. A good chessplayer is neither automatically a good politician nor a good general."

"Really? Father made me play chess with him all the time.

He thought it essential in teaching one to think ahead."

Loghain drank his wine slowly, considering. "I suppose it's good for that, but only just. Life is too complicated to emulate chess." He chuckled, and then explained himself more fully.

"Imagine what a game of chess would be if all the chessmen had their own agendas! If you were not only uncertain about your adversary's men, but also a little uncertain about your own; if your knight could shuffle himself on to a new square on the sly; if your cleric could wheedle your pawns out of their places; and if your pawns, hating you because they *are* pawns, could make away from their appointed squares in order to see you checkmated. You might be the most foresighted of players, and still you might be beaten by your own pawns. You'd be especially likely to be beaten, if you regarded your pieces with contempt. Does that sound hard? It would be. And yet, this imaginary chess I've described is easy compared with the game a man has to play against his fellow men with other fellow men for his instruments. Of course, I've never claimed to be any sort of politician," he admitted, "and sometimes I despair even of being a passable general."

Bronwyn drank her wine, glumly agreeing with him about the impossibility of getting people to do exactly what she wanted. She certainly had not wanted Anora to mention the Tevinter blood mages in front the Landsmeet in the Queen's Speech, but she had. The Grand Cleric could not possibly have missed that.

Another round of wine was served, and then the nobles were called on to begin deliberations for the Crown. By this time they were feeling rather mellow, and much recovered from the Orlesians' threats.

Once again, Fergus Cousland had precedence, and ascended into the Speaker's Gallery. This presentation and those that followed had been carefully planned out in the preceding days.

"My friends, many here can boast of their share of the blood of Calenhad the Great. The Couslands are the closest kin to the Theirins, through Princess Deirdre Theirin, daughter of King Vanedrin, sister of King Brandel, and wife of Teyrn Ardal Cousland. The Rebel Queen, Moira Therin and my grandfather Sarim Cousland were first cousins; King Maric and my father were second cousins. My sister Bronwyn and I are third cousins of the late King Cailan, and thus our claim to the throne is the strongest through the Theirin bloodline."

Calm, confident, he smiled, taking in the room. Everyone seemed to be following, nodding in agreement.

"I was trained from youth to be Teyrn of Highever, and Highever needs its teyrn, ravaged and wounded as it is. I cannot leave it. Instead, I propose for the Crown she whose claim is equal to my own, and who has served her country throughout its present crisis with undaunted courage and resource. Let Bronwyn Cousland the Dragonslayer rule as Queen in Ferelden, and let her husband, the Hero of River

Dane, Loghain Mac Tir, rule beside her!"

A roar of approval and relief. The lords of Highever, Amaranthine, South Reach, and West Hills were all united, which made it largely a settled matter. No one was squawking with outrage, though Teagan Guerrin was torn with guilt and uncertainty. There was his wife, Kaitlyn, dutifully applauding with the rest, and then hesitating when she saw his face. He took her hand and tried to smile reassuringly.

Kane wondered what this would mean for him. His father-in-law had spoken to him of this as something the country needed, and Kane was not secure enough in his holding to openly defy him. And why should he? Who else was claiming the throne? He would cast his two votes — one for Denerim, one of the bannorn of South Docks — for Bronwyn and Loghain. Loghain was a forbidding old wardog, but seemed to know what he was doing. His own father had always thought a lot of Loghain. Bronwyn was a good-looking girl, and had been nothing but civil to him and nice to Faline and Jancey. Habren hated her with a passion. There his wife was, mouth wrinkled like a prune at the idea of Bronwyn as Queen. He smirked. Yes. He would definitely be voting for Bronwyn. He would tell Habren it was out of respect for her father, Arl Bryland. That would drive her absolutely mad.

No one was declaring himself or herself in opposition. Some calls of "Question!" were heard, but that was only to be expected.

"Can Grey Wardens hold titles?"

Three different banns piled on with that one. Bryland was ready with the answer.

"While Grey Wardens are generally expected to surrender titles after offering themselves as recruits, there is no law in the entire Fereldan Codex that demands it. No law declares a Grey Warden ineligible to hold any lordship. In this special case, the need for an heir of royal blood trumps the usual traditions."

"Anybody else checked the law?" demanded Bann Fredegunda. "We don't want any mistakes."

Anora immediately called a law clerk forward, bearing a massive tome. The clerk then swore formally before the Grand Cleric that he had also searched through all the edicts, proclamations, rulings, decrees, laws, and statutes of Ferelden, and had found nothing that excluded Grey Wardens from inheriting lands or titles that were theirs by blood right.

"And what are the Grey Wardens going to say about it?" wondered old Bann Pimkin.

"Lord and Ladies of Ferelden," Bronwyn said, prepared for this, too, "the Grey Wardens beyond our borders have not come forward to fight beside us. I am in communication with some of the Grey Warden posts. Only the Warden-Commander of Nevarra has offered me any real assistance whatever, and that was limited to advice and information. His advice was to expect no help from my brother and sister Wardens, for the First Warden has forbidden it."

A great deal of indignation was expressed. Bronwyn spoke louder.

"It is largely believed that the attack on Ferelden is a mere feint and that the *real* attack will be directed at someplace they regard as more important: namely, their own lands. The First Warden has written to me, but seems unaware that Ferelden is not a province of Orlais. I am given to understand by the Nevarran Warden-Commander that the First Warden is surrounded by Orlesian advisers and secretaries. Therefore, whatever the Grey Wardens in the rest of Thedas may think, I feel no need to heed it. We must fight the Blight in our lands in our own way, with our own soldiers and our own allies. We can fight it more effectively if Loghain and I have clear authority to do so."

Most people thought her reasoning sound, for who indeed cared what some folk in the Anderfels thought or did? Teagan, however, thought his head would explode if he said nothing.

"And what of Alistair?" he burst out. "You do not hold yourself bound to renounce a title. Why then should Alistair be bound? Should he not also have his rights?"

"Alistair?" was the next question from the nearest banns. "Who's he?"

"Yes," echoed Bann Oswald. "Who is this 'Alistair' fellow?"

Before Teagan could answer, Bronwyn spoke first. "Alistair was told by his guardian Arl Eamon that he was King Maric's bastard. He is a fellow Grey Warden and a very fine warrior."

Loghain fumed in silence, hating that this had been brought up. It would only shame the memory of Maric and worse, of Rowan.

"Really?" Bann Stronar said, feigning surprise. He had been told all about it by Bryland one night when they were in their cups. "Maric had a bastard? It's news to me. Not that it matters. We're hardly going to put a bastard on the throne."

Adam Hawke turned to Carver, and whispered, "Alistair is *King Maric's son*?"

Carver, who had heard bits of gossip, shrugged and smirked. It was rare that he was one-up on Adam. The rest of the Landsmeet was transfixed with delight at the most thrilling piece of gossip to come out of the Landsmeet so far: even better than the bit about Bryland sleeping with his mage stepdaughter, since this appeared to be true.

"Maric didn't acknowledge him?" asked Bann Frandarel. "Why not? Loghain, did Maric tell you about this?"

"No," Loghain forced himself to say. "He never did. The boy resembles Maric. He's a fine lad – saved me from an assassin's blade. I don't believe he made up the story."

"Of course he didn't!" Teagan exploded. "Eamon told me the same thing. The boy's mother was a Redcliffe servant who died in the birthing. King Maric entrusted the boy to Eamon, who raised him."

"But he never told anyone else?" pressed Bann Frandarel.

The Grand Cleric spoke up. "Arl Eamon told me."

A silence fell. Muirín said, "Arl Eamon decided to give

Alistair to the Chantry when the boy turned ten. He told me of Alistair's birth, and felt this would be the best thing for him. He did not want me to query the King about the matter, and said that he had consulted with him. Last year, Warden-Commander Duncan conscripted Alistair into the Grey Wardens, shortly before Alistair was due to take his vows as a Templar."

"This all sounds pretty dodgy," Bann Sighard remarked. "Keeping everything such a secret... hiding the boy away... not providing for him... It's not like Maric. How old is the lad?"

"Twenty, my lord," Bronwyn said.

"Born years after the Queen died," mused Bann Alfstanna. "The King could have married again... or recognized a mistress. Why not acknowledge his son?"

"Something wrong with the mother, I expect," sniped Bann Fredegunda. "An elf, most likely. Maric fancied them. Is that it?"

Teagan could answer that honestly. "I know nothing about the mother, other than that she was a servant. Not even her name."

Nathaniel spoke up, his voice cool and rational. "What difference does it make? Warden Alistair, however satisfactory as a Grey Warden, is hardly a contender for the Crown. Or is he?" He frowned at Teagan. "Is he trying to stand on his rights? He'll need proof of a secret marriage, or a written acknowledgement at the very least."

"No, he doesn't want to be king," Teagan admitted, feeling

miserable and out-manuevered. "He wrote and told me so."

"Well," Wulffe jumped in. "There you are. I've met the lad myself, and he's a fine young fellow, just as Bronwyn says. Very handy with a sword. I think we should set the matter aside for now. Once the succession is settled, the new King and Queen can decide what to do for Alistair. Grant him the name Fitzmaric or Fitzroy – give him a manor – set up a new bannorn for him somewhere – or whatever. But *later*."

And that was that. To Teagan's painful disappointment, the issue became a non-issue with a few words and a reference to the future. What had he done? What had Eamon done? His brother had wanted so much to protect Cailan – to protect the Theirin line. He had protected it so thoroughly that it had now ceased to be.

But the Landsmeet was far from over. Teagan was relieved that Bann Babcock had not lost his head, as Teagan had. The old man called for the question that deeply concerned the Arl of Redcliffe.

"So what about the succession? What if the Girl Warden gets herself killed chasing after dragons and darkspawn?"

"Fergus is my heir-presumptive," Bronwyn said tightly.

"That's all fine and proper," Babcock replied, "But does Fergus become King at that point? Does Loghain goes back to being Teyrn of Gwaren? Don't know that there's anything like 'Queen Dowager' for men," he chuckled. "Of course, Bronwyn's just a mite younger than Loghain. Reckon it's more likely she'd be the one left."



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Loghain was quite unamused.

Bryland said, "We believe that granting Loghain the Crown Matrimonial is the best solution. If either of them — Maker forbid! — should be lost, the other will continue to rule."

Teagan fell all the blood rush to his head at the words "Crown Matrimonial."

"Absolutely not!" he shouted. "The throne belongs to the blood of Calenhad! If Bronwyn died, Loghain could marry... *anybody*... and their children could inherit the throne." Desperately, he turned to Fergus, "Are you *certain* you don't want to press your claim?"

"Yes," Fergus shot back. "I am absolutely certain. Here is my plan, and it can be made part of the succession agreement. Bronwyn and Loghain rule jointly, which can only be lawful if Loghain is granted the Crown Matrimonial. If Bronwyn and Loghain have issue, that child would be the heir-apparent. Their joint issue takes precedence. If Loghain predeceases Bronwyn, any child she bore to a subsequent husband would have be in the line of succession after a child of both her and Loghain. If there is no child, I — with whatever heirs I ultimately may have by the time both of them are deceased — am declared the heir-presumptive of them both. If my line fails, the succession falls to Queen Anora and hers. After Queen Anora and her heirs, any child of Loghain from a subsequent marriage succeeds. If all that fails, the next closest relations are the Howes, then the Brylands. Bronwyn and Loghain can sign



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the pact as part of the coronation rite. Does this compromise satisfy you, my lords and ladies?"

This was complicated, and needed repetition and explication.

"Let's see," Wulffe considered. "Bronwyn and Loghain's children, followed by the children Bronwyn might have from another marriage. Then Fergus and his heirs, Then Anora and hers. Then Loghain's children from a later marriage. Then the Howes, followed by the Brylands. I think the Kendells would be next — "

Kane Kendells perked up at these words. He was in the line of succession. That was nice to know, though putting all those people aside the way he did Aron would be biting off more than he could chew. Still, it was nice to be in the line of succession. Distinguished.

"It doesn't sound bad, Fergus," Wulffe allowed. "Not bad at all. Gives you your due. I don't think any reasonable person could object."

"I object," Teagan declared. "I don't see that Queen Anora and her heirs," he bowed in respectful apology to the dowager on the throne, "have any place in the succession at all. The point is to preserve the blood of Calenhad. I absolutely cannot accept that proposal as it stands."

To Anora's chagrin, she found herself knocked out of the succession with casual dispatch after an infuriatingly short debate. On the other hand, most people felt that Loghain's children from a subsequent marriage *should* be treated as heirs, because once he was legally and officially King, how could

princes and princesses not have the right of inheritance?

Loghain rolled his eyes. Marrying Bronwyn was one thing: he could not imagine marrying anyone else, ever. He was irritated for Anora's sake, too. Still, all was not lost. It looked like she and Cousland were a certain thing. Cousland's rights would be hers. The sooner they married, the better; and the sooner they produced a child, the happier he would be. Removing Anora from the succession today eventually would be a moot point. Let Teagan think he had had his way in something.

The wrangling went on for some time. Loghain watched it with a jaundiced eye. Banns stood up and spoke their minds, merely to hear themselves talk, or to boast at home later of having taken part in the debate. The light in the Landsmeet Chamber dimmed, and was supplemented with torches and candles. People grew restless, ready for the feast.

"But what about the Orlesians?" Lady Rosalyn fretted, whispering anxiously to her son, the new Bann Ceorlic. "They don't want Loghain on the throne! Will they declare war? Maybe you should abstain, darling!"

"Can't," Ceorlic the Third whispered back. "Loghain would never forgive it, and he's a lot closer and more dangerous than the Orlesians at the moment. We can send a letter later through Uncle Bresson in the Free Marches, assuring the Empress of our respect."

They were not the only people concerned about Orlais, though no one wanted to be the one to come right out and

talk about it. Loghain was concerned about Orlais himself, and decided to lance that boil of anxiety by bringing up improvements to coastal defenses the following day.

"Hear me!" cried Anora, fighting to conceal her wounded pride. Fereldans were ungrateful creatures, but perhaps that was simply human nature. "I call for a vote! Does the Landsmeet recognize Loghain Mac Tir and Bronwyn Cousland as King and Queen of Ferelden, ruling jointly?"

"Wait!" shouted Bann Frandarel. "I'm willing to vote aye, but before they're crowned I want their signatures on the succession agreement."

A rumble of assent to that.

Loghain had had enough. "Some clerk can prepare the document and have it ready by tomorrow for the first order of business. Since people will be up late tonight, let's start proceedings at noon. We'll sign the agreement and be crowned on the spot! If you have a candidate you prefer for King, speak up! If you don't... then it's time to vote. We have work to do."

"I agree," Bronwyn declared, making herself heard. "If you're not ready to vote on the main issue now, you never will be. Will you have me? Will you have Loghain? Speak now."

"Yes!" Anora said, determined to maintain control of her last Landsmeet. "Lords and ladies of Ferelden, do you accept the Teyrn and Teyrna of Gwaren as your lawful King and Queen?"

"Aye!" shouted Fergus. Bryland, Howe, and Wulffe joined in, and a rolling thunder of acclamation rang from the

floor of the Landsmeet, boiling in a crescendo to the very ceiling. The dogs stood up and barked, rather startled at the noise, though Scout and Amber thought nothing could be more natural than for the other humans to grant dominance to their people.

Carver punched his brother's shoulder. "Adam! Yell louder!" Hawke punched Carver back, grinning, but indulged him with an enthusiastic bellow. Carver still thought Adam's confirmation as bann pretty ghastly, but at least today Adam could do something useful, and vote for Bronwyn.

Reluctantly, haltingly, Teagan added his 'Aye!' to the rest, keeping his grave reservations to himself.

The voting over, the seneschal shouted, "Long life to their Majesties: King Loghain and Queen Bronwyn! Maker guide and preserve them!"

More shouts, more acclaim, plenty of happy backslapping and half-drunken cheers. Bronwyn and Loghain, hand in hand, in armor, stood before the Landsmeet and faced their subjects for the first time. Bronwyn could not decide if she had won a victory over tremendous odds by heroic ability... or simply done something extremely underhanded.

Anora forced a brilliant smile and descended from the dais to make way for her father and stepmother. She had not expected to be swept aside with such brisk dispatch. Of course she was glad for Father, and this was what the country needed, since Cailan had removed Anora herself from contention. It was hurtful, though, and awkward.

Theoretically, Bronwyn had the right to toss Anora out of the Queen's apartments immediately, though Anora knew that Bronwyn would do nothing so rude and inconsiderate. Still, Anora must move out, and quickly, in order to avoid talk that she was sulky and repining. There were always the rooms she had had before she married Cailan. She had been happy there, and perhaps might be so again. And then, in two months, there was Highever House...

Loghain took in the Landsmeet with careful scrutiny, assessing who was pleased, who was not so pleased, who was biding his time, who was too dim to do anything but follow along, who would be useful, and who would not. What would Maric think of this? A betrayal? Or a grand, uproarious joke? Only a fool could imagine the glory of kingship as anything but a burden: the heaviest, the hardest, the most challenging of all.

Within an hour, people were crowding into the Great Hall of the Palace, fighting for their places at the Opening Feast. It was beginning later than the cooks had planned, and those worthies were tearing their hair over their struggles not to burn the dinner. In the end they had waited, and waited, and still had to rush at the last minute.

The guests were a bit frantic, too, for the late session had left little time for dressing and primping. Those who had left early felt vindicated. If they had no vote to cast, why stay? Lady Myrella, Bann Stronar's wife, secure in



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her embroidered gown and braided hair, felt she had missed little. Loghain and Bronwyn were King and Queen, which is what everyone knew was going to happen; so Myrella felt she had missed only a lot of silly speechifying. Some lords and ladies were delayed by the children left at home who were to come to the party tonight. Some of those had not been given their dinners, their parents expecting them to be fed at the Palace; and the little ones were cranky and fussing.

Not so were the young Brylands and Kendells, happily reunited with their friend Bevin. Corbus could always talk a servant round into allowing the two boys have a snack, but things had turned out even better than that. The Kendells girls' governess understood their brother well enough to guess that he would not be pleased if her charges were made to go hungry. She had arranged a cheerful tea party late in the afternoon to give the children enough to tide them over until the feast. The last few hours had been long, while the girls waited, dressed in their pretty new gowns, anxiously trying not to crease them. The boys, in their best doublets, had been hideously bored. At least they were not hungry.

Bevin, however, was starving. The cook at the Redcliffe estate was queen of her domain, and allowed no one to sneak in and take food without proper authorization. Nor did she hold with coddling the young — especially mere in-laws who were not even proper Guerrins. Master Bevin



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had been given his midday meal right enough, served in the dining parlor with the Arl and Arlessa. The cook had been informed by the seneschal that the family was dining out at the Palace, and that only a meal for the servants was needed that night. Bevin, hoping for a piece of bread and butter, was sent away smartly with choice words from the cook ringing in his ears about "greedy boys!" He was quite well-dressed, however, for Arlessa Kaitlyn had given orders to a footman to see to that, at least.

Thinking back to some dull Landsmeets in her own youth, Queen Anora had the servants arrange a special childrens' table for the nobles' sons and daughters under the age of fourteen. There were over twenty of them who were old enough to attend and who were still young enough for the childrens' table: grandly dressed young lords and ladies, some of them aping the manners of their elders with hysterical results.

Faline and Jancey were now officially Lady Faline and Lady Jancey, they discovered. Kane had come quickly to tell them the happy news that he was an arl, and that tomorrow they were all moving into the Arl of Denerim's estate. Because of that, none of them would be staying very late tonight at the feast.

"The Landsmeet starts just after noon tomorrow, with the coronation and all. I have to be there, but if we get up early in the morning, we can be moved over the estate quick as quick."

"We liked it here," Faline said, a bit sadly.

"I know you did, puss," Kane said, kissing the top of her head. "Good people, the arl and his wife. Hospitable. You'll be seeing the boys now and then. But we've got to lay hold of what's ours. You'll like your rooms. I had them fixed them up special for you."

Anora had spared the children the foolishness of the seating based on precedence that was the rule for the adults. Theirs was a low table with cheerful ribbons on the chairs. Bevin took the chair next to Corbus and snatched up a breadroll from the silver basket in front of them, wolfing it down instantly.

The plump little girl in the chair next to him stared at him in astonished disapproval.

"You're supposed to wait for the Grand Cleric's blessing!" she told him.

"I was hungry!"

"It's very wrong," she insisted. She had huge blue eyes and exceptionally white skin. Her red hair was a mass of curls, held in place by a silver circlet around her brow. "Who are you?" she asked. "I don't recollect having seen you before. Is this your first Landsmeet?"

"Yes. Never even been to Denerim before." He popped the last bit of the roll into his mouth, and remembered his manners. "I'm Bevin Merton."

The carroty brows furrowed. "Merton? I don't know that name. I," she told him grandly, "am the Lady Ethelswyth Croombley, sister of Bann Ceorlic of Lothing. My father was the bann there, too. He died. Who's your

father? Which bannorn does he rule?"

"My father's dead, too. My sister married Arl Teagan of Redcliffe, so we live with him, now."

"So..." she thought about it. "You're not a *real* lord. Are you sure you're supposed to sit here? This table is for *lords and ladies*."

"Arl Teagan told me to sit here," he said, feeling uneasy and poor-relationish.

Corbus had been talking to the son of Bann Carlin, whom he hadn't seen in over a year. He overheard enough of what the girl had said to interrupt.

"Don't talk rot," he said. "Bevin's our friend, and he's an arl's brother now."

"But he's not *Lord* Bevin," Ethelswyth insisted. "If he's not a lord, he's a commoner."

"Unless he's a knight," another boy pointed out. "Knights and their families aren't commoners."

"They're not lords and ladies," Ethelswyth countered. "And he's too young to be a knight."

Annoyed, Lothar grabbed a breadroll himself and threw it at Ethelswyth. "You talk too much!"

"Don't throw food!" Faline cried, scandalized. "It's wasteful!"

Ethelswyth dodged the breadroll — she had older brothers, after all — and fixed on Faline's lovely new lavender gown. "You're the sister of the Arl of Denerim, aren't you? What accomplishments are you learning? I'm learning crewelwork and dancing and the lap harp and Orlesian."



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Faline and Jancey knew this kind of talk from their days at the hated school. "I'm learning the lute and dancing and Orlesian, and I know how to do whitework and silk embroidery and... and bargello."

"But she hates it," Jancey said bluntly. "Canvas is rough and heavy. I don't know any accomplishments yet." She shrugged. "We were learning about herbs and flowers, and that wasn't so bad, but I hate all sewing. You don't see the Girl Warden messing about with needles. I'd rather learn to ride. Kane said he'd get ponies for us."

"You'll love it!" Ethelswyth enthused. "Riding is the best thing in the world. I have a pony, but I haven't seen him in ages, poor darling. He's in Lothing, and Mother says it's not safe there."

"It'll be safe soon," Corbus said, full of assurance. "The Girl Warden's Queen now. She's our cousin, so Lothar and I know her. We get invited to the Wardens' Compound all the time. She has a suit of red armor that's made from the skin of a dragon she killed."

"I'm glad she wore a pretty dress instead of a dragon skin tonight," Faline said, looking approvingly at Bronwyn in her vivid crimson gown. "I like red. I like her headband, too. Do you think those are real rubies?"

"Of course they are," Lothar said, imagination aflame. "She found them in the dragon's hoard after she killed it. Everybody knows that rubies are drops of dragon's blood turned hard and sparkly."



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"Well, I like Queen Anora," said Ethelswyth. "She's so pretty, with her golden hair. And Mother doesn't like Lady Bronwyn because she took our horses. But she left my pony Misty, so she's not all bad — Stop that!" She flailed at Bevin, who was sneaking another breadroll. "Look! There's the Grand Cleric! Once she's says the blessing, we'll get a proper dinner!"



"Yes, thank you, Fionn, put the jewelry away. I'll wear my armor tomorrow. Goodnight." The servant departed, and Bronwyn turned back to Loghain, who was lounging in his dressing gown in the chair by the fire.

The Landsmeet Opening Feast that saw her acclaimed as Queen seemed just another noisy social event to Bronwyn, blending in with all the others she had attended since she arrived in Denerim. She was glad that it was over, and she could get some rest before the strenuous day before them. Then, too, there had been a nervous undercurrent in the celebration, something like what a band of naughty children might feel after stealing sweets, wondering when their mother would notice and punish them.

Bronwyn enjoyed herself for the most part — and was very happy to see her Wardens enjoying themselves — but she was very conscious of the eyes on her and was careful to make the rounds, making clear her gratitude to her supporters, and smoothing ruffled feathers where it seemed advisable. Loghain danced no more than usual,

but at least exerted himself to show decent attention to their allies and to the great nobles. It was just as well that he danced only with Bronwyn, for Arlessa Kaitlyn's terror of him was manifest, and if he had danced with any of the nobles' wives, he would have had to dance with her.

"Poor Kaitlyn! If you had claimed her for a dance, she would have fainted dead away, and then Teagan would have rushed forward demanding to know what you did to his wife," Bronwyn said, picturing the scene.

Loghain only grunted, rubbing his puppy's ears. Amber was growing rapidly into a fine creature, whom Loghain thought worth more than all the nobles put together. He set her on the floor, and she shook herself, trotting over to the luxurious dog bed. Scout, replete with smoked boar and roast pheasant, was dozing already.

"We won't get much work done tomorrow —" Bronwyn predicted. "We'll mostly be riding around the city, back and forth."

"It was your idea to have the coronation in the Cathedral after all," he reminded her. "Mind you, it's not a bad idea. With that Orlesian jack-in-office making trouble, it's best not to change things too much all at once. And it's true that the people of Denerim expect their puppet show."

"They do. Besides, the Grand Cleric used her little talk with me tonight as an excuse not to have a little talk with the Knight-Divine. I know she's not looking forward to that. She wants to know about our adventure with the Tevinter blood mages. Maybe it might not hurt to tell her

something about it. It's possible that she can be made to see the difference between a decent young girl like Bethany Hawke and a gang of Tevinter slavers. That would be a gain, certainly. But I'm more concerned about the Orlesians at the moment. Where did Anora have our foreign dignitaries bestowed, anyway?"

"In the North Tower, on different floors. There's a sheer drop from the windows and a sound guard on the doors. They won't be sneaking about. They'll have a sound guard on them tomorrow at the coronation, too. Anora thought it a good idea to let them witness it. I'm still not sure how I feel about it, but I don't object to rubbing the Orlesians' faces in a bit of Fereldan independence." He rose, and prowled restless about the room. "We'll want to keep a sharp watch tomorrow, ourselves. The guardsmen managed to round up the Orlesians on board the ship, but from all accounts some who came in on the ship slipped away into the city before they could be caught. Maker knows what they're up to."

Bronwyn clicked her tongue in vexation, but decided to put Orlais and its obnoxious people aside for the night. Between the Blight and the Orlesians, how was she to know if she would even be in the world this time next year? So she let fall her robe, and let it pool, crimson, at her feet. That was enough to catch Loghain's notice.

"You're insatiable."

"I suppose I am."

All the same, he did not resist as she took his hand and

led him to her large and comfortable bed. He was King of Ferelden, whatever that meant or would mean, and perhaps a celebration was in order.



DUKE PROSPER DE MONTFORT

CHAPTER 9

CROWNING
GLORY

THE DAY OF THE CORONATION DAWNED COLD BUT CLEAR. Very cold, in fact. Frost glittered on windows and icicles dripped from the roofs. The streets were slippery until the sun began to turn the slick spots into dirty puddles. That did not prevent the new Arl of Denerim from making a hasty departure from Bryland House with his wife, sisters, servants, and other impedimenta.

He had talked the seneschal of the Denerim estate into making the desired changes and preparations days before. A certain native charm, plus the strong likelihood of his confirmation made the seneschal wary of opposing or offending him.

Thus the living quarters were nicely made up, and the door to the dungeons in the arl and arlessa's bedchamber was camouflaged with a bookcase and some draperies to keep out the cold drafts from below. Kane wondered a bit about his deceased cousins. A castle had to have dungeons to lock away offenders, but why would the arl and his son

want easy access for themselves? Everything he heard about them suggested they were a pair of sick bastards. There were rumors that the arl's son was a pervert who went trolling in the Alienage for elf women, and had orgies — four or five to a bed — with the elves and his own male friends. Vaughan had been killed by the darkspawn down at Ostagar in the midst of just such an orgy, and it served him right.

The old man was no prize, either. Kane had caught the drift of some of the Council's talk, and it sounded as if Arl Urien was taking coin from the Orlesians. Coin was always a good thing, of course, but the old man was bound to be caught out eventually. He was lucky that the Orlesians got him first. Of course, that was very likely to keep him from talking. Orlesians could not be trusted to keep their end of a bargain, which was enough for Kane. Father had had plenty of stories about what the Orlesians had done to their family during the bad years.

Still, he was a bit worried. Those two high and mighty foreigners who had shown up at the Landsmeet were clearly threatening them. Kane might be new to the Landsmeet, but even he could tell that the promise to leave them alone if they swore homage to the Empress was horseshit. Once you gave the Orlesians something, they'd always want more. It was like their neighbors back at home who kept suing to change the boundary stones.

He really had to stop thinking of the freehold as home. This place was home now. He'd found a good tenant for

the farm now, and would get a fifth of the profits, either in coin or in kind. It was a good farm — for those who liked farming — and the tenant should do well from the deal. His father-in-law had advised him not to sell the farm outright. Over time, a lease like that was worth far more than anything he'd get in a lump sum. Arl Bryland's advice was sound. The man had always done right by him.

All except for saddling him with Habren. She was sulking now, wrapped up in her fabulous furs, her nose red with cold. She'd wanted to sleep late and move in later in the day. Too bad. This was his house, and he was in charge. Besides, there wouldn't be *time* later in the day, with everything going on.

"Kane?" Faline asked timidly, avoiding Habren's hostile glare. "Kane, could we go to the coronation, too? Corbus and Lothar are going."

"Of course you're going," he said. "It's a big event, and you need to be seen. And I've got a surprise for you. Wait right here while I get Habren settled in her apartments, and then I'll show you and Mistress Manda and Kyriel your new rooms." He waved at a footman. "Bring these ladies something warm to drink, quick smart!"

Escorting his bride to their quarters, he felt fierce pleasure in the possession of this place. A real palace, it was. He had found a room on the other side of the entry hall to use as an office. He needed a quiet place to meet with his officers and get his bearings. Urien had used his

bedchamber and the sitting room that led into it as his own office; but Urien, of course, had been a widower for years. It looked like he had planned to stow Habren in an upstairs room and visit her when he was in the mood. Kane could not afford to have Habren tattling to her father right away, and so Habren and he would be together in those handsome apartments on the ground floor. Habren could take charge of them and fix them any way she liked. He would only be sleeping there.

Besides closing off the dungeons, he had made other changes. A new door gave passage between those rooms and the one adjoining. That had been Vaughan's room. Kane had decided to take it over, in order to have a place to retreat to when Habren had her courses or was in a snit. When she was breeding, too, which Maker grant was as soon as possible. Maybe having a bellyful would shut her up. There she was now, going yammer, yammer, yammer...

He'd let her start her primping for the coronation, while he went back to the girls. Imagine their faces when they saw the suite he'd arranged for them, and the new dresses he'd ordered for the coronation!

Anora also moved to new quarters that morning, too; though it was done far more quietly, with little noise and no drama. She had set things in motion the evening before, with a few words to the seneschal and the head housekeeper. The old rooms she occupied before her mar-

riage were perfectly adequate: a sitting room, a bedroom, her maid's little room, and an attached bathing room. All had been scrubbed out and dusted. The dear old bed she ordered made up with some of the embroidered yellow silk bedding and hangings Anora had bought from an Antivan merchant last spring. She was also bringing her intricately inlaid writing desk, also imported from Antiva. The rooms would not look much like they had five years ago, once Anora was done with them.

Some things in the Queen's Apartments were Crown property and must remain there. Other things were Anora's own: her books, her jewelry, her clothes, the portrait of her mother. Those were going with her. And with them were special treasures and trifles — like Fergus' music box.

Rona, her maid, looked back at the grand rooms, now stripped of anything that said "Anora," and whimpered a little. "Oh, Your Majesty! It's so sad."

"It's not. Don't talk so," Anora said calmly. "I am very happy at the result of the Landsmeet. I shall enjoy decorating my old rooms. They face northeast, and have a lovely view all the way to the sea. Come along now."

Bronwyn came by the Compound in the midmorning, but found no one stirring but the staff. Evidently everyone was still asleep, or hung over, or both.

"Shall I awaken them, Your Majesty dear?" asked Mistress Rannelly. She mouthed the words "Your Majesty" to

herself again and again, bursting with pride.

"No! Maker, no," Bronwyn said, disappointed not to have a chance at a visit. "I'll see them later." Feeling wistful, she took a peek at her old room, and decided that if nothing went wrong in Ostagar, she would recall Alistair as soon as possible, and make certain that this nice room was his.

What was she going to do with Alistair? He was depending on her to let him remain a Warden. Before she started taking over his life, she must talk to him and find out what he'd really like to do. If he was determined to avoid the duties of a noble, she would have to find a way to appease the Landsmeet. She could, for example, give him a bannorn of the land around the old Warden outpost, which he could will to the Wardens. On the other hand...

On the other hand, he might have had time to think over his options. Teagan was right in one regard: if she could be Queen, Alistair could hold a title, too. If no one was badgering him and humiliating him, and telling him he was nothing and nobody, perhaps he would enjoy a place of his own where he could do as he liked. He would still be expected to serve as a Warden, as Bronwyn was, but surely Wardens were entitled to furloughs and respites, like other soldiers. She had no idea what they did elsewhere. It hardly mattered. They could do things as they liked in Ferelden. Perhaps a place of his own would give Alistair some pleasure, without burdening him with an undue amount of pressure. The important thing, she

decided, was that it should be *Alistair's* choice. They should be getting another report from Ostagar today or tomorrow. If things were holding there, why not let him come north and introduce him properly?

"Ha! My Queen! It is so delightful to address you thus."

Bronwyn turned, smiling, to see Zevran's exuberant bow.

"I was wondering if I'd see anyone before the coronation," Bronwyn said. "I don't know what you heard about the Landsmeet session yesterday, but we had some fairly threatening visitors."

"Yes, the bad bad Duke and the most distinguished Knight-Divine. Not all that Divine, from what I can gather."

"Unfortunately, they weren't the only arrivals. We have reason to believe that some of their ship's complement slipped away before they could be interned. Perhaps it would be best to keep our eyes open today during the procession."

"My eyes are at your service, and are always open."

The Writ of Succession was a very splendid document, once the clerks got through with it. It was inscribed in black and red ink, and illuminated with gold and silver. The seneschal read it out in a stentorian voice, slowly enough that everyone could catch the provisions. Bronwyn and Loghain signed it, and it was witnessed by all the high nobles of the kingdom, and then sealed with the royal seal. Anora currently had possession of the royal seal, and passed it on to her father, with a formal curt-

sey. The sealing wax was red, too, and had gold ribbons appending from it. There was quite a bit of cheering, and then everyone had to be herded outside for the procession to the Cathedral.

Though put together in haste, this was done with decent propriety. Word had been circulated last night, and so the men-at-arms and servants had arranged the horses and carriages. Everyone moved out in due order and proper regard for precedence. Three companies of Maric's Shield marched with the procession, carefully interspersed with the nobles and their retinues. Zevran, along with some other sharp-eyed agents, watched for disturbances in the crowds lining the way and for marksmen in the upper windows. Bronwyn was glad of her sable cloak over the armor, for it was unpleasantly cold. For that matter, she liked Loghain's crimson-lined bearskin: it contrasted handsomely with the silverite of his armor.

The two Orlesians were put in a carriage with all outward forms of courtesy and kept under guard. If anyone was so stupid as to attack the procession, the guards had orders to kill the Orlesians on the spot. The Knight-Divine was indignant, and Duke Prosper suave and perfectly philosophical. They both quietly agreed that they were somewhat surprised to be alive today and afforded the chance to witness the events for themselves. It was preferable to the boredom of their comfortable prison. Indeed, Duke Prosper found his room rather primitive. The food,

however, had been plain but decent: sent up from the feast. If that was the best Ferelden could offer, Prosper wondered a little at the Empress' focus on this poverty-stricken little realm. So far he had seen nothing desirable in it but a few fine women. Queen Anora was lovely and dignified: not incapable of moving in higher circles. It was a great pity that Queen Bronwyn had not been married to Imperial Prince Florestan, according to plan. She was still young enough to be trained and molded into something better. Instead, she was the prize of that cunning, brutal peasant. A great pity, indeed.

All the knights and gentlewomen and guildsfolk were packed into the back of the Cathedral. The nobles paraded in and took possession of the front: noblemen and noblewomen, their sisters and brothers and in-laws and children and upper servants. The foreign guests were given quite a clear view. Both were manifestly unimpressed with Denerim Cathedral. Then Anora and Fergus entered together and stood at either side of the platform, since they were the highest in rank after the King and Queen.

Bronwyn tried to win a smile from Loghain, but got nothing more than a grunt. If anything, he looked sterner and grimmer than ever. The dogs were not left behind, and were wagging their tails, entranced by the infinite variety of scents. Bronwyn was surprised they could smell anything over the reek of incense. It was rising in great

white clouds from the priests' censers. The smell would cling to their furs more or less permanently. The choir was beginning the coronation chant.

"That's us," Loghain said, "Come on."

"Really, Loghain!" Bronwyn whispered, biting back a grin. "We're about to be crowned, not hanged!"

He only scowled at her, so she controlled her amusement, instead assuming a benign but dignified expression as she marched down the aisle with him, perfectly in step. At the steps of the chancel, the Grand Cleric lifted her hands and began the rite.

"My lords and ladies and honored guests, I here present unto you your undoubted King and Queen, Loghain and Bronwyn. All you who are come here this day, do you swear homage and service to them in the Maker's sight?"

"Aye!" was the reply, more fervent from some throats than others. Duke Prosper smiled, faintly amused, trying to get a better look at the nobles' faces, but he was awkwardly placed for that. He could see the Wardens better, and some of them did not swear homage, but as they were Dalish elves and dwarves – and *Wardens*, after all, that was understandable. There was a strikingly beautiful woman amongst them, who said something, but clearly not 'Aye.' Most beautiful and splendidly dressed... the wife of one of the Wardens, he assumed: dark-haired and a bit *farouche* in her manner. The woman looked his way, and Prosper gave her a slight bow.

Muirin then administered the Coronation Oath:

"Do you, Bronwyn Cousland, and do you Loghain Mac Tir, promise and swear to govern the people of Ferelden according to the laws and customs of the kingdom?"

"I do."

"I do."

"Will you to the utmost of your power uphold Law and Justice to be executed in all your judgments?"

"I will."

"I will."

"Will you hold in your heart the Sword of Mercy, which separates true kings from tyrants. in performing Justice in the kingdom?"

Bronwyn glanced at the Grand Cleric, remembering the riddle in the Gauntlet. It had clearly made an impression on the Grand Cleric. Loghain scowled, not recalling that from Maric or Cailan's coronations. What was she on about?

"I will."

"I will."

"Then as you have promised and sworn, so must you perform. May the Maker turn his gaze upon you and uphold this kingdom."

With a nod, she indicated that it was time to kneel. Kneeling in armor was no mean feat, and they had both practiced it, kneeling simultaneously on the left knee. Loghain chuckled silently as his joints creaked a bit.

Most of the Fereldan crown jewels had been lost in the

Occupation. Maric had allowed a crown to be made, which he wore only rarely. Rowan, too, had a new consort's crown, but Loghain had seen her wear it only once. Cailan had had another, more gaudy crown made for himself for his coronation, and of course Anora had worn Rowan's crown.

Bronwyn, however, was not a Queen-Consort, but a Queen-Regnant. Very quietly, in the past month, a crown similar to Maric's had been fashioned for her, by the same discreet jeweler who had made her ruby headband. It was very simple: a plain band of gold that rose at six points to a dragonthorn leaf, a symbol of the resilience of Ferelden.

The matching crowns were presented to the Grand Cleric by Mothers Perpetua and Boann, and Bronwyn was crowned first, and then Loghain.

"Long life to the King and Queen!" shouted the herald.

"Long life to the King and Queen!" echoed the nobles, their spouses, their children, and their sisters, cousins, and aunts, and everyone else in the Cathedral with the exceptions of the Orlesians, Lady Rosalyn, who feigned a cold, and Habren Bryland, who was distracted by Kane's perfect golden curls.

The crown was surprisingly heavy. Bronwyn had ordered Fionn to arrange her hair so the crown would sit securely on her head. Despite that, it tugged at stray hairs in a very uncomfortable way.

The new King and Queen took their thrones, and the Grand Cleric spoke:

"Hear now the words of the Prophet Andraste:

"Oh, my Maker, let me heed your words; for you said to me: 'You will be a shepherd to your people, and their captain.' Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead in your light. I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, O Maker, my refuge in times of trouble."

And the choir sang another hymn. It was very pretty, but Bronwyn could not quite make out the words amidst all the flowery ornamentation. Anyway, it was pretty. She glanced over at Loghain, who was massively unmoved by everything. everything. Amber seemed inclined to scratch, but the slightest motion of Loghain's hand froze her in her tracks. It was very interesting, seeing the nobles and gentry from this vantage. During her wedding, she had had only a glimpse of those attending. Now she could examine them at her leisure, while the choir warbled on and on.

The knights and their ladies were behind the nobles, and they looked quite amiable: quite happy to have Loghain and the Girl Warden on the throne. She knew some of Fergus' knights, of course, and remembered some others from Ostagar. There was Ser Elric Maraigne, one of Cailan's favorites. She had heard he was in Teagan's train now. He had been very devoted to the late king, and doubtless felt some satisfaction in serving his uncle.

How adorable Kane's sisters looked! She did not want to play favorites, but was forced to let her slight smile widen just a bit for them. They looked like a pair of Firstday lilies,

clad in white and red. There were quite a few children here, the kingdom's future. She must make the effort to get to know them. Ah! There were Corbus and Lothar. She smiled at them as well.

There were her Wardens and her other friends, well-placed to the side of the western banns. No long faces, and quite a bit of curiosity. Bronwyn caught a number of eyes, and really was tempted to wink at Morrigan.

It was time for the Rite of Homage, and the nobles formed into a line by order of precedence.

Anora, as Queen Dowager, was first. She had a new gown for the occasion, one of rare changeable silk from the northern tropics, and it shone turquoise green in one light and pale purple in another. She wore pearls in her hair, and had done all she could to look as young, beautiful... and *cheerful* as possible. She had memorized the words of homage and could speak them without Sister Justine's soft prompting.

"I, Anora Mac Tir Theirin, Dowager Queen of Ferelden and Heiress of Gwaren, do become your liege woman of life, limb, and of earthly honor; and faith and truth will I bear unto you, to live and die against your enemies and the enemies of this kingdom. May the Maker witness."

She received the ritual kiss of peace on the cheek from both Bronwyn and her father, and Fergus was next.

"I, Fergus Cousland, Teyrn and Bann of Highever, do become your liege man..."

It seemed to take forever, and was by far the longest

portion of the ceremony. There were over forty lords or ladies of the rank of bann or higher who needed to swear homage. Some of them were pleasanter than others. Some of them *smelled* better than others. Kane Kendells was very fragrant indeed. Bronwyn did not dare glance over at Loghain. She kept the same expression of pleasant dignity on her face throughout, and her lips grew sore from kissing all the stubbly – or worse, bearded – cheeks. Fergus managed to keep his beard clean: why did Bann Frandarel use that horrible oil on his? Was he trying to poison them? Bann Adam, very considerately, had shaved this morning. The Queen's favor was his.

She could not imagine what Loghain thought of it. For men to greet each other with the kiss of peace was a custom that had gone out of common usage almost two centuries before. Now it was only used for the ceremony of royal homage and by some criminal guilds.

She would not laugh. She would not laugh. Thank the Maker, Bann Alfstanna was next; her cheek clean, smooth, and smelling faintly of apple blossoms.

Once homage was paid and the nobles were back in the places with their families, it was time for the Champion's Challenge. Like Maric and Cailan before him, Loghain stood, drew his sword, and issued it himself. Bronwyn had teased him about wanting to perform this part of the ceremony instead, but knew it would not be politic to press the matter. Besides, he looked very imposing, utter-

ing the ancient defiance.

"If any person, of what degree soever, high or low, shall deny or gainsay us as to be the right sovereigns as King and Queen of Ferelden, then here stand I as Champion, being ready in person to combat with him; and in this quarrel will adventure my life against his, on what day soever he shall appoint."

Unsurprisingly, no one took up the challenge. They were all quiet as mice, in fact. Was Loghain smirking at the Orlesians? Bronwyn hoped not. It would be very inappropriate, though Loghain would say it was always perfectly appropriate to smirk at Orlesians, when not actually killing them.

Then the choir burst into song, and they all trotted back out of the Cathedral, to be acclaimed by the people of Denerim, which lasted some time. Loghain at length grew impatient, and they mounted their horses or climbed into their carriages or resigned themselves to a cold march, processing back to the Landsmeet Chamber. This time they went by way of the East Dock Bridge to the King's Way, and back to more work, work, work. Remembering those Orlesians currently running loose, she kept her smile in place, but her eyes wandered the crowd and the upper windows of the taller buildings, prepared for an attack. Anyone who was lying in wait on a roof would be half-frozen by now.

Nothing worse befell them than some bunches of holly and sweet pine tossed at their horses' feet; and some very

silly professions of love directed at Bronwyn. Others in the crowd were waving rolled-up parchment at them. Petitions, probably. Bronwyn knew that the Landsmeet was far from over.

Getting through the crowd near the Palace complex was even worse than the crowd by the Cathedral. Loghain was glad when all the parading and gawking and foolish ceremony were done with. The Orlesians were escorted away and locked up again, which gave him considerable satisfaction.

There were some major announcements to get out of the way. The first was the appointment of Dowager Queen Anora as Chancellor of the Realm. This raised a stir. It was an unconventional choice, and a number of people scrutinized Bronwyn narrowly, hoping to see signs of disaffection. But Bronwyn knew her part and herself said something in support of the appointment. She and Loghain were fighting a war. They would be away from Denerim a great deal of the time. They needed someone in the capital to keep the government running smoothly.

And they did have to discuss the Blight. Bronwyn gave a report about the Warden's activities.

"The darkspawn have been contained for the moment in the vicinity of Ostagar, with only minor exceptions. There have been fewer darkspawn seen in the area over the past few months, and Wardens have been patrolling all of Ferelden to find the stragglers. No darkspawn have been

found east of the White River, and none have been seen in the Bannorn north of Lothing, with the exception of the renegade incursion in Amaranthine. Those darkspawn were hunted down and annihilated. I am awaiting reports from the Wardens sent on the western patrols. As the Wardens must recruit and train heavily, the King and I, with the agreement of the Council, have returned the fortress of Soldier's Peak to Warden control."

Naturally, people wanted to know where that was. When given the location – on the north coast between Highever and Amaranthine – interested faded. No one except for Nathaniel Howe and one of the new banns was being deprived of anything, so there was nothing for anyone else to complain of.

"So if it's all going so well," Bann Frandarel asked, "are you sure it's really a Blight? Maybe it's just a minor incursion."

Every man and woman who had fought at Ostagar turned and stared blackly at him.

"Really?" Loghain glared at him. "A 'minor incursion' that killed Cailan. Is that how you would describe it? Thousands of darkspawn don't look so minor when one is actually facing them. What do you say?" he asked, turning to Bronwyn.

"Bann Frandarel, it is unquestionably a Blight. I have seen the Archdemon myself when I was traveling in the Deep Roads. It flew over our heads, in fact. A high dragon, bigger than any other I have seen, and foul with Taint.

The darkspawn were obeying its commands. No, I wish I could say otherwise, but it is definitely a Blight."

"But where is it now?" asked Bann Alfstanna, confused. "How can it move so quickly through tunnels, if it's so large? How could it fly over your head? Where was it that you saw it?"

The dwarves present chuckled among themselves at a surfacers' ignorance. Bronwyn gave her Wardens a look and then answered the bann's question.

"Until one has seen the Deep Roads with one's own eyes, it is impossible to imagine their scale. Imagine the Imperial Highway – superstructure and all – under the earth. Now imagine it twice as wide and three times as high, with walls magnificently carved. Imagine huge chambers and caverns leading off from it. Yes, there are tunnels there too, like forest paths. However, I saw the Archdemon in a place called the Dead Trenches, where there was not only a huge complex of high chambers, but a vast chasm plunging to unimaginable depths. The horde was marching there, while the Archdemon bellowed on high."

Impressed, the nobles considered this image. Then Teagan asked a sensible question.

"The Archdemon doesn't have to return to Ostagar to come to the surface, does it?"

"No," Bronwyn confirmed. "It could go anywhere, but there are only certain access points that would be convenient for it. Those are the places the Wardens have been scouting. Aside from Orzammar, which no Archdemon

has ever successfully stormed, there are known access points in Amaranthine, in Gwaren, to the east of Lake Calenhad at the north and the south ends of the lake, at Ostagar, and near West Hill.”

Bann Frandarel knew about the Deep Roads access at West Hill, of course. How could he not? His bannorn had been ravaged by the Occupation and the great, disastrous battle there. Everyone knew the story, but it had special meaning for him. The last thing he needed was the Archdemon popping up in his bannorn.

“So we need to be keeping special watch in those places ... is that it?”

“In some more than others,” she agreed. “Since there are are so many caves and tunnels at Ostagar, creating easy egress for the Horde, we’ve kept a large garrison there, along with a unit of Grey Wardens. From Senior Warden Alistair’s report, they’ve had great success in destroying the remaining darkspawn on the surface there, and they’ve also descended into the Deep Roads to engage them. We’re working on charting where the most darkspawn are at the moment, but as I said earlier, we’ll know more when the reports from the western patrols arrive.”

Then Loghain took over, discussing how the levies would rotate, giving the soldiers regular furloughs. Some would be assigned to support the Warden patrols. Others would be sent north, to garrison duty there. He had a comprehensive defensive strategy he had been working

on for years, and now he could make it a reality.

“You all heard that strutting Orlesian yesterday. The Orlesians are waiting for an opportunity to invade. We need to be ready come spring, which means improving our fortifications at the mountain passes and strengthening the Coastlands from the Waking Sea Bannorn to Denerim. I mention the Waking Sea Bannorn for obvious tactical reasons.”

Bann Alfstanna straightened proudly, “Your Majesty, it’s true. On a clear day, it’s possible to see across the Waking Sea from the Virgin Rocks to the Planascene Islands near Kirkwall. No fleet could pass undetected. I can build and man a watchtower, and I shall have it done before the first of Drakonis!”

Loghain gave her a look of approval. “Well said. We will be talking to quite a few of you over the next few days. Ferelden will be ready for the Orlesians, if they dare to come. We’ll meet again tomorrow afternoon. The Council,” he added grimly, looking at the high nobles, “will meet at midmorning tomorrow.”

It was already late, and already cold, and there was another feast awaiting them. They adjourned, and Bronwyn and Loghain marched out of the Chamber together, past the bowing nobles. They did not miss the worried faces.

Bronwyn got the note from the Grand Cleric, requesting a private audience. She smiled to herself. The poor woman was doing her best to delay the awful meeting with the Knight-Divine. Still, why not talk to her?

The Grand Cleric had not been hostile. In fact, she could have been a great deal more difficult and obstructionist had she wished to be. It was natural that she should be loyal to the Chantry and revere the Divine. It did not follow, however, that she wished Orlais to rule in Ferelden. The Chantry was not utterly a puppet of the Empress, or there would have been an Exalted March on Nevarra long ago.

The servants had moved Bronwyn's belongings to the Queen's Apartments during the Landsmeet session. Bronwyn explored them uncertainly. Some of the rooms were known to her, and some were not. This area was a labyrinth, with main corridors and back corridors. One such corridor led from her private sitting room to the Little Audience chamber. Another led to the Family Dining Parlor. She walked from room to room, here and there, moving things to make them more to her taste. Fionn was already in her new room nearby. There were two more rooms for maids or ladies-in-waiting. The bathing room was very nicely arranged, with a boiler something like the contraption at Bann Ceoric's manor in Lothering. Bronwyn snorted at the sight. Had she known about this, she would have made herself queen earlier.

Bronwyn let Fionn unbuckle her armor, musing over the letter. The presence of the Knight-Divine suggested that the Chantry was looking for any excuse for an Exalted March. She needed to talk to the Grand Cleric in a calm, private, rational way, and find out exactly where she stood.

"Fionn, find one of the footmen and have them see if the Grand Cleric is still in the Landsmeet chamber. If she is, request her presence. I shall meet with her in the Queen's" — she broke off, remember that it was hers now — "in my private sitting room. And once she is here, I wish to be undisturbed."

It would take some time to find the Grand Cleric and then bring her back, so Bronwyn indulged briefly in the bath Fionn had drawn for her, and ordered tea and sandwiches. Maker knew she needed something after all that had gone on today. She smelled like dragonbone and horse sweat, not the most attractive odors individually, and fairly repugnant in combination. Then she threw on a plain green gown and let Fionn paint her freshly clean face and attempt to do something with her hair. The crown had played havoc with it.

"Will you be wearing the crown to the feast tonight, Your Majesty?"

"That's the plan. I shall have to be careful sipping my soup, lest it slip forward and fall into the bowl," Bronwyn shuddered and grinned at the same time, imagining the scene. It would certainly enliven the evening.

She looked much better by the time the Grand Cleric's arrival was announced, and not wanting to keep her waiting, sent Fionn to fetch her tea and went out herself to greet the older woman.

"You must be exhausted after the ceremony, Your Grace," Bronwyn said, somewhat concerned. "Please sit."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I am rather... done in."

"I was about to have some tea. Do join me."

Muirin did not look well: face greyish, skin sagging, dark shadows beneath her eyes. The strain of the situation showed even in her posture.

"Please, Your Grace, tell me what troubles you?"

A faint, rueful laugh. "Your Majesty, that would take more time than you can spare before dinner. However, some specific issues do relate to you. You do understand, I hope, that the Knight-Divine is here, ready to find a pretext for an Exalted March?"

"I do. Just as Duke Prosper has all but declared war. There is little we can do to pacify the Empress, short of abdicating and abasing ourselves before her. However, I am hoping the Knight-Divine can be made to see reason. He is very exercised about poor Bethany Hawke, and yet there is indeed precedent for her status: a precedent that was accepted in the past. No one threatened us because Enchanter Wilhelm was allowed his freedom."

"That was then, and this is now. At the time of the accession of King Maric, the Chantry was very concerned that Ferelden was so antagonized by the actions of the Grand Cleric Bronach that they would break with the Chantry entirely. And frankly, Orlais was sick of war with Ferelden. We are facing a new generation. Furthermore, Wilhelm was a single case. Since the beginning of the Blight, the Knight-Divine might well see a pattern of defiance and

heedless pandering to the mages."

Bronwyn bit back the reflexive defensiveness, and thought about it objectively. "All right, let's talk about the situation in the country and the numbers we're discussing. At the time of the Bloomingtide Battle there was a grand total of seven mages with the army. I will explain in greater detail later why that simply was not enough. I recruited thirty-three more mages for the army, and conscripted two at the Circle for the Wardens. Between those recruited for the army and the Dalish I now have five Warden mages, plus one auxiliary, for it is the tradition of the Wardens to accept help where it can be found. One of them is a Dalish elf. Jowan, a former Circle mage, I came across when he was defending a group of refugees from a darkspawn attack. One of my Circle mages recognized him and conscripted him on the spot—" she laughed at the memory—"telling him that if she had to be a Warden, he did too. I don't doubt, based on her story and on that of the late Wynne, that he had committed a serious crime at the Circle, but I strongly feel it is better for him to expiate his guilt by defending this country. Of the Circle mages who went to Orzammar, three became Wardens, and five have died in battle. Wynne was killed here in Denerim..."

Here she could not help but shoot a grave look at the Grand Cleric.

"...which leaves, as I reckon it, thirty-two mages either with the human forces in the army, or in the Wardens. I do

not have exact figures of the numbers of the Dalish, so let us set them aside for the moment. So, that gives up thirty-two mages operating largely without Templar supervision. The number no doubt seems alarmingly large to you. To me it is frighteningly small."

Muirin looked at her, considering. "'Frighteningly' small?"

"Your Grace, we are not going to vanquish the Blight without the mages. It can't be done. I like to think of myself as a pretty impressive warrior, but I can't tell you the number of times that the mages have saved my life, or enabled me to kill an enemy. Without mages in the Wardens, I would be dead now. Anders saved my life and my face in the Dead Trenches."

"Tell me."

So Bronwyn told her the gruesome story of how she first met a Broodmother; how she had recklessly charged the monster, how she had imagined she might be able to communicate, how she had suffered for her overconfidence.

"My face was literally hanging off my skull, and I was blind. The creature's poison changed the very color of my eyes. My friends finished off the creature — with some effort — and Anders then worked wonders on me. Generally his healing does not leave noticeable scars, but you can see from this —" she leaned forward so that Muirin could get a better look at the long white scar — "how bad the original wound was. Blind as I was, I believed that I would have to order Alistair to take command, and leave

me behind while he continued the mission —"

"Leave you alone?"

Bronwyn smiled ruefully at the Grand Cleric's horror. "Blind, I would have been useless, and there was no time to lose. We had to find a Paragon to break the deadlock in the dwarven Assembly. Anders talked us all into a few hours rest while his healing could work. I owe him my life. That is the most striking example of all he has done for us, but far from the only time he has saved my life. As for Tara, the other Circle mage, I will trust you with the information that she was another member of the party that found the Urn. Yes. She, too, a mage, was found worthy to stand before the Urn. And without her, Cullen would not have been the only one who perished in the battle against the false Andraste. We could not have killed the dragon without her. We simply could not have. Our weapons had next to no effect on the creature. I told you at the conclave of how we killed the beast. Without Tara, it would not have happened."

The tea came. Bronwyn smiled faintly, noticing that Fionn had been listening in slack-jawed awe to the story. Bronwyn poured for her guest, and urged her to take a sandwich or some of the cakes.

"It's a long time until dinner," she urged. "and I'm ravenous myself."

To her surprise, Muirin found she had an appetite, which had not been the case for several days. The tea, too, was very soothing. "You are loyal to your Wardens, Your Majesty."

"We're loyal to each other. Really, I genuinely have had no serious problems with the mages among us. I've heard some theories that what makes us Wardens makes it impossible for a mage to turn into an abomination, but I don't know if that's true or not. However, I want to get back to the need for mages. It's been a long time since mages were needed. Really, you have to go back over two hundred years, after the failures of the first Exalted Marches against the Qunaris, to the time when the Divine Hortensia III unleashed the mages. They pushed the Qunaris off the continent with the exception of that one base they have left. And the last time before that, mages were used liberally in the Fourth Blight. Battlemagic saves lives. It's easy to forget it over the generations, but it genuinely makes all the difference, and I am convinced that it's what's going to make all the difference now."

Muirin sipped her tea, thinking it over. Now and then, various priests and Templars petitioned for the Rite of Tranquility to be used on all mages. Muirin had been in Val Royeaux the last time such a proposal was put forward. During the Occupation, Meghren had a mage close in his councils, and there was suspicion that that the mage had controlled him, or at least had enthralled him into his worst excesses. A number supported the idea of getting rid of the mages altogether. Revered Mother Polymnia, the Starkhaven priest who sponsored the petition, had argued for Tranquility's essential mercy.

"Your Perfection, I beseech you to imagine a world in which no Templar need slay a hapless mage. All alike, whether voluntarily rendered or captured apostate, would be dealt with the same gentle care. No longer would they be tormented by these unnatural powers or by demons of the Fade. Instead, those so afflicted can be released into society, unable to cause harm; the more skilled of them can be given useful employment. Grant all Templars the authority to use the Rite whenever they find a mage..."

Muirin had met Mother Polymnia, and believed her absolutely sincere in her conviction that hers was the humane and loving solution to the ages-old problem. Her opponents were not always so sincere. Some had rationally pointed out that giving Templars so much independent power might lead to corruption, and innocents being made Tranquil who were not actually mages. It was hard to prove such allegations, but there were rumored instances in which inconvenient heirs or heiresses had been just so disposed of. Others thought it not kind, but cruel to deprive mages, already deprived of freedom and family, of even the power to feel love or repentance.

There were others, of course, who did not want to dismantle the Circles, as they gave employment and promotion to a large force of Templars who otherwise would be living rough as they combed Thedas for apostates. There was corruption in Circles, too: opportunities to extort coin from the anxious families of mages; opportunities to skim

coin from the importation of lyrium; even opportunities to smuggle lyrium themselves. There was also an outcry from prominent families of incarcerated mages, who were horrified and repulsed by the Rite.

The actual reason, however, that the Divine would not assent to mass Tranquility was a hard-headed, practical one. As a politically-savvy Orlesian priest had finally explained to Muirin, you never knew when you were going to need the mages. Both the Blights and the Qunari invasion were cited as examples. And then as Mother Nicollette pointed out, it would be absolute madness to in effect disarm themselves with the Tevinter Imperium still in existence. It was a bastion of magical power, which would no doubt be delighted at the opportunity of enslaving Thedas all over again.

"We have to leave a few of them alive and unimpaired to keep the training going, ma chère. The best of the best. That is the point of the Harrowing, n'est-ce pas? The skilled but less magically powerful can be made Tranquil and productive. The weak – or the troublemakers – fail their Harrowings. Yes, yes. The failed Harrowings are important as examples, you see... how did the poet put it? "Pour encourager les autres."

And so, in essence, Bronwyn was making the same argument that Mother Nicollette had, all those years ago. Mages were useful. Mages had pushed back dangerous enemies in the past, and that was exactly what Bronwyn wanted to do now. The precedents were good. It would give her some-

thing to work with, when she faced the Knight-Divine.

She was concerned, however, that Bronwyn had made so many good mage friends—like the passionately Libertarian Warden Anders— that she was unable to perceive the real danger magic posed. That point must be addressed.

"Your Majesty, Queen Anora mentioned a blood mage coven. What can you tell me about that? Do they still present a danger? How can the Chantry help you with that?"

Bronwyn had a refusal on the tip of her tongue, and then thought that if nothing else, the late Ser Friden ought to have his name cleared of the charge of desertion.

"It was a rather unpleasant adventure. I must ask you to keep this quiet, as it could start a panic, but even more importantly, it would prevent us from capturing more of the band. The mother of a Templar, Ser Friden, approached us. Her son had disappeared after telling her that he was on the trail of a band of blood mages. After waiting in vain to hear from him, she approached his officer with the information, but he dismissed her, and told her that Ser Friden had been noted down as a suspected deserter. It seemed a sad case to me, though to be honest I didn't know what we were really going to find at the time. Some of my mages insisted that the that this 'band of blood mages' must be harmless apostates, and begged me to be merciful."

She looked longingly at another sandwich. Cucumber. Lovely. The sooner she finished the story, the sooner she could gobble it up.



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"However, we found the hideaway on the ground floor of the building to which Ser Friden's mother directed us, and very shortly it became apparent that these were very dangerous people. Leading down into the cellars we encountered a Tevinter blood mage – "

Muirin gasped in alarm, but Bronwyn gestured for her to wait. "– a Tevinter blood mage leading a unit of first-rate mercenaries: well-armed, well-fed, and well-equipped. That was only the beginning. There were at least a dozen mages with a force of three dozen mercenaries and some mabarais. They occupied a large, well-built underground complex that extended from a warehouse in the southwestern portion of South Docks all the way to the waterfront. There were fine living quarters, storerooms, treasure chambers, a drinking hall, a kitchen, a dining hall, a council chamber," she paused, "and a vile and shocking chapel in which the Tevinter were performing what one of my mages told me were Death Magic rituals. We found remains there of men tortured and flayed. Perhaps Ser Friden was among them, but nothing was identifiable. I do think it probable that he was killed by the Tevinters."

"Maker have mercy!"

"We had a very perilous fight from room to room and corridor to corridor. There Warden Jowan saved me – and others – from a blood mage attack. We managed to take one mercenary prisoner, and also a young Tevinter mage. We discovered that the Tevinters had been operating out



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of the complex for fifteen years."

"How could they not be noticed?"

"We found phylacteries there. Many phylacteries. We destroyed those of living people. Some of the local priests and Templars were bespelled to look the other way, we believe. Others were phylacteries of very prominent people. Anora mentioned Arl Howe for a reason. There were others. The Tevinters found it very diverting, tricking the savages. The mercenary is still in Fort Drakon and has yielded quite of bit of information. The Tevinter mage was questioned and then executed, as he was simply too dangerous to keep alive. He had quite a tale to tell: the Tevinters for years have lured newcomers of any race to the city to the site and then either killed them to enhance their magic – or shipped them off to Tevinter for sale. The head of this coven was in league with the Tevinter who worked with Rendon Howe to enslave the Highever Alienage. It was a very large operation. We have been reading their records and letters with great interest. They've made fortunes off the Fereldan slave trade, and the dislocation due to the Blight was a windfall for them. The Tevinters send a new ship every spring and every autumn. We found their ship in the harbor, and liberated the slaves on board. They were all so pitifully enthralled that they had no real memory of what had befallen them. We gave them coin, and referred the women and children among them to the Chantry for further assistance."

Muirin set down her teacup and rubbed her face, deeply distressed. "Under our noses! Fifteen years?"

"Fifteen years. The Tevinter was very smug about telling us how profitable the investment was. He even tried to bribe Loghain to let him go. He looked upon us as primitives... or as mere livestock. They have been collecting blood from all sorts of people in all sorts of ways, and I warned Anora about the laundry and her monthlies. The Tevinters paid servants to sell the soiled bandages to them. They may even have obtain some of the priests' blood in that way."

"I am overjoyed that such things are no longer an issue for me," Murin confessed with frank relief. "Did they... enthrall other important figures?"

"King Cailan's phylactery was incomplete. As was my father's."

"Blessed Andraste!"

Bronwyn took a moment to enjoy the cucumber sandwich, and let the Grand Cleric process the story. Of course it would be deeply alarming to her. It was still deeply alarming to Bronwyn. She poured Muirin another cup of tea.

"I was so naive when I first found myself in command of the Wardens. I thought the other nations would unite against the common threat. I thought people would understand the danger and put their selfish concerns aside. Not so. Not so at all. The Tevinters care only for the gold and power they can wring from us. The Orlesians have done nothing but take advantage of our situation and throw

obstacles in our way. They are clearly intent on winning back their lost "province," whether by politics, or by default, when a ravaged, vacant territory to their east is left ripe for colonization. No other nation of Thedas has stepped forward to assist us. As I told the Landsmeet, everyone expects the real blow to be struck elsewhere. We have only our allies by treaty: mages, Dalish, and dwarves; and the Dalish and dwarves I only won by great effort. Technically, all the mages of Thedas should be marching to our aid, but alas, we only have thirty-odd Fereldan mages."

"Teyrn Loghain seems bent on have a mage in every company in the army."

"It would be tremendously useful at any time, simply for the value of their healing skills. When fighting the darkspawn, it's beyond price. You heard at the Landsmeet of the darkspawn incursion in Amaranthine, of course."

The Grand Cleric shuddered. "Led by a *talking* darkspawn."

"Led by a talking, thinking, immensely powerful darkspawn *mage*." She gave the appalled Muirin a nod to punctuate her words. "Darkspawn have tremendous magical power. I would estimate that one out of every dozen or so darkspawn we meet is a mage of some sort."

"Really?" Muirin's eyes widened, taking in the implications. "I had no idea. That is... shocking."

"Cullen, as you can imagine, was a tremendous help in dealing with such creatures. Without him, it's left to our mages to disable the magic users. The darkspawn



ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

use crude but powerful spells. How some come to have magic is a puzzle to me, since genlocks are clearly offspring of dwarven women, and dwarves have no connection with the Fade and no magic. Hurlocks are spawned from human women —”

“Oh, Bronwyn!” Murin cried in distress. “Those wretched, unhappy creatures! Do you truly think they no longer are aware of their plight?” She collected herself, and said, “I beg your pardon, Your Majesty...”

“Call me Bronwyn, while we’re in private,” Bronwyn waved that off. “It’s hard to say, though at the very least, I believe they must have forgotten their prior existence. Certainly it is a great mercy to end those monstrous lives. One thing about them that puzzles me is that shrieks, or more properly sharlocks, which are the offspring of elves, do not have magic users among them. They do not even use weapons, relying on their fangs and claws and their powers of stealth. Curious. At any rate, what I am attempting to make clear, Your Grace, is that we are facing a vast and powerful enemy that wields a great deal of dangerous magic. Removing magic from the army is tantamount to disarming us. *We cannot win without proper weapons.*”

“I was concerned that you did not understand the dangers of magic. Allowing mages such a great deal of freedom...” Muirin waved her hand. “I don’t understand why you’re doing this.”

“Because I think it’s time to offer the mages *something*



ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

for good behavior. *Some* sort of incentive. Now, they have nothing. When an apostate is caught, there is no reason for them not to fight to the death. No reason not to give way to the demons. Why not? If they surrender they are subject to summary execution. If they are young enough — say under twenty-five, they are subject to imprisonment for life at the best, or to being stripped of their humanity and turned into empty tools or playthings. Or they are still executed if they are unsatisfactory in some way. Now I do believe that the Circles are certainly vital institutions of training and discipline. My late friend Wynne believed that as well. I simply think that mages who prove themselves exemplary — like Bethany, like Wynne — should be rewarded sufficiently to make other mages wish to emulate them. We’ve been doing the same things for ages, and nothing has changed. Maybe it’s time to try something different.”

“You are still deeply grieved at the fate of Senior Enchanter Wynne.”

Bronwyn was not going to budge on this.

“I sent her to Denerim and failed to protect her. I will always feel partly to blame. Let us imagine, Your Grace, that one day, when Mother Boann was returning from some deed of charity, she was attacked by four heavily-armed thugs. They smashed her skull and killed her. They looted her body and stripped her naked. To hide their deed they burnt her like rubbish, and then pounded the remains to a smooth powder and used it to fertilize their

gardens. How exactly would you feel about those men?"

"I do not deny that there was great wrong-doing there. Abuse of power, certainly, and perhaps a cynical choice of timing."

"Cynical, certainly," Bronwyn agreed. "We've now got quite a bit out of Mother Heloise. They knew all about Wynne. They wanted to dispose of her just before the attack, and leave no time to find another Healer. They intended the deaths of many others. My point is that the Templars had the right of summary execution. Wynne — who had not committed any violent acts — had no right of appeal to some Chantry official who could have investigated her claim to be under the command of the Grey Wardens."

Muirin thought this over. "The Templars would not appreciate any limitation of their powers."

"Maybe they don't have enough to do. How many Templars are in Ferelden, anyway?"

Murin hesitated, but decided this was not an unreasonable question. "At last count, five hundred twenty-eight."

"Maker! I realize that the Templars for some unknown reason feel that the Blight is none of their concern, but can you imagine how useful even a small force of Templars would be? If they could be got to concentrate on the darkspawn mages they would be formidable indeed!" Bronwyn sighed. "I really miss Cullen. He was a wonderful young man."

Muirin took a little spice cake, and ate it thoughtfully. Bronwyn was not so hopelessly hostile to the Chantry as

she had feared. There were ways — honorable, helpful ways — to win her confidence and favor. There were contributions the Chantry could make to restore their prestige. The great obstacle was the Knight-Divine. What were his orders?

"If the Templars are to help in the struggle against the Blight, they must know where to go," she remarked. "Where is the Archdemon now?"

"Your Grace," said Bronwyn. "That is exactly what I am trying to find out." She glanced out of the darkening skies. "Look at the time! It is growing late. I am sorry to end our very interesting conversation, but I must prepare for tonight. You as well. It is too late and too cold for you to return to the Cathedral. Could I not have a servant show you to a room here for you to rest and refresh yourself in?"

"That would be very much appreciated, my dear Bronwyn." She rose carefully to her feet, still rather weary. "Perhaps we can speak again soon, after I have my interview with Ser Chrysagon."

"I believe we must," agreed Bronwyn rising herself. She was about to ring for Fionn when the Grand Cleric asked a final question. It had plagued her ever since the conclave.

"My dear Bronwyn, when you were in the Temple of Andraste, what did the shade of your father say to you?"

The memory, as always, was vivid. Bronwyn bit her lip, knocked off-balance by the direct question. Leliana had distracted the conclave from pursuing the issue, but now Bronwyn had no means of escape.

"I have never told anyone," she said. "I do not know whether what I saw was my father or some other Sending." She was seized with a painful longing to tell the story to this old friend of her mother – someone she had known since childhood. Simply talking about her father was a comfort. In fact, there was no one else she could tell.

"This must be under the seal of the confessional," she said.

The Grand Cleric was suddenly concerned, almost wishing she had not asked. "Of course. On my vows as a priest."

Bronwyn swallowed. "The being looked and sounded exactly like my father. He spoke... lovingly."

Muirin nodded, encouraging her to go on.

"But he also was concerned for me. He said, *'I must warn you, my child: you reach for an earthly crown, but the kingdom you must conquer is the kingdom within. That is the one realm that will be yours in eternity.'*"

"Bronwyn!" cried the Grand Cleric. She reached for Bronwyn's hand and clutched it in her own aged one. "What have you done?"

"What was necessary," Bronwyn shot back. "The country needs Loghain as its King. It was the only way."

"No!" Muirin contradicted her fiercely. "It was the *easy* way! Oh, my dear..."

"What's done cannot be undone," Bronwyn told her. "And you must never divulge this."

"Nor shall I. But I shall pray for you."

CHAPTER 10

WINTER DREAMS



RONWYN COULD NOT LEAVE THE CORONATION FEAST AS EARLY AS SHE WOULD HAVE LIKED. She had just been crowned

Queen of Ferelden, and was expected to celebrate. Indeed, she needed to celebrate for two, since Loghain was at his sardonic worst. Nobody expected anything else of him, however. It was Bronwyn who had to attempt to be charming and gracious; who had to dance with the nobles and chat with the noblewomen. All things considered, she would rather round up her Wardens and go back to the Compound.

But her Wardens were apparently having a wonderful time: dancing, drinking, flirting, talking. The elves stuck together but were not entirely segregated, since most of the other Wardens were perfectly friendly with them. Maeve was trying to teach Cathair to dance, and Toliver had actually persuaded Danith to dance with him. There were a few guests who clutched their pearls and their purses as if expecting the elves to rob them at knife-point, but they were mostly older. Bronwyn made a point of star-

ing hard at those who had a problem with her Wardens.

While her conversation with the Grand Cleric had been fruitful, she regretted her impulsive revelation. Now the Grand Cleric believed that Bronwyn had disobeyed a command straight from the Maker not to pursue the throne, but to take heed instead to her own spiritual welfare. Apparently, while Bronwyn was favored by the Maker, there was only so much favor she could count on, and she might have lost future protection by her rebelliousness. Personally, Bronwyn found it hard to believe that the Maker cared. Perhaps Andraste did — a little — but that too was doubtful. The Prophet had left her mark on the place where her Ashes were kept, but was that her living will, or simply a last footprint before she departed for the Maker's side? Bronwyn knew she was vain, but she was not so vain as to expect the Maker to step in and save so much as a cat from the darkspawn, much less Bronwyn herself.

The Grand Cleric also apparently believed that Bronwyn had been manipulated into a loveless political union. Bronwyn's personal feelings for Loghain were none of the Grand Cleric's business. Besides, half the time Bronwyn herself hardly knew what those feelings were. Loghain could be magnificent one moment and completely impossible the next.

There were Anders and Morrigan, in their finery, dancing the Nevarran. They certainly made a handsome couple. Quinn was hanging back shyly, his eyes huge at the splendor of the scene. Carver was dancing with his cousin Charade, and Niall was dancing with Aveline. She was as tall

as he was, and pretended to dislike dancing, but was quite good at it, really. Aveline had surprised them all by wearing a gown to the Landsmeet feasts: a becoming gown of brown velvet and yellow brocade. The Compound's store-room had been short of fine clothing for women, but Bronwyn had commissioned Rannelly to remedy that.

Where was Zevran? Not dancing. There he was, prowling the edges of the hall, a predatory smile on his lips, apparently unarmed but actually carrying at least a dozen weapons. He was taking threats to her safety seriously.

The dogs were happily socializing with one another. There was an occasional scrap over treats, but no one questioned Scout's authority. The mabari puppies were romping adorably, chasing after someone's lapdog.

Her crown was so heavy. No heavier than a helmet, of course, but it did not fit as well, and the weight was pressing into her temples. Taking it off would be considered a terrible omen, so that was out of the question.

She hoped that the Grand Cleric would speak with the Knight-Divine soon. They would then know whether he was a honorable man of the clergy, capable of understanding rational arguments; or if he was a well-briefed political operative with a set agenda. If the latter, then it would be wise to keep him here as long as possible, so that their enemies had less time to plan. Not that his absence would stop them. They would undoubtedly arrange two or three contingency plans. However, not even the Orlesian

Empire had the resources to ready an army and a fleet for an invasion unless they were planning to launch it. For all the Empress knew, the Landsmeet was sending her their submission as of this moment. Besides, Orlais was already embroiled in a war with Nevarra. Could the Orlesians really handle a two-front war?

Could Ferelden? That hit closer to home. If the darkspawn and the Orlesians attacked simultaneously, it was doubtful that Ferelden could withstand them, unless Ferelden was very, very clever and very, very lucky.

"Your Majesty, may I have the honor?"

Nathaniel was before her, bowing. The minstrels were playing the introduction to a contredanse called *OSEN'S LAMENT*. Why not? Loghain was in deep conversation with Bann Frandarel, sketching out a map on the tablecloth with a knife and spilled wine. She smiled, gave Nathaniel her hand, and let him lead to the top of the set: twenty couples, men facing the women. The slow drumbeat signaled the dance proper, and they began.

Dancing brought a genuine smile to her lips: especially dancing with Nathaniel, who danced so well and whose height made him a far better partner for her than most. They came forward, right palms touching, and circled each other. Maintaining eye contact at this point was demanded by etiquette. At the next measure, they broke apart and ducked under the raised arms of the other couples, weaving in and out, the rest of the lines following.

The tune was old and melancholy, but very beautiful for all that. Bronwyn glimpsed Morrigan, further down the set, being taught the steps by Niall. Bronwyn wondered if she realized that the song was the plaint of Osen, grieving over the loss of his beloved Flemeth, as he waited on the shore for Bann Conobar's men, whom he knew were coming to kill him.

The line of dancers swayed with the drumbeat: their garments crimson and azure, viridian and gold; velvet and satin and the finest white linen. Bronwyn swayed with it, caught up in the delight of the moment, happy to be dancing and not planning to kill monsters or outwit foreigners. Bethany Hawke, lovely in velvet and pearls, was gazing at Nathaniel, her mild dark eyes slipping away from her own partner. The girl saw Bronwyn notice her, and she blushed and looked elsewhere. Bronwyn smiled archly. Nathaniel clearly had an admirer.

They made their twisting way back the top of the set, and circled each other once more. Nathaniel said, "You seem to dance none the worse for the weight of a crown, Your Majesty."

If he could be formal, so could she. "I'm glad you think so, Arl Nathaniel. It's actually quite the struggle to keep it on my head."

He granted her a wry laugh. "And after less than day! That hardly bodes well."

She laughed, too, and was about to answer him, when a blare of trumpets drowned her words.

The minstrels broke off their playing in a ragged discord. The dancers murmured and grumbled.

The seneschal bellowed, "My lords, ladies, and gentlemen! I have been advised that the temperature is dropping dangerously, and that the streets are icing over. For your safety, the King has ordered the suspension of festivities for the evening!"

A buzz of disappointment rose up, punctuated by some alarm. Families drew together, and there were calls for servants and cloaks.

Some of the servants had gone to Anora, who was directing them to spread out strips of carpeting on the palace steps going down to the inner courtyard. Bronwyn felt a moment's vexation that they had not come to her first. Of course Anora had been queen here for five years and knew all the procedures. And Bronwyn had been dancing.

Loghain had his hand out, a peremptory gesture for her to join him. Bronwyn gave Nathaniel a smile and a shrug. "Duty calls, my lord."

"Always, it would seem," he agreed, rather grimly.

Bronwyn took her place beside Loghain, and the disgruntled guests bowed to them. Then they left the hall together, once again in perfect step.

"The party's over, Ketil!" shouted Idunn.

"Speak for yourself!" her fellow Warden shot back, moving among the emptying tables to finish off anything left in wine goblets or ale tankards. The dwarf stuffed some sugar cakes into his pockets, and snatched up a meaty muttonbone like a mace, gnawing at it between gulps of liquor.

The nobleman dancing with Aveline was not ready to go home either. "What a stormcrow our new King is! I thought marriage would have mellowed him!"

"It's just possible," Aveline suggested, "that the weather really has turned bad. It would be a shame if horses – and people – broke their legs on the ice."

"True, I suppose... but Loghain's a gloomy sort all the same. My thanks for your company, Lady Warden. A pleasure."

The parties of the Arls of South Reach and of Denerim collected by the doors. Adam and Carver, concerned for their family, joined them there.

Habren shrieked in horror at Kane's suggestion that they simply walk to the estate – which was practically next door. Carver and Adam caught each other's eye, knowing that they must not wince visibly. They were in complete agreement about their new stepsister, the Arlessa of Denerim.

"My shoes! My gown!" Habren shrilled. "You can walk if you like, but I simply can't! I can't!"

"The ladies aren't shod for this weather," Bryland remarked to his son-in-law, not unreasonably. "Loghain's right to send us home. I had a look outside. It's getting bad. The servants are having to help the older people down the steps."

"Don't worry, Mother," Adam soothed. "We'll get you into your carriage."

"If it's really bad," Kane said, thinking it over, "perhaps you and your party should spend the night with us. The King will expect us early tomorrow, anyway."

"That's kindly thought of, but I think we'll manage. Women like to sleep in their own beds. And I believe Bann Adam is riding back to Highever House with Teyrn Fergus."

Kane caught the brief looks of horror on the faces of Arlessa Leandra, her daughter, and her niece at the idea of spending a night under Habren's roof. The days before the move had been hard on them. Or rather, Habren had.

Really, he could hardly wait himself to sleep in his own bed, for that matter. The place was his... all his. And the girls would be safe up in their nice little nest.

"Come on, then. Jancey, hold tight to me..."

Tipsy and laughing, the Wardens held their own procession through the palace, on their way to the side door that led to the little courtyard facing the Wardens' Compound. Ketil was not the only one to gather up some treats "for later."

"Where's Carver?" asked Quinn, looking around.

"Helping his mother and sister," said Aveline. "He'll be along later."

The guard at the door wanted to talk to them, "One of the servants came looking for your earlier, Wardens, but there were orders not to let anyone but royal messengers into the Hall during the feast. I tried to back the girl up, but my officer wasn't having it. The girl said there was a Warden come from the west, and not in the best shape, either."

Anders blinked, trying to force back the fog of wine. "Well, then, I'd better have a look at... him? Her?"

"Dunno, Warden. The girl went back without saying much more. You might want a word with the Queen when you can. I warned old Gowan she wouldn't be best pleased, but he said the King's orders were the ones he's following."

Morrigan smirked, hoping she would see Bronwyn's face when she heard of this. If her friend imagined she was on some sort of equal footing with that masterful Loghain, she was manifestly mistaken. Morrigan had tried to warn her, but she had not listened.

The guard opened the door for them, and the bitter wind rushed down the corridor, blowing up under the skirts of those women who had worn them. Aveline sighed, accepting it as the price of vanity.

"Ooo!" Maeve squealed. "Bloody cold, that wind! Move it, Anders!"

A faint mist was drizzling down, half ice, half water, and it froze on contact with the cobblestones of the courtyard. Idunn, pushing impatiently past the rest, felt her legs shoot out from under her, and she was promptly sitting on the ice, her skirts over her head. Ketil bawled with laughter, pointing at her. Maeve, indignant on Idunn's behalf, shoved him, and he slid out as if on skates before sprawling face-down. The mutton-bone skittered away into the shadows, and Ketil wailed his bereavement.

More laughter. The Wardens tried to cling to the stone wall for balance, but that, too, was iced over. Aveline, not tipsy like the others, was making slow, dogged progress. Quinn drew his boot knives, and dug them into the wall,

one hand, and then the other.

"It's like climbing a mountain," he said cheerfully. "Only sideways."

The elves, more sure-footed, fared better. Danith moved gracefully into the lead, glad she had not worn foolish shemlen skirts. Zevran smirked as he caught up with her, shifting his balance from one soft boot to the other. It was actually rather diverting.

The door to the Compound opened, spilling light onto the courtyard. It shone like a mirror, the filth concealed by a layer of crystal.

"There you are, at last," cried Mistress Rannelly, popping out to scold them. "And not before time! Come along now, and no nonsense!"

Morrigan fumed, wishing she could shape-shift. She could, but it would force her to leave her splendid gown behind her. She must find some sort of way to enchant her new clothes in the same way as her battle robes. And the shutters to her room were probably fastened. It was the courtyard, or nothing.

Niall was faring better than some, digging the end of his staff into the ice and then sliding along. At least he did until he tried to help Idunn up, and they both went down. Ketil did not even try to get up, but scrambled along on his hands and knees, cursing.

The servants poured boiling water on the steps to the Compound and melted some of the ice. The Wardens were hauled up by eager hands from within.

"Such a night!" Rannelly fretted. "Go inside and get some hot cider in you. You, too, Warden Anders dear, and then we need you to look to poor Aeron. He's in a bad way, but I'm sure you can fix him up in a trice."

"I'll come, too," Niall promised, slipping on the threshold. "Here, Idunn. Did you bruise your knee?"

"It's nothing," that sturdy warrior insisted. "Where's the cider?"

Rannelly, concerned about Aeron, and feeling he would need some quiet, had put him to bed in one of the empty rooms in the Tower, rather than in the Junior Wardens' quarters. Anders and Niall hardly recognized him. Nor did Danith. As the Senior Warden by rank present, she felt she ought to find out what had brought him here and how he had been hurt.

She paused at the sight. His nose was black with frost-bite, and he was bald, his scalp scarred pink and angry.

Anders did not say what he thought on seeing him. He had already slipped into his Healer's demeanor.

"Let's have a look at you. Not the weather I'd choose for trying to head-butt the walls of Denerim. Yes, I can save your nose. Let's have a look at your feet and fingers..."

Lights glowed blue from the mages' hands, and Aeron began to look at least a little more human.

"Your Majesty, Warden Anders says you need to come, and if you don't he'll come get you himself!" Fionn declared, scandalized and excited. "Warden Danith, too!"

Loghain glanced up under his eyebrows. "Did someone

not make it back to the Wardens' lair in one piece?"

"No, Your Majesty, it's a Warden who came all the way from West Hill. He's had a fearsome time, and he's froze near to death!"

Bronwyn began pulling on her boots. "Who is it?"

"I don't know him, Your Majesty. The name's something like Ayrón or Iron. Nobody I've met, but he's a Warden, sure enough."

"Aeron," Bronwyn said to Loghain. "He was in Astrid's unit."

Loghain turned to the maid. "Tell the footmen and stablemen to spread cinders on the path to the Wardens' Compound. We'll be going back and forth quite a bit, it seems. Carpet, wood chips... anything. Go now."

Fionn disappeared. Bronwyn looked at him, in the process of throwing on her plain green gown and her sable cloak. Loghain was reaching for a leather doublet.

"We?"

"Of course. I promise to put my hands over my ears if I think I might overhear any Warden *secrets*."

It was a nastily cold walk, though the cinders gave them purchase on the ice. The dogs cheerfully trotted along, charmed at the prospect of a walk. A detail of six guardsmen escorted them, clanking in front and in back, and then up into the Warden's Compound. For a moment, Bronwyn wished she still lived there. It smelled wonderful: all spiced cider and well-soaped woodwork. Danith met them at the door, gave Loghain a slight look askance, and then started talking. Up they circled; up the spiral staircase inside the tower. The guards were left to wait in the warm kitchen.

"He brought a letter from Tara," Danith told them. "He passed your courier to her on his way, but decided to let the man continue with your letter, with his message that they had met and exchanged words. By that time he was on foot. He was sent alone because they could buy but one horse, and he could ride well. Anders and Niall have been doing their best to heal his injuries."

The tower was quiet. Danith lowered her voice. "Anders grew impatient with all of us crowding around him, and ordered anyone who could be not be of use to go to bed."

Anders looked up as they entered, his face grim. Niall, washing his hands, turned, gave Bronwyn a hesitant smile, and then blushed and bowed at the sight of Loghain. Maeve, sitting on the other side of the bed with a bowl of broth in her hands, did not try to get up, but nodded with nervous respect. Loghain gestured, and the dogs found a corner and sat quietly. Amber whimpered in sympathy, sensing that the human in the bed was badly hurt.

Aeron's head and hands were swathed in bandages. The sharp scent of healing herbs lay on the air like a warm and heavy hand. The wounded Warden was propped up on pillows, and rolled his head to greet the new arrivals. He managed a weak smile.

"Commander... Teyrn Loghain. I'll try to lie at attention."

Anders scowled at them, clearly worried that they were going to make a childish scene because a wounded man did not know their current titles. Loghain rolled his eyes

at the mage. Anders was not daunted.

"Frostbite, exhaustion, two neglected wounds, and some badly-healed burns. I wanted him to get some sleep, but he insisted that he needed to make his report to you."

Niall found a chair and set it beside the bed. He looked around for something for Loghain, who waved the mage's fussing aside, shaking his head.

"I'll stand back here out of the way." He leaned back against the wall and folded his arms, watching and listening.

Bronwyn sat, trying not to show how appalled she was by Aeron's appearance. She recalled a thick head of black hair, but in between the bandages she saw only pink skin. The blankets were rolled up to give access to his feet. His face, too, was scarred, and he seemed to have taken a bad wound across his chest and shoulder.

Bronwyn softened her voice to the appropriate tone for a sick room. "Aeron, I'm glad to see you alive and in such good hands. How are your companions? Are Tara and Astrid all right?"

His eyes glittered in the candlelight. Clearly, he wanted to unburden himself before he could settle down for the rest he desperately needed.

"Tara's fine, last I saw her. There's a letter for you on the chest over there. Sorry there's blood on it, but you should be able to read most of it. Astrid took a bad wound, but she was doing better the day I left. That was the twenty-fifth. Maybe she's able to fight again."

"What happened?" That did not sound good at all.

"I'd better tell you in order. Tara's got a lot of the story in the letter, and the places we saw darkspawn marked on the map. We came up alongside the Lake and met some darkspawn here and there. Nothing much on the surface. We joined up with the Legion at Lake Belannas. I was in Astrid's party, so we went below. A little south of the northern access point we had a nasty fight with a big force of darkspawn. We lost Liam there, and I got my head set ablaze." He snorted, a little bitterly. "'Friendly fire,' I guess you'd call it. Velanna's aim wasn't exactly perfect. Anyway it was bad, and we needed some rest afterward. We met up with Tara and her people at that little inn by the lake, and then they went down to the Deep Roads for their turn. They came across more darkspawn. All heading west, Tara said to say. Bad fight. Shook up some our people." He paused, chuckling.

"Oh! Forgot to tell you. We've got some golems now. Bloody useful in a scrap. One of them can talk. Found it south of Lake Calenhad. Goes by the name of Shale."

Bronwyn glanced at Anders, wondering if Aeron's mind was wandering. Anders shrugged.

Maeve gave Aeron another spoonful of broth, and the man went on, eager to have his say.

"So we made it to West Hill and they put us up in the old fortress. It's better than the Deep Roads, I can tell you! I was a bit out of it... still in a lot of pain, so I slept until Tara's people and the Legion arrived. I heard about that

fight later... Anyway, the next morning, we found that Walther and Griffith had bailed on us. Gone."

"They *deserted*?" Bronwyn hissed. "*Deserted*?"

"I don't know what else to call it." Aeron glanced uneasily at Loghain. "Sigrun told me that those fights in the Deep Roads scared them shitless. Tara and Astrid said to keep it quiet..."

"I won't say a word," Loghain muttered, meanly pleased to know that even the mighty Grey Wardens sometimes had feet of clay.

"Astrid said that if they ran, they weren't fit to be Wardens anyway, and Brosca hoped they'd freeze. Tara felt bad, though. They were her own men, and they ran out on her like that. Bastards. We don't know where they went."

"We do," grunted Anders. "Griffith, anyway. He got as far as Amaranthine and was killed by the darkspawn."

"Walther, too, probably," Bronwyn considered, remembering the flayed, unidentifiable body on the Architect's rack, and the compassion she had wasted on it.

"Serves them right," Aeron snarled. "Bastards. Anyway, we put some feelers out in the Deep Roads around there. Astrid wanted to go east and look into some old thaigs she'd heard of. I wasn't fit to go — bloody lucky for me! — but Astrid took some Wardens and the Legion and was really chuffed at first to find a thaig untouched by the darkspawn... locked barrier door and all. Nobody had been there in ages. Except it wasn't quite empty. First they found some golems. Then they found out that some inventors were doing experiments

back in the day, and they made a flesh golem out of casteless dwarves. It woke up and went crazy. Killed a bunch of the Legion and the scholar that Astrid was friends with. She killed the thing, but then the head came loose, ran around on these little legs, and jumped Astrid. And then..." he grimaced. "It bit her hand off."

"*Maker!*" The word burst, in unison, from every human in the room. Danith winced in sympathy.

"She survived, though," Bronwyn said anxiously.

Anders was making furious grimaces, as if it were his fault that he could not be in two places at once. Niall blew out a breath. Maeve dabbed up the broth that had spilled onto her lap. Loghain stood motionless, back in the shadows. The man seemed to have his wits about him, wounded and sick or not. It was still a lot to take in.

"Yeah," Aeron agreed. "She's a tough one. She's having the Legion smith forge her some things for her left hand... it was the left hand she lost. They can make her some weapons that she can strap on to the stump. Can make a sort of hand, too, for everyday. She's been out of it for the fighting or exploring, though, you can imagine. Tara wanted to send a letter and they didn't have any horses at the fort, believe it or not. Said the Bann took them with him to Denerim. Couldn't find any at the freeholds, either. Tara went all up and down the coast. Said she thought people were lying to her, hiding their stock. Maybe so. Saw some other things, too. And then we had a bad storm

and couldn't go anywhere for days..."

His eyelids drooped briefly. "Had a chess tournament... nearly killed that bitch Velanna..." He roused himself. "Right. Then the weather broke and a farmer sold us a nag and I set off. Tara couldn't leave with Astrid in the shape she was, and anyway she says she can only ride if somebody's riding with her. Catriona and I were the only candidates, and I got the short straw. No use telling you about the road, except that I didn't run into any darkspawn. Thank the Maker. And I fucking killed the bandits that shot my horse. Tobe the chandler found me in the snow and let me ride in his wagon. He'll sit at the right hand of the Maker someday." His face went slack, and he swallowed. "That's all, I guess."

Anders said, "Maeve, spoon him up a bit more broth, and then I'll give him a sleeping potion. He's done enough talking for tonight." He whispered to Bronwyn, "When he's slept himself out, I think a dose of the improved Joining potion will be just the thing for him."

Bronwyn leaned over the wounded man, and put a gentle hand on his arm. "You've done brilliantly. Sleep now."

She took Tara's thick letter from the chest, gave a quick nod to her Wardens, and left the room with Loghain.

"I've got to read the letter now," she murmured to him, as they descended the stairs. "Maybe she needs help."

Loghain was fixed on the bits of useful intelligence he had gleaned from the rambling report. Most of all, he wanted to get his hands on the elf's map and focus on

the places where darkspawn had been seen on the surface. A very good thought, that. Tara was a sensible little girl – just the sort of mage Ferelden needed. Golems? He remembered a golem from the Rebellion that belonged to the mage named Wilhelm. A very useful tool.

Rannelly brought them more candles, and they sat together at the long table in the Wardens' Hall. Bronwyn popped the seal and carefully opened the parchment. The dark-brown bloodstains had not soaked all the way through, fortunately. She pulled the map out and smoothed it carefully, laying it on the table. Loghain drew a candlestick closer and scowled over the markings. There were circles with numbers in them, carefully marked in red ink. There were annotations along the side of the parchment, giving more dates and details.

Bronwyn took up the letter. Most of it was legible.

Dear Bronwyn,

Is that too informal? I don't know how to write military-style.

Greetings, Commander:

Is that better? Anyway, we've made it to West Hill, and it's a complete dump. The seneschal didn't even want to let Astrid in, but she told him off. The housekeeper is nice, though.

I'm writing this for both Astrid and me. Astrid got hurt a few days ago, but she's doing better. She's determined to be back fighting the darkspawn. I wish I could do more for her. I hate being such a pathetic Healer. The next time I see Wynne, I going to beg for remedial lessons!

Bronwyn sighed. Of course Tara could not know that Wynne was dead... murdered by Templars.

You'll see from the map that we went due west when we left Ostagar. We trailed some darkspawn for quite a ways, and we found them where it's marked on the map. We turned north then, because we were worried about meeting the dwarves on time. As it was, we were a little late. Anyway, it worked out. Do you remember that golem control rod I bought at disgusting Sulcher Village? I found the golem! There's a lot to tell about that, but I'd rather tell you in person than put it in a letter. So anyway, I found the golem and it worked! Better yet, Shale isn't just a thing. It can think and fight on its own. It agrees that the darkspawn need to be killed, and so it said that it had nothing better to do than to come along with us. And it doesn't eat anything and never needs to sleep, so it's a terrific guard on watch at night! I think it likes Astrid better than me, because it's very snarky and calls me "the Cute Little Mage," but it always calls Astrid "the Warden."

Shale's made all the difference against the darkspawn...

"That's interesting," Bronwyn said to Loghain. "She says that the golem they found can think and act on its own and joined them voluntarily. I've never heard of such a thing. Incredibly useful, though."

She read on, through the awkward misunderstanding at Redcliffe; through the march upcountry. Tara was very precise about the darkspawn seen by both parties. Here and there were sentences that sounded more like Astrid,

and which Bronwyn suspected were dictated by her. More details emerged about their battles, and Bronwyn pointed out the sites on the map. Loghain grew impatient with her, and asked that she read aloud. Liam's death, their difficulties with Velanna, their curiosity about the condition of the fortress were recounted. Tara told of the desertions and apologized for her shortcomings as a leader.

It never occurred to me that anyone would desert. They know they can't stop being Wardens just because it's hard and scary. We decided that our mission here was more important than chasing a pair of cowards, but I don't know if you'll agree. We don't know where they went, though Catriona thought they might go east, since the passes west are blocked. There's a fishing village not far from West Hill, but nobody admitted to seeing Walther or Griffith, and nobody said they'd hired a boat. In good weather, it's not hard to sail to Kirkwall, I'm told, but a lot of the boats are in dry dock for the winter.

Then came the horrific events at Amgarrak Thaig.

"They'd been lucky up to that point," Loghain commented, after hearing the full story. "And if the dwarves get a clean, uncontested thaig out of it, they'll consider the losses justified. The golems, too, are quite the prize."

Bronwyn did not think it was lucky to lose three Wardens, but continued reading without bothering to argue with him.

Astrid is determined not to let the loss of a hand slow her down. While the smith forged her prosthetics, I took some parties out, partly to look for some horses, and partly just to

scout. I went up and down the coast and I noticed quite a few Templars traveling on the Imperial Highway. That made me curious. When weather permits I'll do a little more looking into where they're going.

Astrid wants to explore the Amgarrak Road farther in each direction. She wants to know if it's possible to get to a thaig called Kal'Hirol to the east. It's probably under Amaranthine. It was very important to the smith caste. She also wants to know if it's possible to make it to Orzammar by the Deep Roads from here in West Hill. We thought we should let you know what we discovered so far. You may want us to join you in Denerim. Astrid thinks it would be great if we could get there — or as close as possible — by the Deep Roads, because then we wouldn't have to worry about the weather!

So that's what we've been up to. We're sad about Liam and about Astrid's hand, and mad about the desertions. We hope things have been going better for you. We heard that the Queen was cured, so that's all good.

The next few words were scratched out, but they appeared to say

"Well, take care of yourself,

Love,

Tara,"

Bronwyn grinned, imagining Astrid telling Tara that she could not close an official report with the word "Love." Underneath the scratching was

"Respectfully submitted this twenty-fifth of Umbralis.

*Senior Warden Astrid Aeducan
Senior Mage Warden Tara Surana"*

Loghain was still thinking over the possibility of traveling by way of the Deep Roads. He had done it himself years before. Would it be possible to enter them — perhaps at that mine, perhaps at Vigil's Keep, and find this Kal'Hirol? His imagination was fired by the idea of a secret way under the surface, safe from Orlesian spies, impervious to weather. If he could get troops and supplies all the way to Orzammar this winter, it was not at all far that to Gherlen's Halt. It might be a way to foil the potential invasion. How populated with darkspawn was this Amgarrak Road?

"You have a map of the Deep Roads, of course," he remarked to Bronwyn

"Several. You're referring to the Deep Roads under Ferelden, I daresay. It would be something if we could clear out the darkspawn from here to West Hill."

"Or farther."

"I think," Tara said, "that we've discovered the site of the Aeonar Prison. Right there up on that bluff."

They were south of West Hill, walking along the shores of the Bay of Dane. Rocky islets dotted the grey sea. Further north on the horizon, purple smudges hinted at the larger islands of the Waking Sea Bannorn. In sheltered places, the tidewater was frozen. They were not far north of where the Imperial Highway blended into the some-

what cruder Fereldan North Road. It was cold, but not as cold as the past few days, and Tara had wanted for some time to have another look at this place. Six Wardens could deal with anything aside from the cold. Astrid had taken the golems with her on her own mission in the Deep Roads, since Tara had hoped to be somewhat inconspicuous while she prowled this strip of coastline.

"Really?" Brosca asked. "The Aeonar Prison? What's that?"

Surprised at the blank faces, Tara realized that there was no reason for dwarves or Dalish to know anything about it. Catriona frowned, drawing out a thread of memory.

"It's a prison for mages, isn't it?"

"Clever girl," Tara praised her. "That's the story, anyway. It's what they threaten bad little mage boys and girls with, along with Tranquility and summary execution. I was expecting a tower, but maybe this makes more sense."

Gesturing at the crumbling, squat stone structure only visible from the shore, she told them what she knew.

"Back in the bad old days of the Tevinter Imperium, the Tevinters occupied what's now Ferelden, just like they occupied everywhere else. They had two sites dedicated to magical experimentation at the extreme ends of the Imperial Highway. The southern one was the fortress of Ostagar, which looks out over the Kocari Wilds. That was the farthest reach of the Imperium, and the fortress was there to hold back the southern barbarians. At the other end of the Imperial Highway, so the story went, was the Aeonar,

though the exact location is supposedly a secret known only to a handful of Templars. Not long after the death of Andraste, some of her disciples stormed the Aeonar and slaughtered all the magisters there. According to legend, it was an eerily silent massacre, for the invaders burst in while all but one of the mages was in the Fade. The attack permanently damaged the Veil and left the place haunted, so eventually the Chantry decided to use it as a prison. They say they hold accused and maleficarum and apostates there, but it doesn't look all that big to me."

Brosca nodded, sizing up the remains of the little fortress. A pillar slanted over an entryway thick with sere and frozen weeds. To a casual observer, it looked like a ruin, but the road leading up to it seemed to be in good condition. Not far from it was a sturdy stone cottage and a good-sized stable and barn.

"It's set into a pretty big hill, so probably the prison bits are underground. Maybe it's a lot bigger than it looks from outside. Why a prison? I thought your Templars just killed mages they didn't like."

"So they do. But I think it wasn't always that way. From what I can gather, the Templars' powers and authority have grown over time. I don't know who they keep there now. The only person I've ever heard of who was sent there wasn't a mage at all."

They were still curious, and she wondered if Jowan would forgive her if she tattled, but then decided that

Jowan could get stuffed. She was the one who had suffered the most from his crazy attempt at romance.

"Jowan — yes, *our* Jowan — and I were at the Circle together, and one day he takes me aside and tells me he's fallen madly in love. That wouldn't be so bad, but the girl he's fallen for is a Chantry initiate..."

Catriona gasped. The rest still looked blank. Irritated, Tara explained.

"That's like an apprentice priest. Her family gave her to the Chantry, and that meant that once she took her vows she could never marry or... do anything else like that... especially with a mage."

"No sex?" Brosca squawked. "That's... unhealthy!"

"It is unnatural and spiritually harmful to repress such urges," agreed Darach.

"That's what the Chantry says, though. No sex ever," Tara confirmed. "If Jowan had gone looking for the worst girl in all Thedas to fall in love with, he couldn't have done better. And then he introduced me to her, and it seemed that she felt the same about him, though I don't know if she was sincere, or if she was just looking for a man to rescue her from the Chantry. Anyhow, that's when Jowan got his brilliant idea about escaping the Circle. Lily told him that the Knight-Commander was planning to make him Tranquil. To this day, I don't know if that was true, or something Lily made up to give him a push."

Sigrun looked at her shrewdly. "He wanted you to help

them bust out of there."

"What else?"

"This is really interesting and all," grumbled Jukka, "but it's Stone-sodding cold out here. Maybe the people in that house or hut or whatever — " he pointed at the stone cottage " — maybe they'll let us sit by the fire."

Tara grinned, hugging her cloak tighter. Going into that particular cottage was just what she wanted to do. If this place really was the Aeonar, then there would be lookouts and guards posted at the cottage.

"Sure. Come on. Anyway the long and short of it was that we didn't take enough time to plan well, because Jowan thought they were coming for him the next day. We got caught and only Jowan managed to get away. The Knight-Commander told Lily she was going to the Aeonar, and I got locked up in the dungeons. Why didn't they send *me* to the Aeonar?" She shuddered, and not only because of the wind. "But that's a story I prefer not to share. I wondered about Lily, though. I suppose they'd make her serve out her novitiate at the Aeonar, and make sure she couldn't get away. It's probably not a very nice place."

As they approached the cottage, Tara took a good look at the fort. It appeared to be built into a good-sized hill that rose up in back of the building, and loomed over it. How had the Tevinters managed that? Magic? Or maybe that hill was a later addition, with the intent of camouflaging the structure. No one would notice anything about it from



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the Imperial Highway, other than the side road diverting toward the sea and the cottage. The locals had told her that the soil here was particularly rocky and unwelcoming, and that the waters hereabouts were treacherous, and full of submerged rocks. Fishermen would not risk these waters, with so many safer and better places to ply their trade. Smugglers would find it too dangerous to be profitable. No wonder it was wild and desolate, with no neighbors in sight.

"A stable!" muttered Catriona. "We should see if they have any decent horses."

Tara smirked. "I expect they do. Really good horses. Great big war horses."

It took some loud knocking and tough talking even to be admitted to the cottage by the four tall men inside. They were dressed like simple countryfolk, but neither Tara nor even Catriona was fooled for a second. Simple countrymen did not carry themselves as these men did. There were no Templars insignias in sight, nor large pieces of plate armor, but there was a large shrine to Andraste, complete with candles.

"We're just Grey Wardens," Tara said, smiling innocently. "We're patrolling for darkspawn. Can we warm up at your fire?"

"Grey Wardens?" said the one who was obviously the leader, a strapping fellow with dark hair in a short military cut, his beard perfectly groomed. "We heard that the darkspawn were all in the south."

"Nothing to worry about," Tara said, not meeting the man's eye. "Just a routine patrol." It sounded like the big-



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gest, fattest lying cover-up in the world. Tara smiled to herself, hoping they never slept easy in their beds again.

"Got anything to drink?" Brosca asked, shamelessly out for what she could get.

"I'll make tea," offered a handsome young six-footer.

"Tea," Sigrun grumbled, rolling her eyes at Jukka.

"We noticed your stable," Tara remarked. "We're looking for horses."

"We have no horses for sale, Warden," the leader said, his face wooden.

"Really?" Tara pressed. "We'd pay top price. Three... even five sovereigns!"

Catriona whistled, as if impressed by Tara's munificence.

"Wow," said Sigrun, awed. "Five sovereigns! I bet poor farmers could live out here for a year on that."

"There's not much I wouldn't sell for five sovereigns," agreed Jukka. "Including me." He leered at Sigrun, who punched his arm.

"We need our horses for farming," the leader told her haughtily.

"What farming?" Catriona shot back. "I didn't see any fields around here."

"Don't lie to us," Tara growled. "You're bandits, aren't you?"

"Or Orlesian spies!" Catriona hissed.

"We're not spies!" protested the boy with the teakettle. "Or bandits either!"

"And don't even think," snarled Tara, seeing one of the

men's hands moving toward his belt knife, "of pulling weapons on us. Either we'll kill you, or you'll kill us, and then our fellow Wardens, who know where we are today, will hunt you down and kill you anyway. Killing Grey Wardens during a Blight is just about the worst crime you can commit. And if you ran off, Bronwyn the Dragon-slayer would find you, and then slaughter you and your families and burn your house down. It's a thing she does."

She actually considered killing them, swept by the surge of bitter anger that Templars always roused in her. They did not grasp, since she was wearing Spellweaver, that she was really a mage. The dwarves would not care, and Darach would probably rather kill them than not. Catriona might be scandalized, though, and Tara liked Catriona. If they gave her an excuse, though...

The leader glared at her. "We're not bandits."

"Or spies!" repeated the boy.

"Shut up, Desmond," the leader ground out.

"Shut up, Desmond," Sigrun chirped.

"We're just teasing you," Tara said genially. "We totally know you're Templars."

Four expressions of gormless shock on four handsome, square-jawed faces. Tara explained her reasoning.

"You're too well-groomed to be bandits, and Orlesian spies would be taunting us with silly accents."

"Not if they were really good spies," whispered Catriona.

Brosca snorted. "I don't think these guys are really good spies."

"Stop it!" shouted Desmond. "We're not spies at all!"

"Shut up, Desmond," Tara admonished him. "Where's the tea? You want to know how we know you're Templars? We know you're Templars because you're dicking us around when we've been out freezing our arses to protect you and the rest of the world from monsters. If you were really farmers you would have offered us something to eat, and invited us to come sit by the fire. You didn't. Ergo, Templars."

"Warden," the leader said to Catriona, "you should control your people."

The tension ratcheted up a notch.

"Excuse me?" Tara said, "You are presuming that because Catriona is human, she's in charge. Grey Wardens aren't bigoted, unlike nearly every other institution in Thedas. Actually, *I* am the Senior Warden here."

Five cups of tea were nervously poured and silently consumed.

Tara set down her cup – it actually was quite good tea, and warmed her up quite a bit.

"That old ruin..." she began, with false casualness. "Have you seen any activity there? It's just the sort of place that darkspawn love to hide out in."

The Templars practically seized up. The leader huffed, "We know that there are no darkspawn there, Warden."

"Really? Are you sure? It would be really bad for you if you were mistaken. We could check it out for you. No problem at all."

"That is unnecessary. We use it for storage, and we have never seen anything strange there."

"If you say so. Thanks for the tea, gentlemen."

Bracing themselves against the cold, the Wardens left the door wide open as they departed. A little way down the bluff, their muffled sniggers burst into outright laughter.

"Why are Templars always so handsome?" Brosca complained. "What a waste."



Perhaps a hand had been worth it, after all.

Astrid's spirits overflowed with grim jubilation. The mission was a blazing success. With Amgarrak as a base, she had led the Legion and the golems through minimal resistance to the prize of prizes: she had found Kal'Hirol.

It was a haunted place, but with the touch of living dwarves, the phantoms were already fading. Before they disappeared completely, Astrid's troops saw the last stand of the casteless here: deserted by the rest of the inhabitants; giving their lives so that the uncaring and ungrateful could escape to safety. They passed a pitiful ghost of a frightened child bidding farewell to her mother; they witnessed more ghosts forever girding themselves to endure hopeless battle. Above all, they met the shade of Dairon, the warrior who had rallied the casteless. In a vast hall, he gave a stirring speech to his unlikely soldiers; in a small alcove, he died, trampled by an ogre. A legion scout found a tablet there, hastily inscribed by Dairon, with the names of the casteless

who took up arms to protect their fellow dwarves. Astrid promised them that she would do all in her power to see that the tablet was taken to Orzammar and delivered to the Shaperate. Such sacrifices should never be forgotten.

Blighted and foul as the ancient smith thaig was, much of its greatness remained. It had been magnificent, once, with its mighty halls, its vast trade quarter, its murals of polished stone. Myriad dusty corners were heaped with plunder; the wealth of the mines was fabulous. Among the rest of the booty, they were hauling out a tub of lyrium that would supply the Wardens for generations to come. That was the least Astrid could do for the order, which had given her a second chance at life and glory.

While the Legion, accompanied by Shale, spread out to map the thaig, and while Velanna and Ailill slept, Astrid led Falkor and Askil on the search for the lost treasury. When they reached the first of the huge, sealed stone vaults, Astrid lashed out with the sharp edge of the hook that was her new left hand, and cut through the lead seal with a stroke.

It was... intact. And richer than any dragon's hoard. Gems, armor, gold, works of exquisite artifice were exactly where the last lord of the thaig had left them. This was not going to the Wardens. It was the property of the dwarven people, and Astrid would administer it in such a way that it would give them a leader better than Bhelen. It was divided and sorted, and the best of it placed in a trunk that was loaded onto one of the golems. Falkor and Askil

were given generous shares of their own. The entry to the treasury was then carefully concealed. On the return journey, they had hidden some of the treasures in a secret place Astrid had discovered in Amgarrak. Some lined her pockets, and would smooth her way.

Their return march was unopposed. If there were darkspawn, they were far away in twisting side tunnels. In due course, they reached the West Hill access point.

"We'll leave the wagon here, Warden?" asked Rodyk.

"Yes," Astrid said. "We'll want it for taking more supplies in to Amgarrak."

"That's right," snarked Shale, "you have the golems to fetch and carry for you now."

"Not you, my friend," Astrid laughed. "We must leave you free to squish the unwary!"

She had slipped into command of this unit of the Legion almost imperceptibly. Rodyk was an excellent officer, but seemed instinctively to defer to her. It would not be difficult to bring him into her circle of supporters. She thought about Amgarrak a little more.

"Soon we'll want to stock it with tame nugs and deepstalkers, but we'll need a garrison there permanently to look after the creatures. Let's see what we can scrounge from the Daces." She smiled to herself. "I found the controls to the hydroponics operation and switched them on. By the time we return, we should have harvestable lichen. By then, of course, we'll also want someone overseeing it."

"Good thinking, Warden!"

The cold above was a shock. The Legion, to a man, groaned aloud at the prospect of the march to the fortress. The golems – or at least Shale – were smugly indifferent to the temperature. Astrid paused to raise the dwarves' spirits.

"Legion! Stone knows how the cloudheads put up with this, but if they can do it, so can we! In a few days, with any luck, we'll be back down here again, and there will be proper dwarven food in plenty in Amgarrak Thaig. So suck it up, and let's go drink up the surfacers' ale!"

The cheering died down as they marched away. The snow had drifted in places, but West Hill rose up, guiding them. Astrid felt the thump of the shield on her back beat a going-home sort of rhythm. The smiths had done a brilliant job for her, both with her hook-like appendage, and in fashioning her shield in such a way that she could catch hold of it and fit her hooked forearm into the custom-designed grip. When she was fighting, she hardly felt the lack of a left hand at all. Her right hand, dexterous as ever, found its way into a pocket, and played with the jingling gold.

As they drew closer, Astrid could make out the tiny figure of Tara up on the battlements, waving at them like mad.

"Astrid! Come on! We've got a letter from Bronwyn!"

"Sit down, Warden," said Ser Cauthrien. She was not sitting herself, but wrapped in a heavy soldier's cloak and gazing out the window at the ravens dancing in the snow.

She looked back at Alistair. He was watching her, apparently waiting for the axe – whether real or metaphorical – to fall. Rumor said he was the bastard son of King Maric. She had no trouble believing it. She had known the late king well, and as time went on she could see the resemblance between the young man and Maric more and more clearly. And he acted like King Maric: the self-deprecating humor, the cheerful courage... She could see why Loghain had taken Alistair under his wing. Even more clearly, she could see why he had kept the boy away from the Landsmeet.

"I've had a letter from the Teyrn," she told him. "Based on the intelligence we've been sending him, he thinks we should wrap up operations here at Ostagar. We haven't seen darkspawn on the surface since the middle of last month. For that matter, you Wardens haven't seen darkspawn in the Deep Roads without traveling for two days on the Helmclever Road. You haven't found darkspawn on the Gwaren Road at all."

Alistair grinned, and pointed out, "We haven't gone all the way to Gwaren yet. On the other hand, in Bronwyn's last letter, she told me how far Danith's group made it coming on the Gwaren Road coming west. Between us we've nearly gone the full length of it. They didn't find anything either. I sort of promised Bronwyn that she'd be able to walk from Ostagar to Gwaren without getting her feet wet."

Cauthrien snorted. "We have other problems to deal with. With the Orlesian attacks, it's clear that the Empress is get-

ting ready to make her move. What about the Archdemon?"

"Can't help you there." Alistair's smile faded. "It can't be anywhere close. Either we've killed all the darkspawn... I wish... or the Archdemon's taken them somewhere else."

"Do the Deep Roads lead south of Ostagar?"

Alistair frowned. He had never even thought of that possibility. "Not in any of the maps we've seen. I can ask Kardol."

"Do. Loghain wants the army to start a withdrawal north when the weather permits, starting on the tenth of Haring. Wardens, dwarves, elves, mages, and all. He's sent the wagons on their way to us. We'll leave supplies for a small garrison and courier station, but that's it."

She had already spoken to the dwarves. Based on the Warden's scouting efforts, they were planning on going up the Helmclever Road. If things were too hot there, they felt they could make it as far as the Belannas access point, and then travel on the surface along the Lake Road. Otherwise, they intended to continue their march north, engaging the darkspawn all the way to the access point at the north end of Lake Calenhad. She had suggested that they go on to West Hill, a fortress large enough to give them shelter and a mustering place. There was, after all, no reason to persuade them to go to Denerim.

Some of the elves would head north with the army, and then turn east into the Breilian Forest, looking for the ancient elven temple that Bronwyn had found. Many, surprisingly, had elected to winter over at Ostagar, watching the Blightmouth.

"Well, you see..." Merrill had explained in her sweet, lilted way. "We're actually quite comfortable here. The Wardens have been so very nice about freezing out the Taint in the forest that the game is coming back. The old towers and barracks give us shelter and the halla safe stabling. Keepers have no problem melting the snow so the hallas can get at the dry grass. As for me, I'm bound for Denerim, with some of my people. I have no doubt that Bronwyn will make the other shemlen keep King Cailan's word to us, but perhaps it would be a good idea to tell her what we'd actually like."

Cauthrien turned her attention back to Alistair, who seemed rather excited at the prospect of leaving Ostagar.

"I'm expecting a letter from Bronwyn any day," he said.

Cauthrien, her face carefully stoic, passed him a griffon-sealed parchment. "This was in the courier's bag."

"Thanks!" He broke the seal, and looked up at the knight with a sheepish grin. "Mind if I look at it now?"

"Go ahead."

Denerim, Haring 1, Dragon 9:30

Dear Alistair:

Yes, you can come back to the Compound. You've been a very good boy indeed.

Seriously, the news from Ostagar is wonderful. You've done a splendid job clearing the lands of darkspawn. Give my regards to each member of your team as well: they've earned recognition and rewards.

So bring them home with the rest of the army — or at least

that portion of the army that is going to Denerim. Not all of it is, but that is Cauthrien's concern. What I want your people to help with is getting our clever dwarven engineers back safely with you, along with the contents of their workshops. This is your primary mission, after taking care of the Wardens, of course. We will make certain that the Glavonaks have the best facilities to continue their researches. I've even given thought to Sten having a properly proportioned bed!

Adaia, of course, will be glad to see her family again. Vaughan Kendells and his father are no more; and I believe the cousin in line to inherit the title cares nothing for them. None the less, I want Adaia to make a habit of wearing her Grey Warden regalia. In fact, I want all of you to wear it. It is your best protection against impudent fools. Obviously, I am most concerned for Adaia and Siofranni — and Petra, too. When Petra comes to Denerim, we shall look into having a staff made for her that can be taken for a sword or some other sort of non-magical weapon. And we'll buy some armor that she finds comfortable.

It's hard to tell where the darkspawn will strike next. I've just returned from Amaranthine, where there was a serious darkspawn attack. It was led by an emissary who could talk. No. I'm not joking, unfortunately. It called itself the Architect, and it was trying to make the rest of the darkspawn into thinking, talking creatures as well. Luckily, we found it and killed it, along with all its minions. It had even enthralled dragons! Altogether it was very alarming. The Landsmeet looks to me to tell them where the Archdemon is, and of course, I have no

idea. I've heard from some of the other Wardens of Thedas. They don't know either, but everyone thinks the blow will fall within their own lands. I think we've got to be prepared for the horde to pop out anywhere.

However, from your account, the Deep Roads are clean around Ostagar for long distances. Therefore, we've going to have to keep patrolling everywhere else. Danith found nothing in Gwaren or east of the White River. I haven't heard from Tara or Astrid yet. However, I want to patrol more in the north myself. If nothing else, we'll send a party back to Ostagar in the early spring, but there's no reason for you to have to winter there.

I do have some wonderful news. We have laid claim to the old Grey Warden fortress on the Coast, called Soldier's Peak. It's been deserted since the days the Wardens were banished, but we found it in surprisingly good condition. I have no doubt I can persuade the Landsmeet to renew our grant. In fact, I'm so sure of it, I've sent Leliana, Jowan, Hakan, and Soren to work on the place over the winter. Leliana has wonderful ideas for making it a comfortable home for the Wardens. A summer home, at least. I have much more to tell you about it when you return to Denerim.

I wish you could have been here for my wedding. We had a wonderful feast and lots of entertainment at Highever House. Try to get here before First Day, and we'll have another feast, especially for the Wardens!

Loghain is sending a lot of empty wagons along with the

supplies, so you can pack up all the things you've collected in the past few months. He's also sending sledges to mount the wagons on if the snow is too bad. Wrap up warmly and be sure to wear your mittens!

Along with the letter, I've sent a package of treats for you all. They were to be delivered to the Wardens' Quarters, so hie thee off there as soon as you can, before they're all gobbled up!

Your sister,
Bronwyn

Glowing with joy, he looked up at the not-unsympathetic Cauthrien. She, too, was eager to return to Denerim, and be once again at Loghain's side, where she belonged.

Alistair said, "Bronwyn writes that the Wardens are to take care to get all of the Glavonak's things to Denerim safely. Adaia will be glad that she won't be out of a job!"

"Yes... those are useful weapons against any enemy. I'll make certain that you have all the wagons you need for that, Warden. Nothing must prevent them arriving in Denerim. You're dismissed. Why don't you tell your people the good news?"

He beamed, and went his smiling way, running up the circling staircases of the Tower of Ishal to find his friends and the intriguing package. Bursting into the Wardens' quarters, he gave a yell.

"We're going home!"

Asa and Ulfa were there, absorbed in a chess game. Oghren was the only other occupant, slumped in a ale-fueled haze. He squinted at Alistair.

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"We're goin' to Orzammar?"

"Um... no. Denerim."

"Huh."

Alistair reddened. The Wardens' Compound in Denerim was the closest thing to home he could claim. Denerim was Adaia's home. Anybody else's... not so much.

"When are we going?" Ulfa asked, her eyes fixed on her Queen's knight.

"In a few days, when the wagons arrive and the weather seems good enough." He prowled the room and then grinned at the sight of a large crate, marked with a griffon. "Bronwyn sent this for all of us. I guess I should wait until everybody's here." He thought a bit more. "In fact, why wait? Let's call everybody in. We'll want to start packing."

"Packing the loot, anyway," Ulfa agreed, with a wolfish smile that Asa returned. They had done very, very well from their explorations of the Deep Roads.

They were busy playing chess, so Alistair picked on the idler in the room.

"Oghren – find Sten, Emrys, and Nevin. They're sparring in the practice room upstairs. I'll go get Adaia and Siofranni. I've got to talk to the Glavonaks, too. We Wardens are in charge of helping them move their workshop."

Asa snarked, "I look forward to being blown sky-high."

Alistair did not, but asked, "Does anybody know where Petra is?"

"Visiting her mage buddies, I reckon," rumbled Oghren.

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"Taking tea. Plotting to turn us all into nugs."

"I'll find her on the way. Don't anybody touch this box."

Excitement bubbled up again. He raced down the stairs, wanting to see Adaia's face when she heard the news.



SER CAUTHRIEN WOODHOUSE

CHAPTER II

CURIOUS
FORMS OF
TORTURE

E WAS NOT UNDERSTANDING HER VERY WELL. Or perhaps he did not want to understand her. Grand Cleric Muirin was having

a difficult – an excruciatingly unpleasant – conversation with Ser Chrysagon de la Crue, Knight-Divine of the Grand Cathedral. An 'honor' guard had escorted him to her private study, and was waiting outside to escort him back to his quarters in the Palace.

"The rebellious priests are under the jurisdiction of the Chantry," he insisted. "They should be tried before a clerical court under canon law, and then punished as you see fit: consigned to the Aeonar, or committed to the discretion of the Divine. It is an outrage that they are being held by the secular authorities."

"Their crimes were not solely against me," Muirin replied. "They also harmed the Queen of Ferelden, drugging her and holding her against her will."

"Why?" the Templar demanded. "What was the reason? Did they think her to be enthralled? If so, they were within

their rights to examine her."

Muirin looked him in the eye. "No one could have seriously imagined the Queen to be enthralled. Their motivation appears to have been not spiritual, but crass political ambition. They wished to deprive Ferelden of its head of state."

"You cannot prove that!"

"I have their confessions right here, Knight-Divine. Feel free to read them. They implicate a number of highly placed priests and Templars."

"Lies. No doubt obtained under torture."

"They have not been tortured. I visited them myself, though that was distasteful to me. It is not agreeable to confront those one thought of friends, only to discover that they wished to set one aside for their own purposes." She narrowed her eyes, trying to read from his how much he knew of this plot.

"You are playing a dangerous game, Your Grace," the Templar said, his voice ice cold. "You are reckless to accuse holy women, high in the councils of Her Perfection herself. This could be looked upon as a signal lack of faith and obedience."

"I am not accusing anyone," she replied. "I am telling you what is in the confessions. Read them yourself, if you like."

"I would not sully myself with such filth. Ferelden has become a cesspool of heresy. Mages have been unleashed on the land, unsupervised by the Templar order; mages are allowed to mingle with the innocent populace; a mage girl has insinuated herself into a noble family... I see a pattern of perverse disregard for the Prophet's commands.

This Warden Bronwyn... this Girl Warden, has made herself Queen, and she favors mages."

"Perhaps she has been made to be Queen. There was great popular support for the ascension of King Loghain." She refused to respond in any way to the Templar's exclamation of disgust. "Her blood gives legitimacy to his rule. I have talked with the young Queen. I know her well. Her mother, the late, noble Teyrna of Highever was my good friend. Abusing Queen Bronwyn is perhaps not a wise course on your part, Knight-Divine. Queen Bronwyn has mages among her Wardens, it is true. That is no new thing. There have always been Grey Warden mages. There are Grey Warden mages in Montsimmard. However, I also have good reason to believe that the young queen understands the dangers of magic, but believes it to be the lesser of two evils, given the current situation in Ferelden."

"You mean the Blight."

"I do indeed. After a lengthy discussion, she explained to me her reasons for needing mages. I had no idea how magically powerful the darkspawn are. Queen Bronwyn informed me that out of a dozen darkspawn, at least one is a mage. Their magic is strong, and she believes that without magic to counter this danger, the Blight cannot be overcome. It is clear that the King is entirely of her mind in this matter. He, too, has fought the darkspawn."

The Knight-Divine pursed his lips, and sat back against his embroidered cushion.

"There is another way," he said, after some thought. "They could put themselves under the command of the Chantry, and commanded by the Knight-Vigilant, the Templars could lead them to victory."

"There is no precedent for that," Muirin pointed out. "The Templars have never taken an active role in the leadership against the Blights. The Wardens would not tolerate it; and only Wardens can end the Blight."

"Myths and legends!"

"I think not, Knight-Divine. The Divine herself has commanded that Wardens are not to be interfered with. I do not think we want to set ourselves against the Wardens. The Wardens of Montsimmard might have little use for the Girl Warden, but they will not appreciate any precedent that abrogates their authority." She tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair. "However, your idea of including the Templars in the effort against the darkspawn has merit. If a large number of them were discreetly introduced into the army, they could maintain a watch over the mages, as well as demonstrating their prowess in foiling the darkspawn's spells."

"Never!" Ser Chrysagon's wrath overflowed. "Never will a Templar submit to mere secular authority, much less submit to the command of that rebellious peasant, Loghain Mac Tir."

"If I may remind you, Knight-Divine," Muirin said, her patience tight in her chest and fingers, "that Fereldans feel very differently about the events of the Orlesian Occupation than you do. Most found the experience extremely

unpleasant. Loghain Mac Tir is not viewed as a rebel in this kingdom, but as a hero and patriot. The Chantry is above such political name-calling."

Brought up short, the Knight-Divine subsided for a moment. He was accustomed to the rhetoric of Val Royeaux, which took as received wisdom that Ferelden was a rebellious province that needed another — stronger — taste of the whip to bring it to heel. It surprised him that a Grand Cleric of the Holy Chantry could think otherwise. Clearly, this woman's loyalties were questionable. He finally said, "He is a peasant, all the same."

Muirin wondered what the Knight-Divine knew of her own humble origins. Everything, she imagined. She did not allow herself to appear offended. Instead, she decided to make clear her support for one Fereldan monarch, at least.

"Queen Bronwyn is quite able to discern between mages serving loyally under her direction and those who are beyond the pale. Only recently the Queen routed out a band of Tevinter blood mages here in Denerim. They were slavers, preying on a nation at war. They were executed, and the phylacteries with which they attempted their spells were destroyed. Nor is Queen Bronwyn an enemy of your order. One of her Wardens was a Templar who was commanded by his superior to join the order. He died in battle a few months ago, and his death is deeply regretted by the Queen."

Ser Chrysagon looked at her, his face expressionless, trying to gauge the meaning beneath her words. That the

Grand Cleric favored the daughter of the late Prince Cousland was clear to him. Her own opinion of the usurper Loghain was not so clear. He sensed a divided loyalty there. Perhaps she, too, felt an instinctive disgust at the marriage of a young woman of high birth to an aging soldier-of-fortune sprung from the dirt of this barbarian land.

Taken all in all, the Empress would not object to Bronwyn Cousland — unmarried to Loghain — as a subject queen, acknowledging the suzerainty of the Empress. That she was a Warden was awkward, and a very bad precedent. However, the Theirin line, save for a single unacknowledged bastard, was at an end, and the other Cousland had deferred to his sister. Her claim was unquestionably superior to anyone else's.

In the course of their voyage to Ferelden, Ser Chrysagon had gone over the Theirin genealogy with Duke Prosper at very great length, looking for likely puppets. Emperor Florian had grossly erred, when he placed his mad cousin on the throne here. All could have been secured, had he also forced Meghren into a marriage with a daughter of Ferelden. Instead of fighting the Fereldans in open battle, they should have seized the Arl of Redcliffe's daughter by stealth. Lady Rowan would have been Meghren's queen, and that might well have been enough to pacify the barbarians. So many opportunities lost; so many mistakes that glared forth, seen in hindsight.

Was it possible to separate the young woman from Loghain? Sooner or later, he would have to go. All the assassination

attempts had failed thus far. The man was absurdly hard to kill. Prosper's own original preference was for the Cousland girl to be married to an Imperial Prince. Chrysagon had suggested a marriage instead to the bastard. However, the Duke had learned, through a Warden cousin, that Grey Wardens were infertile, especially two Grey Wardens together. Now that they had met the headstrong Girl Warden, it was clear that that she would not do. The bastard might be more tractable. There was no possibility that the Empress would marry such a person, but there were her cousin's three daughters, now in comfortable, remote, but implacable imprisonment in the Chateau Solidor. The older ones were almost beyond the limits of the marriageable by now, but the youngest might be grateful enough for her release to marry with good grace a barbarian bastard and do as she was told thereafter. What was her name? Eponine? Celandine? No, Eglantine.

He gave the Grand Cleric a mirthless little smile. All these possibilities lay in the future. For now he must make a polite pretense to accept the throne's current occupants. "It is a relief to me that the Queen has some degree of regard for the Templar order. How unfortunate that this individual died in battle. It was not... how shall I say... a deliberate accident?"

"It was nothing of the sort," Murin said, nettled by his tone. "I have had the story both from the Queen and from a former lay sister who is also a Grey Warden and who was present."

"A lay sister?" Ser Chrysagon considered that. The Queen did not object to the religious among her Wardens. It might

thus be possible to infiltrate her people. He knew of some good men — and at least one good woman — who would appear to her to be promising candidates. "Very interesting. However, there is much going on that must be set right. I am told that there is an absurd story that the queen located the tomb of the Prophet and sent the Sacred Ashes to Denerim, where they were used to raise Queen Anora from the dead!"

"Queen Anora was not dead," Murin said, "but she was certainly healed by the Ashes."

A pause, and a certain change in the atmosphere. In the course of the conversation, Ser Chrysagon had begun to believe that the current Grand Cleric was someone he could work with. Not so, apparently. He hardly knew whether to laugh in her face or admonish her.

"You believe this ridiculous story?" he asked, with exquisite skepticism

"While I was unconscious during the healing of the Queen, I was quite awake when Queen Bronwyn used the remainder of the Ashes to heal a child in my presence, and that of a conclave of priests and Templars." She reached over to the table beside her armchair. "Here is a copy of the report of the conclave. It is yours. It is a faithful account of the..." She paused at the edge of the abyss, and then took the plunge. "...the miracle. Bronwyn put the Ashes in the mouth of a child dying of a growth in her brain. No mage could cure her. In moments after the Ashes were administered, the child was entirely cured: walking, talking, and asking



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questions. Included in the report is the Queen's account of how they found the shrine in the Frostback Mountains. The conclusion of the conclave was unanimous. I urge you to read it, and then we should speak again."

Either she was mad, or she was using this false miracle for political ends. He had not suspected that Grand Cleric Muirin had become some sort of Fereldan zealot. With a smile and a bow of perfect courtesy, he took the report, and then, after receiving the requested blessing, he took his leave. He did enjoy a good piece of fiction, now and then.



"I think we should all go," Tara said, bouncing a little in her chair. "I think we should all go together. If we meet something nasty, then we can fight it off better. We should load up some supplies and then get try to get to Denerim as soon as we can! Won't Bronwyn be surprised?"

Astrid did not agree. "We're not finished with our explorations. I need to go west and see if we can complete the link with Orzammar. They should be kept apprised of the darkspawn movements, even if there's no reason to visit the city. I can send a message by one of the Legion when we're close enough. Why don't I take half of the Legion and the Wardens and go west, and you take the rest and head to Denerim? You can have a pair of my scouts who were with me at Kal'Hirol. Look." She pushed the map over. "Here is the tunnel that apparently leads out and turns east. The next step is to see where it goes. Based on Bronwyn's letter, it



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must pass close under this Vigil's Keep. Her map shows how the tunnels there connect with the mine. That would be an excellent place for the Legion to bivouac. From there, from her own account, it's only a half-day's march to Denerim. If you choose your weather wisely, you should make it safely." She added, "I am glad that Aeron survived."

They were both weary of West Hill, but had very different goals in view. Tara wanted to see her friends again, and sleep once again at the Wardens' Compound, the most agreeable place she had ever known.

Astrid, on the other hand, had news to share with former friends and allies in Orzammar. With luck those people would once again be friends and allies. She had won two thaigs and had found six golems. She had gold to finance her return. It was a curious form of torture to be racked by hope and possibility after all she had endured — and considering what she must still endure to reach the shining, distant goal.

She must start small, and must manipulate the news in the way most favorable to her. She might not wish to enter Orzammar right away, but she must get close enough that her messengers would transmit the correct information. Furthermore, she must punch her way through to the Deep Roads near Orzammar, thereby proving that she had cleared the Amgarrak Road. That was a spectacular achievement, and would spread her fame throughout the dwarven realm.

And why would Bronwyn object? Astrid could think of all sorts of reasons why having an underground route across



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Ferelden to Orzammar would please her. The humans might be accustomed to winter, but none of them particularly enjoyed it. If there was a way to move from east to west in comparative comfort, it would be a tremendous tactical advantage.

The one person she must not take with her was Brosca. She must not even let Tara and Brosca realize her ultimate objectives. Tara would tell Brosca, and Brosca, devoted to her noble-hunting sister and her little nephew, was a loyal supporter of Bhelen. Astrid liked Brosca quite well, and did not want to fight a duel with her unless it was absolutely necessary. If Brosca was kept far enough away, the likelihood diminished to nothing. Better to present her with an accomplished fact, and the proof that her loved ones were safe and cared for. Little Endrin was still an Aeducan, after all. For that matter, Brosca and her sisters were Aeducans by adoption. Astrid wished them no harm, indeed. Her vengeance would fall on Bhelen, and Bhelen alone.

And some of his toadies, she amended in her thoughts. Vartag Gavorn had to go. A few others. Of course, if she were declared a Paragon, she might not even have to kill anyone. It might even be possible to leave Bhelen on his throne, as long as he was firmly under her thumb.

Probably not, though, she reconsidered. After all, King Valtor had not hesitated to turn on a Paragon, and had ordered Caridin to be made a golem. Bhelen was a tricky little swine, as she had every reason to know.

"I'm going to write a letter to Bronwyn," she finally told



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Tara. "I want you to take it to her. I want to explain exactly what it is I'm trying to do. I think she'll be pleased. I know the Legion will, if they're able to fight through to Orzammar and get resupplied there. You take half and I'll take half. Take that big tub of lyrium we found. Take Catriona with you to make up your numbers. It really works better to keep her away from Velanna."

"Are you going to take all the golems?" asked Tara, rather unhappy at the prospect. "I know it sounds like my end of the road will be all cleared out, but something might happen..."

Astrid really did want to take them all. If she did enter Orzammar, her entrance must be memorable. However, perhaps five might be enough.

"Perhaps it would be best if Shale traveled with you," she suggested. "I'm not sure that Orzammar is ready for a talking golem."

The Shaperate might try to claim the golems or at least claim jurisdiction over them. It was all very well for Rune, and for Tom, Dick, Harry, and Valtor — as Tara had named them. Shale, however, might not be best pleased to be treated as a possession. And Shale did have a way of expressing itself very frankly. Astrid was going to have to be tactful if she wanted to be accepted once more as a dwarf among dwarves.

"Shale!" Tara squealed, delighted. It was so much nicer to talk to a companion instead of talking to a control rod. "Where's Brosca? I've got to tell her! And I've got to tell Shale!"



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Brosca was unsurprised at the news, and very pleased to be going with Tara to Denerim, especially since Astrid seemed to want to reach Orzammar, but not actually enter Orzammar. Bhelen would be tremendously pleased if the whole road was opened up again, and would probably throw a party for the Wardens if they visited.

No. He wouldn't. Not if Astrid were there. Brosca kept forgetting that Astrid was Bhelen's sister. Sure, there was bad blood between them, but why not make up now? Bhelen was King, and Astrid was a Senior Grey Warden. That was really important, too. Besides, didn't Astrid want to see their mutual nephew, little Endrin?

Thinking of Rica and Endrin almost made her ask to travel with Astrid. The little guy must be growing. Rica must be prettier than ever, and covered in silk and jewels. Even Ma might have mellowed a little, with regular meals and all the drink she wanted. Humans talked sometimes about being homesick, and Brosca wondered if that was what she was feeling. Of course, she had no home in Orzammar, unless the Grey Warden hostel there counted. She would never fit in at the Palace. But Astrid would.

Surfacers didn't care that Brosca was a Duster. Most didn't even know what 'Duster' meant. Sod Orzammar! It would be good to see the Boss again and stay at the Wardens' Compound. Astrid had told her it was a fine place, better even than the hostel in the Diamond Quarter. Brosca would have a private room, though the idea struck Brosca



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as odd and uncomfortable. She had never slept in a room by herself in her life. She hoped that someday she could find someone who'd share the space with her. That person wouldn't be Cullen – no one would be, no one ever *could* be – but she wouldn't be so completely alone.

They moved out the next day, each laden with supplies purchased from the storerooms of West Hill. Tara gave handsome gratuities to those who had made their stay agreeable, mostly notably the housekeeper. The golems pulled the wagons, and some of the West Hill servants went with them, to return one of the wagons to the castle. The other was dismantled, and lowered into the depths of the Deep Roads. The wagon that Astrid had used on her last journey was waiting, untouched, exactly where she had left it.

Each of them would now have a wagon full of supplies to help them on their way. Each had a map, though both maps were more than a little vague in places. Astrid told Tara where she would find the supplies left at Amgarrak Thaic – though not the location of the treasure caches either there or at Kal'Hirol.

"Take care of yourself, Duster," Astrid said, bumping a fist against Brosca's.

"Yeah. You, too, Your Ladyship."

"You should be safe if you *do* enter Orzammar," Tara said anxiously to Astrid. "You should be safe because you're a Grey Warden. You've got the five golems, and we cleared out a lot of darkspawn. If King Bhelen causes trouble, you



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come right back to us, right?"

"Of course," Astrid assured her. "I don't intend to get into fights I can't win against fellow dwarves. I can always have Rodyk there take a message into Orzammar. Or send another Warden, like Falkor."

Falkor, indeed, was the messenger she intended to send to her old friends in the Assembly. He was from a respectable warrior-caste family, and his status as a Grey Warden would raise his status even higher. If she could win her way through the Deep Roads to Orzammar, Astrid had a very good chance at turning the game in her favor.

There were hugs and backslaps, both among the Wardens and the Legion. A lot of friends had been made during their expedition. Some regretted the path where duty lay, and some were immensely pleased.

One of them was Catriona, who was fairly dancing at the prospect of a journey to Denerim. Not only that, but a journey far from the odious Velanna.

Velanna, seeing the backs of the other party, as they trudged east, proclaimed her satisfaction to her friend Ailill.

"We may be out of sight of sun and sky, but at least we no longer have to look at a shemlen face!"

Shale's hearing was quite keen, and the golem heard the remark. Curious that elves should be so exclusive. Elves and humans were all equally squishy in Shale's estimation.

Tara had no great love for the Deep Roads. It was a misery



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to be in them, remembering all the horrible things that could happen. Some of the most frightening moments of her life had been spent underground: most notably the time she had thought Bronwyn had been mortally wounded. This time, though, it was really not so bad. She had Brosca with her, which always gave her confidence, and Sigrun, Jukka, Darach, and Catriona as well. They were all good friends by now. It was a remarkably congenial team.

And Shale. Shale might be the Mighty Golem King of Snark – and Tara took great pleasure in calling the golem that – but having a companion of solid rock as big as an ogre and just as strong was a great comfort.

The warriors of the Legion with her were solid support, too. Their sergeant, Byerolf, was Jukka's good friend, and by extension, friendly with them all. They were moving along with the ease of long practice.

They had a good night's safe sleep in clean and empty Amgararak Thaig. Byerolf had been there on the last expedition, and could show them around. They saw the growing lichen, the big workrooms, the sheltered sleeping chambers... even the now-operational bathing rooms. There were also the more unusual sights: the lyrium well and the Fade switches. Tara had read the ancient research notes through carefully when Astrid was out of action, and was quite sure that nothing would induce her to play with things so utterly, pointlessly dangerous. The Tevinter mage they had hired... Nereda... had been some sort of



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charlatan. A vicious lunatic. To murder dozen of casteless dwarves and then to meld their preserved flesh together into that... *thing!* Proper words failed her. Proper thought failed her. The Chantry was full of lies and propaganda, but it was possible that some Tevinter mages were just as bad as the stories made them out to be. Especially Tevinter mages who were clearly out for all the coin they could make, like the slavers in the Alienage.

Anyway, she had been completely crazy. Tara could see all sorts of other directions they could have taken the experiments. If they couldn't afford iron, they could have used rock. And to use a Fade spirit to animate the thing! That was criminally stupid. No wonder Nereda was reduced to working for the dwarves on an impossible project. She was probably too incompetent to make it in Tevinter.

Those chambers were locked back up after she saw them. Really, someone should figure out a way to dismantle them, but that would take some serious work and study, and Tara could not spare it at the moment. Someday, perhaps.

But they had a good night's sleep and a hearty meal, thanks to the provisions in the wagon that Shale drew along without visible effort. Everyone lent a hand when the poor condition of the road demanded it, but it was still far better than trying to carry the food on their own backs.

Best of all, they had seen no darkspawn. None. Tara was not even sensing any. There was still Taint to watch for, of course, and Tara shot blasts of flame on big clumps



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from time to time, cleaning the worst bits. No darkspawn, though. It was important not to become over-confident, but there really seemed to be no darkspawn at all.

They were on the march again, and Brosca marched cheerfully beside her, humming a little tune to herself.

"What do you think about finding that Soldier's Peak place?" she said, apropos of nothing. "The Boss sounded pretty excited about it."

"It would take us a bit out of our way," Tara replied, with a bit of regret. She, too, was quite excited at the idea of a whole castle to themselves; and she would have liked to have seen Jowan. On the other hand, Zevran was in Denerim. "Maybe we should go another time, when it's just Wardens and our special friends. I don't know if Jowan and Leliana can feed a unit of the Legion."

"Maybe not," Brosca shrugged. "I suppose I'd like to see this Denerim place first. I've never seen a human city. Is it much like Orzammar?"

Tara thought that over. "Not much. There are a lot of people: humans, elves, and dwarves, but a lot of it is made of wood and there's the big sky above. It's spread out more, and doesn't have different levels, unless you're inside individual buildings. Some things are the same, of course: there are rich people and poor people and shops and all. I liked it. I liked the Wardens' Compound, too, so I'm looking forward to that. And I'm going to visit my relatives in the Alienage, too."

At least what's left of them, she thought to herself. By

now, if they lived at all, her sister and her parents had been herded into the vast slave market of Minrathous, the largest market of any kind in the world. It was too much to hope that they could stay together, as a family. More likely, they would be sold to different masters, and would never see one another again in life. It was a shame that Arl Howe was already dead.

Bronwyn dropped by the Wardens' Compound early the next morning, before the Council meeting. It was there that a testy Anders told her about the delay in receiving the message. Loghain had ordered only royal messengers to be permitted into the feast, thus cutting Bronwyn off from contact with her own people. Bronwyn said little, but her lips thinned.

"Thank you, Anders," she said. "I'll deal with the matter. How is Aeron?"

"He'll live to fight again, but he'll never look quite the same. He'll sleep most of the day. I thought Velanna was a better Healer than that. Burns are tricky, though. At least Aeron's frostbite won't deprive him of any essential bits. Maybe he'll be one of the sort who looks better bald. It'll give him that air of danger. I'm told women like that."

Bronwyn laughed a little, a bit embarrassed. She wasn't sure about the attractions of baldness herself; but the air of danger... well, perhaps so.

Speaking of dangerous men... she taxed Loghain with

the miscommunication issue as soon as she saw him issuing from the King's apartments in his plain black doublet.

"If my Wardens need to talk to me, or if someone's injured – like Aeron – I can't have palace functionaries causing any delays."

"I'll pass the word on," Loghain said, his mind on the upcoming Council.

Bronwyn stiffened. "I think," she said her voice sharp, "that it should be sufficient that I have made such an order. From what I can gather, this officer sent the servant away, believing that your orders took precedence over mine."

Loghain caught the edge in her voice. Young women were so bloody touchy.

"You had actually given no orders at all," he pointed out. "I, however, had. The officer was doing his best. We will make clear that Warden business is a priority, and we will do it together. Come into the study here, and I'll summon the Captain of the Guard."

Silenced, but rather offended, Bronwyn stalked along beside him, her scarlet skirts swishing with every step. It was so difficult to anticipate every eventuality, and no one seemed to be helping her. Only this morning, she had faced some resistance about the housekeeping schedules from women who told her that "Queen Anora had done thus and so," and "Queen Anora preferred the meals served at this or that time." There was even a bit of difficulty about the size of the portions... a difficulty that Fionn

had previously kept from her by simply sending to the Compound for food. The privilege of serving the King and Queen when they were residing in the Palace, however, was a prerogative accorded to the Royal Cook and his staff, and the seneschal had advised Bronwyn not to offend those individuals by indicating what might be construed as distrust. He promised to see that the food was sufficient for the Queen's appetite in future.

It had been very annoying... that implication that everyone thought her greedy and gluttonous. Well, too bad. A half-sandwich and a cookie for tea were simply not adequate. Anora was not a Grey Warden, and even warriors who were not Grey Wardens needed more food than a soft-handed lady whose only exercise was fine embroidery. Bronwyn could not even use the excuse of feeding Loghain, who never took afternoon tea himself, thinking it silly and effeminate. He, however, had a bowl of fruit and nuts in his quarters that his servants saw was kept well-stocked. Perhaps she should do the same. Yes, she must definitely do that.

The Captain of the Guard arrived, and Loghain gave the man the amended orders, to be passed down the chain of command.

"Wardens and messages from Wardens are to be delivered to the Queen immediately. They are to be treated as royal couriers for the foreseeable future. It that understood?"

"It is, Your Majesty."

There. Done. They could move on to the Council, and Loghain took the lead, pausing to let Bronwyn catch up with

him. She looked vexed at having the words taken out of her mouth, but better to get it done without any recriminations or confusion. For his part, Loghain was sorry that Bronwyn was in a temper, but it was not his fault. It was no one's fault, really. These things happened, and they happened most often when there was a change of administration. Very soon everything would be in a regular train. He had troubles of his own. At least yesterday's headache had subsided. It would return soon enough, inevitably, when he once again had to wear the crown at the afternoon Landsmeet session. It was a good thing that he had long practice at suffering pain without revealing it. He must never rub his temples or show the least discomfort at the weight of the crown, which would give the secretly hostile among the nobles something to gloat over.

Above all, he hated — absolutely hated — moving into the King's Apartments. He would have preferred to have kept his own familiar rooms, but appearances were everything right now. He already knew the King's Apartments perfectly well, naturally, and every stick and stone spoke of Cailan and Maric. Being there — even to shave and dress — depressed him. The idea of sleeping in them repulsed him. Luckily, he had a desirable young wife, and could sleep in her bed. That was odd, too, since his daughter had been the last occupant, but while it was odd, it was not revolting, as was sleeping in the bed of two men he had failed so wretchedly. For that matter, sleeping in the bed that Cailan had shared with his mistresses would have put him off



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even had the boy's end not been so miserable.

Some of those women were making noises, too. The seneschal had passed on the word that private petitions were likely to be lodged, based on promises made by the King to his various women. Thank the Maker, not one of them had a bastard to show for her efforts – or at least not one that could be attributed to Cailan. One of the women, indeed, had given birth two months ago, but the child was obviously an elf.

Cailan had made lots of promises to lots of people, and Loghain would have to decide which promises would be honored. Obviously, the promise to the Dalish was a political issue, and would require careful handling. The Dalish had served honorably and deserved rewards. On the other hand, most of the Landsmeet loathed the Dalish, and would hate seeing the elves receive so much as a clod of dirt, even if it was dirt none of the nobles wanted for themselves. Bronwyn was likely to take most of the opprobrium for her generosity to the elves, but Loghain reckoned that she could afford it. She was generally popular otherwise.

They entered the Council Chamber together, and took the throne-like seats of the King and Queen. Anora took the Chancellor's seat, that had been for so long Loghain's own. This 'new normal' was something of a wrench. The table was long, and Bronwyn sat on the end opposite Loghain. There was a great deal of business to be got through before the Landsmeet session in the afternoon.

First, there were appointments to the royal offices.



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Loghain and Anora had notes about these, and intended to confirm most of the current appointees. Some of Cailan's old friends, however, would be replaced. Bronwyn felt her lack of knowledge and experience here keenly. She had heard of most of the offices, but knew few of the people involved. Fergus knew far more than she did. Teagan, too, knew them, and fought for some of the individuals; considering them loyal vassals of the last king: men who deserved better than to lose their places. The discussion was brief but spirited. Loghain and Anora were canny enough to let Teagan have his way with some of the lesser offices.

The Master of the Mint – also kept in office – had sent a note, asking when it would be convenient for the new king and queen to have their images made for a new coinage. Loghain, so disdainful of courtly nonsense, knew that this mattered, and sent back a reply to have the artist sent to them tomorrow morning.

"You need to have a coronation portrait painted as well," Anora reminded her father. "The sooner, the better."

"Have that man you used before see me. We'll get it done."

Fergus then proposed something for which Loghain was quite unprepared.

"I think that in light of the threat that both the darkspawn and the Orlesians pose, we should be looking for allies outside our borders."

"Ferelden can stand on its own," Loghain growled, his eyes glinting.

"Perhaps so, but why not reach out to other nations whose interests are in line with ours?" the young teyrn reasoned. "The Nevarrans hate Orlais as much as we do, and they are at war with them even now. They have a great deal to lose were Orlais to gain possession of the Bannorn. I think we should send an envoy to the Nevarran king with offers of friendship and alliance."

"Not the Free Marches?" asked Teagan, frowning. "That was Maric's idea."

"With all due respect to King Maric," said Fergus, "Our situation is very different than it was five years ago. I think Nevarra can do a great deal more to harm Orlais than any of the Marcher cities. Nevarra shares a border with Orlais, after all: a border that is shifting with the tides of war. Nevarra is rich, and might be willing to spend good coin in ways that would further weaken its enemy. And there is but one king in Nevarra, whereas dealing with the Free Marches involves negotiations with a dozen princelings. Nevarra, also, is a trading partner rather than a trade rival, unlike Kirkwall and Ostwick. It loses nothing no matter how strong and prosperous Ferelden grows. In fact, the stronger we grow, the more likely we are to produce grain surpluses that can be sold abroad – and Nevarra is always an eager customer."

Loghain listened with surprised approval. Young Cousland was making good sense. Loghain dreaded foreign entanglements as a general rule: Ferelden had no busi-

ness fighting someone else's wars in someone's else's lands for someone else's reasons. However, it was true that the enemy of one's enemy could be a useful friend... at times.

"It's out of the question that either the Queen or I would go abroad and sue for alliance," he said. "We've surely learned that lesson."

"I agree," Fergus said, without hesitation. "A monarch ought not to travel to a foreign land on such an errand, especially when our kingdom is so unsettled. Someone else – someone of sufficient prestige – should go. I would be willing, but if you can discover another more suited to the purpose, then send him."

"Fergus!" Bronwyn murmured, distressed at the idea. Nor did she miss the look on Anora's face. The Dowager Queen was positively horrified. "Not in this weather, surely!"

"If the Orlesians can travel," Fergus snorted, "so can I. The sooner, the better. I've given it some thought."

"I could go," Nathaniel said, rousing from a somber silence. "I, too, have traveled in the northern lands. I know quite a few Nevarran nobles. I don't think the Teyrn of Highever should risk himself, but I could go. I *should* go."

Teagan sighed to himself. Should he, Teagan, volunteer? Could they trust Howe? It would be a wrench, leaving Kaitlyn, for he would certainly not risk her by taking her along. He decided to wait a bit, and see if his services would be required.

Bryland, also recently married, nearly grinned with relief at Nathaniel's offer. Going abroad... leaving Leandra and the

boys... enduring the dangers of travel by sea in winter... dealing with a foreign court... What an escape! If young Howe had said nothing, Bryland felt it would have been incumbent on him to volunteer, but Howe had volunteered, and it seemed perfectly suitable to him. Kane might have the status now, but obviously knew nothing about diplomacy. Besides, Habren would hate it, and for that matter... well... Habren, he had to admit, could not possibly be sent on a diplomatic mission. Unless they wanted to provoke a war. He might be her father, but he was hardly blind. Or deaf.

Wulffe would not have volunteered to go in anyone's place. He had never in his life been out of Ferelden and was not about to start now. Better no Nevarrans than to go himself.

Kane was completely oblivious to the call of duty. He had no idea where Navarra was, actually. Apparently, it was on the other side of Orlais. How would anybody get there? Would the Orlesians just let someone walk through their lands? Would Howe have to go in disguise?

"It's not necessary," Fergus said to Nathaniel, with careful civility. "I'm not a novice at diplomacy."

"I know you're not," agreed Nathaniel. "But you are also currently the heir-presumptive to the throne. If you go to the Court of Navarra, the king will presume you wish to cement the alliance by a marriage of state. He will expect it, and I see no way you will avoid it if you wish his favor. He has two young daughters and a number of nieces. Do we want to entertain the possibility of a foreign Queen of

Ferelden: one with strong ties to a powerful kingdom that may involve us in further obligations?"

His words caused something of a stir. Loghain blinked, impressed by the young man's acumen. He had been wrong-footed by Cousland's proposal, and at first had been ready to reject it out of hand on general principles. This, however, was an objection that had not occurred to him. Ferelden had not had a foreign queen in nearly two hundred years, and she had been ... what? Right, from Ostwick. A Nevarran queen could create unimaginable complications.

Fergus' jaw dropped a bit, and he shut it with a snap. A hot flush rose up, happily hidden by his beard for the most part. How could he have overlooked that? It was, in fact, pretty much what had happened ten years ago when he and Father went to Antiva looking for trade agreements. At least then he was able to sidestep the first girl they tried to foist on him, and succeeded in carrying off a prize like Oriana instead.

"They might expect it, anyway," Wulffe pointed out. "They're bound to ask questions about the heir — about everyone. It might not be a bad idea, at that. A Nevarran princess might bring a thumping huge dowry with her, and if she comes here young enough, we can train her up our way. And very likely Fergus won't inherit anyway." He grinned at Bronwyn, who turned as red as her gown, but could not bring herself to be angry at the bluff old Arl. He was a good man.

"I'm not making any such marriage," Fergus said, his voice somewhat higher than usual. "I am not at liberty



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to contract marriage with a foreign princess. My faith is pledged elsewhere."

Another blush at the table, this time Anora's. The arls were not looking at her, however, but at Fergus. Each one of them was thrilling with either curiosity or amusement, according to what he knew of the matter.

"Well?" Bryland urged him, grinning ever more broadly. "Don't keep us in suspense! Who is the lady? When can we wish you joy?"

Fergus' face tightened into mabari stubbornness. "I'm not at liberty to say."

"My dear lad!" Wulffe burst out. "Don't tell us she's impossible! You haven't got yourself tied down to some fortune-hunter, have you?"

Loghain gave Bronwyn a dark, sardonic smile that made her positively hate him for a brief instant. She glared back at him, and then her eyes flicked to Anora, willing her stepdaughter to say *something*.

She did not. At length, Bronwyn broke the suspense. "My lord brother's choice is unexceptionable, but it is too early to make it public."

"Oh." Bryland gave Anora a discreet and courteous nod. "I see. Very well."

Wulffe, who only appeared to be simple, had rather enjoyed teasing Fergus... and secretly, Anora herself. "You should make it public soon, though. Better not to raise false hopes elsewhere."



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Kane presumed that Fergus really was keeping it quiet for his own reasons. Maybe the girl wasn't of age. For a wild, ecstatic moment, he hoped the Teyrn was speaking of Faline. Surely, he would have come to him first. Or maybe he was biding his time. It would be something for Faline to be a teyrna! But no. He'd had no hints. Fergus said he'd made promises. Disappointed, Kane shrugged off the rest of the conversation.

Howe wondered briefly if Fergus was speaking... surely not!... of the Dowager Queen. She looked a little flushed. He had noticed them dancing and talking together. The Queen had been widowed less than two months... and... oh. That would certainly explain why they had made no public announcement. Otherwise, he might be speaking of those Hawke girls who had spent so much time at Highever House. No. He had never seen Fergus single them out for special attention. Bethany Hawke was lovely, but Fergus' eyes always turned in another direction. Anora, then. It made sense. Perhaps Loghain and Bronwyn had made a secret agreement before their marriage.

Teagan began to have a horrible, sneaking sensation about it all. Either the girl was too young or she was a recent widow. Had he noticed Fergus paying court to anyone? He was so wrapped up in Kaitlyn he really had not noticed. The ghastly suspicion grew, but Teagan mastered his horror and astonishment. It was a struggle to keep his face a perfect blank. He should have known!



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Of all the dastardly, slimy gambits! Cailan's ashes were hardly cold, and that ice-hearted commoner was after another crown! If the Mac Tirs could not keep Ferelden one way, they would another.

Wanting to spare her brother any more speculation and embarrassment, Bronwyn said, "The Nevarran Wardens have been the most helpful and informative of all the Warden posts. If an embassy is sent, I would like to send one of my own Wardens along. He might be able to obtain intelligence there that the Warden-Commander would not care to trust to parchment. Would you object to that, Nathaniel?"

"Not at all."

There was more conversation: what they would ask of the Nevarrans — hard coin, not to put too fine a point on it — and what they could give in return — wheat shipments and some distractions on Orlais' eastern border. Nathaniel would go, and with a sufficiently impressive retinue to uphold Fereldan honor.

"You must have a noble companion. Think about taking Adam Hawke with you," Fergus suggested, "he's a resourceful fellow, and good for fighting or talking."

Nathaniel considered that. "If I take Adam Hawke, perhaps I could take the Warden brother as well."

"Carver?" Bronwyn considered. "That's an excellent idea. But the weather really is forbidding."

Loghain, on the other hand, was becoming more and more pleased with the idea. The Nevarrans had never given



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Ferelden any trouble. They had, on the contrary, given the Orlesians a very *great* deal of trouble, and had taken a number of their cities. Maybe there was something in this diplomacy business... just as long as the envoy understood that Fergus Cousland was not on the marriage market.

"Here's my idea," Fergus said, rolling out a map of Nevarra and the western Marches. "Go incognito, and take a fishing boat from the village of Kilda, up at the Virgin Rocks in Waking Sea Bannorn. They have some good-sized vessels there. If you wait for fair weather, it's only six hours to Kirkwall."

The members of the Royal Council leaned closer, watching Fergus trace the route. The candles guttered a little, as a cold wind whistled through the shutters.

"Buy horses on the other side of the Waking Sea. From Kirkwall, take the road through the Vimmark Pass and strike out west. North of the mountains the weather should be much milder. Head for the Imperial Highway. Here," he said, pointing to a fork in the red line, "you take the road at the city of Barbastra on to the capital. At this time of year, the king will be in residence. I think trying to sail all the way to Cumberland is far too risky in this season. You're also far more likely to come across an Orlesian warship. There must be a few out, even in the month of Haring! I think with reasonable luck, you could be in the city of Nevarra within eight days of your arrival in Kirkwall."

"And with *unreasonable* luck," Wulffe said grimly, "you



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might not get there at all. I know, I know. If you go that way, you're not as likely to freeze or drown. Still, Kirkwall's a dodgy place. You'd want to keep your tongue behind your teeth, because I'll warrant that the City of Chains is crawling with Orlesian agents."

"A good point... and that's not the only place, either. Let us agree," Loghain said, looking at each Council member in turn, "that *nothing* is to be said about this mission. If word got out, our envoy would be the target of Orlesian assassins, bent on preventing his arrival in Nevarra. We want him to get out of Ferelden without exciting comment until he's already on the other side of the Waking Sea. I have some ideas on the matter."

The look he sent her gave Bronwyn the essential hint that her maps of the Deep Roads would figure largely in Loghain's 'ideas.'



The afternoon Landsmeet session was slow and boring: nearly entirely devoted to a wrangle over a dowry for a marriage that had been solemnized years ago. It had not been presented earlier because the plaintiff thought Loghain would be more sympathetic to his case than Anora. As it happened, Loghain was no more in favor of cheating a young woman than his daughter would have been.

Bronwyn was bored and restless and her stupid crown was once again giving her a headache. It was a curious form of torture that she must not let anyone watching her



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know it. Facing her were scores of beady, scrutinizing eyes, looking for weaknesses, looking for something to turn to their advantage, even simply looking for something to gossip about. Even though it was all she could do to stay awake, she must look bright-eyed and interested and perfectly pleased with everything going on about her.

Her throne was hard and uncomfortable, and she noticed that the gilding was tarnished along the arm rests. She amused herself by fixing her thoughts on Nathaniel's projected mission to Nevarra, but then, by degrees, she began thinking about her own plans for the Alienage. She had mentioned her construction project to Loghain, who had brusquely told her to please herself, if she wanted to spend her own coin that way. Not the most encouraging of responses, but she did have coin, and did intend to demolish the vacant and crumbling orphanage and put up a sturdy tenement that would provide decent housing for at least twenty elven families. It would provide the Alienage, in addition, with a meeting hall on the ground floor. She had the name of a reputable builder, and she was meeting with him in the next few days to commission a design from him. Nothing could be built until spring, of course. She had asked a clerk to review the laws pertaining to the Alienage. She suspected some of the harsh restrictions placed upon them were not actual laws, but customs or extra-legal whims of past arls. It was best that Kane understand from the first that Fereldan law would protect all Fereldans.



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As soon as the Landsmeet was over, she would summon the child Amethyne to the palace, along with her teacher, to see and hear what progress she had made. The teacher was Nevarran, she remembered. She should talk to the woman... ask some idle questions. And there was the library. Jowan had mentioned there was quite a bit about Nevarra to be found there.

Thus, her thoughts made another revolution back to Nathaniel and the Nevarran scheme. What could she do to help him? Too long had she been in Denerim, dancing attendance on the Landsmeet. She longed to do something strong and adventurous; something to stir her spirit and lift her heart.

She longed for it more than ever, when she noticed Loghain whispering with Anora, talking over the case, back and forth. As Chancellor, Anora had a small seat of her own, down a step and to the right of the King's. Loghain always asked Anora her opinion of such things, and never Bronwyn herself. She would not be so bored if Loghain ever consulted her. She could hardly make a scene here in front of the Landsmeet, and so turned her thoughts back to her own affairs. How odd. She had not fought anyone yet this month. She had not killed an enemy in the past ten days. She thought of the words of the poet:

*"How dull it is to pause, to make an end;
To rest unburnish'd, not to shine in use!"*

She had had quite enough of this. She had not imagined that being Queen could be so beastly dull. If her wander-



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ing Wardens were not here by the time the Landsmeet ended, Bronwyn would go looking for them.



KANE KENELLS, ARL OF DENERIM



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MAP OF THEDAS

CHAPTER 12

WHAT
DREAMS
MAY COME

O... MY LITTLE SISTER IS AT HOME IN THE QUEEN'S APARTMENTS. MOTHER AND FATHER WOULD BE SO PROUD. You looked splendid today, pup."

"I still feel rather like an intruder, but I'm settling in. Have another sandwich."

"Thanks. These are good."

Fergus munched, eyeing his sister thoughtfully. They had not had a private conversation in some time. He had been in the Queen's sitting room before, of course, when Anora lived here. Bronwyn's changes were already apparent, especially in the color scheme. Bronwyn had always liked green. Tapestry-work cushions with images of deer and mabari were scattered over the wooden chairs and the window seat. She had found some drapes the color of dark fir trees that hung from ceiling to floor, and on the floor was a beautiful carpet that resembled a grassy meadow starred with colorful flowers. The armor and weapon stands were new as well. The bookcase held only a few volumes, but a large collection of curious treasures, most notably the amazing shallow bowl of hammered gold that had

been used to administer the Ashes to Anora. The red dragon armor, crowned with the winged helmet, was as striking as any piece of statuary. It was not at all like her old room at home, and yet it already bore his sister's mark.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

Bronwyn laughed. "Plenty! Your Nevarran scheme has me in a whirl. What a splendid idea... and what an adventure. I'm rather devastated that I can't go myself. How I'd love to see the lands across the Waking Sea!"

Fergus grimaced, feeling his own disappointment. "I had every intention of going myself, but Nate is right: the Nevarran king would write a marriage into any treaty. As it is, I'll have to tell Nate outright about my own plans before he goes. By the time he's at the Nevarran Court, everyone here will know about my betrothal to Anora. By the time he's back in Ferelden, we'll likely be married."

That was startling. "You won't wait until next Kingsway?"

"Ha!" The laugh rang out, waking Scout from his doze by the fire. The mabari padded over to Fergus, looking for a share in the sandwiches and an ear rub.

"Give him the mutton, Fergus," Bronwyn said, "Not the cheese."

Fergus chuckled, petting the dog. He looked up at her under his brows, just as he had as a teenager, and said. "No. We're not waiting for Kingsway. We're thinking Guardian. We'll make a public announcement next month." He saw her trying to discreetly count on her fingers. "Guardian is good enough. Even if we strike lucky and I get Anora with child right away, it



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wouldn't be born until next Firstfall. No chance of Cailan getting credit for *my* seed. Even if it's born scandalously early —

"Will it be?" Bronwyn asked, eyes wide.

"No," he assured her, grinning. "We are being very, very proper indeed. As I say, an early birth might happen in Harvestmere. Still beyond the limit. Guardian is fine. Neither of us has a year to waste. I need an heir. Anora needs an heir. We're not children, and we won't be bullied by the old women and the finger-waggers. Guardian. Obviously, we'll have a quiet wedding, and then have it recognized at the spring Landsmeet."

"Another Landsmeet!" groaned Bronwyn. "Maker knows we needed this one, but one year seems more than enough to me!"

"We don't want to make winter Landsmeets a regular thing," Fergus shrugged. "The ice storm was pretty in sunshine, but a cursed awkward thing to try to get out in. I think you know that quite a few poor souls were found frozen to death. Some huddled in the streets or against walls. A sad thing, that."

Bronwyn soberly agreed, a little ashamed of her warm fire and her warm bed. Most of the very poor were allowed to take shelter in the Cathedral on the coldest nights, but some were not able to get about, and some were elves, who did not always feel welcome. A few might be mages, afraid to go near such a place. Loghain might be so greedy as to want all the mages in the army, but Bronwyn had her own plan, which was to take that tucked-away warehouse in the Market District and turn it into a free clinic. It would give employment to a staff of... what? ...five mages, perhaps. If the Templars had



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an assigned role in supervision, perhaps the Grand Cleric could be made to agree. Healing should not be something to which only the wealthy and noble had access. She was working on a plan, and wanted to show it to Anders for his advice. It needed a bit of polishing, first. Now that she had seen the suffering of the people in winter, she had a new idea. On very cold nights, people would be allowed to go there to be warm. That meant that the building would need a new, modern-built fireplace with a proper chimney. And a fireproof slate roof. Oh, dear, it would not be cheap...

She turned her attention back to her brother. "Well, if you and Anora are determined to defy convention, you'll have my support, obviously. Let me know what you'd like for a wedding present."

He smirked at her. "A cousin for my child."

She threw a cushion at him. Scout barked cheerfully, wanting to play, too.

"All right," she grumbled, summoning Scout to her side, "let's talk of something serious. After I have another sandwich. Maker, I'm starving. All that sitting and... *not* talking... is such a tiresome bore. Let's get back to the Nevarran mission. We'll have to think of something to call it... a code word. 'Coastal Improvements,' or something equally innocuous. One never know who might be hiding behind the curtains! There are heaps of books about Nevarra in the Royal Library, but I don't want to tip our hand by having them lying about. I shall go there to read them



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and I'll shelve them myself."

"That's certainly an improvement from your feckless youth. Perhaps you won't dog-ear the pages anymore, either."

"Certainly not," she replied, very haughty. "We are above such untidiness, now that we have risen to glory."

He threw the cushion back at her.

"The first big hurdle," he said, "is to find a way to get our people to their ship without the whole of Ferelden knowing about it."

"There might be a way," Bronwyn said, "Or at least, part of a way. The Deep Roads in the north seem to be comparatively empty. That's what my Wardens are reporting, anyway. If Nate and his men could go part of the way underground, there would be no fear of prying eyes. And they'd be sheltered from the weather. It's never cold in the Deep Roads... pleasantly cool, actually."

"Empty?" Fergus frowned. "Where in the Maker are the creatures?"

"Tara said they went west. There were some bad skirmishes, but no darkspawn behind the initial forces they met. I'm planning on heading west myself, as soon as the Landsmeet is over. We should be ready to move out then. Everyone will be traveling, and there will be nothing odd about Nathaniel leaving with the rest."

"Fair enough. I had another idea. What ships are not in dry dock are heading north. I've had dealings with a Rivainni captain before — the one I sent to Antiva. Clever, and stays



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loyal as long as she's properly paid. She's back in Denerim now, and I'm inclined to hire her, rather than to hope for an adequate fishing boat. The SIREN'S CALL is shallow-drafted enough to get into the little coves up at the Virgin Rocks. We can make arrangements for her to get out of Denerim with a cargo of rare timber, and make for Kirkwall. That harbor never ices in. We'll set a date for her to come to Kilda — allowing for the weather — and Nate and Adam can go in style in Captain Isabela's ship. She'll wait for them there until they return, and that way they can get home without a fuss."

"I like that idea!" Bronwyn nibbled her sandwich, feeling more and more pleased. "But let's keep it a secret from the rest of the Council. They don't have to know all the details. We'll want to meet with Nate and the Hawkes. Maker! I'll have to talk to Carver about it... What will their mother say?"

"We'll distract her with her niece's betrothal. Rothgar told me he's ready to make his move. We'll have to tell Loghain and Anora about it, too."

"Eventually," Bronwyn said. "But I don't want them taking everything over."

Fergus gave her a quick, shrewd look.

"Anora's been Loghain's daughter all her life, after all," he remarked.

"And I'm supposedly his wife! How does it look, when he confers with her, on and on, back and forth, and I'm sitting there like a dressed-up doll?"

"Oh... the Mac Korval dowry debacle. Did you have an



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interest in the case?"

"Not in the least."

"Did you have an opinion about it? Did you study the background of the complaints?"

Reluctantly, she admitted. "I knew nothing about it, other than the gossip."

"Well then..." He gave her another look, which heightened his resemblance to their father so much that Bronwyn's breath caught. "If you want your voice to be heard, you have to have something to say. No one expects you to know everything about everything. Become an expert in the things that interest you. That's a good place to start... like this whole Nevarran... I mean "Coastal Improvements" plan. Maker knows we know little enough about the country. If you're the expert, Loghain will turn to you for advice. Don't sulk, pup," he said, firmly and kindly. "Make yourself indispensable. That's what Anora's done, but Anora's no warrior and has never been out of Ferelden. You've only been to Ostwick yourself, of course, but..."

"Not true," Bronwyn declared. "I have journeyed to Orlais... if only to the Roc du Chevalier. But I have been in Orlais, long enough to have a conversation in the language and drink an entire goblet of wine; and I have explored extensively *under* Orlais by way of the Deep Roads, so I feel myself quite the experienced traveler. Now, fortified by my sandwiches, I shall venture even into the Royal Library, and take you up on your excellent suggestion."



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"Bann Bonnam has a very pretty sister, darling," Leandra reminded her son. "You danced with her last night. Very pretty and quite nice. A very nice man himself. It's a way of cementing friendships."

"Mother," Adam said, trying to be patient. "You didn't marry my father to cement any *friendships*. In fact, as I recall, your marriage to my father resulted —"

"I *loved* him!" Leandra cried, exasperated. "But you're not in love with *anybody*, Adam! You never *are*! If you were in love with someone I could understand it! We could try to make it work, no matter who she was!"

Hawke glanced nervously at the door to the parlor. Someone was going to hear her. He hoped it wouldn't be the Arl.

"Mother. Calm down. Give me time. I've just been confirmed, for Maker's sake! There's plenty of time for me to look about, now that I have something decent to offer a woman. The Landsmeet won't be over for a few days. I promise to look about *tonight*, for that matter. I'll dance every dance, and have a careful look at all the virgin sacrifices —"

Leandra dropped her head into a weary hand. "I just want grandchildren. Yes, I want grandchildren. Is that so much to ask? Carver is a Grey Warden... and who will marry Bethany?" She turned blue, pleading eyes up to her son. "You're my only hope."

She was quieter now, at least. Hawke went down on one knee and took his mother's other hand.



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"I won't let you down, Mother. I promise. Just give me a bit of time. You'll have a daughter-in-law. You'll have grandchildren. Look at how far we've come in just a few months. Look at how we're living. Just calm down. You have to look your best for the feast tonight."

"Oh, yes," she fluttered, dabbing at her eyes with a dainty handkerchief. "Blessed Andraste! I have to see to the boys. The children are having their own party tonight, you know, in the Yellow Parlor at the Palace. Such a charming idea of the Dowager Queen's. Dancing and games. I must look in on them later during the feast."

Hawke nodded, and backed away cautiously, hearing soft sounds outside the door. Someone eavesdropping. He reached the door and flung it open.

Bethany was disappearing into her own room, just the train of her dress trailing away. The door shut. Hawke hoped she had not heard much of the conversation, but since she had run away, he supposed she had, including the bit about nobody wanting to marry her. He fought down useless anger at his mother. She was an Arlessa now! Couldn't she be satisfied with *that* until the end of the month?

"I'll let you get ready, then," he said, his voice mild. "I might as well have a word with the girls before I go."

Charade did not want to let him into the room she shared with Bethany. Instead she stood outside in the hall and spoke to him in whispers.



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"She's crying. She doesn't want to talk to you right now."
"I've always been able to make her feel better. Give me a chance."
"I don't know what she heard, but it upset her. A lot."
"Mother didn't mean for her to hear it." He took his cousin gently by the shoulders and moved her aside. "She'll feel better after we talk it over. Why don't you send for some tea?"

Charade made a face at him. "I can make tea *myself*. Come on."
It was true. She had a grate and a tea kettle and even a toasting fork. The girls' room was really charming.

Bryland House was a good sized mansion, but even a mansion does not have an unlimited number of fine bed-chambers. The Arl had his rooms, the Arlessa hers; the boys had their schoolroom and the room they insisted was no longer the nursery. Habren's room was exactly as she had left it — aside from the things she had taken with her — because the the Arl had muttered something about 'You never know with Habren,' and Mother had not argued with him. Bethany and Charade shared the room that had once been Lady Werberga's. Apparently there was a lot more room at the castle in South Reach, but very likely they would want to share there, too. Adam was pleased at so much family affection, but found it a little hard to understand. He had shared a room — or a loft — with Carver from childhood until the beginning of this year, and proximity had not exactly improved their relationship.

But this was really a pleasant room, or would be when the inhabitants were not so unhappy. Bethany was curled up on



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the big bed, crying, while Charade raised her brows and set about making tea. Hawke sat down on the bed by his sister and smoothed the dark hair away from her flushed, wet face.

"You know how she gets. Everything has to be done today, or we're doomed."

"It's true. Everyone knows I'm a mage. No one will have me, especially after the foul things that Orlesian Templar said about me."

"He's full of rubbish!" Charade burst out hotly. She had been stirring the fire up, and waved the poker like a weapon. Then she affected a ridiculous Orlesian accent, and a comical sneer. "I haf never beeen to yoooor coun-tree, and I know nozeeeng about eet, but I will make zee seelly taunts all zee zame. Pah! I speet on you, Dog Lords!"

Adam laughed, and applauded heartily. "You should have been a bard!"

"Stop!" Bethany pleaded, wiping her eyes, laughing in spite of herself.

"Knight-Divine or no," Charade said fiercely. "he's full of rubbish. He's a nasty man and his opinion isn't worth a copper. Everybody in the Landsmeet knows that, and those that don't are too stupid to live. And next time I see him, I'll say I don't care *that* – " she snapped her fingers " – for his ugly lies!"

"You're braver than I am," Bethany sighed. "All the same, nobody sensible would want to marry a mage."

"You don't know that, " said Adam. " I've seen plenty of



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men dancing with you. If you wash your face and do your hair, I predict that yet more will beg for the honor. It's a new world here in Ferelden, Bethany. The Queen favors the mages. Everybody knows that. The King, too. He brought all those mages up from Ostagar, and gave them places in the army. Look at all the mages in the Wardens. Nobody shuns them."

"I don't see anyone asking to marry them, either!" Bethany shot back.

"I think Warden Anders would marry that Morrigan in a heartbeat – if she'd have him," he pointed out. "And I certainly don't expect you to associate just with mages. Just last night, at least three men told me how pretty you are. A lot of people think well of you – "

"Mother said you were her 'only hope!'"

"She said that to make me feel guilty. It had nothing to do with you. She didn't mean that at all. She was just using all the weapons in her arsenal to get me married. She even cried real tears."

"Well, I cried real tears, too. I have dreams, after all... I have hopes for something like a normal life. Maybe they're silly, but I have them all the same."

"So do we all, sister mine. Whatever a 'normal' life may be."

Bethany sat up, and Charade brought her a handkerchief.

"Tea's almost ready. I'll put honey in it."

They drank it down gratefully, only exchanging the odd word or two. Charade took her cup to the window and sat on the seat, peering out at the twilight on the roofs



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of Denerim. "There are horses in the courtyard. Someone must be calling on the Arl."

"Someone's *always* calling on the Arl," Bethany said.

There was a knock at the door.

"My lady?" a manservant asked. "Is Bann Adam there? The Arl wishes to speak to him."

"Right here." Adam said, opening the door. He quaffed down the last of the pleasantly sweet tea, and set down his cup. He gave a nod to the girls. "Later, then."

He followed the footman down to the study. What did the Arl want? Adam hoped this was not about his mother's earlier scene. It could be embarrassing and difficult to navigate if the Arl decided to 'help' find his stepson a wife.

The door to the study was opened for him, and the servant said quietly, "Bann Adam, my lord."

No. It was not all about him. Laughing at himself for his vanity, Adam noted that Arl's guests were Arl Wulffe and his son, Rothgar.

"Come in, my boy," said Leonas. "We have family business to discuss."



Later that evening, Hawke tried to present his best and most cheerful face to his dance partners. It was not easy, as his precious new fortune had dissolved into dowry money. Most of it, anyway. Arl Wulffe was eager for Rothgar to make a happy, early, *fruitful* marriage, and Rothgar was eager to get his hands... etcetera... on Charade.



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However, considering that Rothgar was heir to an arling, it was unreasonable to expect them to accept less than five hundred sovereigns in dowry, in addition to the bride's clothes, jewels, and other possessions. Adam had hoped that Arl Leonas would offer to contribute to the dowry money, but he did not. He only said that his Arlessa would no doubt enjoy putting together her niece's trousseau. That would be a real help, but at the spring Landsmeet, Adam would have to come down with the coin himself. By then he would have some steady income streams from taxes and trade tariffs, but it was still a blow. It was almost exasperating enough to make him find a bride and a dowry for himself.

He dutifully danced with only marriageable young women. Some were better than others, though none of them particularly interested him. Perhaps it was his mood.

The dance ended. He smiled with practiced charm at his partner, and gave her a graceful bow of thanks. Beyond her, he saw Fergus and Nathaniel talking quietly and earnestly, looking in his direction. Fergus raised his brows at him; a clear, discreet summons. Adam made his way across the hall toward them, smiling at all the ladies, making himself agreeable as he went. Bann Berthilde winked at him, the naughty minx – and she married and the mother of three. He smiled back at her. A very fine woman, that.

"Adam," Fergus acknowledged him. "Nate and I want to sound you about a little plot we're concocting. Let's go to the Yellow Parlor and watch the sprogs at play."



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Proud mothers and fathers were in and out, pleased to see their offspring mingling with suitable companions. Said offspring and their companions were waxing fairly hilarious over a game of Musical Statues. A few older, more dignified sorts were strolling about, chatting, looking very superior, or simply stuffing their faces. A knot of the big girls were gossiping exactly like their mothers. It was a very cheerful scene for all that.

Fergus knew from the moment he entered that he had made a mistake. Seeing these children, imagining Oren among them, almost hearing his clear young voice and his happy laughter made his heart twist inside him. Stolidly, he put those memories by, and stationed himself in a corner.

"Adam!" shouted Corbus. "Look at us! We can leapfrog all the way across the room without stopping!" He ran up behind Bevin, and vaulted over him, and then over Lothar. Bevin quickly leaped over Lothar and then Corbus, and then...

"Come on, Lothar! Don't be a baby!"

Thus urged, Lothar bounded after Corbus and failed to make the jump, sprawling with an uproarious shriek on his brother's back. The room erupted into squeals of delight. The boys laughed, too, though Corbus looked a bit put out.

"My lords!" Their tutor bustled after them, trying to swallow a distracting sweetmeat. "This is most inappropriate!"

Adam gave Corbus a grin and a wave, and the men talked quietly among themselves, pretending to watch the children.

"This is absolutely secret," Fergus said, sipping his wine.



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"You may choose not to participate, but you must tell no one about this conversation."

"Of course."

Nathaniel admired a group of little girls, colorful as a wreath of pansies, dancing in a ring. They reminded him of his sister, long ago. Delilah had been such a pretty, serious child... "The Council is planning an embassy to Nevarra. It was Fergus' idea, but I'll head it. I'd like you to come along. It's important. And it could be extremely dangerous."

Adam thought briefly of his mother, Charade's betrothal, his projects in Amaranthine, and the Fereldan marriage market, where he was so much meat to the grinder.

He smiled. "I'm at your service, my lord Arl."

Bronwyn's head was full of recent Nevarran history and genealogy throughout the evening. It was unwise to take notes at this point, and so she used the memory tricks taught to her by Aldous years before. She would also, during her next visit to the Wardens' Compound, look for any notes left by Jowan during his Nevarran studies. They might prove a treasure. On leaving, she did take one book with her: THE NOLDOR ANTHOLOGY OF DWARVEN POETRY. That should baffle any spy.

An aggressive people, the Nevarrans. Their nation was only five years older than Ferelden: also founded in the Exalted Age in the backwash of the Fourth Blight. The Van Markham family still ruled there, their line crossed again and again with the powerful Pentaghast clan. King Baltus was forty-six



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years old and had reigned for the past fifteen years. Melantha, his Queen, was a Pentaghost by birth, and his second cousin. Their succession seemed secure: their son Tylus was the heir and Prince of Cumberland, as was the custom. There was another son, Paris, and two daughters: Sophia and Porphyria — *neither* of whom was going to marry Fergus! King Baltus had not been on good terms with one of his sisters, but there seemed to be no threat to his rule. The royal family was large and branching, but of course, theirs had not been slaughtered during an Orlesian invasion, unlike the Theirins.

They were highly cultured, too. All the sources — including Brother Genetivi's book — described Nevarra as a land of artists as well as warriors. That book, of course, Bronwyn possessed.

"The whole country is filled with artistry, from the statues of heroes that litter the streets in even the meanest villages to the glittering golden College of Magi in Cumberland. Perhaps nowhere is more astonishing than the vast necropolis outside Nevarra City. Unlike most other followers of Andraste, the Nevarrans do not burn their dead. Instead, they carefully preserve the bodies and seal them in elaborate tombs. Some of the wealthiest Nevarrans begin construction of their own tombs while quite young, and these become incredible palaces, complete with gardens, bathhouses, and ballrooms, utterly silent, kept only for the dead."

That was a new word for her: necropolis. A City of the Dead. Preserving and housing bodies in elaborate tombs seemed very peculiar and rather nasty to Bronwyn, but



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perhaps they had adopted that custom from the dwarves?

At any rate, it was *their* custom, and must be respected. They had done extremely well against the Orlesians, and taken quite a bit of territory from them. Good.

She also found herself doing a bit of research on Kirkwall, the first stop on the itinerary abroad. She had heard rumors before, of course, but Arl Wulffe was right: Kirkwall was definitely a dodgy place. It was a very ancient city — or perhaps one might say that modern Kirkwall was built on the bones of a very ancient city: Emerius, a center of the Tevinter slave trade in the days of the Imperium. Very likely that was the first "civilized" city that Andraste had seen after she was enslaved. In those days, southerners from what was now Ferelden were taken in the slave ships to Emerius, to begin the weary overland march to Cumberland, there to travel up the Imperial Highway through all weathers to their masters' capital.

Not always, of course. In those days when Tevinter ruled all Thedas, and slaves would be sold off at every city, only a small percentage — the best of the best — were kept back for Minrathous and the Court of the Archons, on account of remarkable beauty, strength or talent. The story was that Andraste was one such. Bronwyn wished that more was known about her escape. That must have been an incredible adventure.

At any rate, Kirkwall was still an odd place, even with the Tevinters long departed, even after throwing off the Orlesian yoke themselves. A very high percentage of the population were mages, many of whom evaded the Templars and lived



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as apostates. Many of said apostates became abominations, rampaging through the streets – or at least that was the story the Templars told. The Templars were immensely powerful in Kirkwall... so powerful that the Knight-Commander brazenly murdered the Viscount, Perrin Threnhold, when he tried to oust the order from his city. She had put a weaker man, Marlowe Dumar, in his place, but everyone knew who held the real power in the city. Personally, Bronwyn thought the Kirkwall Templars sounded particularly incompetent, since they could not get the mages under control, despite their numbers and political authority. Odd that they should not recognize that their failure made them look incompetent: good only for cutting down unarmed noblemen who spoke against them. She was surprised that the city had not risen.

But of course they would be afraid of an Exalted March, the threat the Chantry pulled like a dagger whenever anyone dared displease them. Ferelden itself had been threatened, and Bronwyn sensed that many were frightened at the prospect. Truth be told, she was worried herself.

Not enough to bend the knee, however. Would the Orlesians dare an Exalted March for such cynically political reasons? Another good reason to ally with the Nevarrans, who were unlikely to be impressed by that sort of bullying.

Preoccupied as she was, she smiled properly when the children were trotted out from the Yellow Parlor to perform a little dance, and she showed appropriate approval when the betrothal was announced between Rothgar



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of West Hills to Lady Charade Amell. The marriage was planned for the spring Landsmeet, here in Denerim.

"I had not imagined Wulffe to be so patient," she murmured to Fergus.

"Hawke needs some time to get the dowry together," he whispered back. "Coming down with five hundred sovereigns when he's a new bann can't be easy. We'll have to give the embassy some coin out of the royal treasury."

"Of course. I've been taking your advice. Perhaps we can have a private meeting about those Coastal Improvements – not tomorrow, but the day after. By then, maybe we'll have more pieces put together."



If her elves had not gone to the Alienage the following day, Bronwyn would not have known Marethari and a band of her Dalish were in Denerim. Danith sought her out in the afternoon after the Landsmeet session to give her the news. It could not have been easy, making their way to the city and dealing with the guards and the hostile humans. Once there, they had been laughed at when they asked for directions to the Warden-Commander, and had been shunted off to the Alienage.

"They camped in the big empty building," Danith told her. "The orphanage, they call it. The one you plan to replace with something less flimsy. The Keeper tells me they were comfortable enough. There is plenty of room for the ten of them."

Bronwyn could have sworn like a trooper. Was every human



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in Ferelden part of a plot to undermine the Warden alliances?

"I am very sorry they were treated so discourteously. I will give orders... no... let's have the Wardens escort them to the Palace. I would like to talk quietly with Marethari and hear what she thinks of the lands near the ancient temple. The guards will be made to behave properly."

"Why not in the Warden Hall?" Danith shrugged. "Her alliance is with the Wardens, not the Queen of Ferelden. If your husband wishes to come, let him come as the mate of a Warden."

"That will do for now," Bronwyn allowed, rather amused by Danith's description of Loghain as 'the mate of a Warden.' "But when we announce the grant, it should be in front of the nobles, in the Landsmeet Chamber. The Wardens have no power to offer the land grant; that really must be done in the name of the Crown of Ferelden. We have to make them all understand that this is a binding agreement. The Dalish are our allies, and should be treated with respect. Yes, put together a honor guard of Wardens – of all races. There is no reason that Marethari and her party could not be accommodated at the Compound, if they wish. It is good of her to venture to Denerim in this weather."

"The Dalish do not tremble at a little snow."

Danith left to gather her detail, and after Bronwyn gave some stern orders to an officer of the Palace guard, she decided to change into her Warden gown, still thinking about the afternoon session. It had featured a very unpleasant public petition that should have been pre-



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sented in a private audience. The nobles had watched, some sympathetic, some titillated by the scandal.

It could not have been easy for Anora to sit impassively, while those women – Cailan's mistresses – made their demands. Three of them had joined together, finding strength in unity, waving their grubby scrawls on grubby parchment. One wanted a house that she said Cailan had promised her. Another wanted a pension. The youngest – and she was too young to be debauched by a king, in Bronwyn's opinion – told them that Cailan had promised her a dowry of ten sovereigns, with which she planned to marry and open a bakery.

None of them had any proof in writing, of course, though that did not mean that Cailan had not made such promises. The other two known mistresses were both elves, and had not dared to show their faces in the Landsmeet Chamber. One had slipped back into the obscurity of the Alienage, clearly expecting nothing now that Cailan was dead. The other had sent a pitifully misspelled plea for help. She claimed that Cailan had promised to support her and her child, whether it was his or not. Yes, her child was an elf, but the King had promised to stand by her.

Anora was not speaking, so Bronwyn saw an opportunity. She leaned over to Loghain, and whispered. "Give them each ten sovereigns, and send them away. I like the girl. She has a plan. Give the elf who wrote ten sovereigns, too."

Loghain snorted, "That's a lot of coin."

"Cailan would have spent far more than that on them,

had he lived. Don't haggle. Consider it payment for services to the Crown. Anora wants them gone."

That was a sure push at Loghain's feelings. Bronwyn smiled with satisfaction at the memory. The girl had been pleased and happy; her companions less so, but relieved to get anything at all. They had been hustled away, after Loghain told them that the issue was closed, and no further claims of the sort would be entertained.

As it was getting dark and very cold, Bronwyn hurried to the Compound, leaving a message to Loghain telling him where she was. She looked forward to reconnecting with her Wardens. She warned Mistress Rannelly to expect visitors, and went to check on Aeron. He was rapidly improving, since his dose of improved Joining potion. His hair was still not growing out, but he was free from pain and his frostbitten appendages were all functional, allowing him to practice a new song quietly in a corner.

"That's nice," she murmured, pulling a stool closer so she could listen.

He smiled, and strummed more chords, searching for just the right one. "Just a little something of my own. A lot of the others went with Danith to fetch the Dalish. Anders and Morrigan are up in their room. Niall's reading in the study, and Maeve's doing a bit of sewing. I'm not in the mood to face the cold until I absolutely can't avoid it."

"Then play for me."

The light strumming grew more certain, and the pleas-

ant tenor rose in song.

*"Blow, blow, thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude, as man's ingratitude.
Though thou the waters warp,
Thy teeth are not so sharp,
Although thy breath be rude, although thy breath be rude.
My faithful friends draw nigh
And look us in the eye.
It is a wealthy man who has good friends like you.
Through darkness, cold, and snow,
Wherever you may go,
You bear my friendship true, you bear my friendship true.
Now warm these gentle folk
With maple, birch, and oak,
And turn you front and back to feel the cheerful blaze.
And be of cheerful mind,
And bless the wintertime;
Its calm and starry nights and bright and silent days."*

Bronwyn fell warm and relaxed listening to the song, and accepted with whispered thanks the cup of hot cider Rannelly pressed into her hand. She always felt at home here. Seeing her pleasure, Aeron sang a few more songs for her. Very soon, Niall and Maeve joined her, and a bit later, Anders and Morrigan.

"Hah!" Morrigan remarked. "The Queen deigns to join her humble minions. We are honored!"

"So you should be," Bronwyn said, pleased to see her. "Of



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course the food and the entertainment – " she gave a nod to Aeron " – are mighty draws."

Morrigan huffed, but sat down by her all the same.

"Another song, please, Aeron," Bronwyn urged.

"How about this?"

"Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more;

Men were deceivers ever;

One foot in sea and one on shore,

To one thing constant never;

Then sigh not so,

But let them go,

And be you blithe and bonny;

Converting all your sounds of woe

Into 'Hey, nonny, nonny.'"

Sing no more ditties, sing no more,

Or dumps so dull and heavy;

The fraud of men was ever so,

Since summer first was leavy.

Then sigh not so,

But let them go,

And be you blithe and bonny,

Converting all your sounds of woe

Into 'Hey, nonny, nonny.'"

"'Hey, nonny, nonny,' indeed," Morrigan scoffed. "What curious fellows you minstrels are! If any man dared deceive me, he would hear me say something quite other than 'Hey, nonny nonny!' Though I should not waste my sighs, either."



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Anders laughed, and bowed gallantly. "I couldn't deceive you even if I tried!"

"Yes, you are perfectly transparent. I like that in a man."

The outer door opened, letting in a draught of icy air. Marethari, her nine Dalish companion, and a large party of Wardens made for a noisy entrance. Bronwyn got up immediately to welcome her guests.

"Welcome, Keeper Marethari, to the Grey Warden Hall," Bronwyn greeted her. "I am glad that we will have this opportunity to talk. First, however, we would be honored if you and your companions joined us for a meal. Later tonight, we will be feasting at the Palace, and I hope you will all come."

"My thanks, Grey Warden," replied the elven mage, "for myself and my clan."

It was a very pleasant meal. The elves had seen no dark-spawn on their journey north, which was obviously good news. Urged by Steren, the Dalish brought their aravels and halla to the Compound, where they could be comfortably stabled with the other Wardens' animals.

"Our city cousins," said Marethari, "were quite courteous, especially the hahren, who seems a very good man. It is sad, however, to hear the tale of the lost. Were it not for the weather, I suspect that a number of the elves might wish to travel with us."

"You are, of course, very welcome to stay here with us," Bronwyn said. "There is plenty of room in the Compound..."

"You are gracious," said Marethari, "but I think... not. It



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is very interesting to see an Alienage for myself. I wish to know more of how our cousins live. There is some good we can do there during our visit. Divided or not, we are all elves. I want them to know that should they decide in the future to join us, they would be accepted."

"The Keeper," Cathair said proudly, "healed many in the Alienage today."

Bronwyn smiled dutifully, hoping against hope that word of this would not spread outside the Alienage. Very likely it would not – or not very soon. The weather was cold; people were not getting out and about to gossip. Humans were not interested in elves, anyway, and elves were close-mouthed about their own doings. However, Templars did patrol there from time to time, and there was an enticing bounty for reporting magic use. In her heart, Bronwyn hoped that Marethari's stay would not be protracted.

Loghain made his appearance a little later, bringing a map of the Brecilian Forest with him, naturally.

"We can't talk long today," he told Bronwyn in a low voice. Perhaps a few preliminaries."

West of the White River; south of Dragon's Peak; north of the Brecilian Passage. That much was clear. What was not settled was the exact extent of the lands to be granted. Based on the location of the ancient temple and a tributary of the White River, they marked out a rough ellipse of land in the bulge of land jutting out into the Amaranthine Ocean that could do. It was a day's journey along the



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long axis, and half a day's journey from south to north. Another big question was whether the elves wished for any part of the coast. They did not.

"We know nothing of the sea," Marethari said calmly. "It has never been part of our lore. Elves belong to the earth. We fish in fresh water, not in the salt of the ocean."

Loghain was deeply relieved by that, since he did not want any disputes about land ownership along the coastal trail. It was a road in places, and one really could travel along it all the way to Denerim. Not easily, but he hoped to expand settlement in that direction and the fishing industry as well. There was a little village south of Bear Island that would be the closest human settlement. The people there were isolated, and traveled mostly by boat to Denerim. There was a country lane that wound around the south side of Dragon's Peak to the River Way that they used for foot travel. They would still be a day's journey from the elven lands, which would lay to the southwest, and through dense forest. South Reach would not be a problem, being on the other side of the river, and two days journey distant. Even the foresters would have little reason to penetrate so deeply into the woods.

Ferelden was underpopulated; there was plenty of room for all. There was room for immigrants, for that matter, as long as the land could be made safe and secure. Loghain had his eye on new territory for those wanting their own holdings: the islands of the Amaranthine Archipelago; the lands west of the River Dane above Orzammar. No one would be



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deprived of anything by the elven grant, but he knew that there would be some who would grudge it all the same.

The first leg of the march from Ostagar was the riskiest. There was not much in the way of shelter between the ancient fortress and the town of Lothering. If a blizzard came down upon them, they would be in serious trouble. Cauthrien watched the weather with a gimlet eye, and consulted with the Dalish, who were weather-wise of necessity.

She supposed they had made a brave show, as they departed from Ostagar, leaving behind the small garrison lodged in the Tower of Ishal. Road details had been constantly at work, moving the snow from the road, keeping the way clear for couriers. The soldiers trampled the remainder of the snow flat, and the wagons rolled along the roads easily enough, though the going was slippery in places. Alistair rode in the vanguard with her, scouting for darkspawn, and Stronar's nephew Emrys in the rearguard. Most of the other Wardens rode in the wagons carrying the contents of the Glavonaks' workshop.

Not so the huge Qunari warrior. He was mounted on his massive steed beside Alistair, looking about with interest and curiosity, and bearing the cold with admirable stoicism.

"Snow and ice will occupy a great deal of my report to the Arishok," he remarked. "They are a formidable obstacle. However, the warmth of the horse is of great assistance."

Alistair thought so too, glad of the strong, heat-generating



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horse between his thighs. He had a fine wolfskin cloak now, too: lined and hooded, fashioned from the hides of wolves he had slain himself. There was something infinitely satisfying about that. The artisans and craftsmen who had followed the army had made a great deal of coin off the fact that many in Ostagar had not come expecting to face the cold. Once the darkspawn had been exterminated, trappers and hunters had moved in... cautiously at first, fearful of handling Blighted animals... but later on with more and more confidence. Their comparatively high pay had allowed the Wardens to commission warm gear. Everyone had furs now; and nothing like them for keeping out the cold!

He turned in his saddled, grinning at the soldiers behind them.

"We look like a troop of bears on horseback," he said to Cauthrien. "Big, fluffy bears."

Cauthrien snorted. Just like Loghain, Alistair noted. He shrugged. "Well, not all of us look like bears, of course. Some of us look like wolves or foxes. More elegant, I guess. But on horseback it still counts as unusual."

Part of that was a tribute to her silver fox cloak. It was very becoming, though Alistair supposed he shouldn't say that to a hard-as-nails Commander of hard-as-nails troops. It was, though. She looked really good in it, with her cheeks pink from the cold.

Then, too, Adaia and Siofranni looked like adorable little bunnies in their own furs. No – more expensive-looking



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than mere rabbits. More likes sables. Minks. They had designed some quite gorgeous sleeved coats that they said were comfortably toasty. Everyone had fur boots and mittens, too and big fur hats: bearskin and wolfskin and deerhide; fox and beaver and rabbit and squirrel and marten. Sten's hat seemed almost large enough for the elves to use as a tent. The dwarves favored fur hats that fit entirely over their helmets. It made their heads really... big.

Cauthrien said, "I sent a courier to Lothering to arrange for billeting in the town, as far as possible. The Chantry can sleep hundreds. The bann's manor, too."

"I've stayed there," Alistair told her, happy to share the memory. "They have a boiler there and a bathroom and all. I had a private room. The bann's manor is really fancy."

"Well, you won't have a private room this time. Likely we'll all be four to a bed and the rest packed into the rooms on straw pallets. And those will be the ones with the good billets. We'll have soldiers sleeping in pigsties tonight."

"Even in a pigsty, I'll still have a fur blanket," Alistair said, laughing, "and so will you."

They moved along steadily, but rather slowly; stopping to rest the horses and eat and drink. Unsurprisingly no bandits challenged their passage; no darkspawn manifested. The Blight along the road had either been burned out by earlier patrols, or it had frozen, crackling into innocuous dust. As far as Alistair knew, there had never been a Blight in lands so far south before. Maybe that



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was the reason the Archdemon had pulled the horde back from Ostagar. Darkspawn were tough, but apparently not tough enough to survive a hard freeze. Especially not without magnificent fur cloaks.

On they pushed; on and on. It was a hard, long march, and it lasted well into dark, but it was safer to billet in Lothering than to risk camping in tents. The sky was heavy and grey, but it seemed to Alistair that the Maker's hand held the snow in check. Even the air grew still toward evening, sparing them the wretchedness of bitter winds.

Cauthrien's courier had got through, and her careful planning paid off. The units were directed toward their billets with a minimum of confusion. The town militia had considerably lit tall torches that would light the way into and about the town. Sergeants bawled orders at their troops and hustled them into the houses and barns of wide-eyed townsfolk. Disciplined companies of Maric's Shield poured into the Chantry. The dwarves had good, sturdy quarters in the big gristmill and the tavern, among other places; and their leaders, like most of the officers and the Wardens were given quarters in the bann's manor. The Dalish stayed in the stables and barns with the halla, as did those guarding the oxen and horses. The Glavonak brothers refused to leave their wagons, and cossed down in the stables as well. There was kennel space enough for most of the dogs, and the rest found a degree of comfort in chickenhouses and pigsties.

Inside the manor, the traumatized seneschal was wan-



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dering the hall, hands over his mouth, as filthy, lice-ridden soldiers fingered the tapestries and scraped the woodwork with slush-covered boots and spurs. Cauthrien was shown to an elegant bedchamber, and immediately declared that there was plenty of space in there for her staff as well.

The Wardens were given a room to themselves. As it happened, it was the room that Alistair had slept in last spring. It looked much smaller with nine Wardens and a Qunari warrior filling it. Alistair wondered, smirking, how long the bann's fancy plumbing would last under the onslaught of them all. They'd probably do better bathing together in the laundry. He suggested it to a passing maid he vaguely recognized.

"We have a boiler for that, too, my lord Warden. I'll see to it," she said, bustling off.

'My lord Warden!' Alistair smirked to himself. He liked the sound of that. He took another look at his mob. Half of them looked afraid to touch anything. They slowly pulled off their heavy furs. Adaia was staring at the blue brocade-draped bed. It was quite the sight, heavily carved with oak leaves and acorns, gilded in places, and long enough for a Qunari.

Emrys muttered, "It's easy to see where old Ceorlic spent his coin. Is this his own bedchamber?"

"Don't think so," Alistair told him. "I think it's just one of many guest rooms. They're all incredibly posh."

"It's beautiful," Adaia whispered, thin fingers tracing the carvings. "So this is a noble house. Do they all live like this, Alistair?"



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"Pretty much."

"And all the rest of us... live the way we do..." her voice drifted off, and she studied an elegant x-shaped chair with scrolled arms. The back was painted with golden flowers, and it was cushioned with purple velvet. It stood in front of a inlaid writing desk. On the desk was a bronze inkstand with the image of a knight fighting a pair of wolves. Light was provided by a bronze candelabra, holding four scented candles.

"Not all of us live like this," Emrys snorted. "My family manor wasn't much more than a big farmhouse. We didn't have upholstered furniture or gilded beds. Or fancy gew-gaws everywhere."

"Still..." Adaia whispered, now admiring the wall hangings.

"Did that girl say we could have a bath?" asked Petra, sniffing gingerly at herself. "because that would be a gift of the Maker."

"A hot bath?" echoed Asa. "There's a long-forgotten treat."

Oghren rubbed his red beard. "Now who's going share *that* big bed with me? Heh-heh. Looks like there's room for all you fine ladies."

"Don't be a pig, Oghren," Ulfa rebuked him wearily. "Or we'll have to skin you and roast you."

"Er..." Alistair mumbled. "I thought we'd let the females... er, ladies have the bed, and we men would take the floor. We've got lots of furs and things..."

"Do not patronize them as weaklings," said Sten. "However, if one observes that most of the females are indeed



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smaller, it is logical for them to take the bed, as more of them will fit."

"You have a brilliant mind, Sten," admired Asa. "You see everything so clearly. I think we can find a way to fit five on that bed. I'll fine-comb my hair first, though, just in case I've got some visitors."

"Considerate of you," Ulfa approved. "Me, too."

There were some fairly unmilitary shouts down the hall. Alistair guessed that someone had found the bathroom. Right. There was Cauthrien's voice, raised in command, reining in the chaos, organizing a rota.

"That's the upstairs bathroom," Alistair said. "Let's not get involved in that. The tub's only big enough for one or two, so they'll have to use the water over and over again. The laundry tub is probably really big. Maybe a bunch of us can go at once."

"I'm not bathing with Oghren," Asa declared. "I'll bet he'd pee in the water."

The dwarf put his hand on his heart in mock protest. "Me? Never!"

As it turned out, the manor's laundry tub was huge. It was on the ground level, next to the kitchen, and was likely the warmest place in the entire manor. The minute the women saw it, its steam roiling up whitely, they collectively screamed and began throwing off their clothes.

"Wait!" Alistair protested. "What are you doing? Stop —"

"I guess they're going first," Emrys said, craning to get



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a look at the retreating back views. He grinned at Alistair. "I can put my hands over your eyes if you're feeling faint."

"Mighty fine," leered Oghren. An indignant scullery maid shut the door in his face. He shouted through the door. "Don't take so long that the water gets cold!"

The horde was marching: thousands upon thousands of genlocks and hurlocks. Thousands of shrieks were among them, loping along like beasts. Ogres lumbered slowly, twice as tall the rest. Above them, the Archdemon bellowed in triumph.

Alistair awoke, that terrible cry still ringing in his ears. Around him his Wardens were moaning. Adaia was awake and whispering to Siofranni, too softly for him to hear. The figures on the big bed shifted. Petra, sleeping crosswise at the foot of the bed, sat up, gasping for breath.

"It's all right," Alistair murmured. "It's real, but it's all right. It can't be anywhere close."

"Are you sure?" Emrys said softly, stirring on his pile of furs. "I saw a great wave of darkspawn, marching in endless columns through the Deep Roads. They hear the song, and are filled with purpose."

"Sodding blighters," swore Oghren. "This dreaming thing is the worst bit about being a Warden."

"What if they're going to Denerim?" Nevin's eyes caught a shaft of moonlight and reflected it back. It made him briefly look like a frightened animal.

That was a terrifying thought. Alistair fought to control



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the brief flare of panic.

"I don't see how," he said quietly. "We haven't seen them any place where they could be gathering. From Bronwyn's letters, nobody's seen the main body of the horde in months. They're going somewhere else, and Maker help the people there."



The nightmare forced Leliana out of her bed at Soldier's Peak, heart pounding. She fumbled into a warm wrapper, and slid her feet into her sheepskin-lined slippers. Holding her flickering candlestick, she went upstairs to the kitchen. At this hour, all the servants would peacefully asleep. The fire, however, was burning brightly. Someone had already made it up.

"You too?"

Hakan and Soren were there, eyes shadowed, playing one of their endless chess games. Wind whistled through the high kitchen shutters, but the room was warm enough.

"I've had some wild dreams," Soren said, "but that one was pretty creepy. Who could fight an army that size?"

"Any army *could*," Hakan pointed out. "But they'd be massacred."

"Thanks for that cheerful insight," Soren snarled.

"I'll make some mulled wine," Leliana offered.

"You're a sweetheart," Hakan grunted.

Red wine, of course. She opened a bottle and decanted it carefully into the pan, adding spices and a bit of raw sugar. While it warmed, she took down cups from a shelf, humming softly to herself.



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"I wonder if I should go see if Jowan is all right."

"Don't bother," Hakan advised. "It's too cold for you to go hold his hand. The wind would blow you right off the bridge to the Mages' Tower. You'd better stay here and fix up that wine."

"The old man probably still has him working late. Likes to crack the whip. Crazy mages can take care of themselves," agreed Soren.

"They've been very helpful," Leliana scolded them mildly.

Hakan was not altogether wrong, of course. To check on Jowan she would have to put on boots, breeches, jerkin, cloak, and gloves, and then hope that Avernus had not locked the tower entrance. She really did not want to stand on the high walkway, pounding unheard at the heavy door. She could pick the lock, of course, but Avernus often laid traps for the uninvited. Horrible old man. Paranoid and horrible. He only liked Bronwyn and Jowan. Maybe Morrigan, from something he had said, but that was not so surprising. Morrigan was quite horrible herself.

Truth was, she was inclined to look for Jowan because she was rather lonely, especially at this dark hour, when only Wardens were stirring. The women of the Wolf and Dryden families were very nice and very hard-working, but Leliana had little in common with them. She enjoyed putting the Wardens' castle in order, but there were times — like now — when it was simply not *enough*. Jowan at least could talk to her of travel and history. He had read many of the same books, and they had had fun putting



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the library here in order, working together pleasantly. They had something in common. He had made terrible mistakes, but so had she. He liked her songs, too.

She must talk to him tomorrow about moving out of the tower. Surely it would be much nicer for him to be here, with his friends.

The wine smelled so good. She poured it out, and brought the dwarves their cups, smiling as they grunted their thanks. While she sipped her wine, she thought back on the dream. The horde looked like a river of Taint, but here and there streams of other darkspawn flowed away from it, heading toward other destinations. Where were they going?

"Did you see that?" Velanna whispered, unsure if she was awake or asleep.

Askil swore softly. "By the Stone, I *hate* the Fade."

Astrid agreed, but said nothing. Instead, she sat up, resting her back against a smooth stone wall, and lit a small lantern, considerately keeping the sides facing her Wardens shaded. They were in the Deep Roads, not far from Orzammar. She pulled out her map and brooded over it. Falkor had to have reached the city by now, bearing her letters. A letter to House Helmi. A letter to House Dace. More letters... twelve in all. By tomorrow, Falkor would stand before the Assembly with Rodyk, proclaiming her victory. Amgarrak Thaig regained. Kal'Hirol regained. Golems won to aid in the fight against the darkspawn. The entire Amgarrak Road



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cleared from Kal'Hirol to Orzammar. When was the last time that Orzammar had had such news? Not in her lifetime, certainly. What was Branka's smokeless stove to the reconquest of dwarven territory? Lady Dace, at least, should be swayed by the argument that a Paragon would be a useful counterweight to the power of the King.

Her fellow wardens were not so elated, and were having trouble going back to sleep. Some nearby Legionnaires grumbled, cursing restless Wardens.

"I saw the Archdemon," said Ailill, his voice trembling. "I saw the horde."

"We all did," said Astrid. "But they are nowhere near. We have done well."

Kal'Hirol was dark and empty, and Tara thought it was a lot creepier than Amgarrak Thaig. That was just clean and vacant, like a newly built house awaiting its owners. Astrid and the Legion had cleared it out so thoroughly that there were no signs in evidence of the recent disaster. Kal'Hirol, on the other hand, was a disgustingly Blighted place where lots of people had died horrible deaths at the hands of the darkspawn.

No surprise, then, that she had horrible dreams. That bloody stupid Archdemon had the horde on the march again, and was being some sort of stupid drama queen about it. Everybody woke up, and it was a good thing that they had found a little corner to themselves, or Sigrun's



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yell would have roused the entire Legion.

"Stone preserve us!" Jakka grumbled. "That's not... right."

"You've been all over the Deep Roads, Tara," Catriona said, shivering under her cloak. "Did you recognize the place we were seeing?"

"No," Tara admitted. "Brosca, what about you – ? Brosca? Where did she go? No, Sigrun don't call for her, or we'll wake everyone else up and they'll be mad at us."

"I will search for our sister Brosca, Keeper," Darach said virtuously. "It will be some time before the impression of that evil vision fades. Better that I occupy myself in useful labor." He got up and was just reaching for his quiver when there were footsteps and then a little wavering light, and Brosca bounded in among them.

"You're all awake! That's great!" she enthused, and then clapped a hand over her mouth. "I need to be quiet. I've got something to tell you guys! What are you all doing up, anyway?"

"The Archdemon paid us a visit," Tara said, making a face. "Bad dreams."

"Glad I missed it. Anyway, gather round, boys and girls." She knelt, face gleeful, and whispered, "Astrid's been holding out on us!"

Tara struggled up to a sitting position. "What do you mean?"

Brosca grinned. "I found the thaig's treasury. A nice, *full* treasury. What's more, I think Astrid did, too. There were footsteps in the dust and the seals were broken."

Sigrun looked at Jukka. "Maybe she thought it belonged



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to the dwarven people."

"That's what I say!" Brosca agreed. "To dwarven people and their friends!"

The reaction to this was generally favorable.

"She'll know if we loot it," Tara said doubtfully. "And probably she wants to help Orzammar. I guess that's fair..." She shook her head at Brosca. "I don't want her to be mad at me. I'm sure she had a very good reason for keeping it quiet."

"It's huge," Brosca said. "She'll never know if we're careful. Six huge tubs of gold and jewels. We can skim a bag off the top of each one." She added. "Yeah, she'd probably be pissed if she knew, but the best way to keep her from having her feelings hurt is not to tell her. So we don't. We don't tell anybody. Finders keepers. Let's go."

Sigrun was already on her feet. "Yeah. Let's go before the Legion wakes."

"We don't want to wake the Legion," agreed Jukka, stumbling over his cloak. "That would be rude. They need their rest."

Catriona thought of her brother and his skinny, bare-foot children. "Right. Let's go. Come on, Darach. With gold you can help your clan."

"There is that," he agreed. "Let us go."

There was gold, all right. There were carved jewels and strings of fiery opals. There were silver goblets and diamond rings. They decided not to take any bulky armor, since their own armor and weapons were adequate. The bags were filled; carefully, prudently. Brosca weighed



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each one in her hands, shutting her eyes to be fair, and was able to roughly gauge equal shares for all.

"Look!" she said, pointing at the levels in the huge vessels. "You can't tell we were here. Told you. Astrid shouldn't have held out on us, but I forgive her, since I got a share anyway."

When they were done, they slipped away, concealed the entrance just as Astrid had, and returned to their night camp, to dream of gold instead of darkspawn.

There was one place where Anora's influence was entirely absent. Some might consider making use of her advantage unsporting, but Bronwyn decided that being overscrupulous in the marriage bed would be casting away a tactical advantage. Here, Loghain listened to her, and her alone. All one had to do was ravish him thoroughly, and thus gain his undivided attention.

"Should we even let the Orlesians leave?" Bronwyn wondered aloud, after collapsing onto her husband's chest. Quite a nice chest: broad, not overly hairy, and hard as oak.

"What?" Loghain asked, roused from his descent into peaceful sleep. "Keep them as hostages, you mean? It won't work with the Knight-Divine. The Duke? Perhaps."

"We know they must have planted agents here in Denerim. Those agents won't do anything public until the Knight-Divine and the Duke are safely away. Afterwards..." She slid off him and curled up at his side, head pillowed on his arm.

"On the other hand," Loghain pointed out, his head



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pleasantly muzzy, "they might be motivated to rescue their leaders. I was considering waiting for particularly bad weather, and then sending them on their way."

"That might do," Bronwyn mused.

Loghain smiled faintly, dreamily: liking the justice of it. Let the pair of them sink into the oblivion of the Waking Sea; let them be trapped under a coastal ice shelf, faces turned up pleadingly to the impotent Sun; let them cling to broken spars on the grey and shifting sea until the cold leached life from their bones. All pleasant, restful images...

"Besides," he said, "keeping them as hostages without open acts of war by the Orlesians puts us in the wrong. It won't help our case with the Nevarrans. The longer we keep them, the more likely they are to bribe or coerce someone to act as a messenger with their people. They might even find sources of intelligence within the Palace. Not worth it. Let them go, but after Howe and his men are safely away..."

So they drifted off to sleep very companionably. Even later, when Bronwyn's nightmares began, Loghain was not irritated, but spooned up behind her and nuzzled her awake.

"You were dreaming."

She shivered. "If you want to call it that. The horde is enormous. The Archdemon screamed in my face. It doesn't help to know that all the Grey Wardens see the same things. It *feels* personal." She tried to slow her breathing. Loghain pulled her closer.

"The same things?" he murmured. "That's strange."



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"Strange but true. I've asked. We really do seem to see the same things. Gruesome, actually."

"Try to sleep. No Archdemons here..."



CHARADE AMELL, LATE OF KIRKWALL



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CHAPTER 13



UNEASY LIES THE HEAD THAT WEARS A CROWN

IT WAS CLEAR THAT THE LANDSMEET WOULD BE OVER IN A DAY OR TWO. A few betrothals were announced, a few weddings celebrated, and quiet plans were made to send the "Coastal Improvements" mission on its way north.

The exact location of the lands granted to the Dalish was marked on the map and agreed to by Marethari. Loghain was saving that for the last order of business, when everyone was too tired and too eager to go home to put up a serious opposition. Not a single nobleman of Ferelden would lose a fingerlength of land from it, but there was certain to be resistance to anything favorable to elves.

The Council, at least, was in agreement about the concept. Even Teagan, whom Loghain had expected to oppose it on general principles of opposition to Loghain, only said that the Dalish must expect and tolerate visits of Chantry missionaries. Bronwyn groaned inwardly, A slippery slope. First the missionaries would come, and when those



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were ignored, the Templars would move in to compel belief and arrest the Keepers... And then they would see the Fall of the Dales all over again. How to prevent it? She wracked her brains, trying to think of ways to prevent that disaster. There was only so much disaster-prevention she could manage. The elves might be fairly safe for a few years. Meanwhile, there was still a Blight and a possible Orlesian invasion to deal with.

They must bid farewell to their Orlesian guests, too. Their ship had been thoroughly searched, and two men found hiding aboard. They were taken to Fort Drakon for questioning, and it was decided that they would not be surrendered to the ambassador. These men, Dagonet and Lenoir, had been going about collecting juicy intelligence here in Denerim: news of troop movements; news that the darkspawn had withdrawn from Ostagar – something which Loghain absolutely did not want the Orlesians to know; news of the rumored Dalish land grant. That was one more thing that did not need to go beyond their borders at the moment. They must get rid of the Knight-Divine and the noble Duke before the announcement was made.

As to the Nevarran affair, they had worked hard and quickly to move things along. Nathaniel had a band of eight picked men to go with them: two knights, four men at arms, and two servants. The knights, Ser Zennor Stone and Ser Erald Mac Morn, were sworn to Loghain, and were sober, talented swordsmen; the four men-at-arms



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were selected from Maric's Shield. Sergeants Darrow and Kain were trustworthy veterans, and Rhys and Walton were highly thought of. The servants, too, Mapes and Dudgeon, had known hardship and battle, but were young enough not to find the journey too arduous.

Bronwyn took Carver aside to tell him of the proposal. He was thrilled at the idea until he realized that Adam was going, too.

"Is that the only reason you asked me?" he demanded, looking very hurt. "Because Adam's going?"

"No," Bronwyn said patiently. "It's not the only reason. I must have a Warden go. Between us, and to be perfectly blunt, I felt it best to send a human, because you never know how hidebound and prejudiced other people are going to be. I prefer to send a man because the rest of the party is male and we don't need romantic distractions. I thought of you because I *know* you: you're a proven warrior, and I think it's going to be very dangerous. Yes, I did consider the fact that your brother is going and I thought that was a positive, because for all your rivalry and quarreling, I know you would never turn on each other or on Ferelden."

That rather took the wind out of his sails. "*Bann* Adam," he muttered.

"—And *Warden* Carver," she added. "I think you, Arl Nathaniel, and your brother will make a powerful team. Who can you think who'd be better than you? I've got to have a Warden there, Carver. Someone I can trust, and



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who can see the big picture. I have a mission for you that I have not disclosed to anyone else — no, not even the King.”

He looked up, much more pleased.

“Yes,” she said, “you must keep this quiet. You need to visit the Warden-Commander of Nevarra. I need you to get him to talk to you frankly, face to face, about the situation in Weisshaupt and about why no one has offered us help — I mean *real* help in good faith. There may be things he will tell you in person that he would not trust to a letter. Our order has many secrets, and great energy seems to be directed at keeping them from our own people!”

She was not being entirely honest. She could think of Wardens who were more mature, but she did not know them as well, and in the end blood was a mighty bond.

“Also,” she said, “You need to find out all you can about the old Nevarran dragon-hunters: what weapons they used... their tactics... everything, really. Surely the Pentaghasts would like the chance to boast a bit.”

“Aren’t you going to send a mage with us?” he asked, with a sly grin. “Bethany would love to get out from Mother’s thumb!”

Bronwyn laughed. “Your mother would probably assassinate me if I sent all her children to Nevarra! I’ll admit I think your idea is good, but if we send a mage, he must be a Warden. Anyone else and the Chantry might try to interfere. Whom do you suggest?”

Flattered at being asked his opinion, Carver hesitated,



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and then said. “Jowan. He gets along with all the posh types. And carrying that staff that looks like a sword, he blends in. Nobody will know he’s a mage until he zaps them. You can say he’s our secretary.”

“I’ll consider that,” Bronwyn said. “Yes, It might be better to send two Wardens on a mission to another Warden post. There might be magical lore that Jowan could pick up, while you deal with the commander. At any rate, you’ll have the best equipment and the warmest clothing. Court dress, too, for we’ll need to make a good impression on the Nevarrans.”

Carver groaned. Bronwyn was standing for no nonsense.

“And it can be all black and grey, for all I care, but our ambassadors aren’t going abroad looking like beggars!”



Captain Isabela was sent an intriguing message, and met a representative of the mission at the one place no one was surprised to see a nobleman visit: Denerim’s finest brothel, the Pearl.

On seeing her, Hawke no longer wondered why she had made an impression on Fergus. He knew her at once from Fergus’ description, even though Hawke himself had never set eyes on her before. Captain Isabela was a damned fine woman, with luminous amber eyes, a roguish grin, and skin the color of old honey. She had the air of someone who had seen it all, and knew how to handle herself in even the worst of it.

He made his way through the tables near the bar with-



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out hesitation, giving her his best smile.

"Well!" she said, gesturing to the chair across from her. "If it isn't my new best friend!"

She liked the coin Fergus was paying. She liked the idea of tricking Orlesians. She liked Hawke, for that matter.

"I can't promise a timely arrival, though," she said, "not in this weather. Oh, I think I can make it out of the harbor all right, and I'll sail for the northern shore directly. I can leave tomorrow, for that matter. Ten to one I can make it to Kirkwall. The cargo's a good idea, and I want half the profits. I know just the man to get us a good price for it. The problem, Handsome, is getting back to Ferelden and navigating that nasty little obstacle course near the Virgin Rocks. You may have to row out to the ship, and we'll have to settle on a range of arrival dates."

"I'd be surprised if we could get to Kilda before the 23rd," he said. "Could I buy you another drink?"

"You can buy me anything you like, Handsome," she replied. "Be generous."

He smiled, feeling comfortable with her. She was, after all, the same sort of woman that he was a man. Knowing that, obviously, did not make her more trustworthy. She would be on their side, as long as it paid well and offered her amusement.

So he bought a bottle of Madam Sanga's finest Antivan red, and deep bowls of spicy fish chowder. While Isabela wolfed down the food and drink, Adam laid out the dates she needed to meet him and his associates in Kilda. The



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24th of Haring, or as soon as the weather permitted; the pay highest the earlier she got there.

"And once we get to Kirkwall, we'll pay you for your time there, We want you to wait for us while we take care of our business, and then get us home."

"Any idea how long that might be?"

"Maybe a month. Maybe less."

"Hmmm. I want a letter of marque and reprisal from your King... Queen... whatever... licensing to me to attack their enemies at sea and bring the captured ships and cargo to the safety of Fereldan ports for sale."

"And what do they get?"

"A fifth of the profits."

"Half."

"You're dreaming. A third."

"Sounds good. I think they'll grant it. Once the mission is a success."

They probably would. Licensing privateers was a way to run a navy on the cheap. It would also bring gold into the royal coffers, which Adam thought was probably something very much to be desired.

They haggled a little over the amount of coin to be paid outright, mainly because not haggling would be boring and rather insulting. Isabela named further demands, and Hawke assented, smiling as she led him into one of the private rooms.



Two bands of friends arrived on the twelfth. The first



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was that of Merrill and a dozen of her companions, who were passed through the Great Gate of Denerim with considerably greater courtesy than the guards had shown to Marethari a few days before. Merrill too, ended up visiting the Alienage, and like Marethari, found plenty of room in the sprawling former Orphanage. There was great excitement among the Dalish when Marethari described the extent of land to be given them.

"But will the darkspawn allow us to enjoy it in peace? The Blight is not yet over," Merrill said softly.

"More to the purpose," Marethari pointed out, "Will the shemlen priests allow us to enjoy it? We must find ways to protect ourselves – no, not the old ways, Thanovir, but subtle ways. If we can persuade the land itself to hide us, we may not once again fall to the Templars' swords."

The great news was that their shemlen friend Bronwyn had been declared Queen by the nobles. She and Loghain were married now, and he was King. That gave the two of them more power to enforce their will, but their power was not absolute.

"Still," Maynriel said cheerfully, "they are more likely to favor us than anyone who might rule this kingdom. We should call on them, since this is their home. They would certainly not enter our camps without making their presence known."

"Truly," agreed Marethari, "and there are others you should meet: our cousins here in the Alienage, and especially their hahren, Valendrian."



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Word was sent to the Warden Compound of Merrill's arrival, and they were given a friendly welcome. Loghain made a point of joining Bronwyn, and they sat and talked more of the plans, looked at the maps, and considered how this one change would cause other changes.

The sun shone brightly that day, though it was still cold. There was much to see for elves unused to town life. They explored the Alienage at length, curious about Alarith's shop, since he was not a craftmaster, but one who sold the work of others. The Dalish did not have merchants, per se, but Alarith was a pleasant man, and happy to trade for furs and Dalish crafts.

"When we have land of our own, our way of life will change somewhat," Merrill remarked, almost to herself. "We have the Temple, of course, but some might wish to live outside its walls. It is inevitable that a village will spring up around it."

"Elves have lived in cities of their own before," Maynriel pointed out. "What is important is that we plan carefully, and not create a filthy, rambling warren like this Denerim!"

To Bronwyn's manifest joy, the other arrivals were Tara and her Wardens, and they were given a hero's welcome at the Compound, late that afternoon. No, one, unsurprisingly had offered to bar Shale's way. The six other – much less stony – party members were in fairly good shape, though chilled by their march from the Wending Wood.



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Anders fussed over them.

"Still got your ears, elfkins? It'd be a shame if you couldn't wear hats anymore!"

"Don't own a hat," she complained. "I should get one. Helmets aren't very warm!"

They were deeply relieved to see Aeron alive and well. Catriona gave the minstrel a heartfelt, sloppy kiss, while everyone else cheered and catcalled.

Food was served, and for a while there was no interest in doing anything but eating. After the first edge of hunger was blunted, the servants were allowed to help the newcomers out of their cloaks and gear, while baths were drawn and beds made up. Bronwyn came down to meet them, excited at the news.

"Tara! Brosca!"

"Hey, Boss!" Brosca ran over to see her, still gnawing on a chicken bone.

"Look at you! Queen of Ferelden!" Tara dropped a curtsy, forgetting that she was not wearing a skirt. Her party followed suit, dropping to one knee in respect.

"Up!" Bronwyn ordered. "Wardens kneel to no one! Tell me everything while you're eating."

A rumbling, sarcastic voice spoke, causing Bronwyn to look up in surprise.

It said, "I neither bow nor eat, so perhaps I should tell something of what transpired, while the squishy folk devour the comestibles."



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Bronwyn looked at the creature in bemusement. She had seen golems, but never been addressed by one.

"Shale, I presume?"

"You do."

A burst of laughter, which Bronwyn joined, somewhat nonplussed.

"Be respectful, Shale," Tara reproved the golem. "This is the Warden-Commander and the Queen of Ferelden. Maybe not quite as grand a being as the Mighty Golem King of Snark, but pretty close."

Anders got close enough to Bronwyn to whisper, "Should we give them the new Joining potion? It would give them a boost."

"Good idea." She raised her voice again. "Anders has a healing potion for each of you new arrivals. Take it right away, and then enjoy the rest of your meal."

Tara downed hers obediently and then made a horrible face. "What is that? It tastes almost as bad as — " She cut herself off abruptly. "Ummmm... I mean..."

"Tell you later," Anders promised.

There was much to learn. The first, exciting news was that Tara had indeed come from West Hill to Denerim nearly entirely by way of the Deep Roads, only excepting the walk from West Hill to the access point, and to Denerim from the silverite mine in the Wending Woods.

"And you had no trouble? You saw no darkspawn?" Bronwyn pressed her.

"No darkspawn, Bronwyn. And the way was really



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pretty wide open. We brought a wagon with us, and had to take it apart and put it back together, which was no fun. Shale pulled it." She whispered to Bronwyn. "It's in the stables, but we need to unload. It's got an emperor's ransom of lyrium in it, packed in an old tin tub!"

"What?"

"No lie, Boss," Brosca said eagerly. Her voice dropped to a confidential growl. "There's a lot of treasure in the Deep Roads, if you know where to look."

"For Maker's sake, let's get it inside and locked up right away," Bronwyn said, already out of her chair.

"I shall carry it," Shale offered, "if some individual can be troubled to open the door."

The tub was wrapped in heavy canvas, and Shale, as directed, brought it into the study. Bronwyn gasped when the cover was thrown aside and the size of the windfall revealed.

"This is worth..." Words failed her. "I actually don't know how much this is worth," she said, rather lamely.

"Lots," said Brosca. "Astrid figured it would last the Grey Wardens for hundreds of years, and there's more where that came from."

"The tub looks old. Where did you find this?"

Brosca beamed. "In a place called Kal'Hirol. Old dwarven thaig. Important. Astrid thinks the deshyrs are going to be really chuffed when they hear it's all cleaned out."

"Where is Astrid?"

Tara told her. "She thought the mission wasn't complete



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until we made sure we could get all the way to Orzammar, so she went that way with half the Wardens and half the Legion. Our half stayed at the silverite mine. They've got supplies for another week or so, but they could use more. Astrid's got some food growing in Amgarrak Thaig, but Kal'Hirol is too messed up without a lot of work. Anyway, it looks like the whole Amgarrak Road is clear right now."

"Holy Maker," Bronwyn swore. "Call all the Wardens to the Hall. Call Rannelly, too, and all the servants."

The crowd in, wondering and excited. Bronwyn stood at the head of the table, looking stern, and waited until the last trickled in.

"Not everyone's here," Bronwyn noted. "Where's Zevran and Danith?"

"The elves went to the Alienage, Bronwyn," said Maeve. "They said they'd be back before full dark."

"When they get back, send them straight to me. Don't tell them anything before I have a chance to talk to them."

When the rest were gathered, she said, "We welcome today Senior Warden Tara, and Wardens Brosca, Sigrun, Jukka, Darach, and Catriona. We welcome our ally, the golem Shale, who is to be treated with the same courtesy as all our other companions."

"Ooo! Courtesy!" Shale snarked. "What a concept!"

Bronwyn did not smile, but went on, "My first word is for the staff. You may hear some very interesting and surprising things from our travelers. You are not to repeat



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a word of it. Not to *anyone*. This is vital. You are to tell Warden business to *no one*. The lives of the Wardens and the safety of this country depend on it. Do not speak of our business to your own family. Do not speak of it among yourselves, for you may be overheard. Mistress Rannelly, our lives are in your hands. Please take the staff to the kitchen, while I address the Wardens and allies."

"Of course, Your Majesty dear. We won't fail you. I'll tell them all what's what."

When they were gone, Bronwyn leaned forward and spoke urgently. "Most of you have now heard that our comrades came all the way from West Hill largely by way of the Deep Roads. That cannot be become common knowledge. In fact, I intend only to tell the King, the Dowager Queen, and my brother. This is a major tactical secret. Those of you who have been present for the Landsmeet as guests witnessed the day that the Orlesians arrived and threatened this country. That we have a way to traverse northern Ferelden unseen and unhindered by weather is something that must be kept silent. Do you all understand me?"

Mumbles and nods. Bronwyn repeated, "Do you *understand* me? Must I have each of you take an oath of silence?"

Tara looked at her wide-eyed. "Of course we understand, Bronwyn. Are the Orlesians going to invade? During a *Blight*?"

Anders said, "They don't like all the uppity mages being out of the Tower, even when they're saving lives. Or maybe *because* they're saving lives. They don't like our Bronwyn



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and her Loghain wearing crowns. They don't like anyone very much, I think."

They talked for some time, going over the story of the march north, the battles, West Hill, and the horror of the flesh golem at Amgarrak. Shale had been there as well as Catriona, and they all had quite a bit to say about it.

"Hardly a *golem* at all," Shale sneered. "Simply a mindless savage monster. I am quite of Warden Astrid's opinion that the Tevinter mage the dwarves hired was some sort of fraud. Of course, she was quite rapidly a *dead* fraud..."

Tara added, "She had dozens of casteless murdered, and used their flesh to make the thing, and then — get this, Anders — she used a *Fade spirit* to animate the hulk."

Morrigan scoffed in contempt, while Anders and Niall groaned.

"It was horrible," Catriona said quietly. "It stamped one of the dwarves to death. It threw others against the wall. It was incredibly huge and powerful. And fast. And then, when its head detached and attacked Astrid, running on those creepily little legs... It was unbelievable. I kept shooting and shooting, and I might as well have been shooting at hay bales. Only heavy axes and swords could cut into it. I really thought we were all going to die. Astrid saved us. It was ghastly that she lost her hand."

"I wish I could have done more for her," Tara agreed, "but the dwarves made her some things she can put on the stump, and so she's able to do a lot she could do before.



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She's such a hero."

"She's all right," Brosca said, very happy about the bag of treasure that was even now bulging on the floor by her feet. "We accomplished a lot. The Legion's pretty pleased too. And we had lots of other adventures, too. We should tell you about how we met Shale..."

"Maybe later," Tara said, not wanting Honnleath to be a subject of general discussion. "Did Aeron tell you we had desertions?"

"He did. We have every reason to believe that they were killed by the darkpsawn in Amaranthine."

Brosca slammed her fist on the table, making the tankards jump. "All right! Sodding justice!"

That seemed to be the general opinion of Tara's party. Even mild-mannered Darach nodded sagely.

"Did someone find their bodies?" Catriona asked.

"I believe I did," Bronwyn told her, and then related the tale of the Architect and the battle in the silverite mine.

Carver blurted out, "Bronwyn rode a dragon! There was this huge chamber and the dragon took off with Bronwyn on its back, and she went up and down, and the dragon tried to scrape her off, but Bronwyn held on and stabbed it. It was something, I can tell you!"

The dead deserters were forgotten, and there was laughter and disbelief, and then there were toasts.

"I want to ride a dragon like that!" Brosca declared. "I'll bet the Archdemon could carry us all at once!"

In the midst of this, the elves returned from the Alien-



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age: Danith, Cathair, Steren, Nuala, and Zevran. It was a merry meeting. Tara hesitated, wondering if Zevran had found a fresher, prettier elf girl at the Alienage, and came forward shyly.

Zevran saw it, and went to her at once. Falling gracefully on one knee, he took her hand and kissed it.

"*Cara mia*," he declared, "Once again, my life is complete as I see your face. Let the night come at once, for you shall shine in it like the silver moon!"

"Awwww!" said the Wardens.

"Ewwww!" said Morrigan, waving a hand in weary disgust.

"So..." Tara ventured. "You're happy to see me."

"*Tesoro*," Zevran assured, "It is not a dagger I have in my pocket. Or more properly, not *just* a dagger."

Bronwyn wondered if the two of them should not just go to Zevran's room at once. She got up to leave. "We'll talk more. Tara; you and Brosca please come see me early tomorrow morning and bring your maps. If you're all up to it, come join us tonight at the Palace, too."

The meeting broke up, and Bronwyn left for her apartments and the Wardens variously for baths and their quarters. Those new to the Compound were taken on a tour by Maeve, who was very house-proud of their fine home. Catriona and Sigrun were to join Aveline and Maeve in their room, and Jukka and Darach were shown to the larger men's quarters. Anders and Niall discreetly gave the newcomers the word about the improved Join-



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ing potion. As for Shale, it found a quiet corner of its own, where it loomed over the armor stands.

It was not until her early breakfast the next morning that Tara noticed the puppies playing under the table.

"Whose dogs?" she asked Zevran.

"That one —" he pointed — "is Carver's. He has named him 'Magister' in memory of the adventure that delivered him to us. His friend is not yet claimed, though not for lack of bribes to win his favor."

"Really?" Tara was hopeful. "I used to be afraid of Scout, until I found out he was a sweetheart. And that he could rip out genlock throats with one bite. I wish I had a dog. Everybody respects a dog."

Zevran patted her thigh, amused. "It is true. Everyone in *Ferelden* respects a dog."

"Here, girl... er... boy. Do you like bacon?"

"Everyone likes bacon," said Quinn, sitting on the bench opposite. "Hey, sport," he said cheerfully, tossing a bit to the pup. "Maybe he likes all of us so much he can't decide."

Catriona came in, smiling archly at Tara and Zevran. "I never thought you'd be up so early."

"Bronwyn wanted to talk to me about the Amgarrak Road. She's really excited about it."

"Personally," said Catriona, "I've seen about all I want to of it, but a soldier goes where she's ordered." Her voice softened and she leaned over to give the independent puppy



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an ear scratching. "Hello, precious."

Tara knew herself happy, here with Zevran, with a wonderful breakfast in front of her, nice puppies playing under the table, and friends in plenty. Important friends, too. Bronwyn was Queen, and liked mages. Tara had been to the Palace feast the night before, wearing her lovely dress given to her by Arl Teagan. Things were changing for the better... if the darkspawn or the Orlesians didn't kill them all.

"Anybody seen Anders?" she asked. She needed to talk to her fellow mages about Honnleath and the new warding spell she had learned there, but they were not to be found so early, the slackers.

"Anders always sleeps late," Carver told her. "Here, Magister, try these sausages..."

"Niall, then?" Tara persisted.

"Haven't seen him. Everybody was wiped out after last night. I like a good party as much as anybody, but I'll be glad when the Landsmeet is over."

"Not as happy, I suspect," said Zevran, "as our illustrious Commander."

"Really?" Tara asked concerned. "What's wrong?"

"I would not *know*," said Zevran. "I only observe. In my country, however, there is a saying: '*Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.*' She has much to concern her, and more than her rightful share of enemies. The Landsmeet is a necessary evil, but I think she has had enough of nobles and their plotting."



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"Everybody's always plotting," Quinn remarked. "Human nature, I guess." He blushed, "and... elven and dwarven nature too. No offense."

"None taken," Tara assured him, amused. "What's the weather like outside? I was too dopey when I woke up to look out the window."

"Pretty white," Carver said. "The dogs and I took a walk. Pretty cold, too."

"Rats," Tara complained. "I wanted to go to the Alienage."

"Why do we not go tomorrow, *cara mia*?" Zevran suggested. "You have your meeting with our noble Queen, and then, this afternoon, you should come to witness the mysteries of the Landsmeet. It is a rare and delightful opportunity to watch nobles in their natural habitat."

Tara was rather taken with the idea. "I never thought I'd have the chance. Pretty good for an elven mage, I'd say. Look, Brosca and I are going to see Bronwyn now. As soon I get back I'm calling a mages' meeting. I learned a neat new spell I want everybody to learn!"



The servants and guards were nice enough to get Tara and Brosca into the Palace, and then direct them up staircases and down confusing halls until they found the Queen's Apartments, which were where most people thought they would find Bronwyn.

"Come see me," Tara, muttered. "Like we're supposed to know where she is, now that she doesn't live at the Com-



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pound anymore!"

Brosca shrugged. "Well, everybody *does* seem to know where she is. Relax, it's just another Palace, just like my sister lives in. How hard can it be?"

Tara's annoyance and embarrassment dissipated, once she was shown into Bronwyn's sitting room.

"Boss!" Brosca burst out. "This is great!"

"It's really nice," Tara agreed, looking around her. She liked the little flowers in the carpet a lot. Come to think of it, there were some silk rugs in the storerooms. She could lay one on the floor in her own room. This room gave her lots of ideas about fixing up her own quarters.

"Glad you like it," Bronwyn smiled back. "Come in and sit down. I want to hear all about your adventures."

They talked for some time. Bronwyn, obviously, was most interested in the darkspawn movements and the clearance of the Deep Roads.

"Loghain very much approved of your map," she told them. "Giving the places you encountered the darkspawn as well as the numbers was very helpful. If Astrid finds the way clear to Orzammar, it will give us a way to keep in contact with the dwarven kingdom all winter long. We'll also use it to pay a visit to Soldier's Peak."

"Oh, I'd love to go!" Tara enthused. "I'd like to visit with Jowan and Leliana. Let's go!"

"Not all of us," Bronwyn said. "I don't think the place is ready for that many. But when we go, I'll definitely take



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the two of you along.”

“Sounds like fun, Boss,” Brosca smiled. She wouldn’t mind another chance to skim a bit more off the Kal’Hirol treasury.

Bronwyn had to go to her council meeting, but Brosca’s curiosity was not satisfied.

“Can we see your crown?”

“If you come to the Landsmeet today,” Bronwyn said wryly, not looking forward to wearing it, “you’ll see it on my head. But all right. It’s exactly like Loghain’s, so we match.”

So the heavy gold object was trotted out. Compared to the crown that Caridin had made for Bhelen it seemed pitifully plain, and Brosca was disappointed for her friend, thinking that the human deshyrs must be a bunch of cheap bastards. It should have some big rubies under each of those leaves, and maybe a ring of diamonds around the bottom. It should have something sparkly on it, anyway. Then she had an idea: Tara could write out a letter to Bhelen...nah...maybe to Rica. Rica could wheedle Bhelen into sending proper dwarven-crafted crowns to Bronwyn and the big guy. Didn’t kings give each other presents? Bhelen owed Bronwyn a lot.



“Magetown?” Anders repeated, astonished. He had hardly known what to expect when Tara called the mages to a meeting, but this was beyond his imaginings. “A town of mages? A *secret* town of mages?” His smile burst forth. “That is the neatest thing I ever heard!”



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Niall was even more astounded. In the Circle, he had been a member of the Isolationist Fraternity, where mages dreamed of leaving Thedas entirely, and creating their own ideal society. While they were blowing hot air about it, other mages were living that reality in a place called Honnleath.

“They’re not all mages,” Tara confessed. “Just a lot of them. Mages and their families. Maybe the husband or wife is a mage, and some of their children are mages. They use a lot of household spells I’ve never seen before, but then we never needed them in the Circle. Morrigan, have you ever heard of cooking and cleaning spells?”

“I have not,” Morrigan replied, rather huffily. “Flemeth did not approve of using magic for frivolous ends.”

“But it’s not frivolous, really,” Tara said. “They’re some nice, everyday chopping and boiling spells... a spell to get stains out of linens... that sort of thing. Matthias told me they were derived from larger-scale spells, but they’re quick and useful and don’t take much out of you. The old man Wilhelm who was their leader for a long time had views,” she snorted, “about ‘living in peace,’ so the people were weak on their primal and entropy spells. I gave them some remedial training. But they had this warding spell that I’ve never even read about. It creates a barrier that no darkspawn could break through, not even using magic. Really powerful – like a wall. What’s absolutely brilliant about it is that spells and blows don’t bounce off. Their energy is absorbed, making the barrier even stronger. You



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need something to anchor it, but let me show you. I'll use that doorway. Anders, get on the other side and I'll shoot spells at you."

"Yes," Anders answered, dead-pan. "I really want to stand there while you shoot spells at me."

"All right!" Tara jumped up, nothing daunted. "Then you can shoot spells at me! I'll put up the barrier, give you a wave, and then you can send a fireball my way!"

"Tara?" Niall said, growing nervous. "Are you absolutely sure about this?"

"Come on! Prepare to be amazed. This is going to be great for all of us!" She ran into the hall, stretched out her hand and murmured the incantation. She felt a smooth buzzing under her skin, and then grinned at her friends, waving them on.

"Er..." Anders grimaced. "I don't think so. I don't see anything."

"You asked for it!" Impatiently, Tara fired a bolt of lightning straight at them. Anders and Niall ducked. Morrigan flung up a hasty shield spell. None of those things were necessary. The lightning stopped at the doorway, spread out in a pool of cool light, and with a faint ripple, the doorway was transparent again. The other mages stared, and then each took a deep breath.

"Hit it!" Tara yelled. Or rather looked like she was yelling, because her voice did not travel through the barrier either.

"Let me see..." Morrigan approached, intrigued. She put out her hand at the doorway and came in contact with a smooth, hard, transparent surface. She rapped on it



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sharply. There was no sound, and the barrier did not yield in the least. "Impressive..." she muttered. "Stand back!"

She tested spells for some time. Tara grinned at her with cheeky impudence, unharmed, unaffected. Neither an entropic spell, nor a primal spell could pass the barrier. Anders found that not even a healing spell passed; all were absorbed into the barrier. Tara put up her hand at one point, and they watched while she took the barrier down.

"See? And there's also a version that makes you invisible and makes people avoid the barrier itself. You can anchor it to all sorts of things: trees, rocks, fence posts, houses. The people at Honnleath got sloppy and complacent and nearly got overrun by the darkspawn, but some got into a cellar and put up the barrier. The darkspawn couldn't get at them, but the people might have starved to death there if we hadn't come on the scene. It's great when you're camping. I'm going to teach it to the Dalish. It'll make their camps safe, too."

Niall was still bemused by the idea of a town where mages lived unharassed by the Chantry. "It's sounds perfect."

"It's not *perfect*," Tara said, shaking her head. "They're mostly farmers. They have to work hard. They have to make a living, but their magic helps. It doesn't do everything for them. It doesn't solve all their problems. But yes, they have nice normal lives, and people don't run around turning into abominations. One little girl was being bothered by a demon, but we got that sorted out pretty quick."



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I don't think they'd want a lot of mages with phylacteries coming there, bringing the Templars down on them, but otherwise it's great. I knew I was going to like it when I saw that there was no Chantry there. The houses look better than in any town I've visited, probably because they're not supporting a Chantry!"

"No Chantry?" Anders asked, with growing delight. "No Chantry at all?"



"I have already given orders to put the Orlesians' ship in order," Loghain announced to the rest of the Council. "They will be received at the beginning of the Landsmeet today, given a letter to the Empress, and escorted to the docks. The crew is being taken from Fort Drakon to the docks now. They will leave on the evening tide with instructions not to make port anywhere in Ferelden. I've done with pampering our enemies."

The letter, written by Anora and her long-time secretary, was a cool and perfectly polite political nothing. It was merely a pro forma communication from King Loghain and Queen Bronwyn, announcing their accession to the throne of Ferelden, and expressing their regards to Her Imperial Majesty as their neighbor.

Bronwyn was annoyed not to be included in the composition of the letter, but accepted it as part of Anora's duty as Chancellor. Reading through it, she found nothing to complain of, as the letter was remarkable only for



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its restraint. There was absolutely no point in sending threats or insults, however satisfying they might be. It was vital to try to put off any Orlesian invasion as long as possible, in order for Ferelden to prepare to counter it. The coronation of Loghain Mac Tir was provocative enough.

The letter was signed and sealed. Bronwyn was almost becoming accustomed to writing the words "*Bronwyn, Queen of Ferelden.*"

And now, it was time to discuss the Dalish.

"We want to present the grant tomorrow, as the final act of the Landsmeet," said Bronwyn, seizing the moment. "The Orlesians will be gone, and won't be able to gossip about it. Those of us who have stood beside the Dalish — and there are many of us — will agree that it is best that they are suitably rewarded for their courage. The Council has already agreed to it in principle. This was the will of King Cailan, and it is incumbent on us to honor his commitment."

That largely silenced Teagan, who knew that Cailan had indeed wanted very much to reward his Dalish friends. He had felt that not enough was being said about his royal nephew, and that the last act of this special Landsmeet would be to honor his memory was deeply satisfying to him. That did not mean that he expected it not to meet some resistance and some very unpleasant remarks. He had done his best to meet and talk with his own banns, and present arguments as to why this was not only the honorable thing to do, but a good thing in itself. Let the



Dalish have a little place of their own, and there would be fewer of them traveling the country, poaching game and quarreling with the locals.

Kane did not see how this affected him at all. His father-in-law had explained the map to him. The Dalish land was far to the south, days from Denerim. For all Kane cared, all the elves in Ferelden could move there, including the layabouts in the Alienage that the Queen fussed over. Maybe they *should* move there, and be with their own kind. Kane was more interested in getting home, and inspecting the kennels he had discovered he owned. The girls wanted puppies, going on and on about the King's 'cute little Amber.' Maybe one of the bitches was about to whelp. It was be wonderful if both the girls could have their own mabari friend. Reluctantly he set aside the pleasant dream. People were looking at him and still talking about the bloody elves.

"The Chantry is going to insist on sending missionaries," Bryland said glumly. "There will trouble. Not this year or the next, perhaps, but eventually."

"I've talked to the Dalish leaders about the importance of dealing courteously with Chantry personnel," Bronwyn said. "If they can keep their interactions peaceful, the Templars may not see fit to move in."

"You're more hopeful than I am, Bronwyn," said Fergus. "But I agree that we must honor the late King's promise here. "At least the agreement is under the authority of the



Crown, and the King and Queen have the power to mediate any disputes."

The document was quite explicit about that. The grant was irrevocable, but the land was *called* a "protectorate of the Fereldan Crown." The Dalish would be self-governing within their borders, but still legally subject to Fereldan law outside them. The Dalish, as subjects of the King and Queen, were also entitled to their protection. A small, token tribute was written in, which a Dalish delegation must present at every spring Landsmeet. That was the palpable, concrete sign of the contract between the parties. The Dalish had not liked certain clauses, feeling they limited their independence, but it was the best everyone could do. The elves did not have a vote in the Landsmeet, but they had the right to attend and speak, which would not please some humans.

"After this, we should be finished," Anora told them, rather pleased. "Everyone will be glad of that. The Kornings and the Mac Coos are not going to put up a fight about their boundaries after all. We've already put quiet pressure on Bann Frandarel about keeping watch on the coast, and after consulting the treasury, we should be able to squeeze the coin for renovation of the tower on the Isle of Mourne. It commands all of Denerim Bay, and could give word of any fleet heading to the capital."

"We can't start construction on any of this until the weather improves," Loghain said, his face sour, "but by



mid-Guardian we can make preliminary surveys and transport the materials. By Drakonis we had better put our backs into building our defenses."

Bronwyn was eager to inform those concerned about the situation in the Deep Roads. After the Council broke up, and Anora and Loghain were talking quietly together, Bronwyn asked Fergus and Nathaniel to speak to her, and quickly told them the news.

"My Wardens from West Hill arrived yesterday. The Amgarrak Road is clear all the way from that infamous silverite mine to the Deep Roads access point a mile from the fortress. Obviously, you'll have to travel on foot, but the going should be quick and easy. I have maps of the route, and we have a golem who can haul a wagon of whatever supplies you need."

"The Deep Roads!" Nathaniel stared at her, full of instinctive horror at the idea of descending below the surface. "Truly? They are free of darkspawn?"

"Good," Fergus gave her a nod. "I've already sent our ship off to Kirkwall. All that remains is to get Nate and his men to Kilda. This sounds like the way."

Loghain and Anora joined them. "The Deep Roads are clear?"

"The Amgarrak Road across the north of Ferelden is clear," said Bronwyn. "So say my Wardens. I can't guarantee that entirely, but they found no evidence of anything. My guess is that there might be some stragglers in side tunnels. Our party will be more than powerful enough to deal with them."

Fergus cocked his head. "'Our' party?"



Loghain scowled at her.

"Absolutely," Bronwyn replied, not about to be intimidated. "I need to inspect the Deep Roads myself, in my capacity as Warden-Commander. I want to visit Soldier's Peak and have one of my mages go with Nathaniel. The Landsmeet will be over, and that means that it's time for me to search for darkspawn again."



Loghain did not trust himself to speak calmly to those infernal Orlesians. It was important to be calm, to put on an Orlesian mask of good manners, to pretend that he did not know that they were trying to cut his throat. He knew Anora could manage it, but it would have to be Bronwyn, whom even the Orlesians seem to regard as having some sort of right to the throne. They held a brief conference, in which he and Anora told her what she needed to say. That only seemed to irritate her.

"I know perfectly well how to speak to ambassadors," she said. "Especially to ambassadors who will not like anything I say. I saw my father and mother gild the word 'no' in all sorts of ways. We're not granting them anything they want, and we're rather insultingly giving them the boot. I will phrase all the shameless hypocrisy as politely as possible."

And so she did. First she took great care to look her best: dressing in the elaborate gown she had worn at her wedding. Her hair was carefully arranged around her crown, and everyone seemed pleased at her appearance



when she glided into the Landsmeet Chamber, her hand on Loghain's arm.

Duke Prosper and the Knight-Divine were escorted in, under guard. The Duke had evidently brought a great deal of fine clothing, for he was arrayed in a different doublet and hose than the one he had worn on his arrival. These were equally colorful, exquisite — and even picturesque. His beard and hair were perfectly arranged, and he appeared quite at his ease. He certainly, Bronwyn mused, did not lack courage.

The Knight-Divine was not so calm. He looked ruffled, like a hawk readying itself for an attack. There was something seething under the surface, and Bronwyn suspected it was anger.

Of course, they had been confined to their quarters for the past seven days, leaving only to witness the coronation — which they could not have found very enjoyable. True, the Knight-Divine had been permitted his interview at the Cathedral with the Grand Cleric a few days ago, but had not requested another audience.

The men bowed, though the Knight-Divine's bow was rather cursory.

Bronwyn took the lead, as planned.

"Your Grace. Knight-Divine. As gracious as your visit has been, it is now, alas, the time for farewells. We are impatient for you to transmit our regards to Her Imperial Majesty. Your crew has been set to work preparing your ship for your departure with ample supplies. Only your



presence is needed there. Here is a letter for the Empress, expressing our respect to her, and informing her of our accession." She gestured to a clerk, who handed the document to the Duke, bowing.

She smiled, and gave them the real message. "The independence of Ferelden is innate, immutable, and indisputable. We are a free people, back to our earliest origins. We need neither foreign gold nor foreign arms to defend ourselves. We owe no fealty and pay no homage to those outside our borders. That said, the hand of Fereldan friendship is always outstretched to those who reciprocate in good faith. We look forward to peaceful and profitable relations with the Empire of Orlais and its illustrious Empress. Go now, with our wishes for your safe journey, and with these tokens of our gratitude for your endeavors."

Impatiently, Loghain snapped his fingers at a footman, who came forward, bearing flat, silk covered boxes. Opening one, the servant revealed to the Duke a large disc of gold, set with a carved emerald. It was attached to a long silk ribbon and could be worn around the neck like an order of honor. It was a particularly fine piece of loot that Bronwyn had found among the Architect's treasures, but the Orlesians did not need to know that. Bronwyn had assured Loghain that the jewel had been carefully cleaned with fire, but Loghain did not care. In fact, he would have been better pleased had been infected with Taint. That would have been too obvious, he supposed. The

box for the Knight-Divine contained a similar item.

Bronwyn wanted to give them something particularly costly, partly to show him that the Crown of Ferelden was in no way necessitous or poor; and partly to rebuke the Empress' breach of manners. Celene, after all, had sent no gift to Ferelden, as was customary upon the accession of a new monarch — even upon the accession of a monarch one disliked.

Duke Prosper, understanding all this perfectly, accepted the generous gift with another elaborate bow and a twitch of his lips. It was clever of the girl. She had put him in a very awkward position. He could not keep this secret, and such a very a handsome gift might suggest that she had bought his loyalty — especially as no gift was being sent to Her Imperial Majesty. All in all, it was better played and more polished than he would have expected, had it all been left to the bandit Loghain.

There *he* sat on his stolen throne, wearing a doublet as black as his heart, stroking his mabari puppy and smirking grimly; while his fair and noble young queen did the honors.

"I shall convey your message to the Empress, Your Majesty," Duke Prosper assured her, "and I shall have much to relate of my experiences in Ferelden."

She smiled graciously, and turned her attention to Ser Chrysagon. "Knight-Divine," she said "We are also grateful to you for honoring us with your presence at such an auspicious time. Express our devotion and respect to Her Perfection, and assure her that Ferelden, the birthplace of

Andraste, remains a bastion of devotion to her."

Duke Prosper admired the diplomatic ambivalence of the Queen's words. Devoted to the Divine — or only to Andraste? The Knight-Divine was too disgusted to play the courtier.

"I shall return," he gritted out, controlling himself with an effort. "Indeed I shall return. I shall tell Her Perfection of what I have seen — and heard — in this country!"

His tone caught the attention of the lords and ladies assembled. Charade and Bethany exchanged glances, lips twitching, remembering Charade's imitation of an Orlesian accent.

"I zhall tell Hair Perfection of wat I haf zeen — and haird — in zees countree!"

But there was only a moment for laughter. The Knight-Divine was working himself into a state of righteous fury. He spurned his gift from the footman, knocking it to the floor.

"Even the Grand Cleric joins with you in your mockery of the Maker's laws! She gives me papers making absurd, blasphemous claims; she tells me untruths to my face — "

Gasps, rising voices, cries of shock and alarm followed this declaration. Thunderstorms began gathering in the faces of the King and Queen. Duke Prosper was actually startled into showing surprise and a certain alarm. The Grand Cleric shut her eyes and slumped wearily, knowing that this was the crisis she had foreseen.

"The Grand Cleric," Knight-Divine shouted above the noise in the chamber " — the Grand Cleric has presented me with documents purporting to substantiate a miracle

performed by Queen Bronwyn! She has dared to impute to her powers of healing derived from the Prophet Andraste herself! This lying testimony – signed by many in high positions in the Fereldan Chantry – states that the Queen obtained a pinch of the Prophet's Ashes, by which she healed Queen Anora and a child close to death!"

"She *did*, you fool!" shouted Knight-Commander Harrith, offering his arm to the trembling Grand Cleric. "I saw it for myself!"

The noise only grew greater. Duke Prosper's brows rose. This piece of news was extremely interesting, and he wanted to see the papers for himself, if he was not summarily executed in the next few minutes. The herald shouted uselessly for silence. Loghain lost patience with it all.

"Enough!"

The bellow silenced the room. Excited gossip died away into frightened squawks.

"Knight-Divine," said Loghain. "You have overstayed your welcome."

Ser Chrysagon seemed to have completely lost his head. "I have stayed long enough to see this barbarous land for what it is! I hereby arrest the Grand Cleric Muirin for heresy! She will travel with us to Val Royeaux to face the judgment of the Divine and the Holy Office of the Grand Cathedral!"

CHAPTER 14

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HEREBY ARREST THE
GRAND CLERIC MUIRIN FOR
HERESY!"

Those words, thrown out by the Knight-Divine like a gauntlet, shocked and scandalized some of the Landsmeet and infuriated the rest. The Grand Cleric's companions, Templar and priest alike, rallied to her, the priests supporting her, the Templars forming a protective circle. Ser Otto and Ser Irminric were in front: Irminic glowering and Otto serenely confident.

Sister Justine whispered protests to Sister Rose. "He hasn't the authority! Not unless he's been given apostolic powers by the Divine herself and... er... oh, dear... Maybe he has!" Sister Rose's face was as panicked as her own must be.

Bronwyn rose from her throne before Loghain could stop her, and stalked down to confront the Knight-Divine. "The Grand Cleric is going nowhere with you!"

Duke Prosper edged close to Ser Chrysagon, and whispered urgently, "Are you *mad*? Are you deliberately provoking them?"

In a ghastly flash of insight, it occurred to him that those

might be indeed the Divine's orders: to provoke an unforgivable scene resulting in their deaths. Perhaps that was exactly the *casus belli* that the Divine wished. He himself had been somewhat out of favor of late, and had looked upon this mission as a chance to raise himself in the Empress' eyes. Perhaps she had viewed it somewhat differently. Chrysagon was a fanatic, and coming close to the end of his active service, due to his heavy indulgence in lyrium.

The Templar pushed Prosper away, and took a heavy step toward Bronwyn. Scout, sensing the big man's ill intentions, bounded down from the dais more quickly than any human could manage and barked angrily. Without breaking stride, the Templar kicked out with his steel-shod boot, and caught the surprised mabari in the ribs. With a pained yelp, Scout twisted away from the full force of the kick, and prepared to spring on this enemy and rend him.

"Scout! To me!" cried Bronwyn. However satisfying it might be to see the Knight-Divine mauled to death by a mabari, it probably would not do Ferelden's reputation much good with the rest of the Thedas.

A terrible, shocked silence fell. It penetrated even Ser Chrysagon's understanding that perhaps he had overstepped his limits, though he was not entirely sure why. After all, he had only kicked a dog.

Duke Prosper had the sense to frame it quite differently. Ser Chrysagon had kicked the *Queen of Ferelden's* dog. In Ferelden. In front of a great many angry Fereldans and

their dogs. Loghain was coming down the dais now, and was reaching for his sword.

Prosper's chances of leaving this country alive were shrinking to a tiny window –

He reached out, and spun the Templar around. A single punch to the jaw put the man down. The Duke immediately dropped to one knee in front of Bronwyn. The huge dog at her side panted, jaws slavering.

"Pardon, Your Majesty! The Knight-Divine is ill! He is deranged! Spare him, I pray you!" And then, he held his breath, wisely not looking the young woman in the eye. Instead, his fixed his gaze on the glittering hem of her gown, and took quick glances from side to side with his peripheral vision.

There was noise now, hushed but expectant. People were chattering and gesturing. Some were chuckling at the brawl, which while not as thrilling as a duel, still provided them with entertainment. Dogs were barking and growling, baring their teeth. It was a thoroughly bad situation, but he had given the Fereldans a pretext for allowing them to live.

And besides, Chrysagon *was* a madman.

Anders moved through the crowd, and cast a healing spell on Scout. The dog was only bruised, but humans, he had found, often were more sympathetic toward the sufferings of animals than toward those of their own kind. Some coos of sympathy and approval were directed his way. Immediately, he withdrew behind the rest of the truculent Wardens, who were crowding up near Bronwyn.

"I can cast a sleep spell on the Knight-Divine, Your Majesty," he said, in a voice at once manly and subservient, perfectly pitched to carry. "Perhaps after a healing sleep, he may come to himself once more."

"Grand Cleric," Loghain said, "This man began his raving insults with you. What do you wish done with him? His behavior deserves a cell at Fort Drakon or worse."

Muirin paused, wondering what she *ought* to do. Har-rith whispered in her ear.

"It could be that it's the lyrium, Your Grace. It *could* be. With the strain and the sea voyage, it *could* be early collapse. Another voyage in this weather might kill him."

Muirin raised her voice, hating the easy escape, hating the deception, hating everything that sullied that one thrilling, never-to-be-forgotten moment when she seen Andraste's power for herself. She dipped her hand into her pocket, and found the inextinguishable warmth, drawing strength from it.

"Your Majesties," she said. "If the Knight-Divine truly wishes me to travel to Val Royeaux, I shall go —"

Cries of "No!" interrupted her. Some of them came from her own people. Bronwyn glared at her, furious. Muirin put up her hand to be heard.

"— in the spring. I would go now," she said, "if I thought I could survive the winter in a ship. I *will* go in the spring and present myself to the Divine. I shall go as soon as the Waking Sea is free of ice. Duke Prosper, as the Knight-Divine appears to be indisposed and unable to attend to practical

matters, I will tender the written account of the miracle to you, and I charge you to deliver it into the hands of the Divine. She will have time to ponder it before my arrival."

"Gladly, your Grace," Prosper assured her. Things were looking better. If he was charged with an errand, there was yet another reason to let him live and sail away; far, far away from this land of bandit kings, of fierce, green-eyed queens, of unnaturally intelligent dogs, and of impolitic, inconvenient miracles. He could not wait to read the Grand Cleric's account. For that matter, it might even be true. Truth was, after all, very often stranger than fiction. That did not mean, of course, that the Divine would allow herself to be convinced by something so very contrary to the political currents in Orlais.

"You cannot mean to go before the Holy Office," Bronwyn hissed at the older woman. "It is tantamount to suicide!"

"It is not suicide," Muirin said. "It is bearing witness. I can do no other. though I perish for it. What is a priest, but one who bears witness to the truth of the Maker? I do not fear the truth, though it might be distasteful to those for whom the Chantry is only yet another path to worldly power. I saw a miracle. Yes. I saw it. I witnessed it in a conclave of priests and Templars. I will never deny it, though the fire burn and the blade pass the flesh. I would go to Val Royeaux, but I cannot go *now*, not when there is a strong chance that the ship would sink in a storm or I would die before I had a chance to speak in my defense. Yes," she said,

feeling a little braver. "I *shall* go, but in the spring."

She could not risk dying at sea. If that happened, the Fereldan Chantry would be left without clear leadership. The Divine might send one of her favorites to create even greater fractures among the faithful. It was clear that the Divine wished to remove her from office. If she had just a little longer, she could ordain more priests and prepare her people for the inevitable onslaught. Just a little longer, and perhaps Beatrix would die, and a Divine of stronger will and less loyalty to the Empire might be elected...

"Meanwhile," Loghain said, "what is to be done with *him*?" He waved a contemptuous hand at the Knight-Divine, who was stirring, moaning, on the stone floor.

"He is my responsibility," Muirin said. "Let him be taken to the Cathedral where we can care for him. His duties, it seems, have become too onerous for him. Let the mage cast a spell of sleep on him, lest he harm others or himself."

Anders smiled, and cast the most powerful, crushing, repressive sleeping hex in his power, relishing the public permission from a priest. It was sweet.

With consideration, feigned by some Templars, but quite genuine in Otto's case, Ser Chrysagon was loaded onto a litter, and carried out to the Grand Cleric's carriage, to be taken to one of the clean, comfortable cells in the Cathedral set aside for Templars who had at last become dangerously addled by their addiction to lyrium. Most were eventually sent to the hospice in Val Royeaux,

to be tended by the well-trained brothers and sisters there. Some were too ill for the journey, and those were cared for in Denerim. Ser Chrysagon would very likely be one such, though Muirin's conscience pained her. She did not think it was lyrium talking in his case: she believed that the man simply had no respect whatever for Ferelden and its inhabitants, and had lost his temper.

Bronwyn pointed at the discarded box on the floor. The gold and sapphire ornament had spilled out, gleaming. "And do take him his present," she said acidly. "Perhaps it will please him to contemplate it."

"Your Majesty," Nathaniel Howe spoke up. "After the Knight-Divine's wild words, there is bound to be speculation and gossip. Might I suggest that it would be better to be told the true facts? Could the Grand Cleric be prevailed upon to tell the Landsmeet the result of her investigations? If Andraste has made a miracle in Ferelden, that is a holy thing, something to be honored and celebrated throughout the kingdom."

"I agree," Kane Kendells called out. He wanted to know. The Council never told him the juicy bits. Besides, the Knight-Divine was a bastard who kicked dogs. Kane thought hanging was too good for anyone who'd hurt a dog. Anything that got the Orlesian dog-kicker that wound up was something Kane favored.

"Loghain," Wulffe growled in an undertone. "Better to get it out there. Bronwyn's been too modest about it, after all."

"Yes," Loghain said aloud. "Grand Cleric, the truth should be known."

Bronwyn sighed deeply, feeling rather sick at the prospect, and went back to her horribly uncomfortable throne. "If that is the wish of the Landsmeet, then I agree, but let it be known that it was never my intention to boast of this."

The Grand Cleric was too exhausted to tell the story herself. Instead, she beckoned to Sister Justine. Muirin had suspected there would be some sort of scene at the Orlesian's leave-taking, and had ordered a copy of the transcript brought to the Landsmeet in case she needed to refresh her memory.

Sister Justine was shown to the speaker's platform, and glancing about nervously, began reading.

"Minutes of the Examination of Lady Bronwyn Cousland, this first day of Umbralis, Dragon 9:30. In attendance at the conclave:

Grand Cleric Muirin, officiating.

Revered Mothers Perpetua, Boann, Rosamund, Damaris, Eudoxia, and Juliana.

Knights-Commander Harrith, Rylock, Bryant, and Greagoir. Templars Ser Otto and Irminric.

Sister Justine, curator of holy artifacts.

Sister Rose, conclave clerk

Demelza, a child of the Chantry

Also in attendance:

First Enchanter Irving of the Kinloch Hold Circle of Magi.

Grey Wardens Anders and Jowan. Grey Warden Leliana, formerly a lay sister of the Lothering Chantry.

Lady Bronwyn Cousland, Acting Warden-Commander of the

Grey in Ferelden, as the individual to be examined in regard to claims made as to the discovery of the Ashes of Andraste, and in regard to a certain cure alleged to have been made of the Dowager Queen Anora by means of said Ashes.

The excited whispers faded, as the complete attention of the Landsmeet focused on the small and mousy figure in the speaker's platform.

Bronwyn was relieved, as Sister Justine kept reading, that this account was edited to reveal nothing about the other pinches of Ashes. It gave the impression that the child had been healed by the remains of the pinch that had been used for Anora. This was what the Grand Cleric had promised to do, but Bronwyn was rather surprised that she had kept her word in the official version intended for the Divine.

"And that's the end," Bronwyn broke in, after the final account of the events at Haven: the slaying of the High Dragon Andraste, the death of Cullen, and her warning to the villagers to desist from their murderous ways.

"Why isn't this a place of pilgrimage?" one old lady called out. "The Prophet's Shrine should be a place of worship and healing! Why is it being kept secret?"

Many voices supported this, and Bronwyn had a ready reply. "Because it is *dangerous!*" she shouted, exasperated. "The journey is dangerous; the villagers are dangerous, and the caverns might harbor more dragons yet. The Gauntlet itself it dangerous. We found the remains of many who had failed and died. Yes, we hoped to make this public,



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but after the Blight is over and the way can be made safe.”

Duke Prosper had listened to the entire tale with wonder and pleasure. It was better than the best bard's tale, full of variety, adventure, and tragic death. It was, he believed, largely true. Most impressive. His opinion of the young Queen rose accordingly. All the more reason to deplore her marriage to a man no better than Maferath. In fact, Loghain bore unpleasant resemblances to Maferath. It was astonishing that these bumpkins did not see that. One did not really factor the *Maker* into one's affairs – not if one were rational man of the world; but Andraste had clearly shown this young woman favor. It was something to consider seriously. If only she could be freed of her frightful *mésalliance*.

He had heard that she had previously killed a dragon, hence her *sobriquet* of Dragonslayer. That, however, had been a well-prepared expedition. This was something far more dangerous. How big was a High Dragon, really? Prosper had no real idea. However, he had hunted wyvern in one of his family estates, and they were quite dangerous enough. He even had tamed a wyvern and had trained it as a mount. Could one ride a dragon? All very interesting. Even more interesting were the things obviously not in the report.

Meanwhile, he wanted very much to take these papers, retrieve his luggage, and get out of this country. Loghain noticed him, and promptly ordered exactly that.



Bronwyn was put out at all the furtive, awed looks directed



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her way. Even Nathaniel and her own brother were being perfectly ridiculous. The Ashes were old news to her, but clearly not old news to most of the nobles of the Landsmeet. Rumors were one thing; the findings of the Chantry were something else. She overheard the murmurs about “Andraste's True Champion” throughout the evening. Loghain must have heard them, too. He was even more stone-faced than usual. Of course, dealing with the Orlesians earlier in the day had put him out of humor. At least he had had the satisfaction of one being tossed into custody at the Cathedral, and the other sent to sea in questionable weather.

She wondered at the depth of Duke Prosper de Montfort's loyalty. The Empress was not going to be pleased at any news he carried. Bronwyn thought that in a like case, she would make for the warmer seas of the Free Marches and winter in Ostwick or Hercinia. Of course, if he did that, he might not be able to return to Orlais... ever. At least he was no longer their problem. She was happy to leave the Landsmeet and the day's business behind.

More pleasantly, the Nevarran musician Zoe Pheronis arrived for her private audience, along with adorable little Amethyne. Loghain grimaced at the thought of such frippery, but attended after all when he heard that Nathaniel Howe and the Hawke brothers were invited, as well as Fergus and Anora. The Little Audience Chamber was arranged with cushioned chairs, and in the middle of the room, some padded stools for the musicians.

The Nevarran was a woman of about fifty, handsome and well-preserved. It was possible that she was even older, but it was difficult to tell. Understanding that the Queen wished to see something unusual, she wore Nevarran dress. It differed from Orlesian styles in small but interesting ways: necklines were lower; and the sleeves of the overdress were slashed from elbow to wrist, falling away from the tight undersleeves. It was quite attractive when she played the lute, and the color combination of greens and turquoise-blues was subtle and restful. She had devised a similar costume for the child out of the same materials. Of course, it took very little cloth to dress a slender little elf maiden.

She brought a number of instruments: a fat-bellied lute, a smaller mandora, a straight flute of — of all things! — dragonbone. She had a wide drum, called a drogedan, and rattles, bells, and a little triangle of silverite. Amethyne carried these in, with an important air, as well as her own little tambourine. Both the woman and the child made the most beautiful and elaborate curtseys before the King and Queen.

Amethyne was learning drumwork quickly, and accompanied her teacher both on tambourine and then on drogedan. The Nevarran woman was a superb instrumentalist. Bronwyn, accustomed to good quality music by Leliana, could tell that here was a true musician. Then Mistress Zoe played a Nevarran tune, and Amethyne danced for them like a leaping kitten, all quick grace and trailing scarves. It was really very charming, and Bron-

wyn thought her coin well spent.

After the applause died away, Bronwyn said, "Thank you, Mistress Zoe, and thank you, Amethyne. I am glad that you are making the most of your opportunity to study with such an accomplished teacher."

Zoe immediately bowed low once more, glancing quickly at Amethyne, who copied her perfectly.

"I thank Your Majesty. Allow me, I pray you, to express my gratitude at the opportunity to serve you in this. Also, indeed, for your gift of such a talented pupil. She is a joy to teach."

"You are from Nevarra originally, I understand," said Bronwyn.

"I am indeed, Your Majesty. The life of a minstrel is one of travel. It is some years since I saw the city of the Van Markhams, where I was born."

"I know little of Nevarra. I should like to hear some of your country's songs."

"As you wish, Your Majesty. I shall render them into your tongue."

They were quite nice songs, too, though the mode of their composition sounded a little odd to Ferelden ears. Many of them were about the land itself, and about the Minanter, greatest of rivers.

"Orlais, of course," said Mistress Zoe, at the end of a ballad, "is our great enemy. We have many songs about battles fought against the chevaliers and about how Nevarrans have resisted their invasions. Would it please

you to hear one? I can render it, also, into your tongue."

"Yes," Loghain said shortly, before Bronwyn could make a gentler reply. The song proved quite gruesome.

*"In Blessed Age eight forty-one the Orlesians formed a plan
To massacre us Nevarrans down by the River Vann
To massacre us Nevarrans and not to spare a man
But to drive us down like a herd of swine into the River Vann."*

"Ah, those are the Orlesians we also know!" laughed Bronwyn, at the song's end. Loghain, she saw, was pleased, as he would be by anything vilifying Orlesians. "But tell me: it is true that the Nevarrans, unlike the rest of Thedas, bury their dead in elaborate tombs? I have read that in the works of Brother Genetivi."

"It is true, Majesty, though only the greatest and richest have the famous tombs that encompass gardens, baths, and ballrooms. Most families have small stone tombs, no bigger than a cottage, where the dead of a family are stacked in their coffins on shelves inscribing their names. That said, the Necropolis is a vast place and not one to linger in after dark, for many things walk there, and the least dangerous are the bandits who dwell in untended tombs."

"Might we hear a Nevarran tale?" asked Anora. "I should like that."

"I can relate to you a famous one, Majesty, that comes down from ancient times."



THE MINSTREL ZOE PHERONIS' TALE OF RHAMPSINITUS AND THE CLEVER THIEF

Lord Rhampsinitus was possessed, it is written, of great riches—indeed to such an amount, that no other noble of Nevarra surpassed or even equaled his wealth. To guard this great fortune, he had built a vast chamber of hewn stone, one side of which was to form a part of the outer wall of a new castle.

The builder, however, was corrupt, and contrived, as he was constructing the outer wall, to insert in this wall a stone which could easily be removed from its place by two men, or even one. So the chamber was finished, and the great lord's gold stored away in it.

The builder fell sick; and finding his end approaching, he called for his two sons, and related to them the contrivance he had made in the Lord Rhampsinitus' treasure-chamber, telling them it was for their sakes he had done it, so that they might always live in affluence. Then he gave them clear directions concerning the mode of removing the stone, and communicated the measurements, bidding them carefully keep the secret, and soon after, he died. The sons were not slow in setting to work; they went by night to the castle, found the stone in the wall, and having removed it with ease, plundered the treasury.

When the lord next paid a visit to his vault, he was astonished to see that the coin was sunk in some of the storage vessels. Whom to accuse, however, he knew not, as the seals were all perfect, and the fastenings of the room secure. Still, each time that he repeated his visits, he found that more gold was gone.

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At last the lord determined to have some traps made, and set them near the vessels which contained his wealth. This was done, and when the thieves came, as usual, to the treasure chamber, one of them was caught in the trap. Perceiving that he was lost, he instantly called his brother, and telling him what had happened, entreated him to enter as quickly as possible and cut off his head, that when his body should be discovered it might not be recognized, which would have the effect of bringing ruin upon both. The other thief thought the advice good, and was persuaded to follow it; then, fitting the stone into its place, he went home, taking with him his brother's head.

When day dawned, the lord came into the treasure chamber, and marveled greatly to see the headless body of a thief in the trap, although the building was still whole, and neither entrance nor exit was to be seen anywhere. In this perplexity he commanded the body of the dead man to be hung up outside the castle wall, and set a guard to watch it, with orders that if any persons were seen weeping or lamenting near the place, they should be seized and brought before him. When the mother heard of this exposure of the corpse of her son, she took it sorely to heart, and spoke to her surviving child, bidding him devise some plan or other to get back the body, and threatening that if he did not exert himself she would go herself to the king and denounce him as a robber.

The son said all he could to persuade her to let the matter rest, but in vain: she still continued to trouble him, until at last he yielded, and contrived as follows: Filling some skins with wine, he loaded them on donkeys, which he drove before him till he

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came to the place where the guards were watching the dead body. Then, pulling two or three of the skins towards him, he untied some of the necks which dangled by the asses' sides. The wine poured freely out, whereupon he began to beat his head and shout with all his might, seeming not to know which of the donkeys he should turn to first.

When the guards saw the wine running they rushed one and all into the road, each with some vessel or other, and caught the liquor as it was spilling. The driver pretended anger, and loaded them with abuse. They did their best to pacify him, until at last he appeared to soften, and recover his good humor and set to work to rearrange their donkeys' burdens. Meanwhile, as he talked and chatted with the guards, one of them began to jest with him and make him laugh, whereupon he gave them one of the skins as a gift. They now made up their minds to sit down and have a drinking-bout where they were, so they begged him to remain and drink with them. Then the man let himself be persuaded, and stayed.

As the drinking went on, they grew very friendly together, so presently he gave them another skin, from which they drank so copiously that they were all overcome with liquor. Growing drowsy, they lay down, and fell asleep on the spot. The thief waited till it was the dead of the night, and then took down the body of his brother; after which, in mockery, he shaved off the right side of all the soldiers' beards, and so left them. Laying his brother's body upon the donkeys, he carried it home to his mother, having thus accomplished the thing that she had required of him.

When it came to Rhampsinitus' ears that the thief's body was

stolen away, he was furious. Wishing to catch the man who had contrived the trick, he announced that he would bestow his own daughter upon the man who would narrate to her the best story of the cleverest and wickedest thing done by himself. If anyone in reply told her the story of the thief, she was to lay hold of him, and not allow him to get away.

The daughter did as her father willed, and the thief, who was well aware of the king's motive, felt a desire to outdo him in craft and cunning. Accordingly he contrived a clever plan.

He procured the corpse of a man lately dead, and cutting off one of the arms at the shoulder, put it under his clothing, and so went to the king's daughter after sunset. When she put the question to him as she had done to all the rest, he replied that the wickedest thing he had ever done was cutting off the head of his brother when he was caught in a trap in the king's treasury, and the cleverest was making the guards drunk and carrying off the body. As he spoke, the princess caught at him, but the thief took advantage of the darkness to hold out to her the hand of the corpse. Imagining it to be his own hand, she seized and held it fast; while the thief, leaving it in her grasp, made his escape by the door.

Lord Rhampsinitus, when word was brought him of this fresh success, was amazed at the wit and audacity of the man. He sent messengers throughout the city to proclaim a free pardon for the thief, and to promise him a rich reward, if he came and made himself known. The thief took the lord at his word, and came boldly into his presence; whereupon Rhampsinitus gave him his daughter in marriage. "My daughter," he said, "has not

only a bold man as husband, but the most cunning in all Nevarra."

"You know what?" Carver whispered to Adam. "If I ever get caught in a trap, I *don't* want you to cut off my head."

Hawke laughed. "Likewise!"

They kept the minstrel talking for some time, telling them of the land and customs of Nevarra. Bronwyn bitterly regretted that she would not be going with the embassy. They more she learned of the interesting places they would be going, the more put out she was not to be part of it.

The last festive night of the Landsmeet was a little wearying. Everyone was ready for it to be over. Bronwyn herself, while she enjoyed the dancing, was not sorry to leave early. It had been eventful, but it had gone on too long. And tomorrow, they would have to deal with the Dalish grant.

She nearly fell asleep while Fionn was brushing out her hair. Loghain came in, and set about going to bed in his usual matter-of-fact way. In the midst of this, a footman appeared at the door with a message.

"Pardon, Your Majesty, but a courier from Ser Cauthrien has arrived."

"I'll see him in my study. Show him up." He turned to Bronwyn. "Later, then."

"Certainly not," Bronwyn said, wanting news of her Wardens. "I'll come with you."

"If you must."



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He did not wait for her, and so Bronwyn threw on her scarlet dressing gown and practically ran after him. She did not notice the admiring looks of the guards.

"— Ser Cauthrien plans an early start tomorrow, Your Majesty, and will be here a little after midday. The weather looks to hold, and the roads are clear."

Loghain dismissed him, and read Cauthrien's letter.

Bronwyn shut the door and perched on the arm of Loghain's comfortable chair. "Tomorrow. They'll be tired, but they should come to the Landsmeet before the end and be honored. People really think we should do something for Alistair —"

"Yes, yes. I've already made plans for both of them."

"Really?" Bronwyn hardly knew whether to be pleased that he had thought of Alistair or offended that he had made said plans without her input. "Might I know what they are?"

Briefly, he outlined what he had in mind for them. He saw no reason why there would be serious opposition.



There was certainly no opposition from the Council. That morning, the last of their meetings during the Landsmeet, Loghain laid out his intention of creating two new bannorns in the west of Ferelden. Reports from army scouts and from the Wardens had made clear that the country there was chaotic and lawless. Firm hands were needed to establish order and keep the peace. After considering everything they had heard yesterday, it was clear that the area around Sulcher Pass must have a ruler.



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That bannorn would encompass the villages of Sulcher and Haven. Considering the strategic importance of the Sulcher Pass and the value of the ancient temple near Haven, he thought the best choice would be someone of proven military capacity; someone who had worked tirelessly for Ferelden security. Thus, Ser Cauthrien would be named Bann Cauthrien Woodhouse of Sulcher Pass.

Bronwyn realized with embarrassment that she had not even known Cauthrien's surname. It was not a very distinguished-sounding one, to be sure, but that might well change, over time. Before the Council could react to this appointment, Loghain went on

"There's that neck of land near Orzammar, too; just under the Waking Sea Islands. It's important to make clear that it's Ferelden. There's a little village — Stonehaven — up on the coast that's the biggest settlement aside from the trading camp by the Orzammar Gate. I've thought over this appointment, and I decided that the bann there should be someone known to the dwarves. A name was brought up earlier in the Landsmeet, and many people feel that the young man deserves some recognition for his birth. I know him, and I think he's a fine lad who'd be an asset to the Landsmeet. Therefore, I'm going to propose young Alistair — Warden or not — as the Bann of Stonehaven. I suppose we should grant him a surname of his own as well. I favor Fitzmaric, myself."

Bronwyn had thought that if he was given anything at

all, Alistair's lands would be in the remote south. Apparently Loghain thought better of him than she had quite realized. Alistair's lands would be south of Alfstanna's, west of Bann Naois', and north of the royal desmesne at Gherlen's Pass. An important new foundation, and something else that the Orlesians might frown upon, not only because Alistair was a Warden, but because the borders that Loghain had sketched out on his map extended all the way to the Jader Bay Hills. Another provocation. Well, why not? As Nan used to say, *"Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb."*

"What a wonderful idea," Bronwyn agreed. "'Bann Alistair Fitzmaric of Stonehaven' sounds very well."

Anora knit her brow briefly, wondering if this might cause issues far in the future. At least father had not granted Alistair the name "Theirin." That would have been awkward indeed.

Teagan was extremely pleased, and less inclined to blame himself for his bungling earlier in the Landsmeet. If nothing else, he had made Alistair's name and heritage known, and now the boy would at last have some good from it.

Howe, Bryland, and Wulffe considered it the right and honorable thing to do. Kane was indifferent for a variety of reasons; among them the fact the new bann would be on the other side of Ferelden. Fergus knew that it was important to his sister, both as a form of restitution for one she felt had not been given the upbringing he deserved – and as her

friend, of whom she was very fond. For that matter, Fergus liked Alistair for himself, and was glad that the young man would have recognition, and an establishment in the North.

"All right, then," Loghain said, looking at the faces around the table. "We'll start the session a bit later than usual. The Dalish know to be there, and I'll give orders for Cauthrien and Alistair to come to the Chamber as soon as they arrive."

Fergus grinned. "They won't exactly be dressed for Court."

"They'll look exactly like what they are," Loghain snorted. "Soldiers of Ferelden. That should be enough for anyone."

The children were coming to the last sessions, partly because it was historic, and also because they might not be seeing much of each other in the near future.

Bad as the weather was, Bryland wanted to take his new bride to South Reach, and show her to the arling, and the arling to her. He needed to be sure that things were running smoothly and that his revenues were being paid in properly. The boys, too, would enjoy winter sports there, now that the south was no longer dangerous. Then, too, he felt that his daughter needed some privacy to enjoy with her new husband. She seemed very happy – very pleased with her choice. Dinner together every day might be close and familial, but they all needed to work on their marriages. The boys would miss the little girls, but they would treasure their meetings all the more for it.

Corbus, in fact, had begged him to take Faline and Jancy

with them, saying that Habren would like it if they did. It was undoubtedly true, and Bryland was sorry for it, but he explained to the boy that Habren could not always have everything exactly as she would like, and it was important for Kane, Habren, and Kane's sisters all to learn to live together as a family. Besides, Kane was fond of his sisters and would miss them. Perhaps the girls could have a short visit this summer. Beneath his calm smile, his thoughts were racing.

If the darkspawn stay far away. If the Orlesians don't invade. If the Chantry doesn't declare an Exalted March on Ferelden.

Besides, he was not going to stay in South Reach very long. With the Orlesians making noises, he would need to be back in the capital by early next month. Even though South Reach was far from the border, he too would have a role to play in preparing the country for a possible invasion.

As to Leandra's daughter and niece, they had waffled back and forth about what to do. Originally, the plan had been for the girls to spend some time in the city of Amaranthine with Bann Adam. That was no longer feasible, as Adam was being taken by his Arl to assess the need for "Coastal Improvements." At least that was the story Adam told his mother. Leandra was not particularly happy about it, and not pleased that Carver, too, was leaving on an unspecified Grey Warden "mission." Bryland did not know all the details, but he knew that the embassy to Nevarra was leaving very soon. The fewer who knew, of course, the better.

Instead of going to the coast, the girls could join them in South Reach and thus would have the chance to see Leandra in her new role of chatelaine of Castle Byland. It would be especially good for Charade, who needed to understand what would be expected of her in West Hills. Wulffe was a widower, and his eldest son's wife would be the mistress of the castle. No time like the present to understand what that was all about.

It was just as well that they had done with the great public feasts. By late afternoon the Landsmeet would be over. Tonight they would enjoy a quiet dinner at home, and retire early – and tomorrow they would be on the road.

The stares fixed on the Dalish envoys to the Landsmeet ranged from wondering to disgusted to outright hostile. It was one thing to make good on poor Cailan's promise to the elves, and quite another to have to stand in close proximity to tattooed knife-ears. A Landsmeet was the time for the nobles to air their frank opinions, and some very nasty things were said to the elves' faces.

"– Land belongs to people who'll use it properly!" objected Bann Berthilde. "The Dalish are nothing but vagabonds and poachers!"

"– It seems to me," huffed Bann Everly, eyeing the ethereal young Merrill, "that some elven wench might have used her unnatural wiles on the young king!"

The Dalish, well-schooled by Marethari, only gave the



shemlens filthy looks. They must remember the prize to be gained. It did not matter what was said, as long as the land was delivered to them. Cathair tugged at Danith's elbow, restraining her.

"Let the fools talk, *lethallan*," he whispered. "It is only so much wind."

Arl Wulffe glared at Everly, mortified that one of his own sworn banns would make this sort of trouble.

Bryland was equally annoyed. Raising his voice, he said, "I was in the King's presence when he raised the issue, and I saw no sign of undue influence. I was also present in my share of fights where the elves gave good service!"

Loghain, seeing Bronwyn's flushed, angry face, had something to say himself. "The Dalish kept their word to us. Now it's time to keep our word to them. This isn't the first time they've done Ferelden a good turn. No one lives on the land in question, and it suits the elves well enough. They'll *use* it," he said to Bann Berthilde, "as they see fit."

Then Teagan got up to speak, and gave an impassioned speech about his royal nephew Cailan, and what Teagan thought of those who sought to diminish his legacy. Cailan had believed that all his people deserved protection and a decent life —

Anders muttered to Niall, "I never heard that he gave a fig for mages!"

"He used the term '*people*,'" Niall whispered back, grimacing. "I don't think he — or the late king — meant *us*. Bronwyn — and I suppose Loghain, too — well, they've



already done more for us that all the other kings and queens of Ferelden put together "

Teagan was going on at length, though, and people were listening. It was a good appeal to sentiment. Furthermore, many nobles hoped that if the Dalish had a bit of land of their own, they would stay there and not trouble honest folk.

The Grand Cleric, of course, had to bring up missionaries. Bronwyn was resigned to it. It was the priest's duty, after all.

Marethari answered, quite a good match for the Grand Cleric in the dignified old lady department.

"No harm will befall such travelers at our hands. This, I swear. Those who find their way to us will be allowed to speak their words in safety."

Tara, standing among the Wardens, smirked. She had had a very interesting conversation with Keeper Marethari yesterday. An interesting conversation and an even more interesting demonstration. Chantry missionaries would walk in circles, round and round the borders, never penetrating into the lands at all. Very few people knew about the ancient temple. They would assume that the Dalish had moved on to another camp. It would be formidable protection from all sorts of possible dangers: darkspawn, foresters, bandits, and yes, Templars. There must be some openings to allow forest creature their natural migration, but those would be guarded carefully. As the barrier would only extend up twenty feet or so, birds would be able to travel as they liked.

Anders saw her smirking and gave her a wink. Dalish Keepers and Circle mages were exchanging a great deal of interesting lore. Not everyone was compatible with the Arcane Warrior magic Tara had learned in the temple, but quite a few were picking it up. Morrigan had been surprised to learn that some Dalish mages knew shape-shifting. She had thought it was a secret known only to Flemeth, but that was not true. It was very difficult magic, however, and only the most powerful and the most attuned to the natural world learned it. Tara and Jowan had not taken to it. Niall was still studying various animals, trying to find one for which he felt an affinity.

Teagan finished his speech, and came down to considerable applause, smiling at an adoring Kaitlyn. Loghain, grimly pleased that Teagan had done the work for him, decided it was now or never, and called for a vote. Bronwyn bit her lip. She understood why Loghain did not want her to speak. She had already made a name for herself as a defender of elves and mages. It would be foolish to antagonize her human subjects by perceived favoritism, however ridiculous such an accusation would be.

A few curmudgeons actually voted against the proposal; there were about a dozen abstentions. It passed, and passed with a reasonable majority. Many nobles, in fact, were uneasy about opposing anything the Queen favored. The document was signed and sealed and copies given to the Dalish and retained for the Royal Archives. Sens-

ing that it was time for an exit, Marethari led her people out of the Landsmeet Chamber. Afterwards, a number of nobles breathed sighs of relief and reassured themselves that their purses and jewelry were still in their possession.

A round of self-congratulatory speeches followed, as the Landsmeet wound down: banns praising themselves and the new King and Queen. Some speakers embarrassed Bronwyn as they went on about her personal relationship with Andraste as her "True Champion," predicting that the favor shown the Queen would extend to the nation as a whole. A few speakers expressed some alarm at the fraying relations with their nearest neighbor, and other expressed hopes that the Blight would be over by spring. Bronwyn did not allow herself to roll her eyes at such fatuity, but the rest of the Wardens showed no such restraint.

In the midst of this, a messenger came forward to whisper news to Loghain, who grunted an order to the man. Bronwyn looked a question, and Loghain gave her a nod. Shortly thereafter, Cauthrien and Alistair entered the Landsmeet followed by a retinue of officers and Wardens. Curious eyes followed them, and there were a few double takes when Sten joined them, easily towering over anyone else in the room. Not all Ferelden nobles had seen a Qunari for themselves.

Alistair shot Bronwyn a bright grin, which faded into confusion when he was urged forward, along with Cauthrien. He and his companions were not exactly at their



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best. They tracked in dirty slush, and to be honest, they were all a bit... whiffy. He had yanked off his ridiculous fur hat before entering the Landsmeet Chamber, but many of his companions had not, and the dwarves, especially, looked like an assortment of dirty, truculent stuffed toys. Oghren's hat was not only bearskin, but was most of an actual bear's head. Their entry was greeted by a few squeaks from the more sheltered noble ladies.

Loghain rose to his feet, and Bronwyn followed him a split-second later. Alistair thought she was looking fairly spiffy, crown and all. He wondered what the First Warden would say.

Looking about the room, Loghain said, "Ferelden is strong, and is growing stronger. To keep order within the realm, we must have leaders. Our reach is extending into the Frostbacks, and I, with the agreement of the Queen, the Chancellor, and the Council, have decided that these outlying lands will be formed into new bannorns. Ser Cauthrien, your loyal, courageous, and capable service make you our choice for the new Bannorn of Sulcher's Pass. Nobles of Ferelden, acclaim her."

Surprised and blind-sided, no one managed to put together a coherent opposition – or if they thought of one, they did not dare voice it. Applause and some resentful murmurs followed the announcement. Plenty of younger sons would have been glad of a chance at a new bannorn.

Eyes glittering with malice, Lady Rosalyn whispered to her younger son, "A handsome farewell present for a cast-



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off mistress! Everyone knows she's been his campfollower for years. Can't have her about now that he's decently married, and so he's sending her off to the far side of the kingdom! At least he hasn't produced any bastards... I *hope*..."

Her older son quieted her, hoping no one had overheard.

Still standing at attention before the throne, Cauthrien appeared quite shocked at the honor. Loghain gave her a hint of smile, and she responded with a salute. Then she blushed, realizing that she ought to have bowed.

"And you, Alistair," Loghain continued, turning to his old friend's son, and conspicuously leaving off the title of 'Warden.' "You have done good service in driving the darkspawn from Ostagar. Your father would have been very proud of you."

Alistair's jaw dropped. His blush was darker than Cauthrien's.

"There is no doubt," Loghain continued, "that by ability and birthright you belong in the Landsmeet. Therefore, we bestow on you the surname Fitzmaric, and the new bannorn of Stonehaven, knowing you will be a respectful neighbor to our brave allies the dwarves."

There was more generous applause for Alistair, especially from ladies who considered the tall figure clad in armor and wolfskin cloak very handsome and now very eligible. The dwarves, too, liked any favorable mention of themselves, and thought 'Stonehaven' sounded like a respectable sort of place. It had the word "stone" in it, anyway.

"Does anyone," asked Bronwyn, "oppose the appointments of Bann Cauthrien and Bann Alistair?"



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No one did. The seneschal insinuated himself between the rather confused new nobles, coaching them through the rite of homage. First Cauthrien, and then Alistair approached the King and Queen and received the Kiss of Peace from each of them. Alistair grew pink with suppressed laughter. Loghain glared at him.

Just like his father!

Bronwyn kissed him on both his stubbly cheeks and gave him a wink.

"But —"

"Shhh!" she hushed him. "This is a good thing. We'll talk later."



The Landsmeet closed with pomp and circumstance, and then with dozens of nobles scrambling to be first out the door to their carriages. Bronwyn watched the carnage, laughing and unseen, from an upstairs window. Then she changed out of her royal trappings, and went to join the noisy reunion in the Wardens' Hall.

Those who had never seen it were given the tour. There was astonishment at Shale, and excitement at the comfort their quarters promised. Bronwyn showed Alistair the room that had been hers.

"This is yours, now, Senior Warden."

"It used to be Duncan's," he whispered, and then scrubbed at his eyes furiously with the heel of his hand. Bronwyn patted his arm, not willing to waste any more sentiment on Duncan, whom she liked less and less in retrospect.



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Briskly, she helped Alistair get organized in his new space.

"What's in that chest? It rattles."

Alistair was a little embarrassed. "It's loot, all right? We found lots of things when we were exploring the Deep Roads."

"That's wonderful," she said, opening it to have a look. "Oh! Very nice! You should wear that jeweled collar. In fact, go down to the stores and have yourself fitted up with at least one good doublet. We have heaps in the storerooms. You'll need it when you get invited to dinner. Don't make that sulky face. Fergus will invite you, and you can hardly complain about him."

"I like Teyrn Fergus all right," Alistair allowed.

"You'd better!"

Mistress Rannelly called them to dinner, and Alistair was out of the door before Bronwyn could pursue the matter.

"Maker! I'm starving!"

It had been a hard march, and the newcomers ate heartily. For the sake of camaraderie, so did all the rest. After that, the newly arrived Wardens were hustled into the study and given a dose of Avernus' potion, and then told briefly about Soldier's Peak. When that was done, the junior Wardens were dismissed to be happy, rowdy, and comfortable, and Bronwyn called all the rest to a long meeting. Some of it was repetition, but everyone was interested in what the others had been doing. Each made a detailed report of what they had seen and experienced. The dogs jostled their way into the meeting, enjoying the



smells of pack members, old and new. Alistair was thrilled when the unnamed puppy sat beside him, listening for all the world like he understood the conversation.

The big news items were the slaying of the Architect, the curious withdrawal of the darkspawn, and the clearance of much of the Deep Roads.

"Now that the Landsmeet is over at last —" Bronwyn began.

Alistair interrupted. " — And I still have a bone to pick with you about that — "

"Later," Bronwyn said. "We'll get to that, I promise you. Now that the Landsmeet is over, I need to get back to Warden business. I'm going to take a party up to Soldier's Peak, mostly those who haven't seen it yet."

"I already called dibs!" Tara declared. "Brosca and I are first in line!"

"Oh, you're certainly coming along. Alistair, you just got here, so why don't you and your people rest a bit and hold the fort? Have some fun in the city and sleep in? You'd probably enjoy a rest from marching."

"No lie!" Alistair agreed.

"I need to go home, anyway" Adaia said, feeling very daring. "I need to see my family."

"Of course you do," Bronwyn agreed. "They'll want to see you. And Tara, you promised to go yourself. Go in the morning, and be ready to move out at midday."

Adaia punched Tara on the arm lightly, whispering.

"No," Tara said, "I don't think there will be any trouble.



The new Arl of Denerim isn't interested in the Alienage at all, and I don't think he cares about Vaughan and Urien."

"I don't think he does," Bronwyn said with a nod. "All the same, I'm giving you the orders I've given everyone else, and pass them along to your junior Wardens. *No one* goes anywhere alone. When you do go out, you wear your Warden tabards. If you don't have one, go see Mistress Rannelly and she'll get you kitted out. The going out alone part goes for everybody, even *nobles*."

"That means you, Chantry Boy!" Oghren slapped the back of Alistair's head.

"Hey!" Alistair made a face. "Bronwyn, you said nobody would make me be anything I didn't want to be."

"I said," Bronwyn replied, "that no one would make you *King*. You're not *King*. Everybody felt that you deserved recognition. Teagan made a very stirring speech about you. Loghain, now that he knows you better, feels that you're someone the Landsmeet needs: someone not puffed up, someone who's known hardship and battle. It was the decision of the Landsmeet, Alistair. Obviously, both of us have to put our duties as Wardens first while the Blight lasts. We can but hope the Blight does not last for the rest of our lives."

"What are we supposed to call you now?" asked Carver.

"'Bronwyn' here amongst ourselves, or 'Commander' if you're feeling formal. If you're speaking of me to someone else, maybe you should refer to me as 'Her Majesty,' or just as 'the Queen.'" She thought again, "Or as 'Queen Bronwyn'



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if my stepdaughter is anywhere in the vicinity."

Anders said, perfectly straight-faced, "I think we should always refer to you as "Andraste's True Champion."

"Please don't," Bronwyn said, looking pained.

"Or as 'The Dragonslayer,'" suggested Morrigan, with a faint, sly smile.

"Very funny. I thought 'The Girl Warden' was annoying enough."

"Who else is going to Soldier's Peak?" asked Tara.

"You and your your party," said Bronwyn. "Along with me. Anders, Morrigan, Carver, Zevran, Aveline, Toliver, too. Some others will be traveling with us, too, but they have a different mission. And Loghain."

"Ha!" Brosca burst out laughing. "The Big Guy doesn't want to let you out of his sight, does he?"

Bronwyn shrugged, smiling a little, "Something like that." She saw Alistair, still brooding over his new title. "Alistair, it's done; and it should have been done a long time ago."

"But what's the First Warden going to say about us?" he pleaded. "Me a Bann, and you a... a Queen!"

"At the moment," Bronwyn said, iron in her voice. "I really don't much care about the opinion of the First Warden. I've written to him about the talking darkspawn we killed in Amaranthine. I've written to a lot of the Warden posts. The Warden-Commander of Nevarra wrote back, telling me that all the Wardens have been forbidden to help us in any way. He believes it's Orlesian influence, and that



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nearly everyone thinks Ferelden too unimportant to be the real target of the Archdemon. Meanwhile, they sit on their hands, waiting for events to unfold."

She thumped the desk, the anger rising in her again. "We are facing the first Blight in four hundred years. In my opinion, any Warden worth his salt should already be here, facing it with us. What else are they for? And what's to stop them getting on a ship and coming here, if they had any honor or courage? Since they have decided to leave us to the darkspawn, I think we're free to run the order here any way we want."



"Oh, Cousin! You're home!"

An impromptu celebration in the Alienage led to some scandalously early-morning drinking. Warden Adaia was welcomed back by her family, and tried to accustom herself to the name "Melian Tabris" once more. Wardens crowded into the dingy wooden hovel, bringing gifts. The keg of ale Oghren carried was broached at once.

Adaia's father, Cyrion, cried over her, holding her as if he could not bear to let her go again. Even those elves who had looked on her as a troublemaker and disgrace in the past greeted her with respect. Adaia had never before realized that being the center of attention could be... pleasant. Her croaking voice, as always, was at odds with her delicate face.

"Father, these are my special friends: Alistair is my Senior Warden; and this is Siofranni – she's Dalish, as

you can see; and this is Oghren, and this is Sten, You know Danith, Tara and Zevran, of course. That's Cathair and Darach, and there's Steren and Nuala, talking to Valendrian. We could almost make an Alienage from all the elves in the Wardens!"

Danith snorted, "Don't try to make me a city elf, *lethallan!*"

"Wouldn't think of it." Adaia said, pert with good humor. "But I think we've learned that Dalish elves and city elves have more in common than any of us realized! If you like, you can think of Alienage elves as just another clan!"

Shianni tipped her cousin's face up to the sunlight and approved. "You look good. Where did you get that fancy fur coat?"

"I earned it!" Adaia said proudly. "I've been working hard and fighting, too, and Warden pay is really high. I've brought presents! I earned the furs, and Siofranni and I designed our coats. It was really cold at Ostagar."

Alistair thought about joining the conversation, but then felt very shy all of a sudden. They had all been so close down at Ostagar: really like a family. He had thought that maybe Adaia... liked him, a little. At least she seemed to have forgiven him for being human. Emrys had warned him that maybe Adaia would not want a lot of big, armed humans intimidating her people, but Alistair had laughed at that. Now he felt awkward and out of place, and was wondering if he had blundered in somewhere where he really was not wanted. Emrys was smart; Alistair knew he should listen to him more often. Even the Dalish looked

more at home here than he did.

Adaia was still talking, cheeks red with excitement.

"And as soon as we got to Denerim, we were called into the Landsmeet Chamber – all of us! And Alistair was made a bann!"

The atmosphere around them suddenly froze. Everyone, to Alistair's horror, started bowing and cringing away. Some people even looked frightened.

"My lord, you do our house honor – "

"I'm just a Grey Warden," Alistair said, his throat thick. "Just another Warden! We're all friends together... "

"Kindly spoken, your lordship... "

It was hopeless. Fixing a smile on his face, Alistair left the packed little house as soon as he could and wandered across the frozen, filthy lane. Some of the Dalish Wardens had already come out, and were talking with Marethari and Merrill's people.

The Dalish were in the process of leaving, not wanting to give the shemlen a chance to change their minds about the land grant. The women trusted Bronwyn, and the old men trusted Loghain, but they trusted no one else but their own people and their Warden friends. Marethari wanted to get back to the land and start casting the barrier wards that would hide them from unfriendly eyes.

"*Anetha ara*, Warden Alistair!" called Merrill in her sweet, light voice. "We are going home."

"I'm glad for you," he said. "Really glad. We'll keep in



touch, and let you know as soon as we find out anything about the Archdemon."

"We will come quickly, when the time comes. Our Keeper has spoken to Tara. She will know how to find us."

She was called away to help with the last of the packing. Alistair, once more at loose ends, shuffled back toward the Tabris hovel, and met Zevran, who was lounging outside.

"You look out of sorts, my lord," the Antivan said, smirking.

"That's right; it's Mock Alistair Day. I thought you'd be in there, the life of the party."

"Alas, there seems to be a plot brewing to arrange a 'proper' wedding between me and the divine Tara. She feels exactly on the matter as I do — that others should mind their own business. However, they are her cousins, and she does revel a bit in the hitherto unknown delights of family. As for me, if they cannot find me, they cannot drag me before a priest."

Sten appeared, stooping under the wooden lintel. "The ceilings are too low here," he rumbled. "And this place is a scandal of poor urban planning."

Zevran shrugged. "It is not the worst Alienage I have ever seen. It is my understanding that Bronwyn intends to demolish the derelict object opposite to us and build decent housing in its place. She has also spoken of having a sewage drain underneath the 'street' rather than the current putrid open gutter. It will be interesting to see what comes of that."



Tara emerged from the door, hands up to forestall argument. "— I think it sounds grand, but I just can't right now. Oh, there you are, Zevran. We've got to get back to the Compound. Bronwyn had a mission for us, didn't she?"

"Indeed she did," Zevran agreed, gallantly rising to her defence. "*Cara mia*, may I take your arm?"

"You may, good ser."

"A mission?" Alistair said, snatching at the pretext. "I almost forgot!"

"Indeed," Sten said, already ahead of them, "It would be very wrong to fail in our duties."



Nathaniel Howe, Arl of Amaranthine, was going home to his arling. His arling, indeed; confirmed in his possession by the Landsmeet. With him were a number of his banns, a group of Wardens, and to the surprise of some, the King and Queen. Bann Varel had been quietly informed that Nathaniel and Adam would be traveling for possibly the next two months, and he was charged with running the arling and the city while they were gone.

As to Ferelden itself...

"Anora is Chancellor," Loghain told his people. "She has Fergus Cousland to back her up in case of trouble. Meanwhile, I have inspections to make."

While Bronwyn had been making merry with her Wardens the night before, he had enjoyed a long and detailed conversation with the Glavonak brothers, and even now

had some detailed plans with him to think over. They had played with a number of substances, and their explosives were more powerful than ever. They had invented some war-engines, too; machines capable of throwing missiles and explosives over the highest walls, or onto the largest ships. There was still time to organize some thoroughly nasty – he hoped lethal – surprises for unwelcome visitors.

Traveling up the Pilgrim's Path was not easy at this time of year. Instead of oxen, they had hitched work-horses to the wagons they were bringing to resupply the Legion. Their speed was much better than usual, even on the wintry road. By the time twilight enshrouded them, they had reached the impressive entrance of a deserted silverite mine, deep in the Wending Wood.



CHAPTER 15



SUNLESS JOURNEYS

WHILE THE WIND BLEW SHARP AND THE SNOW DRIFTED HIGH, THE PARTY COMPOSED OF KING, QUEEN, AMBASSADORS, WARDENS, AND THE LEGION OF THE DEAD SPED ALONG UNDERGROUND IN COMPARATIVE COMFORT.

Two mages were always in the vanguard, burning away clumps of Taint, while scouts and archers looked for enemies. There were none. What was before them, instead, was a long, rambling labyrinth of tunnels leading to the vast and majestic Deep Roads.

When he had made the journey underground from Vigil's Keep to the mine, Nathaniel had been too fixed on a goal to take in much of his surroundings. Now, making the same journey in reverse, he was astonished by all he saw. When they finally moved into the Deep Roads proper, he admitted to himself that he not really imagined their scope. Aside from some rockfalls and the remains of darkspawn vandalism, they truly were broad, smooth roads: easily traveled, well-marked, and engineered with unmatched genius.



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Loghain accepted his return to the Deep Roads without complaint. At that, they were not the horror he had experienced so long ago. Parts of them were clean now, and the once shrouded glory was on full display. Ferelden had treated with Orzammar as an ally throughout Maric's reign. Only now, during the Blight, had Loghain come to see the full potential of that alliance. In its own way, it was just as valuable as a possible alliance with the Nevarrans.

The Chantry might control the lyrium trade, but the dwarves controlled the lyrium. If the Orlesian Chantry declared an official Exalted March, the first thing they would do would be to force the Templars to choose a side. Those in opposition to the Divine would have their regular supply of lyrium cut off, eventually making them mad and useless. However, it was just possible that a secret deal could be cut with King Bhelen, and the traffic conducted underground and out of sight. He did not expect the Templars to support him in large numbers, but some very well might. Even if they could remain neutral but sane, that would be a gain.

Access to the Deep Roads was a tactical advantage beyond his wildest dreams. He was keeping detailed notes on his maps of roadblocks and bottlenecks. For the most part, the Roads were in a condition to allow a large force to travel along them fairly quickly. The lack of beasts of burden was a logistical problem, but it might be solved by human laborers pulling supply wagons. Perhaps sure-footed mules could manage the stone steps from the sur-



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face. Furthermore, traveling the Deep Roads simply did not require the same amount of equipment that the surface world did. Tents were optional; blankets largely unnecessary. There was no challenge from the environment, other than possible attackers that would be dealt with by the use of weapons, which he and his soldiers carried anyway. There was water in plenty, marked on the map; and where it burst out in springs filtered through rock, it was pure, even in places the darkspawn had traveled.

Food was the one thing they must carry. A large human army could not live off lichen and deepstalkers. Provisions would be the largest item they need carry, but not needing tents, blankets or heavy clothing already reduced the wagon train of his imagination to comparatively modest proportions. How deep did the Deep Roads run under Gherlen's Pass? Would it be feasible to dig into them from the surface directly to the stronghold?

Or — he pulled out his maps once more, and began studying the other side of the border. Where was the nearest access point in Orlais? He knew quite a bit about Roc du Chevalier from various agents. Their main defenses faced east, of course, into Ferelden. Did they even guard the western approach? He smiled, happily and very unpleasantly. Then he noticed a pair of his old soldiers gazing reverentially at Bronwyn, and he scowled again. People were taking the whole issue of "Andraste's True Champion" entirely too seriously.

They stopped briefly to leave Varel — now Bann Varel —



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in charge at Vigil's Keep, pick up yet more supplies, and for Nathaniel to apprise Adria of what was going on. She, of course, could be trusted.

"All the way to Nevarra!" she gasped, her warm dark eyes scanning his face with anxious affection. "You've hardly been home at all, and now you must travel to foreign parts again!"

"I've been entrusted with a great responsibility, Adraia," he told her, kissing her lined forehead. "It's an honor. I'll try to be back by the end of Wintermarch, but we'll see how it goes. I'll bring you back a present."

Topaz, Adria's wise and faithful mabari, gave Nathaniel a whine and a wag. He patted the dog, smiling.

"And now, I'm off! I can't keep the Queen waiting!"

They moved swiftly and slept securely in the sunless gloom of the underworld. The wonders of Kal'Hirol were revealed, and there they camped for a few days, while Bronwyn led her Wardens on a journey north to Soldier's Peak. Loghain insisted on going along, and at length they burst out into the piercing cold light of winter from beneath Drake's Fall.



It was just as well that they had left the wagons behind in the Deep Roads, for the going was hard on the surface. Snow had drifted high, obscuring the landmarks. Bronwyn studied her map anxiously. Once into the tunnels leading up to the fortress they were somewhat sheltered from the wind, but it was a profound relief to climb the



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rest of the way up to the rambling, soaring stones of the ancient Warden fortress.

The wind drove tiny grains of ice into their faces. Bronwyn gestured at the massive structure, a looming grey shadow in the swirling whiteness. Loghain peered at it, proud that Ferelden possessed a fortress so imposing, and displeased that it belonged to what was essentially a foreign military order. No Orlesian must ever be permitted to command here.

A voice called to them above the scream of the wind.

"My lady! Is that you?"

"It is indeed!" She peered at the tall, lean shape bundled in furs. "Dirk!" She told Loghain. "This is Dirk Wolf." She shouted at the former werewolf. "Is everyone all right!"

"All is well, Lady. All but those on watch are safe behind stout walls. Let me lead you to the Keep."

The broad double doors opened, and the wild noise faded to a dull roar. Bronwyn wiped her eyes with the back of her gauntlet, leaving a faint pink smear on it. The storm was fierce. The next door led them into the Hall proper, alight with a cheerful fire in the big hearth. Wolf surged ahead of their party, heralding their arrival with a triumphant shout.

"It is the Lady of the Wardens. She comes, with her companions!"

More shouts, cries, scrambling feet, doors slamming; and Leliana ran in from the door on the far wall, her arms out.

"Oh, Bronwyn!"

Hakan and Soren came in through a side door, pleased and grinning, happy to have company other than their own, espe-

cially happy that some of the dwarven company was female.

Leliana was enchanted to have company, herself. She recognized Loghain, and started; then curtsied graciously.

"My lord! What an honor! Thank the Maker we have a decent quarters for you! Really! We've accomplished so much! I want you to see everything! But you must have had a terrible journey."

"Not so bad, really," Bronwyn said, "We traveled by the Deep Roads much of the way. The darkspawn have withdrawn elsewhere for the moment."

"How strange!" Leliana wondered. Then her mind turned to her large party of guests and how to care for them. "We always have soup on the simmer. We can give you a hot meal directly! Here — yes — Rizpah, take the Teyrn and Teyna's cloaks and packs to the Commander's quarters."

" — the King and Queen!" Tara corrected her, smirking.

"Oh, yes! How exciting! — Hello, Tara, I'm still so surprised — Rizpah, take Their Majesties' cloaks and packs upstairs. We have not yet had a chance to furnish it as I would like, but it will be at least warm and comfortable."

The news that they were entertaining the King and Queen of Ferelden sped rapidly through the castle, and mobs of red-haired and black-haired Drydens and yellow-eyed Wolfs crowded close, eager to meet, greet, and help.

" — And this is Levi Dryden," Bronwyn said, introducing him to Loghain, "Patriarch of Clan Dryden, and descendant of Commander Sophia —"

"What an honor, Your Majesty!"

A child pointed at Loghain. "Is that Teyrn Loghain?"

"He's the King now, darling," her mother murmured.

"Hello, King Teyrnloghain," the child sang out.

General laughter and good feeling. Those who had not seen the place before marveled at it.

"This is all ours?" asked Catriona. "It's immense!"

"This is great!" Brosca yelled. "By the Stone! This is huge!"

"It was nearly a ruin," Leliana told them, showing them around the downstairs proudly. "But now it has had a good cleaning. I have all the plans made out as to plastering and masonry, but those must wait for the spring. I am so glad we have enough bedding.."

Bronwyn looked about, amazed at how much had been done. Simply clearing away bones and cobwebs had made a tremendous difference. The demon-haunted ruin was now a shabby but functioning castle. The Great Hall was warm and welcoming, its long table polished to a mellow shine. The kitchen was clean and full of inviting smells. At the end of the corridor stood Andraste, shelves of votive candles on either side. She looked pleased, too, Bronwyn thought.

Leliana showed them the library, which was rather dark.

"I cannot open the shutters until the glazier can come, and that will not be for months. Still, we organized the books and used the hopelessly broken shelves for fuel. It is a pleasant place to read on clear days. Oh, and let me show you the *salle d'armes*."



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The big chamber on the other side of the Great Hall had been made into a very nice practice room, complete with weapons racks and archery targets. The long gallery running the length of the room and up a few steps had been cleared of its bunk beds and was now a place to meet and talk and oversee training.

"And we can use it as a ballroom, someday," Leliana said, dimpling. "With its own minstrel's gallery!"

Their supper was put on the table, and they ate hungrily before the tour resumed. Part of the way through the meal Jowan appeared, looking a bit harassed, but bowing dutifully.

"How is Warden Avernus?" Bronwyn asked him quietly.

Hakan and Soren snorted. "Couldn't kill him with an axe!"

"He's fine, Bronwyn — er, Your Majesty. His mind is razor-sharp."

Loghain scowled, wondering of whom they were speaking. He was eager to see every corner of this structure, and to analyze it for weaknesses — which were few from his cursory examination. There was a great deal of talking, drinking, and laughing, but Loghain spent most of his time in thinking.

Soon they were on the move again: the Wardens were shown their quarters, and Bronwyn and Loghain were given the tour of the offices and storerooms. Bronwyn told Jowan that she wanted to meet with him, Anders, and Tara in the "workroom" later, and he nodded, understanding her.

The next floor was in confusion, future rooms marked



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out in detail on the stone floor. Only the little mezzanine was still fairly intact, though Hakan had decided that the staircase from it to the upper floor must be moved, and the new one be made of stone.

"This will be six private rooms," Leliana informed them. "As you see, the space was entirely wasted before... And upstairs..."

Andraste's former location was filled with a large table surrounded by chairs. The far wall was warmed by an old wall hanging embroidered with griffons.

"I have commissioned a round table for this space," Leliana went on. "It will be such an excellent council chamber, and very quiet for meetings. And here, of course, are your quarters."

Ah, the wonders of soap and water. Bronwyn had felt some trepidation at the idea of sleeping in the room so long occupied by the demon possessing Sophia Dryden's decrepit corpse. Good work had been done here: the reek of decay was gone, as were the... er... remains. The room was scrubbed out and mildewed books removed. It was furnished with a wash stand, a tub, chests and armor stands, a writing table, and a pair of chairs. A servant had made up the fire while they sat at supper. The bed was actually two single beds, pushed together, with feather beds heaped high across them. It was crude and ungraceful, but looked invitingly soft for all that.

"You've worked wonders, Leliana," Bronwyn said, "Thank you."

"It was my great pleasure. Will you be staying long?"

"Alas, no. We're in the midst of a mission. We'll be off tomorrow, and we'll need to steal Jowan for awhile." Seeing Leliana's disappointment, she added. "Now that we have a way to avoid the worst of the weather, I'll be sending more people here to help. Alistair is back from Ostagar with his people, and they would love to visit."

"How delightful! It does get a little lonely here."

"I'll see that we do it soon."

Loghain was looking a bit impatient. The maids were bringing up some hot water, and were filling the bath.

"I have to meet with some of my Wardens, Loghain. I'll bathe after you."

He frowned at her in suspicion. Bronwyn smirked. The snow had reduced their visibility so greatly that Loghain had not even seen the free-standing Mages' Tower. Leliana's strategically placed wall hanging had concealed the door to the high stone bridge connecting the tower with the rest of the castle. Bronwyn hoped Loghain enjoyed a nice, long bath. There were secrets she did not wish to share, nor did she want to discuss Avernus with him.

"Where is the treasure chest?" she whispered to Leliana.

"In the Mages' Tower," Leliana whispered back. "No one will dare trouble it there."

Her meeting with the mages was interesting but contentious. Bronwyn told them about the embassy to Nevarra, and told Jowan to be ready to move out the next day. The

diffident young mage had clearly learned a very great deal from Avernus, but not everyone approved of the new battlemagics he described.

"It's still Blood Magic," Anders grumbled. "I don't like it."

"Well, the Joining is Blood Magic," Tara said, "so some kinds of Blood Magic are necessary. And if you need to put a powerful opponent down really quick —"

Bronwyn saw Avernus' eyes glint with malicious amusement, and wanted to head everyone off the path to loud, pointless arguments.

"I agree that Blood Magic is wrong, up until one reaches the point at which one is going to die without it," she said, her face hard. "If that is what it takes to keep you all alive and killing darkspawn, I'm all for it."

"Bronwyn!" Anders threw up his hands in disgust.

"I'm serious," she insisted. "Your lives are more precious to me than your principles. I don't want anyone dying a noble, preventable death. I also don't want other people dying if they can be protected. Certain forms of Blood Magic have always been accepted. No one's proposing that you keep phylacteries of your enemies and try to enthrall them the way those vile Tevinters did."

Avernus nodded sagely. He had wheedled and manipulated every single detail of the story about the Tevinter hideout from the Wardens. Those were forms of attack that also needed countermeasures. He had done his bit of enthralling... or at least *nudging*... in his day. That War-

dens would be controlled in such a way was unacceptable.

Bronwyn could see that he was not particularly pleased to be losing his new acolyte, but he accepted it as necessary, holding out for another Warden mage to train up his way. Tara did not seem unwilling, which was a good thing, since Anders and Avernus seemed likely to butt heads. It was unfortunate that Morrigan was not a Warden, for Avernus had met Morrigan and thought well of her mind – aside from her failure to take the Joining. He refused on principle, however to teach her spells that he considered Warden secrets.

But Tara would get on with him. After they completed their journey to West Hill – or a bit farther – perhaps they would return and let Tara spend some time here. Zevran, too. He was always worried that someone was about to assassinate Bronwyn, but with the Landsmeet over and won, and no Orlesians likely to fall upon them until spring, surely he could enjoy a well-deserved holiday, complete with winter sports, here in the Wardens' Keep. It was a better place to train and spar than the more cramped training room at the Compound.

Jowan looked a bit hunted and harassed at the orders to pack up and go on a long, dangerous mission across the Waking Sea. He clutched his mabari puppy closer. He was, Bronwyn decided, getting just a little too comfortable here.

"I know it's sudden, Jowan," she said gently, "but you're the closest thing we have to an expert on Nevarra, and the

party really needs a mage."

"And no phylactery in sight, on that side of the Waking Sea!" Tara pointed out.

"Actually..." Jowan looked around from habit, and then confessed. "You don't really have phylacteries anymore either."

Tara stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Jowan fidgeted, rubbing Lily's ears. "I tampered with them. I already told Anders and Morrigan about this, but you wouldn't know. When I was searching the Cathedral with the soldiers. I found the phylacteries. I injected them all with sheep's blood. They're all useless – at least the ones placed there before the tenth of Harvestmere."

A silence and then a burst of wild laughter. Lily was startled and woke up from her doze with a yip. She jumped from Jowan's lap and trotted over to Scout.

Anders, who generally disliked Jowan, actually slapped him on the back. "It's still the best thing I ever heard."

Tara frowned. "You didn't just smash them?"

"Of course not," Jowan said, irritated. "They would have just cut everyone again. They're no good, but the priests won't ever know it."

"Well reasoned, acolyte!" Avernus praised him. "An admirable ploy."

They went around the room, reporting more of their various discoveries. Bronwyn found some of the talk boringly technical, but their results were not. New barrier spells, improved Joining potions, greater skill with shape-

shifting and battlemagic like the Arcane Warrior ability... her mages were proving their worth, over and over.

"Did I tell you guys about how I found the Aeonar Prison?" Tara asked. Jowan fell silent. Tara, remembering Jowan's escape from the Circle, as well as its cause, said, "No, I didn't go in, but I found the place. It looks like a ruin, and there's a little stone cottage nearby, with a squad of Templars keeping watch... in disguise. Templars pretending to be honest countryfolk are pretty funny."

Avernus was interested, and asked her to show him the location on a map. Considering it, he remarked, "It is well known that the Tevinters conducted experiments there. I think it very likely that the Chantry has followed suit. Though it is a prison, it is not precisely a *mage's* prison."

Anders agreed. "Nobody ever suggested sending me there. I think it's more for cleansing anyone who's had contact with Blood Magic."

Tara got up and prowled around the room. "Someone who's *not* a mage! Nobody said a word about sending me there, either! I'd like to sneak in and find out what's going on."

Bronwyn was not thrilled at the idea. "I think I've kicked the hornet's nest quite enough for one year, thank you. The Chantry's already threatening an Exalted March."

"Then what have you got to lose?" Jowan asked. "If they do declare an Exalted March, then the Aeonar Prison would be an enemy stronghold!"



They set off moderately early the next morning. Snow was falling again, turning the air dense and white. They were in the rugged hills of Drake's Fall as soon as they could manage it, and then glad to be underground for the long slog back to Kal'Hirol. Jowan carried Lily in a sling similar to Loghain's and Carver's. The puppies were growing rapidly, but the snow was too deep for them to manage in comfort.

Bronwyn brooded over the Aeonar issue, not willing to mention it to Loghain at the moment. If it was not used to incarcerate mages, what was it used for? What did the Chantry need a remote location for, when they had a vast complex in Val Royeaux? The only reasons she could come up with were not very savory ones. The Chantry had secrets, yes; she knew that. The location of the Aeonar suggested they had secrets they did not even want their own people to know about.

Just like the Grey Wardens, she thought wryly. Imagine a Thedas in which everyone told the truth and shared important information!

Actually, she could not. Was Aeonar a threat? Why did they not keep the phylacteries there? Was it a training facility? Tara had reminded Bronwyn – in discreet whispers – of the reason she had been locked up at the Circle. Jowan had tried to run away with a Chantry initiate. Tara had helped them, and Jowan had panicked, used Blood Magic, and had fled, leaving Lily and Tara behind. Tara had been imprisoned in the Circle Tower's dungeons. Lily had been shipped off... to the Aeonar. So the place was a



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prison for failed priests? Perhaps for failed Templars, also?

Loghain roused her from her thoughts.

"Can you see the Waking Sea from that castle of yours in good weather?"

"I don't know," Bronwyn admitted. "I've never been able to spend much time there, and it didn't occur to me to look. The topmost tower is pretty high, but as you saw, they had the shutters closed. That's something to look into, certainly. If not, I'm sure we can find a good site for a watchtower right on the coast. Of course," she added glumly, "if the Orlesian fleet is already that close, we're in serious trouble."

Loghain grunted. That was too true for argument. Ferelden had hundreds of miles of coastline. If Ferelden still had a proper fleet, it would be better to bottle up the Orlesians further west, where the sea narrowed at the Virgin Rocks by the Kirkwall Passage. That Rivainni woman Fergus recommended was supposedly a skilled captain. If they could find a few more like her, they might be able to eke out an effective tactical fleet, supplemented by what remained of Maric's shipbuilding. The Glavonaks' machines might well work at sea. They had another device, too, that the mad brother seemed excited about: it was a sort of pump with a metal hose, and it squirted fire. While the effects resembled a mage's spell, it would be far more powerful. More like a dragon's breath, the dwarves told him. They were building him a prototype. Dragon's Breath. That was a good name for it.



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Happy to be back in mild climate of the Deep Roads, Amber began squirming. Loghain let her walk, watching her trot along with her littermate Magister, the two of them following Scout like obedient little soldiers. Loghain had visited the royal kennels before he left. The kennelmasters were working hard there, making good the losses from the Bloomingtide battle. Cailan had launched the dogs' charge far too early. The archers should have got off at least three more volleys before the young king released the hounds. Typical of him, of course: impulsive and slovenly. Dogs were as precious as any other soldier. How would the mabarais fare against the chevaliers? The ineffectual Brandel had made little use of them, and had fled Denerim leaving the kennels behind. The kennelmasters had for the most part set the dogs loose rather than hand them over to the Orlesians. Loghain's own childhood friend, Adalla, had probably been a descendant of those escaped hounds. How to make good use of the mabarais? They were effective, properly managed, against darkspawn. Against armored warhorses? Perhaps not – or not effective in a grand but idiotic frontal assault.

After long hours, they saw the campfires ahead, and the guards recognized them. Nathaniel came to greet them, relieved to see them again.

"It felt like you've been gone forever, but the dwarves say not. It's hard to gauge time, without sun or moon."

Everyone at Kal'Hiol was in good spirits. Hawk's dog,



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Hunter, came to visit the other mabarais, and they appeared to be playing some sort of bizarre game of tag.

The dwarves, they learned, had enjoyed seeking out the mysteries of the ancient thaig. More books and inscriptions had been discovered, and some smithing workshops examined for their secrets. Once arrived, Brosca, Sigrun, and Jukka gave Tara a wink, and strolled off, suspiciously innocent. They had whispered a promise to go shares with the "old crowd." The treasury of Kal'Hirol was skimmed judiciously, yet again.



Carver, fresh from hot meals and a soft bed at Soldier's Peak, felt superior to Adam for once. Or at least cleaner. They were getting on better than they usually did. It helped that Arl Nathaniel was a good fellow: a little stuffy, a little formal and a little old-fashioned, but really decent. The others in the party actually looked up to Carver as a Warden.

He introduced Jowan to them, and found out that most of them knew that Jowan was the mage who had brought the Sacred Ashes to Queen Anora. That disposed them to think well of him from the first. The fact that Jowan wore light armor and carried a sword made him less a mage in their eyes than some sort of bookish gentleman Warden who knew healing.

The reading Jowan had done about Nevarra stood him in good stead. The embassy gathered together when they camped. Sometimes they walked together. Jowan told



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them lore he had gathered about Nevarran customs and the history of the dragon-hunters. Nathaniel told those who had not heard it the Nevarran story of the clever thief. Adam had unearthed an old copy of Brother Genetivi's TRAVELS OF A CHANTRY SCHOLAR for the bits about Kirkwall and Nevarra. Of course, Genetivi had just been a wanderer, not an envoy to the Court. He had not represented the nation of Ferelden. Nathaniel knew that far more would be expected of an ambassador.

After a long march, they camped, ate, posted guards, and settled down to sleep, though the light was just the same as it always was. Nathaniel found that rather disorienting, and brooded quietly by his campfire. Not far away, Bronwyn was sleeping in her cloak beside Loghain. She slept very decorously, her hands crossed under her heart like a queen on a monument.

Nathaniel watched her, thinking of the imponderable twists of fate. How had it happened, that he was in the Deep Roads, going on a desperate mission to find friends for his country? How had it happened that Bronwyn Cousland should be married to Loghain Mac Tir, rather than himself? That Bronwyn should be a Grey Warden, commanding a rowdy company of misfits and castoffs? Was it the doing of the mad being called the Architect, who had caused a Blight to occur in their lifetimes? Was it the fault of those vile Tevinter mages, perverting Father's mind for who knew how many years?



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Perhaps it was they who had turned Father against him. It was the shock of his life when Father had exiled him to the Free Marches. There was no apparent reason; nothing that Nathaniel had done to disgrace himself or his family. One day, Father had coldly declared his will, and nothing could sway him. While other heirs remained at their father's sides, learning the art of ruling, Nathaniel found himself squiring a succession of arrogant Marcher nobles. He had not even been given the chance to bid farewell to his friends. In the long run, it had not been to Father's advantage. Bryce and Eleanor had liked him, Nathaniel knew. If he had offered for Bronwyn, they would not have refused him.

And what of Bronwyn? Nathaniel could not believe that given time and effort, he could not have won her, if only because he saw little in the way of competition among the great nobles who would have been the only possible claimants for the hand of the noblest maiden in the land. Loghain had seemed disinclined to remarry, as did Arl Wulffe. For that matter, the Couslands might not have wanted to send their daughter to the south. Vaughan Kendells was too unsavory to consider, and Bryland's boys were too young. No. He, Nathaniel would have been the logical, proper choice; the choice that would have bid fair to be a happy one for both of them. Father's intrigues had done nothing but destroy him, and nearly destroy the Howes altogether.

Actually, shortly before sending Nathaniel away, Father's greatest fear was that Bronwyn would be wed



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either to Cailan or to King Maric himself. The King was a healthy, vigorous man, and much of the Landsmeet felt he was failing in his duty by not remarrying and begetting more Theirins. He should have lived far longer, and Bronwyn might well have been his Queen. Nathaniel found that idea rather distasteful. King Maric had been a great man, but he had not been a great man where women were concerned. His conduct toward Alistair, for example, was deplorable. There might even be other bastards. For that matter, some Landsmeet gossip had noted that Warden Anders resembled the late king.

Bronwyn stirred in her sleep, frowning. She must be dreaming of unhappy things. Nathaniel grew anxious, wishing he could help her. As far as he could tell, Loghain cared little for her, using her bloodright to advance his own ambitions. Nathaniel had not missed the look on Bronwyn's face when Loghain turned to his own daughter for counsel, ignoring his young Queen. Nathaniel greatly respected Loghain, and felt he was the best man to rule Ferelden at this dark time; but that it had to be at the cost of Bronwyn sacrificing herself was a bitter thing to him. And who was fit for her anyway? The Prophet had shown her favor... the Maker had turned his gaze her way. Perhaps it was impious for any mere man to claim her. Marriage had not worked very well for Andraste and Maferath, after all.

A soft moan caught his attention. Grey Wardens were unquiet sleepers, Nathaniel had discovered. He was



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tempted to go over and awaken her from her nightmare, but Loghain, sleeping beside her, put out his own big hand. He laid it gently on Bronwyn's forehead, calming her. It was the first sign of tenderness for his queen that Nathaniel had seen, and the young arl was not sure whether to be relieved or repulsed. Bronwyn woke a little, her eyes opening slowly. She saw Nathaniel, watchful and anxious, and gave him a sweet, sleepy smile before falling back into slumber.

He must stop thinking of what might have been, or it would drive him mad. The embassy to Nevarra had seemed to him important to protect Ferelden's independence; now it had become imperative, if he were to keep his honor.

At the end of the next march, they reached Amgarrak Thaig. The dwarves left there were overjoyed to be relieved, and even more overjoyed to be assured that they had not been left inside a dead thaig while all the rest of the Legion was slaughtered. Seeing everyone well and safe was cause for celebration. Shale pulled the supply wagon into the thaig with a certain careless panache, proud of its immense strength as a golem.

"I, of course," Shale pointed out. "Need no supplies, being self-sufficient in all things."

"That's nice for you," Tara agreed, munching on a spicy sausage. "But maybe a bit dull."

The Legion moved into the thaig as if into their own home. Loghain and Bronwyn were taken on an official tour



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and were impressed by the general shininess. Catriona was the supplemental guide, giving them details of the fight with the flesh-golem. The bloodstains were barely visible.

"But other working golems were discovered here?" asked Loghain.

"Five, in fact," Shale put in. "Not as independent as I am, of course, but quite serviceable, especially the one named Rune. Most impressive in the art of squishing darkspawn."

Loghain wondered if one of them might have been the golem owned by the mage Wilhelm during the Rebellion. The mage had done good service, and his golem had been useful in a fight. It had never spoken, unlike the extraordinary creature named Shale — who had an opinion about nearly everything — but it had understood speech and could follow orders. Loghain coveted a golem. The immense strength would be invaluable in building defensive works. Yes, he coveted any golem other than Shale. The endless snark palled a bit after a few days.

Half a day out of Amgarrak Thaig they actually encountered darkspawn.

The scouts heard the scrabbling beyond the stone walls of the Deep Roads, and alerted the rest of the party. Bronwyn sensed the creatures first, and then the more experienced of the Wardens did too. Loghain immediately organized their defenses, and they were well-prepared by the time the wall collapsed, revealing a band of dark-



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spawn pouring out of a crude tunnel, rumbling like bees bursting from the cells of a hive.

"Loose!" roared Loghain.

A wall of arrows arced to meet the charging genlocks. Sizzling spellfire shot out like fireworks. Hurlocks flung out their arms to summon their battle rage and were knocked flying. Brosca and Jukka threw acid bombs into the tunnel mouth. Darkspawn screamed in a murderous green haze.

Some of the creatures scrambled over their fellows' corpses and leaped forward. Shale trundled out, grabbed a pair of them and smashed them together. The oozing bodies were thrown in the faces of more darkspawn, which struggled to push past the piling bodies. Shale picked up a huge building stone and tossed it into the tunnel. It tumbled, end over end, crushing more of the monsters.

"Shale! Out of the way!" ordered Loghain. At his signal, another volley was launched: arrows, spellfire, and bombs in a fury of destruction.

Scout tensed impatiently next to Bronwyn, annoyed that he had not had the chance to tear at one of the Tainted things. Hunter bayed, ready to do his part.

That changed with another charge. The darkspawn did not intend to retreat. The survivors sensed their ancient enemy and attacked again. A handful reached the defensive line of Wardens and were cut down and mauled by the dogs. Bronwyn quietly ordered her people to collect some darkspawn blood. One never knew when more Wardens would be needed.



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The looting by Wardens and Legion alike was a matter-of-fact business. Loghain frowned, watching it, not because of the looting itself – all soldiers did that – but because it occurred to him that there might be a great deal of treasure in the Deep Roads. He asked Bronwyn as much.

"Yes. I daresay they found quite a bit in the thaigs," she agreed. "No one's talking about it, but that's only to be expected. What? Are you considering a treasure-hunting expedition?"

"It's not a bad idea," he said, his voice low. "Down in some of the empty Roads there must be other lost thaigs. If the dwarves have done without the treasure for ages, I see no reason for us to hesitate to go after it. Let's look at that Deep Roads map again when we get to West Hill."

Bronwyn remembered that there were certainly some old thaigs marked on the map. One was a little south of the access point at Lake Belennas; another was east of Ostagar. There were some other, smaller ones as well. Unquestionably, they needed coin for the kind of defenses Loghain wanted to build. The Deep Roads were a possible option, though she felt a bit torn, wondering if any treasure found with the aid of Grey Warden ought to go directly to the Wardens. Perhaps. Perhaps not. She was already keeping a fortune in gold secret from Loghain. If he ever heard about the hidden chest at Soldier's Peak, he would not soon forgive her.

But he would not know The Wardens and their friends had no reason to blab to him, and Bronwyn was not going to betray that particular Warden secret, either. That gold made



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them independent; no longer hostage to the petty moods of Crown and Landsmeet. With the land she had wrung from the Council, they could be self-sustaining as to food. They might even make coin from the surplus. She had a real responsibility to the Wardens, and did not want to sacrifice them to the convenience of Ferelden. So far, she had seen little evidence that Ferelden's gratitude would outlive the Blight. Well... not more than a year or two, at any rate.

"I thought the idea of the letter of marque was a good one, too," she said. "Privateers are an inexpensive alternative to building ships."

He was still studying the map. "As long as they attack our enemies, and don't bring down the wrath of everyone else upon us. Your brother's Captain Isabela sounds like a dodgy little adventuress to me."

"Well," Bronwyn said, a little annoyed. "We'll see how dodgy she is when the time comes for the embassy to cross the sea. If she can *dodge* the Orlesians, then good on her."

They discovered later that they emerged from the Deep Roads on the twenty-first. The snow was thick on the ground, and heavy. Spoiled by days in the weatherless Deep Roads, soldiers bitched and complained about the effort involved in taking apart their supply wagon and hoisting it to the surface. Then they complained about marching through the snow.

Shale did not complain, but waded through the drifts with undaunted aplomb. It only paused when a hawk and



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a raven rose up from the ranks and winged swiftly toward the jagged rise of West Hill. This feat roused murmurs of awe and admiration from the rest of the column. Shale did not seem inclined toward either emotion.

"Yes," Tara admitted meekly. "Morrigan and Anders can turn into birds."

"Indeed." Shale's voice was as frosty as the ice coating the top of its head. "I suggest they be careful about their foul and bird-like functions, lest I squish their fragile bird-like heads."

Loghain snorted. Personally, he was pleased that they had scouts who could alert the fortress of their arrival. For that matter, the mages were scouts who could take a quick look at the place... just in case unfriendly forces held it. Who knew what was going on in this part of the country? Frandarel was an incompetent fool. It was hard to access the fortress' condition at this distance and in this weather, but Loghain noted that the outer works at the base of the hill were badly eroded. Not a promising beginning.

"I'm glad you're with us!" Brosca told him in her frank way, trudging along beside Bronwyn. "The fellow in charge here nearly refused to let us in. Made Astrid sign some sort of paper, promising to pay for food and lodging. As if! Place is falling apart, too."

Loghain's lips thinned. His inspection here would be very thorough.

The reception accorded to Loghain was considerably



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more friendly – or at least more subservient – than the one earlier given to the Wardens. The news from Denerim was greeted with wonder, and the seneschal made bold to open one of the 'good' guestrooms for the King and Queen... and then another for the Arl of Amaranthine... and then another for the Bann of Amaranthine City.

"And his brother!" said Carver. "In fact, I think you should open them all up and give us the best lodging available."

Tara muttered, "They stuck us in a dusty old courtyard before. The barracks hadn't been cleaned in ages," She felt rather put upon. What did Wardens have to do to get some respect?

Apparently, wear the crown of Ferelden. The people of West Hill had heard of the Girl Warden, and were thrilled to acclaim her as Queen.

"Tall and human," Brosca comforted Tara. "That counts for a lot in these parts. Of course the Boss deserves it. She's first rate."

Loghain made good use of his authority at King to pry into the bannorn's finances and records. From what he could tell, Frandarel had done nothing whatever to repair or restore this fortress since Loghain had been here in 9:22. In fact, its condition was no better than it had been during the Rebellion, when the Orlesians had crushed the Fereldan army here and set Maric, Rowan, and Loghain fleeing for the dubious safety of the Deep Roads. The fortress was old, rambling, and dilapidated. The nearby village was crumbling, and half the houses were vacant.

Nathaniel had no luck finding a boat to take his people to



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Kilda here, for the little harbor was fairly shallow and thus mostly iced in. All the fishing boats were in dry dock. The slack-jawed yokels informed them that there might be boats at Dane Sound or Tidewaters, but no one knew for certain.

At any rate, a cold snap forced them to stay indoors the next day... a tense, rather unpleasant day, during which Loghain terrorized the seneschal and the slack and portly guard captain.

"This place is hopeless," Loghain snarled to Bronwyn in the musty privacy of their bedchamber. "I could knock the walls down with a carpenter's maul single-handed. Frandarel has let the place slide, while he spends his coin on his collection of rarities. And where is his coin coming from, anyway?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Bronwyn answered it anyway. "Smuggling?"

"Of course, smuggling!" Loghain grunted in disgust. "The coin goes in his pocket and he sees that precious little of the lawful ship taxes and luxury taxes make their way to the royal coffers! I swear, I wonder how the nation has lasted this long, with nobles picking away at it like vultures. If the Orlesians invaded, they'd walk right into this place."

"If it had a good ditch," Bronwyn ventured, "and some ballistae with explosive bolts... "

Loghain rubbed his hand over his eyes. Amber thought he looked tired, and whimpered in sympathy. Loghain picked up the puppy and soothed her and himself. When he spoke, he sounded calmer. "Someone would have to dig the bloody ditch! I'll order Frandarel to have it done, and

then I'll have to come back and see that it's actually *been* done. And I'm not entrusting first-rate weapons to these puppet-show soldiers. I'm surprised they haven't sold the steel of their blades for wine!"

Hopeless or not, the local militia made a real attempt to smarten their drill under the gimlet eye of their new King. Loghain made exhaustive lists of the stores and supplies stowed away throughout the castle. They were plentiful, and much of them were clearly smuggled goods. When he returned to Denerim, Loghain decided that he would call Frandarel to account and make an example of him. On Bronwyn's urging, he unleashed Brosca and Sigrun, who found a secret cache of coin and papers. Out here in the remote reaches of the west, Bann Frandarel had been doing a tidy business in helping people and information enter and leave Ferelden.

They had to get the embassy to Kilda, so as soon as the cold eased, a party was on the march to Dane Sound in search of a boat. The tides there kept the cove ice-free, and they found a good-sized vessel and a fisherman who liked the look of gold in his palm. It took two attempts, but at length, on the twenty-fourth, the twelve members of the Nevarran embassy made their farewells. The embassy had the appropriate diplomatic letters to present, and sufficient gold for their comfort. Each one, beginning with Arl Nathaniel, reverently kissed their Queen's hand, bowed to their King, and were soon on board and headed north to the little island of Kilda, there to await the arrival of Cap-

tain Isabela and the SIREN'S CALL.

Bronwyn stood beside Loghain on the little pier, surrounded by her Wardens, hoping that nothing horrible happened to Nathaniel; hoping that nothing horrible happened to the Hawke brothers, whose mother would certainly never forgive her; hoping that none of the party were captured by pirates or infected by some ghastly foreign disease; hoping that they would get something worth the effort from the Nevarrans. Once again, she wished she were going on the embassy herself, so she would have a measure of control over its fate. As it was, she could do nothing but leave it to the mercy of the Maker.

"Can we go check out the Aeonar?" Tara pressed Bronwyn. "Can we? I'd love to give the Templars there a hard time."

Loghain chuckled, amused by the little mage. She was perhaps his favorite of all Bronwyn's Wardens. Bronwyn had told him about Tara's discovery of the Aeonar. He would have to confirm that for himself, of course. The fact that mages were not sent there for punishment suggested that its purpose was quite different than the one he had imagined. A training facility? Why was it not in Val Royeaux, in the vast Chantry labyrinth surrounding the Grand Cathedral? Bronwyn had a theory that they were doing something there that sensitive souls might object to.

"We'll have a look at your Templars in due course," he said. "First I want to find out if Warden Astrid has won her way to Orzammar. We won't enter the city, of course.

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It wouldn't do for foreign monarchs to pop up there uninvited. I'd like to know how close we can get to Gherlen's Pass without anyone seeing us."



ARL NATHANIEL HOWE OF AMARANTHINE

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CHAPTER 16

T

THE THIRTEENTH WARRIOR

THE DOGS WERE NOT SEASICK, AT LEAST. Nor was Captain Isabela, her face turned to the cutting wind. No one else particularly enjoyed the day's voyage to Kirkwall.

Contrary winds changed their direction almost hourly. Currents and eddies did their malicious best to push the SIREN'S CALL off course. Isabela was on her guard, scanning the choppy seas for floating ice and the submerged rocks marked on her charts. The Kirkwall Passage was tricky at any time, and deadly in the winter.

Carver bid a regretful farewell to his good breakfast, leaning dangerously over the rail.

"Maker!" he groaned. "I feel... I feel... *sick*. What possessed Mother and Father to cross the sea to Ferelden?"

Groans rose from the deck like doleful music. Jowan repeatedly cast regeneration on them — and himself — but the effects were fleeting.

"Keep drinking liquids," he urged everyone. "You don't want to get dehydrated. The small beer is all right. I think



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Bronwyn had some cider put on board, too.”

Nathaniel kept his roiling belly under control by sheer will. Jowan’s words, however, could not go unchallenged.

“Do not speak of her as ‘Bronwyn,’” he gritted out between his teeth. “Wardens may be informal, but foreigners will not understand.” He swallowed bile. “They may imagine that we do not respect her.”

“Then they’re idiots,” groaned Carver, wiping his mouth. “The only thing I have against Bronwyn is that she put me on a boat.” He saw Isabela glance his way. “...I mean a... ship.”

While happiness is fleeting, misery is eternal. The day stretched out endlessly, grey sky pressing down on restless grey sea. The passengers just wanted it to be over. The crew shook their heads and chuckled at the uselessness of landlubbers.

The light was just beginning to fade when Isabela nudged Adam Hawke with the toe of her boot.

“I’ve got something here you want to have a look at.”

“Yes, Isabela,” he groaned. “You’re lovely. Maybe another time.”

“Oh, get up, Handsome. Look to the north. That way.”

He pushed himself up and squinted in the direction she pointed. Beyond the slim, brown, capable hand was a smudge of dark grey on the horizon.

“Land?” he asked, hardly daring to believe it.

“The Wounded Coast,” she told him, with a grim smile. “And smack in the middle of it, Kirkwall. Better get his other lordship, your lordship.”

Nathaniel was the only one of the party ever to have



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seen the immense fissure in the stone bluffs that was the entrance to the harbor of Kirkwall. It was an ancient creation of Tevinter magic, crowned with the colossal statues named “The Twins:” images of anguished slaves, the fountainhead of Kirkwall’s earliest prosperity.

“Impressive,” Adam remarked. “Intimidating, too. Kirkwall may not practice slavery these days, but they don’t seem to be ashamed of their past.”

Isabela shrugged. “They don’t have to ‘practice’ slavery. A lot of people have it down pat. Tevinter gangs prowl the city all the time. Keep your eyes open.”

One of the knights, Ser Zennor, frowned at her words. “But none of us are elves.”

Isabela rolled her eyes. “Tevinters don’t care.”

Those who had not participated in the raid on the Tevinter bases were stunned and horrified.

“Really?” asked Ser Zennor. “Tevinters enslave *humans*?”

Carver made a face. “Don’t you remember your history? They enslaved Andraste. She wasn’t an elf.”

“That’s right,” Isabela agreed. “Humans, elves, dwarves, Qunari: they’ll buy and sell anyone they get their hands on.”

Nathaniel said nothing, but eyed the approaching harbor with an inscrutable expression. He said to Adam. “We should change into something a little more civilized, or people will think us a mercenary band and bid for our services.”

Jowan had heard rumors about the treatment of mages in Kirkwall. “I’ll put on my Grey Warden tabard. Carver,



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maybe you should, too."

"Fine. Come on, Magister. Let's prepare to meet civilization."

Kirkwall loomed above the harbor: the bulk of the Gallows, now the home of the Kirkwall Circle of Magi; the tall peaks of Kirkwall Cathedral and the Viscount's Keep. The rugged terrain created a city on several levels. They could make out the tall mansions of Hightown. Nathaniel was their best guide here, for he had visited in a number of them, in his days as a squire in the Free Marches.

Another aspect of civilization came in the form of a cheerfully sardonic dwarf by the name of Varric Tethras. Isabela introduced them, in the dwarf's oddly luxurious quarters in a fairly squalid Lowtown inn.

"Varric, meet the Arl of Amaranthine. Hand up to the Maker, he's the Arl of Amaranthine, really and truly. His handsome friend is the Bann of the city of Amaranthine. They're not here to visit the Viscount. They want lodgings for a night or two and horses."

"Sure. I can fix you up with a place to stay. I can even find you some horses. Can't stand the beasts myself, but you all seem to be good with animals."

Nathaniel gave him a droll look. "We don't need you to say the words 'Dog Lords.' Someone else is sure to oblige."

"I aim to please," Varric said smoothly. "I've got just the place for you gentlemen. High-class digs up in Hightown, no less. But first, let me offer you the hospitality of the Hanged Man: piss for ale and mystery meat stew!"



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They were all hungry after a day of starvation at sea, and managed to wrestle the mediocre fare down their throats. Nathaniel did not want his party to spend the evening drinking themselves drunk in a cheap tavern, and so told Varric that it was time to show them to the "high-class digs" he had promised.

"Your servant, my lords and gentleman," smirked Varric. He shouldered a curious weapon that vaguely resembled a crossbow, and led the way out into the stinking streets of Kirkwall. Isabela remained at the bar, and gave them a sardonic little wave.

"I'll be waiting, boys!"



A dwarf followed by twelve well-armed men and three mabarais attracted some curious attention as they marched through the city. Nathaniel had lived in Kirkwall in the past, and accepted the possibility that he might be recognized at some point. However, it was long past sunset, and he hoped to be out of Kirkwall tomorrow or the day after at the latest. He was not here to treat with the Viscount, after all. Kirkwall had little to offer a Ferelden at war, and was unlikely to offer even that. The city had no standing army, and would not dare send its ships against Orlais. And considering that the Knight-Commander was the real ruler of the city, Ferelden could not hope for friends here — not when a Knight-Divine mouthed threats before Nathaniel's King and Queen.

Kirkwall, although 'civilized', was no safer than Denerim after dark. Stealthy noises from corners and alleys kept them on the alert. Two well-dressed noblemen were tar-



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gets for the gangs that owned the criminal enterprises of wealthy Kirkwall. These noblemen, however, were heavily guarded, and besides were in the company of Varric, whom most of the gangs had no desire to cross. He was too valuable a Merchants' Guild middleman for that.

Hightown was not free of such threats, but it was altogether grander than anything they were used to in Ferelden. The long, complex rows of houses, the dignified facades, the complete lack of defensive architecture all spoke of "foreign lands" to the visitors.

Adam looked about, remembering places his mother had described.

"There!" he said to Varric. "Who owns that house?"

"The old Amell place?"

Adam glanced back at Carver, who raised his brows.

"Yes," said Adam. "That one. Who lives there now?"

Varric gave him a droll look. "A cabal of wealthy Tevinter merchants. They're not too forthcoming about the kind of trade goods they deal in."

"Slavers?" asked Nathaniel, tensing.

"Could be. Probably."

"That's disgusting," Carver muttered.

Adam blew out a breath. He had had vague hopes of smooth-talking the current residents into letting him have a look at the place. In fact, he had brought a certain key that his mother had often shown him. He hoped Mother would not miss it, since he had not exactly asked her permission. There



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was supposedly a secret entrance to the mansion's cellars in Darktown. Considering the current residents, he almost certainly would not be going in through the front door.

They passed the Viscount's Keep, which was heavily guarded. A long arcade led back into darkness. It was a building that had been conceived by an actual architect, instead of growing organically and messily over hundreds of years. Ser Eraid did not have the vocabulary to describe it that way, but he responded to the grandeur of the Keep.

"Not much like the Palace at home," he remarked. "Fancy on the outside."

"It's fairly grand inside, too," said Nathaniel.

Varric's eyes were bright in the moonlight as he surveyed Nathaniel. "I've seen you before. I know it. This is not your first visit to these shores."

"No, it's not. Where is this place you're taking us? In the upper court west of the Chantry?"

"Someone who knows Kirkwall. I like that. Well spotted, my lord Arl." Varric thought a bit more, as they clanked into the Chantry courtyard. "You're Nathaniel Howe, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You're not very chatty. How unlike the nobles of my own dear city."

"That the Chantry?" Sergeant Darrow muttered to his friend Kain. "'S'big, innit? Wouldn't mind having a look. I hear Andraste in there is made of pure gold."

Varric chuckled. "Pure gold leaf. Sorry."

It was still a huge and imposing structure. The Fereldans paused to admire it and there was agreement that they should go in and have a look at it tomorrow.

Hunter pricked up his ears and whuffed. Adam was distracted from his sightseeing.

"What is it, old fellow?"

"Listen!" whispered Nathaniel.

To their left, up the staircase to a courtyard of elite houses, there came curses and the clash of metal. Shouting voices floated down to the Fereldans.

"You! Slave! Give yourself up and you'll keep all your bits!"

Another voice was raised in defiance.

"I am not a slave!"

"Tevinters!" Nathaniel snarled, loosening his bow. He immediately strode toward the staircase. "Slavers!"

"Tevinters!" echoed Carver. "I hate those guys!"

"Right," Adam said. "Come on." The knights and soldiers immediately fell in, moving up behind and to the sides of their arl. Varric, much amused, was perfectly ready to join in the adventure.

"We're getting into a fight?" Jowan whispered anxiously. "In a foreign country?"

"Looks like it," Carver said, feeling uncommonly cheerful. "Magister, watch yourself! Here now, Jowan, put Lily down. She's a smart girl and knows not to get herself hurt."

They ran up the shallow stone steps toward the fight. A city guard slunk away in the opposite direction, vanish-

ing into the shadows.

Meanwhile, a band of soldiers in excellent, uniform armor was fighting a running battle with a slender man wielding a greatsword. A shaft of moonlight caught the warrior's hair, and its pure white color at first made Nathaniel think that the Tevinters were attacking an old man.

"Cowards!" he shouted, loosing an arrow. Hawke pelted toward the combatants with his dog beside him. Carver was grinning, Yusaris at the ready. The only ones hanging back were the sensible servants who were guarding the luggage, daggers unsheathed.

Surprised in their turn, Tevinter heads turned toward them, mouths agape. Their hair was cut in a curious bowl-shaped style, which the Hawkes thought remarkably stupid-looking.

"How dare you interfere with an officer of the Imperium!" blustered a scrawny fellow, a few seconds before Carver took off his head.

The lone defender, it became clear, was neither old nor infirm. Though wounded and bleeding, he was a shaft of moonlight himself; shifting here and there, striking like a thunderbolt. Strange blue glints of light flashed from him as he fought. Nathaniel wondered if his armor was inlaid with jewels or mother-of-pearl. He was certainly a magnificent swordsman.

Jowan froze a group of soldiers in place, and they were shattered by lusty blows from the Fereldan men-at-arms. Carver cracked a skull with the pommel of Yusaris. Adam



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knocked down one of the last of the Tevinters, and was about to finish him off, when another of them stabbed at him from behind. The white-haired swordsman reached out, plunged his hand into the attacker...

... and crushed his heart in his fist. The Tevinter officer crumpled, and the Fereldans stared.

"Thanks!" Adam said, astonished. "I never saw that move before!"

The cold blue glow on the strange swordsman was not from inlaid armor, but from elaborate, luminescent markings on the man's very skin. The only substance that could possibly create that effect was... lyrium. And that was not the only unusual thing about the man.

"Will you look at that!" exclaimed Kain. "The fellow's an elf! Never saw an elf swing a sword like that!"

Darrow eyed the white-haired warrior with critical admiration. "Tall for an elf. Human-sized. Plenty tall to handle a greatsword. Nice work, that heart-crushing thing. You a mage?"

The elf glared at them. "No." He turned to Nathaniel and gave a slight bow.

"I thank you. My name is Fenris. These men were Imperial bounty hunters, seeking to recover a magister's lost property, namely myself."

Nathaniel gave him a nod. "Slavers deserve their fate."

"I have met few in my travels willing to help an escaped slave. The officer told me that my former master was on his way to Kirkwall. Because of you, he will be disap-



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pointed, once again."

Kain persisted. "You *sure* you're not a mage? 'Cos I never saw anybody who *glowed* before."

"I am *not* a mage," Fenris repeated, gritting his teeth.

"If you say so," Nathaniel said, unable to keep himself from staring. "Your abilities are far beyond the common, and your appearance is does have a certain touch of the arcane."

"My master's doing," Fenris said, his face bitter.

"...Not that we've got anything against mages." Darrow went on, chatting comfortably while he wiped his blade. "Warden Jowan over there can do a bit of magic. Hey, Warden! The fellow's bleeding."

"So are you," Jowan said, looking them over. Blue light bubbled up from his hands, and their wounds sealed over.



"Where are we?" Hawke asked Varric, looking about him in amazement. The dwarf had led them to an elegant townhouse with a huge reception hall. The servants seemed surprised, but certainly knew Varric, who was passing out silver to them with a smirk.

"My friends, welcome to the house of my fathers," Varric said cheerfully.

"You are generous," Nathaniel said, "to receive us all as guests."

Varric was unperturbed by guilt or scruples. "It's nothing. We'll work out a good price for the horses and I'll show you the coin I made on that lumber shipment Isabela brought in. The Fereldan Crown gets half of the prof-



its, as agreed, and I would be delighted to handle all such arrangements in the future."

"No doubt you charged an appropriate handler's fee."

"No doubt!" The dwarf was quite pleased with himself. "I'll get on with finding you horses at the crack of dawn. Pack mules, too, if you like. Maybe a few extras. Sure you don't need a wagon or two?"

"I think fifteen horses and four pack mules would suffice," said Nathaniel. "We will also want three days rations. No wagons."

"Perfect! No problem at all."

They were shown to their rooms. Nathaniel had one to himself, and Carver and Adam were given a room with a pair of single beds. The rest were made comfortable in the currently vacant guards' quarters, and the servants of the house were cajoled into passing out enough bread, cheese, sausage, and ale to make good the deficiencies of the Hanged Man.

Fenris withdrew to a corner, isolating himself from the rest. At Nathaniel's urging, he had come along with them. Jowan felt sorry for him, and brought him a mug and a plate of food.

"Here. After all that fighting you must be hungry."

Fenris eyed him warily. "I need no favors from a mage."

"You need food. I already healed you as far as I could, but your body needs food to be healthy. That's my job. Keeping the company healthy."

Another puzzled stare. "You are a Grey Warden?"



"That's right. I'm a Grey Warden. So is Carver, Hawke's brother. He also carries a greatsword, so you have something in common with him."

"I confess I do not understand why your party interfered on my behalf. You are Fereldans? I have never met anyone from your land before. Why help a stranger and an elf?"

Darrow interrupted, happily quaffing, "Bored, mostly. Needed the exercise. That lot you were fighting looked like they needed killing."

Ser Zennor, more seriously, added, "— and the Arl hates Tevinters. Hates 'em. With a bloody passion." He walked off to find more sausages.

Fenris thought about that, and then quietly asked Jowan, "Why?"

It was not something to boast of, so Jowan's reply was equally quiet. "Some Tevinter Blood Mages enthralled his father. They made the old man do horrible things, and then they got him killed."

"Got him involved in slaving," Darrow added helpfully. "Sold a bunch of elves, and the young Arl took the disgrace hard. We don't hold with slavery in Ferelden."

"I suspect," Jowan said primly to Fenris, "that you don't hold with it, either."

Fenris grunted, but took the food and drink all the same.

Meanwhile, Adam and Carver were making themselves at home in the splendid upstairs bedchamber.

"Quite the swordsman, that elf," Carver remarked, flopping down comfortably on one of the beds, Magister jumped up



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and curled up beside him. "Ought to take him along."

"We should," Adam agreed. "I'll have a talk with him. Nate, too. If our lyrium-inlaid swordsman hasn't anywhere else to be, we might as well hire him."

He liked the idea so much that he decided to talk it over with Nathaniel at once. Hunter followed him to the arl's room.

Nathaniel was sitting by the fire, sipping some first-rate Tevinter wine from the mansion's cellars.

"Have some," he said to Adam, pouring another glass. "I haven't tasted this in forever. I wonder what the dwarf will charge us for putting us up here."

"Not a copper, because it's not costing him a copper, either." Adam grinned at him. "He told me. This place is his older brother's. The brother is in Starkhaven on business."

Nathaniel laughed, and stretched his legs out on an embroidered footstool. "There's no guarantee we'll be able to leave tomorrow. Varric may need the whole day to find the horses we need."

"That elven swordsmen, Fenris, is quite the warrior," Adam remarked, sipping the exquisite vintage. "Worth his weight in ... er... lyrium. Maybe he'd be willing to hire on with us. I suspect we'll be glad of another sword before we're done."

"I've already decided to ask him. He has extraordinary ability, and apparently nowhere to go. I'd hate to leave anyone to the Tevinters. If I can save just one elf from them..." His voice trailed off, and he poured himself another glass of wine.

"And while we're here in Kirkwall..." Adam ventured, a



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little nervous about presuming on his still-developing relationship with his arl. "Since we're here, my brother and I were hoping to have a look at our old family home. Not publicly," he said, seeing Nathaniel's concerned expression. "Discreetly. I have a key to the cellars. I thought that Carver and I could go. Maybe we'd take Jowan, too, since we might run into mages. I know it wouldn't do for you to be mixed up in such an affair, especially if there's violence. I hope there won't be, though. We just want to see if there are still any family heirlooms there... maybe pictures. Mother has nothing left from her family but the house key and memories. Charade had to flee Kirkwall with only the clothes she wore. "

"Actually, it's sounds like fun," Nathaniel said frankly. "If I lost Vigil's Keep I would certainly try to retrieve some of my family's things. But you're right: I can't be involved. If you won't be gone all day by all means see what you can find out. You know where the entrance to these cellars is?"

"My mother described it. I'm sure I can make my way there."

Adam found that Varric had not yet gone to bed, and so he asked the dwarf a few general questions. Varric clearly had an unsurpassed knowledge of Kirkwall's highways and byways, and he grew curious, and then amused by the adventure Hawke proposed.

"What say I go along?" He laughed. "I know more about Darktown than anyone in the city. I'll come along, and we'll slip in and out and get you your keepsakes."



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They decided that instead of waiting until the following night they would leave in the darkness before the dawn. Quickly, they settled down to sleep and had several hours of good rest before they made their preparations. Carver threw on his armor and then went downstairs to awaken Jowan.

"What?" Jowan muttered into the dim light. "Who's there?"

"It's Carver! Shhh! Adam and I are going to beard some Tevinters in their lair and we'd like you to come along. No, don't wake poor little Lily. Grab your armor and come on!"

Jowan groused, but obeyed. They slipped out of the guards' quarters and Jowan set about buckling his armor.

"Do you know what time it is?"

"No. Do you?"

Adam and Varric appeared, annoyingly well-groomed and debonair. Hunter trotted after them, pleased at the idea of a walk and a fight.

"Maker's breath!" groaned Carver, peering at his brother. "You actually shaved, didn't you?"

"Now, now, ladies," Varric reproved them. "No bickering. I know a quick way to Darktown, and then we'll look for your secret entrance."

"And I shall go with you," said Fenris, from the doorway. "It is the least I can do for those who stood by me."



The Hawkes returned, triumphant, in the rosy light of dawn. To their disgust, every one was asleep, and so there was no one to boast to of their exploits.



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They had fought guards in the cellars, won their way to the treasure vault, and then burst out into the mansion itself. The fifteen Tevinters in the house were scattered, and no match for motivated opponents. Locked in cages in the storage vault under the library were twenty-three captives, some of them in a deplorable state. Jowan healed them as best he could, while the Hawkes plundered the place of all portable loot. Fenris, though suspicious of Jowan, saw the sense of it when told to fetch food and water for the captives. Very carefully, they did not use their names around the prisoners. Hawke gave them each a few silvers, opened the front door, and let them out, a few at a time, into the cold grey light. He and his companions decided it would be wiser to go back the way they had come, even though it would take longer.

They found books about the family, jewels, a silver inkstand, the family coat of arms, fur cloaks, and the last will and testament of their Grandfather Amell. Adam took a moment to actually read it.

"He left everything to Mother," he said, blowing out a breath. "She wasn't disinherited after all. Uncle Gamlen had no right to the house. He blew through the estate, *and it wasn't even his.*"

"No point in telling Charade," Carver said. "It would just make her feel bad. Let's not tell Mother either. She couldn't keep it to herself."

Adam agreed, and knelt by an elaborate Tevinter chest. Within minutes, he had picked the lock. Inside they found



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neatly-written invoices for dozens of slaves and over three hundred gold sovereigns.

"Blood money," Fenris said in disgust.

"Looks like clean and shiny coin of the realm to me," Carver contradicted him. "And considering that we were done out of this estate, I totally have no problem taking it as restitution."

"This may have been earned in an evil way, but much of it will go for our cousin Charade's dowry. She's a very nice girl," said Adam. "It certainly will not be enriching some Tevinter slaver. However, as our companions, you are each due a certain share. Would twenty apiece suit you?"

"Sure!" Varric said. "'Gold is always honorable,' as the dwarves say. 'And a bit of diversion with it, too. A good night, all in all.'"

Fenris stared at them, nonplussed. "You mean to give me twenty sovereigns?"

"Yes, I do mean that," Adam agreed, smiling suavely. "The fist-in-the-heart thing never gets old. Jowan? What about you?"

The mage blushed. "I don't really need any money. I mean... my Warden pay is plenty. I'd rather the money went to your cousin."

"Such a gentleman!" Carver clapped him on the back.

They had found other things, too: many of which they simply could not take with them. There were thick illuminated tomes of history and fables that were simply beyond price; huge oil paintings finer and more real-looking than any pictures the Hawkes had ever seen; magnificent



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furniture carved and inlaid with malachite and gilded bronze. There were luxury fabrics: splendid garments of Tevinter make. Adam found veils of silk so fine that they could be folded to the size of a handkerchief. He took three of them, each in a different jewel-like color, and made a tidy package of them. Another splendid fur cloak with a wide fox collar was gathered up as a gift for their Arl.

Adam lingered, looking around him at the amazing house. Even after being abused by a criminal gang, it was still beyond anything he had seen in Ferelden. It breathed gentility... dignity... a civilized way of life. Compared to this, even the rooms he had seen in the Palace of Denerim were crude and unlovely. No wonder Mother missed it. Somehow, he would try to make his own mansion in Amaranthine something that fine.

The Tethras mansion, too, gave him lots of ideas. Once back and safe with his loot, Adam took an appraising look around him. Proper chimneys, smoothly plastered walls, tiled floors: no raw stone to be seen; upholstered chairs and fine ceramics; skylights overhead to brighten the place. Adam made up the fire in the reception hall, plans forming for major changes back in Amaranthine.

"What a lot of nice things," Carver said, patting the leather bag slung over his shoulder. It was bulging with his new possessions. "I think Mother will be thrilled to see that little portrait of her again. With pearls in the frame, no less!"

"I don't know," Adam laughed. "I think that was made



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when she was engaged to the Comte de Launcet. Bethany will love it, though." He thought a little more. "Remember: we can tell Nathaniel what we've been up to, but no one else. Slaughtering an entire house full of law-abiding slave traders is probably illegal in these parts. We'll have to keep it quiet. Is that all right with you? Varric? Fenris?"

"I promise to keep it quiet until you're safely back in Home Sweet Ferelden," Varric promised. "After that, it will be grist for my latest thriller: *HAWKES OVER HIGHTOWN*. Sound good?"

"I shall say nothing at all," Fenris said in his resonant and well-bred voice. Adam thought he could give any Ferelden noble pointers on sounding posh. "The slaves we freed need time to make good their escape. No doubt there are other gangs who would be glad to capture them. Slave traders are very competitive. "

Jowan grimaced. "You mean they steal slaves from each other?"

"Of course. What could be easier and more convenient than netting all the fish another has caught? That mage in the cellars was a mere foot soldier. When Danarius returns to Kirkwall..." His voice trailed off, and he slumped onto a bench.

"Was Danarius..." Adam considered how to put it. "Was Danarius the man who claimed to own you?"

"Yes," Fenris said heavily. "Danarius is a magister of the Tevinter Imperium, where he is a wealthy mage with great influence. Yes, he was my master. As I told your lord, it is he who marked me as you see. He has hunted me for months, wanting to strip the lyrium from my very bones."



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"Well, we can't have that," Carver declared. "I think you should stick with us."

"What do you mean?"

Adam shot Carver a 'let me handle this' look. "What my brother means to say is that our company could use a warrior of your quality. Arl Nathaniel was impressed by your fighting skills and hopes you would be amenable to the idea of joining us. He'd pay you well."

"Pay me?"

"Yes," Hawke said, giving him a wry grin. "Free men don't work for free."

Noise came from the servants' quarters. There was hope of breakfast, which seemed like a very good idea.

"Think about it," said Hawke, at his most persuasive. "We won't be staying in Kirkwall long. Why stick around alone for this Danarius fellow? Better to face him with some friends at your back. Can you ride a horse?"

"Yes..." Fenris was still rather dazed by the offer. "Yes, of course."

"And you'll need a pack. If nothing else, you can use it to stow away your twenty sovereigns."

"Now those are horses!" declared Ser Eraid, staring in wonder at the string of Antivan barbs Varric had conjured for them out of his network of acquaintances, rivals, and sworn friends.

"Yeah, they're pretty good," Varric allowed. "I'm no horseman myself, but I know people who are. Could only get you ten of

the barbs. The rest are cobs, but they're sound. The mules are healthy. Going to get an early start tomorrow morning?"

Nathaniel thought it over.

"Very early."

They spent much of the day preparing for their journey north. They had brought their tents, bedrolls, and other gear with them on the ship. Anything else they needed was obtained in the markets of Kirkwall. Nathaniel and Varric haggled – a little – and Varric was very pleased with his profits from the dealings. For that matter, Nathaniel decided that keeping Varric well-disposed to them was well worth some extra gold. They were coming back here, after all. He hoped that most of the animals survived the journey. If they did, he would do his best to bring as many of them back to Ferelden as possible. Anyone who could breed horses of this quality would be made for life.

He told Varric, "We hope to be back by sometime next month, and perhaps will have more business for you."

The dwarf shrugged. "Bartrand – that's my brother – may be home by then, so I may not be able to put you up at his place. Why worry? There's always the Hanged Man!"

"That what I'm afraid of."

After their early-morning adventures, the Hawkes thought it prudent not to show their faces in Hightown. Yes, the escaped slaves *should* be grateful, but one could not presume too much on the honor or judgment of people who had been so abused.

Jowan, too, did not go out. He was impressed by the Tethras home library, and had no desire to visit the Chantry. The Templar presence in Kirkwall was beyond anything he had ever seen in Ferelden. True, he did not look like a mage, but the fear in him was bone-deep, and if there were a fatal 'accident,' he did not think there would be anyone who could call the Knight-Commander to account.

So it was that Nathaniel went to the Hightown Market and the Chantry with his knights and men-at-arms. Nearly all of them next paid brief but rewarding visits to Kirkwall's finest brothel, The Blooming Rose. It was in the Chantry that Nathaniel's presence was revealed to all the city. Nathaniel had always thought Sebastian Vael was something of an idiot. A well-meaning idiot, certainly, but still...

"Nathaniel Howe!" called the Prince of Starkhaven, above the sweet lulling melodies of the choir. "How are you?"

There was nothing to do but shake the proffered hand and make the introductions. Sebastian was armed and arrayed in armor... white enameled armor, too, of all things. He told Nathaniel a grim tale of the murders of his family by the Flint Company.

"Who hired them?" Nathaniel asked. Clearly a band of professional mercenaries would not kill the ruling Prince of Starkhaven and his family without some sort of reason... or at least without being paid a sufficient amount of coin.

"That I do not know... yet," Sebastian said, wide blue eyes burning with wrath. "When I learn, though, they will not

escape my vengeance! How is your family? Your noble father?"

"All dead, too," Nathaniel replied. It sounded very flat after hearing much the same tale from someone else... as if he were attempting to compete with him for the prize of Most Heartbroken Orphan. Sebastian was taken aback, and then blushed, remembering that he had heard that Arl Howe had been assassinated by the Crows. It had slipped his mind, with his own troubles.

"Indeed, I am very sorry," he said. "I share your grief." His eyes brightened. "You are here in the Free Marches to pursue his assassins?"

Before he could deny it, Nathaniel thought again. It was really not a bad cover story. It would at least do while they were in Kirkwall and for a few days after. With any luck, Sebastian would spread it.

"He was betrayed. Perhaps the less said about it, the better," he answered curtly, and then changed the subject. "You have not yet gone north to claim your birthright?"

He was then treated to a long peroration as Sebastian described his spiritual struggles over the matter. Was it right to pursue something for what might be the wrong reasons? Did he want to be Prince of Starkhaven to spite his dead elder brother? Did he want to be Prince of Starkhaven to prove himself to his dead parents? Did he want to be Prince of Starkhaven *at all*?

Nathaniel, out of patience with all this waffling, ended the conversation. He had never felt any such compunc-

tions about becoming Arl of Amaranthine. "Well then, just as you think best. Andraste guide you."

A laundry maid at the Tethras mansion gossiped to her scullion sweetheart who worked in the kitchens of the Comte de Launcet. That scullion knew a rich gentleman in Hightown who paid for any information about foreigners and nobles. The dwarven household had noblemen as guests – lords from Ferelden and a pair of Grey Wardens. There were dogs there as well: big smelly dogs that frightened the maid. No, nobody knew what they were here for, but the tip alerted the gentleman to watch the mansion and the movements of the merchant Varric Tethras.

The Fereldans visited the Chantry and made their devotions, as was proper. They had an elven servant amongst them who was permitted to wear a sword. Peculiar, but no more peculiar than their love of dogs, which were blessedly absent here in the house of the Maker.

The gentleman recognized the leader of the party: Nathaniel Howe. A well-known Chantry brother called out his name for all to hear. As the men of the party addressed him as "my lord Arl," he had clearly inherited his father's title, which was surprising, because it was the gentleman's understanding that his younger brother was the heir. Was the Fereldan in Kirkwall to ask for help against the Blight, or to wrangle some sort of shipping agreement for Amaranthine?

Yet Arl Howe had not petitioned the Viscount for an audience. Perhaps he was recovering after his sea voyage, which must have been disagreeable at this time of year. He had had some sort of dealings with the Tethras brothers, because there had been a large shipment of exotic southern wood from Ferelden that Varric had sold off at a very fine price. What was going on in the south? Perhaps the Dog Lords were trying to make what coin they could before fleeing their tainted country? One of their nation had come through here a few months ago: Bann Esmerelle of Amaranthine, who brought a huge fortune with her. The gentleman had heard she had settled in the city of Hasmaal, an elegant, civilized place. Sensible of her. The Orlesian gentleman overheard what he could of the conversation between the Arl of Amaranthine and the Prince of Starkhaven, and then retreated into the shadows, making mental notes. It was all very interesting.

Betrayed? Could the Arl mean the lady Esmerelle? Would he be heading north to Hasmaal? And why were Grey Wardens traveling with them? The gentleman had seen no Grey Wardens in the party. Perhaps the servant wench was mistaken.

But if there were Grey Wardens, what were they here for? There were only a handful of Fereldan Grey Wardens. He had heard that most of them were killed in battle last spring, fighting the darkspawn. Perhaps the Wardens were going to seek help from the Marcher Warden posts and had traveled with this noble and his guards for safety.

The gentleman was under the impression that one of the Grey Wardens was a young woman in whom the Empress was very, very interested. The Girl Warden. Stories of her had spread across the Waking Sea, though obviously much exaggerated. He must check his source. Meanwhile, he must assign one of his agents to keep careful watch on the comings and goings from the Tethras mansion.

Moving out like shadows – or at least like shadows that clanked a bit – the Fereldans made an early start the next day. Horses were not permitted within the walls of the city, and so the men had a long walk to the outskirts where their horses were stabled. Gold passed from Nathaniel to Varric, and then hands were shaken. Horses were saddled, the puppies were settled in their traveling slings, and the mules loaded.

Fenris mounted the piebald cob designated for him with some approval. Not the best of them, but not bad. Not bad at all. The gelding was rather small, but sturdy and compact, and Fenris was told that its name unsurprisingly, was "Pye."

Varric saw them off, raising his brows at the amount of weaponry they carried. "Lord Howe, I almost wish I was going with you, but horses and me... well, we just don't agree. Take care of yourself. You too, Hawke... Junior..."

"Don't call me 'Junior!'" Carver muttered.

"...and the Broody Elf. Good luck to you all, wherever it is your going."

By daybreak, they were already galloping past the

western face of Sundermount.

The Orlesian gentleman was pleased with his own acumen when his man told him that the Fereldans had left the city on horseback, traveling neither east nor west along the Wounded Coast, but north to the Vimmark Pass.

Yes! They were going north. His guess had been correct. The Fereldan lord was hunting Lady Esmerelle, whom he considered a traitor to his family. She had brought with her a very large fortune indeed. No wonder the young man was wrathful. Stolen? Perhaps. So... A Fereldan noble on his way to Hasmaal. Did that merit a special report to Val Royeaux?

No. It was a routine matter, not a matter of state; and it could be included in the regular correspondence on the usual ship.

The first distraction: a band of well-armed mercenaries in the foothills of Sundermount. Solution: Kill them all.

To Nathaniel's annoyance, they proved to be the very Flint Company upon whom Sebastian Vael had sworn vengeance. Perhaps it would be best to suppress the fact that he had killed them, since otherwise Sebastian might decide that his debt to Nathaniel could only be repaid by swearing an oath of blood-brotherhood, and by remaining at his side forever after as a loyal companion.

On the other hand, killing the Flint Company was a good thing. First, because they were trying to kill Nathaniel and *his* company. Second, they had quite a lot of loot on them. Some of it was obviously stolen from the Vael.

Nonetheless, it was a lot of loot and his people enjoyed sharing it out. If the journey continued as it had begun, they were all going to profit handsomely from it.

He was very pleased with them. They were jelling well as a fighting force. The little skirmish with the Tevinters had broken the ice, as it were, and they were all finding their places. The elf, too, was absolutely brilliant. The men seemed to regard him as something as a good luck charm — if there could be a 'lucky thirteen.'

Second distraction: a band of well-armed Templars patrolling for mages. Solution: Ride past them and answer all their shouted questions with the word "no."

"We haven't seen any 'mages,'" muttered Kain, winking at a trembling Jowan. "Just the one."

The Templars, unfortunately, could not be completely ignored. Nathaniel was forced to rein in his horse, stop his party, and actually speak to the leader of the Templars, Ser Alrik. Apparently, there had been a mass escape from the Starkhaven Circle of Magi. Somehow, the place had caught fire, and rather than staying put and allowing themselves to burn to death like good, obedient mages, the wicked maleficars had run away. That was the message that the Hawkes gleaned from Ser Alrik's story, at any rate. Nathaniel told them that they were traveling to Tantervale "on business," and that they would be on their guard against such dangers.

The Templars came impudently close, and even ran their

hands over packs and saddlebags, but Nathaniel did his best to calm the situation. He guessed that he was expected to pay some sort of bribe to Ser Alrik – a 'donation' to the Chantry, of course – but he was feeling impatient and not particularly generous. Ser Alrik did not press the matter, as there were only six in his party. The Fereldans rode on.

Third distraction: a band of well-armed lunatic dwarves haunting a sprawling abandoned fortress in the Vimmark Pass. This proved far more troublesome.

"There's something wrong here," Jowan declared. "It's not that the Veil is weak, exactly. I don't know... I've never felt anything like this. There's some sort of powerful, malignant kind of magic here. I think it's driven those dwarves mad."

"Blood Magic?" Nathaniel asked.

"Maybe." Jowan fidgeted. "A lot more powerful than anything I've seen. Worse than that coven of Blood Mages in Denerim."

The dwarves shot arrows at them, threw rocks, and chased after them like street dogs, howling inanities.

"It is the Blood of the Hawke! We must bring them to Corypheus!"

Nathaniel had to make a decision. The country past Sundermount was arid to the point of being a desert. The next day or so would be rough. It would be far worse if they were tracked by madmen.

"We'll check out that ruin," he said, "and deal with the dwarves."

The ruin was a crumbling old wooden fort, but as they

rode through, they found that a ravine led them to a huge jumble of buildings trailing down a face cliff to a misty chasm below. Beyond was an ancient tower of strange design, decorated with... griffons. Equally ancient was an elaborate stone bridge over the chasm, also decorated with griffons.

"Griffons?" Jowan said, half to himself. "Is this some sort of Grey Warden post?"

"We really should check it out," Carver said. "Bronwyn wanted us to talk to other Wardens."

They gave chase to the dwarves, who melted away into the labyrinth of stone and mud brick. A gallery of arches sheltered a long descending staircase. Before them was a confusion of doorways and steps and tiny barred windows. Darrow and Kain dismounted and entered a few of the rooms, coming out and shaking their heads.

"There's a big staircase going down into the cliff. Crazy dwarves must be hiding."

Not all of them could go. Nathaniel detailed Kain, Walton, Mapes, and Dudgeon to stay outside and guard the horses. The puppies, too, were left with the guards, much to their disappointment. The rest of them moved in cautiously.

The cool air inside smelled of decay, and the structure did not appear to have been inhabited by anyone other than a handful of lunatics in many years. Here and there they found scraps of parchment, suggesting that a dwarven force had come through some ages before. The references were vague and confusing.



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"Scout's report:

"Our examination revealed construction that is remarkably sturdy for its age. The fortress's foundations reach deeper into the rock than expected. Two levels below the surface, we discovered a series of twisting, underground passages, chiseled out of the mountain itself. I commanded the men to set up camp there.

"Not an hour later, one of the newer men reported voices from the depths. He flew into a frenzy, demanding that we leave immediately. Those unused to tight spaces often display such hysteria. Thankfully, I was able to calm him before his raving affected the rest of the team.

"But he was gone this morning. Tracks led deeper into the caverns. We shall follow him..."

There were more staircases, more high-ceilinged rooms, mostly of rough-hewn wood. The supports and cart rails suggested that this had been a dwarven mine at some point.

Jowan scowled and whispered to Carver, "I'm picking up Taint. What do you think?"

"Makes sense, doesn't it? If this was a Grey Warden base, I mean."

"I don't know," Jowan shook his head. "The Warden Compound doesn't feel like this. This is... bad."

Bad or not, they found more loot: abandoned weapons and armor; some caches of old coins. Jowan saw a mage's staff propped up in a corner and went over to admire it. It was inscribed with the name "Malcolm Hawke."

"Er... Carver... Adam... You may want to see this."

The staff was puzzled over.



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"Father was here? Why?" wondered Adam. "It doesn't look like the Wardens have been here in ages, and if they were, what business with the Wardens would he have?"

"Dunno. Look here, we should save this. Maybe Bethany could use it. Anyway, it looks like a good staff."

"A very fine staff," Jowan agreed, regarding it with a bit of envy. He hefted it, but felt no hint of power. "At least it looks good. It might be..." he hesitated. "It might be keyed to your father himself. By blood. Probably your sister could use it, but no one else."

"Then we should *definitely* take it along," Adam decided.

Nathaniel was puzzled, too. "Could your father have been a Grey Warden who left the order?"

Adam blinked. "I don't think — surely he would have said something. I don't know."

Carver wondered, too. Father had been vague about bits of his past. *Very* vague as to where that coin had come from that had bought their place in Lothing and supported them for years. All sorts of ideas came to him, none of them very attractive. He touched the staff, and felt a faint sizzle of energy.

"Whoa!"

"Whoa, what?" Adam touched the staff himself, and bit his lip. "I felt something, too. Bethany's staffs never gave me a buzz like that."

Fenris muttered, "Perhaps *you're* a mage."

Hawke snorted, and shook his head. "It's strange, though. Like the rest of this place."

They searched all the alcoves and doorways and hiding places, checking for traps and plunder. There was loot, certainly, but Nathaniel was even more pleased to find a windlass and a well. Jowan inspected the water and pronounced it untainted and fit to drink. Canteens were refilled, and Carver and Darrow left to scout ahead. Not too much later, they trotted back to report.

"My lord," said Darrow. "There's a stone staircase ahead that don't look like anything we've seen before. Much finer and more finished-like. It goes down a long way."

Carver agreed. "It's different, all right. Older. It looks... important. And there are darkspawn down there, too."

"Darkspawn!" Nathaniel's grey eyes widened. "The Deep Roads?"

"No, my lord," said Jowan. "I've studied the maps. While the Deep Roads have an access point near Kirkwall, the Roads do not run here. This is something else. Maybe they wandered into the cellars here."

"I think..." Carver tried to remember. "Those dwarves didn't get close enough to us to see for sure, but maybe... Jowan, do you think those dwarves were Tainted?"

"I'm not sure either..."

"I know I don't want them chasing us all the way to Nevarra!" Adam snapped. "Whether crazy or Tainted or what, we don't need them sneaking up on us in the night. My lord, why don't Carver, Jowan, and I go on and see what we can find out?"

Hunter barked, reprovably.

"And Hunter," Adam added, with a pat of apology for his mabari. "I don't like the idea of hanging back and letting others face danger," Nathaniel scowled. "We'll all go."

It was not the Deep Roads. It was a Grey Warden prison, trapping darkspawn, demons, and the Fereldans, too.

Down, down the stairs they went. Down and down. The staircases transformed gradually into elegant masterpieces of stonework: a bit crumbling, but still very fine. At the foot of the stairs there was a rumble and a flash, and a warded barrier glowed blue, sealing all access to the stairs leading back up.

Ser Eraid bellowed a curse. "Bastards have boxed us in!"

This was not good. Jowan inspected the warded barrier and agreed that going back was not an option for now.

"It's ancient magic," he said. "I could work on it, but without knowing exactly what it is..."

"Very well. Then we go forward," Nathaniel said. "Whatever is doing the magic is ahead, anyway. It looks like we have to go down to gain access to that tower we saw."

In the next room they entered was a handful of darkspawn. The Fereldans fought fiercely and efficiently. More darkspawn charged from a connecting hall. Once they were dead, there was quite a hush, and the party took a look about them.

"It's not the Deep Roads," said Jowan, "but the construction looks like dwarven work."

"And since there are griffons on everything, it was clearly built for the Grey Wardens," added Carver.



GREY WARDEN PRISON



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Along the fine stone walls were cells. Barred cells. Many of the cells contained skeletons. Some contained valuable loot.

"This was a prison," said Nathaniel. "But for whom?"

"That's interesting," Jowan said, gesturing at a shield hanging in the next chamber. Part of it was glowing ominously. "I think it's a magical device of some kind."

He gingerly touched a glowing red light with the tip of his staff, and a resonant, disembodied voice issued forth.

"Be bound here for eternity, hunger stilled, rage smothered, desire dampened, pride crushed. In the name of the Maker, so let it be."

"That sounds like..." Hawke began uncertainly.

"...Father..." whispered Carver. "But how can that be?"

"They're triggers for demon wards," Jowan said. "I read a book about them once. The voice is part of the enchantment; a memory of the spell that was cast...well, who knows how long ago? It's called a Mark of the Binder."

Tapping another mark released the creature inside. The party was startled to find itself facing a demon that rushed them with a roar. Blades worked well against it. As the last glow of magic faded, the disembodied voice spoke again.

"I can do nothing about the Warden's use of demons in this horrid place, but I will have no one say that any magic of mine released one into the world."

"It does sound like Father," Hawke said.

Fenris found the place profoundly disturbing. He asked Jowan angrily, "What do you know of this place? Do War-



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dens deal with demons?"

"I don't know anything!" Jowan squeaked. "I've never heard of anything like this. Bronwyn would have told us if she knew about it. I think it's a big secret that was so secret everybody forgot about it!"

Nathaniel remembered some of the unpleasant things his father had said about Wardens. Much of them were likely all too true.

"This place must have been designed by a lunatic," he remarked. Rows of cells led to nothing; corridors met at odd angles. And there were bones. Lots of human and dwarven bones. Most of them were quite bare and of not much interest to Hunter. Finally, in a particularly nasty cell, they found a document.

"*Privileged to the Wardens,*" Adam read. He called out, "This is important!"

Jowan leaned in and then took the paper, reading it aloud.

"All we hear is that this is one of the great Grey Warden secrets. 'It must be protected at all costs.' As usual, we're most concerned with deceiving our own people. But why hide that the Deep Roads were shaped not only by the dwarves but also by us?"

"I found records dating back to 1004 TE, the wake of the First Blight. Early Wardens discovered that some darkspawn could think and speak and command portions of the horde even after the Archdemon's death. A few could wield magic with the skill of a Tevinter magister, and the Wardens greatly feared them."

"It was here, in the Vimmark Mountains, that Warden Sashamiri set her trap to capture and study the greatest of these creatures, the one whom they called Corypheus."

"Corypheus! That is a Tevinter name," said Fenris. "How is it that a darkspawn has a name?"

No one knew. They moved from chamber to chamber. Everywhere were griffon statues and the arms of the Wardens. The place was grand even in decay. Carver moved ahead, peering out to a stone bridge connecting one part of the structure to another, and then shrank back, waving at Adam and Nathaniel.

"Come and see!" he whispered. "It's not a darkspawn. I think."

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes. What was that creature, grubbing in the rubble? It moved like a darkspawn, but its skin was much lighter, and there were random patches of hair on its head. The creature rose from its haunches, and they all saw what it was wearing.

"Maker's Breath!"

They moved forward — cautiously — to meet the shambling figure in Grey Warden armor.

It was a ghoul. Clearly, it was a ghoul, judging from the filmy eyes. It was also still, to some degree, a man, a warrior, and a Warden. The pitiful creature looked their way, and gaped. He limped toward them, calling out questions in a rasping, stammering voice.

"The Key! The Key! Did they find it? I heard the dwarves looking... digging. How did you bring the Key here?"

Carver asked. "Er... are you Corypheus?"

The ghoul Warden shrank away, lifting his hands as if to ward off even more evil than was contained in his own putrid carcass. "Do not say his name! He will hear you. Do not attract his attention — not when you hold the Key!"

Jowan hefted Malcolm Hawke's staff. "You mean this, don't you? How can this be a key?"

"Magic! Old magic it is. Old magic from blood. It made the seals. It can destroy them."

Nathaniel asked. "What is your name? And what are these seals you speak of?"

"So long since I said my name," the ghoul whispered. "Larius. Larius...that was my name. There was a title, too... Commander... Commander of the Grey."

"Eeewww," Jowan managed, a little helplessly.

Larius began babbling, overjoyed to have an audience other than himself.

"Wardens, yes. Guardians against the Blight. I can help you. Show you the way. Down and in. Down and in."

Hawke asked, "Are there are other exits to this prison?"

The decaying teeth were exposed in a sly smile. Larius said, "The Wardens built their prison well. If the center holds, who cares what else is trapped?"

"Who, indeed? Looks like we'll have to go through this place from end to end, Hawke," muttered Nathaniel.

The name riveted the ghoul's attention. "Hawke! The Blood of the Hawke. You, too?" he asked Carver. "Only the

Blood of the Hawke holds the key to his death...Yes, I can show you out, yes." Larius hobbled away and returned with a piece of tattered parchment.

Jowan took it from him, grimacing. He cleared his throat, and read.

"The Warden's Prison.

"The Grey Wardens' prison in the Vimmark Mountains is believed to have been constructed more than a thousand years ago. The original method of construction has been lost to history, but the Warden-Commanders of the Free Marches have maintained the prison's secret through the centuries.

"The prison is concealed in a great rift in the Vimmark Mountains, far from any easily-traveled mountain passes. The Wardens themselves have spread rumors of banditry and beasts to prevent explorers from approaching.

"The prison consists of a central tower built into the rift with magically-maintained bridges allowing access at different levels. Each level is sealed by a blood magic ritual in which a mage of untainted blood uses his own life essence to create a magical barrier that is permeable from the outside yet impenetrable from within. This one-way access has caused other darkspawn – and perhaps unwary travelers – to be caught within the prison's confines. Those who disappear inside never re-emerge."

"Perhaps quite a few unwary travelers," said Ser Zennor. "Not very sporting of you Grey Wardens."

"What do you mean, 'you?'" Carver growled. "Nobody

here built this place!"

"Come," cackled Larius. "The First Seal awaits the blood of the Hawke! Let the Key absorb the magic back into itself." He limped away, beckoning to them.

In a round chamber they found an elaborate magic circle, bound with iron and salt, with four lyrium torches at the cardinal points.

Gingerly, Carver tapped the top of the seal with his father's staff. It was insufficient.

"Blood of the Hawke, eh?" Adam asked Jowan, who nodded.

Without hesitation, Adam smoothly drew his belt knife and sliced a shallow cut into his forearm. As the first drop of blood touched the seal, there was a burst of white flame. A Pride demon materialized, threw back its horned head, and roared. After a shocked moment, the Fereldans fell to, hacking and slashing. The demon fell with a crash.

The lyrium torches blazed higher, wreathing Malcolm Hawke's staff in sparks of blue. When they died down, the staff glowed briefly.

"I think it fed more power into the staff," Jowan told them. "Maybe that's what Larius meant by the Key absorbing the magic into itself."

Larius peered around the corner and crept in. "So long... so long.. But the blood works. It is good. The magic calls to the blood...reads the thoughts of those that hold the Key. The last to hold it...the Hawke. I was here, when he laid the seals. Before I became...this."

"Stop right there!" Adam snarled. "How was my father caught up in this? Was he a Warden? What did you do to him?"

"Paid him," whispered Larius. "Paid him well, yes. Without the Hawke the prison would have fallen twenty-five years ago. Not a Warden. Would not take the Joining afterwards. A pity to conscript him so unwilling. A learned man. We held him until he did my bidding, and then let him go to his woman."

He hobbled away, while the Hawke brothers looked at each other, horrified. The source of their family nest egg was now perfectly clear.

"Come on," Nathaniel urged them.

They moved out the far door. There was yet another bridge, connecting the round chamber with another part of the structure.

"Darkspawn ahead," Jowan muttered. The sensation was very strong, but he saw nothing. No, wait...

A squat figure detached itself from a pillar. They had not seen it at first, as it was sheltered behind a massive iron shield taller than itself. The shield was so large, in fact, that the genlock simply pushed it along in front, with an ear-splitting scream of metal on stone.

It was another powerful enemy, this time, extremely resistant to magic, and insensible to pain. It crashed into Rhys and Eraid, and knocked them down. Darrow flicked a knife into the creature's face, and it thudded home between its eyes. It paused, just the least bit, and Carver swung

long, biting into the back of the armored legs. The genlock turned, with surprising speed, and rushed in Carver's direction. Nathaniel placed an arrow past the shield and the genlock's roar turned into a rasping gurgle. Hunter lunged, and knocked the genlock off balance. That was the edge the party needed to bring the creature down, drag the heavy shield away, and hack to pieces. It took some time.

Once it was dead, however, they were pleased to discover that they had completely cleaned out that floor of the prison. Another staircase was found. They prepared themselves, and then descended to the next level.

It was very much like the floor above, both in design and condition. There were darkspawn; there were prison cells; there were bones, picked clean.

"Where's the seal here?" Carver wondered. "Too bad they're not all in one place, but no: that would be *convenient*."

They found more bindings, and more glowing triggers. They unleashed and slew more demons. And once again, they heard the voice of Malcolm Hawke.

"I may have left the Circle, but I took a vow. My magic will serve that which is best in me, not that which is most base."

With painstaking effort, they searched every chamber and every cell; opened every chest, read every scrap of parchment.

"Over here!" shouted Darrow, from the rubbly depths of a cell. "Look at this! It's got an inscription with it. Can't read it, though."

Jowan leaned over. "It's in Arcanum. *'The Crown of Dumat.*



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In reverence, you will approach the altar. Know that you come into the presence of Dumat. With head bowed, say:

"Blessed are you, Dumat, silent and strong, secret and wise. We bring you gifts, sacrifices to your greatness."

"An offering to one of the Old Gods!" Fenris whispered in disgust.

"Probably cursed, I reckon," said Darrow.

They crowded to stare at the black and spiky circlet of iron. Flourished upon it was an inlay of lyrium.

"Don't touch it," advised Jowan. "Leave it alone."

No one disagreed, and they moved on.

Further down the rows of cells, they found more bones, and another archive of parchment. These documents were old and crumbling; much of the parchment fell to fragments when touched, but a few sheets were stronger. All of them were in Arcanum, and as such, only Jowan could decipher them.

"An unusual discovery." He read aloud.

"The creature can speak. It has a name, Corypheus. We have encountered darkspawn before who use words, but none individual enough to have chosen a name. This Corypheus appears unique among darkspawn, and has gathered many of its brethren to follow it.

"It would be wasteful to kill such a creature. If it can be captured, tamed somehow, its unnatural influence over the darkspawn could perhaps be turned to our favor. It is clear the darkspawn will never bow to human commands, but this Cory-



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pheus seems at times more human than beast. I have conversed with it, and though its thoughts are disordered and inhuman, it speaks of the Old Gods by their Tevinter names. I have wondered if perhaps he is no darkspawn at all, but a ghoul, so corrupted by the Taint as to have become a new creature entirely.

"I recommend we find a way to capture Corypheus, hold it somewhere safe from both men and darkspawn, and study its unique nature. This will require magic, however, for Corypheus' own abilities are powerful. It uses spells both human and Tainted, and has a strength that would shame any magister. We must muster our best mages to face it and to hold it. I shall send my findings to the First Warden."

"And it's signed by Warden-Commander Farele and dated 1004 TE. A long time ago."

"Pre-Andrastean!" Nathaniel said in amazement. "That must date to the First Blight... or a little after. But this is madness! To keep such a creature prisoner..."

More cells, more Bindings, more demons. Carver and Adam looked forward to breaking the Bindings, if only for the chance to hear their father's voice again. One magical echo was particularly poignant:

"I've bought our freedom, Leandra. We can go home now, us and the baby. I hope it takes after you, love. I would wish this magic on no one. May it never know what I did here."

Nathaniel listened grimly, and said, "Here's what I think happened: the Wardens felt the wards weakening, and so they captured a poor apostate and blackmailed him into



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fixing the place. I suppose he was lucky they didn't con-script him or leave him here to die."

They continued their meticulous search of the cells, in between savage fights with random bands of darkspawn. In a chest, Ser Zennor found a dagger of black iron, whose blade bore a tracery of lyrium.

"Be careful," Jowan advised. "The inscription says it's Dumat's Sacrificial Dagger!"

Ser Eraid jerked his hand away. "And he's welcome to it!"

They eventually came to yet another round chamber, and the second seal. Here, the release of magic nearly knocked them off their feet. There was another Pride demon, and Malcolm Hawke's staff radiated sparks again after its satisfying demise.

They made yet another descent down a very, very long staircase, and they found themselves at the dark base of the structure. Dim green light filtered in. Mist rose from fetid hollows. The stink was vile. There was a scabbling ahead, and a pack of what looked like ugly, leathery green chickens scampered away into the shadows. Hunter growled, eager to be loosed on the hunt.

"Deepstalkers!" Carver shouted. "I've heard of those! They're dangerous in a pack. What else lives down here?"

They found out, soon enough. Darkspawn, deepstalkers, and giant spiders lived down there. They had also died down there, adding the overall stench. The party



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came across more of the unusually powerful genlocks, and afterwards found a sepulchre that seemed to have belonged to one of the ~~commandants~~ commandants of the prison, who, by his bones, had been a dwarf.

They found other traces of those who had gone before. Weapons, of course. Bits of Grey Warden armor. Long ago, some of the Legion of the Dead had come through, searching for the lost son of a dwarven Paragon. He had perished, trapped in the Wardens' Prison. Nor had his would-be rescuers escaped.

In a moldering chest they found more offerings to the Old God Dumat: a ritual scroll and an urn, all with rather creepy inscriptions. A squat and hideous little temple to Dumat, complete with altar and ever-burning flame, could be accessed by some stepping stones through the greenish muck. It was obviously very old: possibly one of the earliest parts of the complex. They backed away, the very surroundings filling them all with dread.

They moved on, and found themselves emerging from the wet and swampy foundations up a slow incline into something that was not a cavern, but was certainly not a man-made chamber, either. More light seeped down here, and they surmised that this might have been the surface before the tower was built. Now it was dirt and jagged rocks. They looked up, and through the swirling dust found that they were looking up the side of the tower. Far above were the labyrinth of bridges and balconies, like spokes in a wheel.

They came upon the remains of a long-deserted campsite and there found more evidence of the Wardens: skeletons and a weathered journal bearing the Grey Warden's seal. This appeared to be comparatively recent, as it was written in the Common Tongue in a legible script.

"This is interesting!" said Nathaniel, turning over a page.

"Speculations on Kirkwall"

The records say Corypheus has been trapped below the Vimmarks since the days of the Tevinter Imperium. Can it be a coincidence that the darkspawn besiege this area more fiercely than anywhere else on the surface of Thedas? Or that Kirkwall, the closest city, suffers from endless plagues of violence, lunacy, human sacrifice, and blood magic?

"If one studies Kirkwall's public records, it becomes hard to deny that some malevolent force has long shaped its history. Could a darkspawn, even a powerful mage, have such influence even as it slumbers?"

He snapped the book shut.

"It explains a great deal."

Fenris said quietly, "Kirkwall was an evil place, long before the First Blight, but one cannot deny that such a creature might be a malignant influence."

The path began spiraling around the base of the tower, leading up toward a low arched door.

Darrow grunted in relief. "From now on, we go up, looks like."

Carver made a face, and glanced at Jowan. "I feel funny," he whispered. "Like there's somebody else in my head. Do

you feel it?"

Jowan trembled. "I do. I think it's Corypheus."

And at the center of the tower's foundation, they found another seal. This was much like the others, though now they knew what to expect and were better prepared. Adam tapped the seal with his father's staff, Carver cut himself this time, and this Pride demon — far more powerful than the others — manifested, and they destroyed it. The power drawn into the staff this time made them all sit down abruptly. The seal chamber led out to a walkway that resembled the bridges higher up.

Larius appeared again, lurking at the end of a bridge.

"He feels the seals weaken. He's knows that you are close. We must hurry!"

A handful of dwarves rushed through another door. One pointed at the Fereldans and shouted, "There! Those are the Hawkes! The others are to be killed! To arms! And pray that Corypheus honors our sacrifice!"

They fell, quickly, no match for Fereldan soldiers. Larius himself was still pretty good with a sword. In a dingy stone chamber Jowan found a last piece of parchment: another ancient document in Arcanum, which was a copy of a memorandum send in 1014 TE from Warden-Commander Daneken to the First Warden in Weisshaupt.

"I was wrong. We cannot control the creature Corypheus. Even our most powerful mages hold no influence with him. In truth, it is they who have been most vulnerable."



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"A dozen times, those assigned to guard or study the creature have sought the Key to free him. When they are removed to a safe distance, they remember little. They speak of a voice in their minds, a calling like that of the Old Gods, but it wanes outside Corypheus's presence.

"Darkspawn have attacked as well, seeking him. I can only assume they are summoned the same way. Somehow his magic lets him speak through the Blight itself, affecting any who bear its Taint.

"The same power stays the hand of any Warden who approaches to kill him. I must recommend that we seal this prison over and conceal its very existence. Corypheus must not be allowed to go free."

"Well," Nathaniel sneered. "There you are. We can't set Corypheus free. The seals are broken or breaking, so the only thing left is to kill him. Good job that we're here and mostly not Wardens, since Wardens apparently *can't* kill him!"

Endless climbing; endless stairs. At the top of the last staircase they found themselves outside in the chill of a desert night, the dim stars flickering overhead. They had reached the top of the central tower, and only a single bridge separated them from the last, most desperate challenge.

Larius shambled ahead.

"He stirs! He wakes! Do not let him gather his full strength. Use the Hawke's blood! Free him, and slay him!"

It seemed a good idea to have a look at the ground before rushing into battle. Jowan determined that the griffons



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grounded the containment spell. Each was carefully disarmed, and the golden light faded, replaced by a baleful green glow.

Carver rapped the seal with the staff, and Hawke gashed his forearm once again.

The seal dissolved. They braced themselves for a burst of a light and another demon. Instead, there was a silence, and then a long, attenuated figure floated up from the black hole gaping in the middle of the floor. Something not quite human, but not like a darkspawn, either. Half of the gaunt face was nearly normal; the other half appeared to be crystallizing into slabs of stone. The limbs were grotesquely long and emaciated; the appendages on the arms more claws than hands. Ragged, decaying finery trailed on an uncanny breeze. The creature came to a stop three feet from the floor, and opened its eyes. A gravelly voice issued forth.

"Be this some dream I wake from? Am I in dwarven lands?"

Corypheus' head turned slowly, taking in the appearance of the strange warriors before him. His eyes fastened on Nathaniel, clearly the leader. He pointed a bony finger his way and began issuing commands.

"You! Serve you at the temple of Dumat? Bring me hence! I must speak with the First Acolyte!"

"I don't take orders from darkspawn," Nathaniel sneered.

Corypheus stared at him, nonplussed by his disobedience.

"You look human. Are you not citizens of the Empire? Slaves, then, to the dwarves? Why come you here? Whoever you be, you owe fealty to any magister of Tevinter.


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On your knees! All of you!" His gaze shifted to Adam and Carver, and became sly and cruel.

"You are what held me. I smell the blood in you." He lifted his voice to the unheeding skies.

"Dumat! Lord ! Tell me! How long have I slumbered? What waking dream is this?"

Larius whispered, "He slept. He knows nothing of the time. We must kill him now."

"Right." Nathaniel nocked an arrow, and in a twinkling, put an arrow through one reddened, rheumy eye.

A nightmarish battle it was – that they all agreed upon afterward. The darkspawn mage – or Tevinter magister, as he called himself – or whatever he was – commanded brutally powerful elemental spells. Lightning crackled from wall to wall, a firestorm swept along the floor, heating their armor, singeing their flesh. Larius was caught in it, and burned, shrieking, stumbling back along the bridge until he toppled, flaming, into the abyss. Carver screamed, tongues of fire licking at his face. A blast of force, and half the men were stunned and stumbling.

"Maker preserve us!" shouted Nathaniel. "Don't stand there staring!"

Jowan had tricks of his own. While he did not possess the raw power of an ancient magister, he knew a crushing spell that immobilized its victim, and the magister knew no way to counter it, other than shooting huge blasts of fire. Meanwhile swords and axes hacked at the vile and


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ancient flesh. Hunter howled and bayed, and Nathaniel shot arrow after arrow, his aim unerring.

Adam sliced off Corypheus' casting arm. The stump did not squirt blood, but oozed a black and foul ichor that Hunter sensibly avoided. Maimed, the creature slumped; and then Fenris, with a mighty leap, brought his blade down, cutting through the grotesque head from behind. Corypheus looked almost comically surprised, as his brain slid away, falling to the stones with an unspeakably wet flopping squelch. The creature collapsed like an unstrung puppet.

They all gasped for breath: some clutching at their wounds, some fumbling for flasks of brandy; some simply collapsing to the stones, dazed.

"Corypheus really was a Tainted ancient magister," Jowan marveled. "I always thought the Chantry's story of the origins of the darkspawn was just a myth."

Fenris' handsome face was tense with loathing. "If this is what the magisters of today sprang from, then much is now explained."

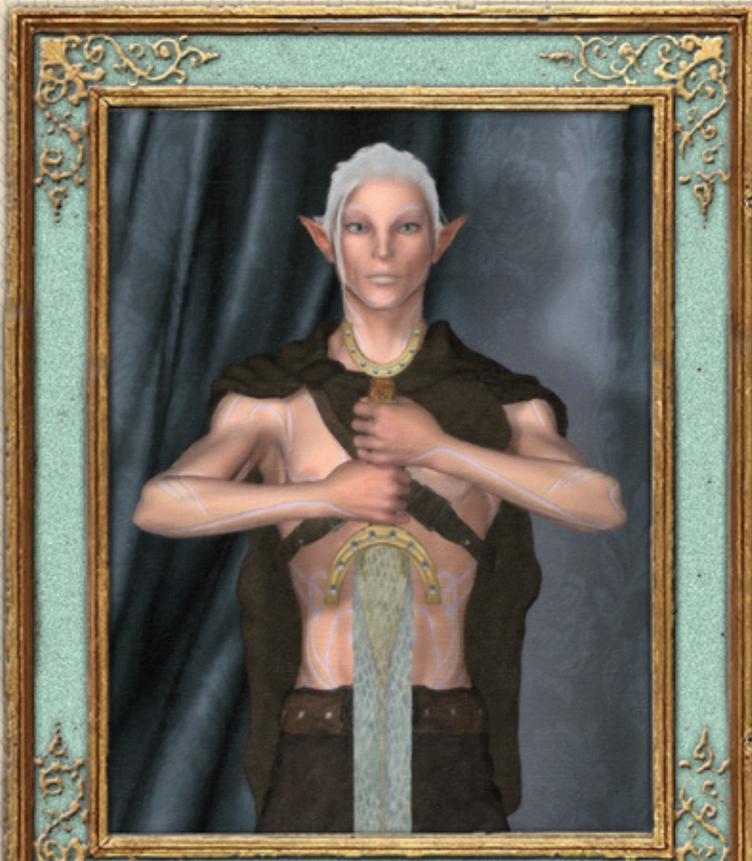
"We're lucky we fought him while he was dozy from sleeping a thousand years," Ser Zennor wheezed, holding his cracked ribs. "Lucky to be alive!"

Carver leaned back against a wall, wincing with the pain of his burned face. "That was worse than the Architect! Don't touch him or anything on him. You'd be Tainted. We need to get out of here and wash."

"Stay where you are, first!" ordered Jowan. "If you have blood

on you, I'll clean it off. Here, Carver, let me heal your face..."

Carver tried to hold still. He muttered to Jowan, "Bronwyn is not going to like it when we tell her about this place!"



FENRIS, FORMERLY OF TEVINTER

CHAPTER 17



RETURN OF
THE EXILE

HILE ASTRID KNEW THAT SHE COULD ENTER ORZAMMAR OPENLY, WEARING THE PANOPLY OF THE GREY WARDENS, THAT WAS NOT THE WAY SHE CHOSE TO ENTER ORZAMMAR. Bhelen had bested her in a duel of wits that she had not even known she was engaged in. The worm had turned. This time, he would not know he was under attack until it was too late.

Her preparations were minute, exacting: she had rifled through Tara's memory for every detail of Bronwyn's venture in the dwarven lands: everyone she met, everyone she helped, everything she learned, everyone she had fought. Astrid had not the least scruple in calling in Bronwyn's debts on her own behalf.

She had her Wardens, and she had a unit of the Legion of the dead — fifty-five dwarves in all. They were all well-disposed to her and looked on her as their leader. She had newly-corrected maps of the Deep Roads that the scholars of the Shaperate would sell their firstborn children to possess.



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She had five golems. She could present the Assembly with two thaigs, and a clear road from Orzammar to Kal'Hirol.

They loaded a wagon with supplies from West Hill, piling on the victuals until the axles creaked. Astrid blithely presented the stupefied seneschal with a meaningless promissory note, and she left the fortress behind. If all went well, she would never see the place again. If she did return, she would dare the fool to try to collect.

The journey itself was eerily easy. No darkspawn challenged them. Even spiders and deepstalkers were rare. Astrid supposed that they had been slaughtered by the horde, in the irresistible tide of their passage.

There was plenty of extra Legion armor: the last bequests of those who had died in battle. Astrid donned one of the heavy, face-concealing helmets as they approached the city. The other Wardens would stay at the hostel: Velanna, Ailil, Askil, and Falkor. Astrid herself, and the soldiers of the Legion, would stay elsewhere. As for the golems, they would be brought in, one at a time, as the guard changed. The guards would know that the Grey Wardens had one golem: they would not know there were actually five.

Falkor was the ostensible leader of the Warden patrol; Rodyk for the Legion. Both were now her men.

The Legion entered first, quietly, without fanfare, by twos and threes. Falkor, also in a Legion helmet, came with Astrid, so he could find her later.

They did not go to the vast and noisome Legion bar-



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racks. Instead, Astrid led them to a shop, with a secret door. Down a wide tunnel was a large, handsome chamber, suitable for meetings and assemblies. Off of it was the small, luxurious office Tara had told her about. So far, everything was going according to plan.

"This is the Carta hideout, Astrid?" Falkor asked, looking around in surprise. "I thought I was in a noble's house for a minute."

"I'm told the quarters here are very comfortable. Let's get everyone into this first big chamber and then we'll make sure the place is clear and defended. Tara told me that Bronwyn locked the place when she left, but we want to be careful."

Torkel, the smoothest of the Legion, kept the owner of the shop, the smith Janar, occupied and distracted, until the Legion had slipped past, to the secret entrance.

Once Torkel himself joined them, Astrid called them together.

"This was once the hideout of the Carta; the headquarters of Jarvia, until she was killed by the Wardens. We are going to clear the place thoroughly, and make certain that the other exit — the one to Dust Town — is sealed and inaccessible to intruders. I'm told that this place was well-supplied with preserved foods, not all of which were confiscated and taken to the Warden hostel. Sergeants, you will lead your men out and scour the tunnels and chambers for unwelcome squatters. This is our place, not the Carta's."

Using a scribbled map, she directed the various units off on the hunt, and then settled into Jarvia's office. It had been thoroughly looted by Bronwyn's people, but that was



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no more than Astrid had expected. The furniture was still here, and still fine.

"Now, Falkor," she smiled grimly, "Bring the Wardens in. Get them settled in the hostel. Present the report that we wrote to the King's secretary."

The report covered the march north to West Hill. It covered the battles they had fought and the arrival at West Hill. The great news – the news truly significant to all dwarvenkind? That – *that* she would present in person, before the Assembly.

"Atrast Vala!" called the guard at the Orzammar barrier door. "Stone preserve you, Wardens!"

"Good to be back," Falkor answered cheerfully. This time he had removed the heavy helmet.

As it happened, the guard commander knew Falkor, and was very impressed that he had become a Warden. He was also impressed by Rune. The other golems were concealed, well out of sight, just outside the barrier door. Falkor would bring the next one in when the guard changed. This was the third watch, due to be changed very soon.

"You'll be wanting to stay in the Warden hostel, of course," said the commander. "Everyone will be interested in your report."

"I'm sure."

Askil, of course, knew every detail of the plot. Velanna and Ailil only knew that Astrid wanted to make a dramatic report of her successes to the Assembly, in order to



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spite a brother who had treated her so badly.

Once the elves were settled in, Falkor and Askil went about their other errands, visiting their own families; and then paying calls (with suitable letters of introduction) on some of Astrid's old friends, the Bemots, the Daces, and the ladies of House Helmi.

Nerav and Jaylia Helmi were bitter opponents of Bhelen. Jaylia had been betrothed to Trian, the murdered eldest son of King Endrin. Before his own fall and execution, Harrowmont had told them the truth of the matter: Gytha, the second child of the king, had been innocent. It was Bhelen who had assassinated Trian and then framed his sister. It was also now known that the sentence of certain death in the Deep Roads that had been unjustly passed on Gytha Aeducan had been remitted by the Stone itself: for the princess had survived.

There was, Falkor learned, no chance of support from House Harrowmont, for that house was nearly extinct. A few of the younger members had fled to the surface, but the rest had been assassinated at first, and then openly slaughtered, down the last babe in arms. The deshyrs were nervous. Orzammar politics could be brutal, but the extermination of an entire noble house overstepped certain traditional limits.

"I don't deny," drawled the extraordinarily ugly Lady Helmi, "that a counterweight to Bhelen might be a very, very good thing. We'll have to speak to the individual in question, of course."



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"Of course."

There was another house to be contacted, too: House Ortan had been restored, and Lady Orta was known to be indebted to the Wardens. Falkor found her eager to discharge her obligation.

Those arrangements were made, and Falkor went past the barrier doors to bring in another golem and take it up to the hostel. Over the next few hours, the process was repeated, both by Falkor or by Askil, until all five golems were safely bestowed in a locked room at the hostel, away from the prying eyes of the servants.

Later, a pair of Wardens, accompanied by their golem, visited House Bemot. The golem was a useful threat. If the nobles gathered there attempted to ambush the Wardens, they would pay dearly.

But there was no such attempt. Lady Dace, senior in precedence, took the lead at the meeting.

"Being recognized once more as a dwarf, a noble, and an Aeducan has no precedent," she remarked, her voice harsh. "There is no law that can be cited."

"I do not ask to be recognized as a noble or as an Aeducan," Astrid said. Her eyes were limpid and calm, her voice under iron control. "I have not fought my way through Taint and blood to be a junior member of my brother's house. I bring great gifts to Orzammar: an entire Road clear of darkspawn; two thaigs completely ready for recolonization. I, Gytha Aeducan, have done this."



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Aller Bemot leaned forward, his eyes avid. "Which thaigs?" "Amgarrak Thaig. It is intact, and has never been Tainted. The lichen ponds are producing again and the veins are rich. And then there is Kal'Hiol."

"Kal'Hiol?" gasped Nedra Dace. "You have found it?"

"I have. The Taint there is thick, but the darkspawn are gone. Orzammar has but a short window of opportunity, but if we work hard, we can build doors to defend the entire Amgarrak Road, from Orzammar to Kal'Hiol. We will have places for our people to spread and to grow."

A silence.

"This is a great thing," said Lady Helmi. "If true, it is the best news that Orzammar has had in many an age."

"It is true," Astrid said at once. "True beyond denial. I have with me a unit of the Legion of the Dead which followed me throughout the battles. Two new thaigs are ours. One is ready for occupation immediately; the other holds important engineering secrets for us, and it, too, can be made habitable with diligent work. I also," she added, with a cool smile, "have five golems in my retinue."

"Five!" exclaimed Nerav Helmi. "That's an army in itself!"

"I shall bring them with me to the Assembly," Astrid said, "in case there are... difficulties."

Lady Bemot had been silent a long time. "Where are the darkspawn? Word has it that the allied army, under Warden-Commander Bronwyn, has pushed them back into the Deep Roads, yet our patrols have seen no activity recently."

"The horde seems to have gone west," said Astrid. "Bronwyn saw them in the Dead Trenches. The Archdemon has led them somewhere else. We have met with only scattered resistance. That is why we must act *now*. Once the Blight is over and the Archdemon dead, the darkspawn will spread once more, a cancer in the Deep Roads. Let us act to salvage everything we can."

"What is your plan?" asked Lord Dace.

The Assembly was in session: another tense round of obstructionism and name-calling. Bhelen sat on his throne, smiling blandly, looking forward to the day he could get rid of this pack of useless parasites.

Lord Ivo, a loyal ally, bellowed at Lord Bemot, "And I tell you that this trade monopoly will not stand, and I'll shorten you by a head if you —"

"Pardon, Your Majesty... my lords," Steward Bandelor called out. "The Grey Wardens are here, and wish to make a report to the Assembly."

"Let them come in!" Bhelen called out, surprised but genial. The Wardens' written report was positive. It would distract the nobles from their bickering. Their successes only made him look good, since he was linked to their prestige and the admirable Warden-Commander.

The war was going well. Warden-Commander Bronwyn had backed him, and he had backed her in return. She was a sensible woman, for a surfacer, and had seen

the reality of the dwarves' situation far more quickly than many born in the deeps.

Perhaps that was the objectivity of the outsider. However she had come to her decision to support him, he was grateful to her. Recent news had suggested that she might be going for the throne of Ferelden. It was a questionable precedent, but from all accounts, she had the best bloodline, and was not about to let the throne go to a lesser claimant. And after all, why should she be intimidated by ancient custom? Bhelen knew that there were times when custom had outgrown its usefulness. In her place, he would not have hesitated to take what was his by right.

The Wardens entered. Bhelen narrowed his eyes, interested in the make up of the group. Five Wardens. Two were Dalish elves from the markings and three were dwarves, two of them wearing full helmets. The leader was someone he thought he might have seen before — someone from a good old warrior caste family. Very appropriate; very honorable. Following them were three officers of the Legion of the Dead, and a... a *golem*! This was going to break up the monotony!

"My king! Lords of the Assembly!" Falkor began. "I bring great news! The darkspawn are pushed back. The entire Amgarrak road is clear, from Orzammar all the way to Kal'Hiro!"

A roar of astonishment and jubilation rose from the deshyrs. Bhelen was as astonished as the rest of them, and thought back over the Wardens' report. Of course!

It was incomplete, only going through the beginning of last month. Why hadn't they updated it? Probably just to create this moment of drama. And Kal'Hirol? That was tremendous news. What a coup, what a success, and so early in his reign...

"Kal'Hirol is taken?" shouted Lord Ivo.

"Kal'Hirol is ours once more," affirmed Falkor, "and another thaig as well, in pristine and untainted condition. Amgarrak Thaig is ready for colonization. The Deep Roads paths to the east are clear. To answer all your questions, I present the hero and leader responsible for these victories, the Grey Warden Astrid, once Gytha Aeducan, Princess of Orzammar!"

One of the dwarven Wardens swept the heavy, concealing helmet from her head, revealing the golden hair and handsome features of one known to each person in the room. At the same moment, the doors of the Assembly swung wide, and four more golems lumbered into the room, shaking the floor, along with a detachment of the Legion of the Dead.

Bhelen's jaw dropped. Instantly he comprehended the extent of his danger. Before he could summon his guard, his exiled sister was already speaking.

"Hear me, Lords of the Assembly! I have returned two of Orzammar's lost thaigs to the dwarves! If we move swiftly, and build well, we can keep the Amgarrak Road, even after the end of the Blight. We can move settlers into Amgarrak Thaig, and our smiths and scholars into Kal'Hirol. Such

an opportunity may not come again. I, Astrid of the Grey Wardens, born Gytha Aeducan, say this!"

Bhelen used all his skills to keep his terror hidden, still unable to quite process the horrible sight before him. His voice shook just the least bit when he finally spoke.

"If all this is true, then it is good news indeed. Orzammar has always respected and supported the Grey Wardens, and my decision to send them troops has been proven to be the wise one."

His loyalists among House Ivo rumbled their agreement. There was mild assent from the rest, but more ominously, there was an air of expectancy. A Legion officer stepped forward and spoke.

"All that has been said is true, and more! The veins of Amgarrak Thaig are rich. The workings of Kal'Hirol show unparalleled genius. There is lyrium already mined there, waiting these past ages to be hauled for refining. Both thaigs are empty and unclaimed. Both were taken due to the valiant leadership and example of Astrid Aeducan. *Valos atredum!* By the favor of our ancestors, dwarven lands are again in dwarven hands!"

More shouting, more celebration. The Shaper of Memories himself was here among them, nodding his snowy, aged head in approval. Bhelen wracked his brains, trying to find a way to take credit for this. Perhaps he could fob one of those empty thaigs off on Gytha. Would she be satisfied with that, and go away?

Amidst the shouting, a voice — he never knew whose — called out, "Deeds worthy of a Paragon!"

Others took up the cry. "A Paragon! A Paragon!"

Lady Bemot — Bhelen noted her with loathing — demanded to be heard.

"When has Orzammar received such news? Not in many ages. Who has done more for the dwarven kingdom? Two thaigs restored, a major Road cleared. New golems to defend us, even! I call for a vote. Let us recognize Gytha Aeducan as she deserves — with the name of Paragon!"

"She is a Grey Warden!" shouted Lord Ivo.

When applied to, the Shaper of Memories was very definite on the matter.

"There is no law forbidding a Grey Warden be acclaimed as a Paragon."

"But surely," Bhelen remonstrated gently, "These admirable deeds are attributable to the honored order of the Grey Wardens, not to the individual Warden Astrid herself!"

Falkor eyed the king coolly. "With all respect, Your Majesty, it is due to our leader's heroism that these things have been achieved. She led us, and she sacrificed herself for Orzammar's greatness." He turned. "With my own eyes, I saw her hold off a monster of a horror never before seen, and save every soldier under her command. Show them, my lady, I pray you."

With a show of reluctance — not entirely feigned — Astrid unbuckled her left gauntlet, and lifted the stump of her

arm high. There were gasps and a faint shrieks.

"Lords of the Houses!" she said. "This is what I gave for the dwarven people in Amgarrak Thaig, when we were attacked by a fell monster from the realm humans call the Fade. It was the only living inhabitant of Amgarrak, a creation of madness and folly, but I slew it and left the thaig clean for dwarves! I do not ask to rule you, but I ask that you look upon me with eyes unclouded, and judge my deeds worthy!"

Bhelen clung to the words "do not ask to rule," hoping to survive the session, now packed with his sister's supporters and the five huge golems. She obtained a majority easily, only opposed by House Ivo and House Aeducan. He counted his enemies with every vote.

"House Helmi?"

"A Paragon!"

"House Dace?"

"A Paragon!"

"House Ortan?"

"A Paragon!"

On and on. Silently, Bhelen raged as the Steward and the Shaper tallied the vote and then bowed to her. Reverently.

"Paragon, will you name your house?" asked the Shaper.

"Let it be called House Gytha," she said. "I shall be known as Paragon Astrid, for my best deeds were accomplished under that name. Gytha, nonetheless, shall be the name of my House. I shall gather my household, and they shall take Amgarrak Thaig for their home. Also, I urge the assembly to

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ready a company of shapers, smiths, and engineers to examine Kal'Hirol. The darkspawn vandalized it, but most of its secrets appear to be intact. We must seize on them."

She spread her arms out, including friend and foe alike, and looked Bhelen in the eye.

"Last, I propose that we immediately set about defending the Amgarrak Road. Let us prepare to maintain our control at the inevitable end of the Blight! Let us hold what we have! Let us build a great series of barrier doors to protect us from the darkspawn. In addition, some new magics have been discovered that will also thwart the incursions of the darkspawn. Let us recruit mages to use them! Let Orzammar be greater than ever!"

Bhelen concentrated on his facial muscles, forcing them into a pleasant smile... a smile of high-minded approval and noble clemency. If Gytha wanted to kill him, she had just passed up her one best chance of it. He would make sure she never got another. If she wanted to take a mob of malcontents and go live in a cave far away, who was he to object?

The other suggestions, of course, were perfectly sound, and he would undertake them right away and then claim the credit. Kal'Hirol? It was a valuable acquisition, and the colonial detachment he sent would include casteless, who were bursting at the seams in Orzammar. He had learned the lesson of Jarvia and her Carta. If the casteless had no other options, they would turn to crime. Why waste all that muscle? The traditionalists in Orzammar

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might keep them out of the army at home, but in a distant thaig, Bhelen could reshape dwarven culture into something more vital. For that matter, he would find a way to make Gytha accept some of the casteless too, in her 'pristine' little thaig. Serve her right.

"Our thanks, Paragon Astrid... Gytha. This day will never be forgotten."

Another roar of agreement. Gytha smiled at him, in the way Bhelen had known and hated from his earliest youth.

The naming of a Paragon called for a celebration. It was held at the Palace, naturally, and Bhelen gave considerable thought to poisoning his sister in the course of it. Perhaps that would be a bad idea, since Gytha went nowhere without her pet mage and her squad of golems. The best way to deal with his sister, as always, was to send her far away. Maybe the Archdemon would eat her.

And she had to sit to his right, in the seat of honor. She would always be given the seat of honor, now that she was a Paragon. It was horribly annoying, but not as annoying as it would be if he had been killed and she were sitting on the throne. She was in fine armor, and around her throat was a massive torque of gold. She had a jeweled ring on every finger remaining to her, and a golden hand with some kind of hook attached to her stump. Insufferable ostentation. To put her in her place, he invited Rica to the feast and put her in the place to his left, opposite his haughty sister.



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That also did not quite go as planned. Rica was dutifully quiet and self-effacing, but Gytha actually addressed her. Voluntarily. On purpose.

"Your sister has told me so much about our mutual nephew. How is dear little Endrin?"

"Oh! You know Freydis? But of course you do..."

"Yes. We're very good friends. She's a splendid warrior and a credit to the Grey Wardens and to Orzammar. She sent you a present."

That was a complete lie. Brosca had done nothing of the sort. However, this was a chance to irritate Bhelen, and as such, it was too good to miss. She produced a pendant from the loot of Kal'Hirol: an amethyst carved into the shape of a flower, set in gold, on an intricate chain. The flicker of envy in Bhelen's eyes was like fine wine. Rica was enchanted.

"How gorgeous! Oh, I've got to write Freydis and thank her!"

"I'll be happy to take her your letter."

"Thank you! It means so much to me!"

Rica glanced at Bhelen, and immediately was quenched by his expression; shrinking away like a rose trying to grow backwards. Astrid gave her a mild, understanding smile.

"I would love to see the child while I'm here in Orzammar."

Bhelen narrowed his eyes. His sister would not be allowed within shouting distance of his little son. "That's... dutiful of you, sister, but hardly necessary. Endrin is a fine boy, but only a baby. Hardly interesting to a hero and a Paragon!"

"How could I not be interested in the next generation of



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dwarves, brother?" Astrid inquired sweetly. "It would be irresponsible of me, as a Paragon, not to pay attention to their education and welfare."

"He's fed and clean. At the moment, that's all he requires."

"Why, brother! You act as if you thought I wished little Endrin harm! Nothing could be further than the truth. I, for one, have always thought there should be *more* Aeducans!"

The sharp-witted deshyrs of the Assembly watched the duel of words with thinly veiled delight, wondering when the blades would come out. A few discreet wagers were made. The less acute were pleased at so much family affection and duty, and began lifting their goblet in a torrent of toasts.

"Hail to Paragon Astrid!"

"Hail to Astrid Gytha, Paragon of Orzammar!"

"Hail to Astrid One-Hand, the Deliverer of Kal'Hirol!"

"Hail to Astrid Kingsdaughter, the Golem-Tamer!"

The surface delicacies were delicious, the meat so tender it slipped from the bones. Astrid ate heartily, not shy about asking for more. She gave Bhelen a wink, and whispered, "If I fall over poisoned, my golems have their orders!"

Apparently golems had very good hearing. The biggest of them, richly engraved with runes, turned in Bhelen's direction, and its eyes briefly glowed with the hot blue of burning lyrium. Astrid lifted her golden goblet with a triumphant smile.

"Hail to King Bhelen, who heeds wise counsel!"



Frandlin Ivo stayed late at the feast, nervously watching the apparent détente between King Bhelen and the sister he had forced into exile. Afterward, even more nervously, he watched the Paragon Astrid's departure for the Warden hostel. Frandlin had played a great part in the scheme to make Bhelen Aeducan the only child of the king. Bhelen had lured his elder brother Trian to the site, and had managed to kill him. Then, when Princess Gytha had appeared on the scene, she and her party – including himself – had found Prince Trian dead. Bhelen had been with his father when they came upon the sight of the King's daughter kneeling beside the cooling corpse of the King's heir. Frandlin's job was to swear that there had been a quarrel, and that Princess Gytha had murdered her unarmed brother. The minions with them had sworn the same. Bhelen had often chuckled over the look on his sister's face at that moment. The minions were long since disposed of, lest their tongues wag. Frandlin, on the other hand, had been rewarded with wealth and promotion, suitable to his noble blood. He was in line to become head of his house eventually.

It had all been too good to be true. Now the Princess was back, only now she was raised to the rank of Paragon, far above any mere king. It was worrying. Even more worrying was the fact that the new Paragon had not once looked in his direction. It was hard to believe that she had forgotten him, or the thing he had done to her. On the

strength of his statement, she had been exiled into the Deep Roads without even a trial. The King was old and failing, and wished to avoid the scandal. Whether he had believed her innocent or not, he had allowed the farce to proceed, and the gates of Orzammar had closed behind his only daughter. Dressed in rags, barefoot and unarmed, she had been consigned to the dark of the Deep Roads.

"And that," said Bhelen at the time, dusting his hands off cheerfully, "is that."

Except that it wasn't. Somehow, the princess had survived. Somehow, she had found weapons and won her way to the Grey Wardens. She was certainly a Grey Warden by the time the first report of her continued existence hit Bhelen's desk. It had been quite a shock.

It was a lesson to everyone: *Never gloat over your dead enemy until you've seen his cold and rotting corpse for yourself.*

Frandlin hurried along the corridors of the Diamond Quarter, feeling the need for solid walls between him and the Paragon Astrid. The way was deserted, and lit with the golden light of the lava streams, lambent and warm.

"Hello, Frandlin," said a voice from a shadowed corner. "I haven't seen you since you swore my life away. Did you think you'd never have to answer for your little bit of fun?"

Yes, it was the Paragon Astrid Gytha, still wearing that enormous gold torque. Behind her loomed a monster of rune-engraved metal. Frandlin's blood turned to ice.

"Don't worry," she said, smiling. "the golems will only



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turn you into red jelly if you run away. I don't need them to fight for me. Is that why you did it? The day I defeated you in the Honor Proving? It was a fair fight, you know. What you did to me? Not so much."

"You can't do this," he protested, his throat thick. "You can't just kill me in front of my own house."

She frowned, thinking it over. "No," she said, with a quick shake of her head. "No, I believe you're wrong. What part of my being a Paragon do you not understand? The law is what I say it is. There is no one to arraign me for it. Bhelen can't help you here."

He drew his sword, blustering. "You can't fight me... you cripple! Astrid One-Hand! You're through with shaming good men in the Proving Grounds!"

Her sword was out now, too, and she was smiling.

"No, I think you're wrong about that, too I don't need more than one arm to kill you." She brought up her left arm. Instead of the hooked golden hand, there was a vicious serrated blade attached.

"Maybe *this* arm," she mused.

He had fought well, long ago in that distant Honor Proving. He was fighting for his life now, and it showed. He was strong, quick, clever and agile. He was everything a noble of Orzammar should be, if you had no use for truth or honor.

Another golem emerged from the shadows to his right. Frandlin stumbled briefly, remembering that the princess had five of the things. Frandlin made a feint to the left, pad-



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ding about, looking for weaknesses. Astrid countered, watching his eyes. Their swords touched lightly, ringing with the contact. He lunged, quick and aggressive, and Astrid sidestepped him coolly, slashing down to her left with her saw-blade. It ripped through his gauntlet as if it were silk. There was groan of metal and a streak of red. Frandlin hissed with pain and jerked away. He swiveled, and tried to sweep her legs out from under her, but she danced away.

"Not good enough, I'm afraid," she mocked. "*As usual.*"

A swing, a lunge, a parry, another streak of blood, this time along his jaw. That saw-blade *hurt*.

They fought in silence, watched by impassive witnesses of stone and steel. The only sounds were the clash of metal against metal. Astrid was playing with him now, inflicting small cuts here and there: on his scalp, on the back of his neck, under his arm. He slipped in blood and sat there stunned, while Astrid cocked her head, looking at him.

"Get up and fight," she drawled.

His nerve broke at that, and he stumbled away, trying to escape.

"Help me!" he shouted. "Help me! Open the door!" He ran toward home, and stopped when another golem emerged, like living stone from behind the threshold. Another appeared, and then and another, until all five were ranged around them.

"Come back and fight me, you coward," Astrid snarled, "Or I'll make them bring you back. Or bits of you, anyway."

With a shriek, he charged her, waving his sword like a roasting spit. She parried it aside. He thrust again, and she parried it to the other side, smirking. Then the heavy serrated blade flash past his face and tore into his throat, nearly beheading him. He tried for some last words, but merely drooled. Then he collapsed, face-first.

Astrid pursed her lips, considering the body. It was not as complete a revenge as killing Bhelen, of course, but Bhelen was her brother, and not doing so badly as king. As Paragon she was not the servant of the law, but above it, which was a very nice place to be. Yes, she could leave Bhelen where he was for now. His stooge would disappear, and he could stew about it.

She shrugged, and gave Rune a command. "The surfacers like to burn their dead. Throw him in the lava stream."

There was a hiss of sublimating flesh and blood. The golden light of the lava dimmed in places, burning, stinking of bone and leather. After awhile, it shone clean again.

"So being a Paragon is a good thing, I take it?" Velanna asked, with a touch of acid. The celebration at the Warden's hostel continued the festivities at the Palace. Astrid made a late entrance, a bit ruffled, but in high good humor.

"A very good thing," she replied, practicing her future discussions with Bronwyn on the Dalish mage. "It gives us a great deal more leverage over Orzammar in the matter of troops and weaponry. We're no longer dependent on

Bhelen's moods, which, confidentially, can be bloody-minded. Yes, it's a very good thing. We're in with the Assembly, in with the Shaperate, and in with the casteless. Some of them might well volunteer to join the Wardens."

"I thought you were going to declare yourself Queen, as Bronwyn plans to do," said Ailil. "A Paragon is not a Queen, but more... like a hahren?"

Askil and Falkor hid their smiles.

"More like a Keeper," Astrid said. "A Paragon is a living ancestor, revered by all dwarves for their wisdom and their contributions to dwarven life. We lead by example, but are free of the day-to-day political grubbing of mere kings and queens. And the word of the Paragon is worth more than all the rest of the deshyrs put together."

"It makes it impossible for Assembly to be deadlocked," Falkor said, quite seriously. "No one can prevent us from pushing forward our plans for the defenses against the darkspawn. Velanna, there are other elven mages in Orzammar. If you could give them a bit of training..."

"Why do these elvhen live under the earth?" Velanna demanded, rather indignantly. "It is no place for an elf!"

"Nonetheless, they do," Astrid said. "Some have escaped from mage Circles... some are apostates from Alienages, who've avoided the Templars. For all I know some may be Dalish survivors of extinct clans. None are unwelcome in the dwarven realm. We will be here a few more days, organizing the colonists. Why don't you seek out these



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elves? Some might wish to join us."

"It is very odd," Velanna muttered. "How could they not miss the Sun?"

Hundreds of people volunteered to join House Gytha, even after it became known that she was accepting a group of the casteless. These would be sorted out according to their abilities: those who passed certain standards would be declared warrior caste outright; others would be juniors of the smith caste; the rest would be servant caste, which was still infinitely superior to having no standing at all.

Astrid also made the proclamation that her brother and sister Wardens would be honorary members of the House Gytha as well, and did not distinguish between dwarf, elf, and human in this regard. In fact, she even mentioned a Qunari comrade-in-arms who was to be given the courtesies of the House if he ever came to Orzammar.

It took many days to put together the colonization expedition, but at last Astrid was ready to lead her people out.

Bhelen was overjoyed to be seeing her off — he hoped to battle and death. The event was quite a festive, ceremonious one. Bhelen gave the Paragon the reverence custom demanded, and Astrid patted him on the head.

"Good luck to you, little brother. Try not to destroy the kingdom while I'm gone."

"I think Orzammar will fare quite well in your absence, sister. Do give my regards to Warden-Commander Bronwyn when you see her. I'm sure she'll be interested in your



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activities. I do seem to recall what she did to the last Paragon who crossed her path."

Yes! He was sure he saw her smile slip for a second. It was a relief to know that Bronwyn was not party to Gytha's plots. Bhelen hoped his sister would get in heaps of trouble with her commander.

Too quickly, her mask was back in place.

"The last I heard, Bronwyn was engaged in making herself Queen of Ferelden. She's no hypocrite. I hardly think she'll disapprove of anyone gaining her just deserts."

"And may you get your just deserts, too, sister," Bhelen said, smilingly. "Very soon."



"Movement ahead, Paragon!" called a scout. They were a day into their march back along the Amgarrak Road.

"Form ranks!" Astrid shouted, and was gratified with how quickly and efficiently her people fell into their defensive formation, with the wagons and noncombatants to the center.

Moving three hundred seventy-four dwarven colonists, four Wardens, sixty-odd soldiers of the Legion of the Dead, and five auxiliary elves, along with all the necessary paraphernalia, was a very different matter from leading a simple fighting unit. There were even a few children amongst the settlers: precious children, in Astrid's view. Dwarves needed to have many more children, and they needed to stop throwing away those children who were of insufficiently exalted castes. None of her people were to be considered casteless.



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Some might bear the brand of the Dust Town, but there would be no Dust Town in Amgarrak Thaig.

Nor in Kal'Hirol, for that matter. Bhelen was explicit about that, and Astrid agreed with him. If the casteless failed to make a go of their chance in the colonies, it would not be for lack of support from their leaders.

She glanced back over her people. There were some survivors of the Carta among them, clutching their weapons, their faces fierce and determined. No one was here against his will — that was something Astrid had insisted on, when Bhelen demanded she take her share of Dusters. If they wanted to stay in Dust Town, they were welcome to it, though the old Carta headquarters was lost to them.

The new comers were coming up to the place where the Road curved. There were shouts and the sound of weapons and armor. The dwarven archers tensed. Astrid listened, and then smiled.

"Stand down!"

A familiar voice echoed off the walls of the Deep Roads.

"Astrid? Is that you?"

"Bronwyn?"

The two forces met, glad not to be fighting darkspawn instead. Bronwyn gave Astrid a hug. Tara, just behind her, hugged her, too. Loghain watched with admirable patience, until Bronwyn brought Astrid over to speak to him.

"A great many things have happened since we last saw one another," said Bronwyn. "Loghain and I are King and



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Queen of Ferelden!"

"Well done!" Astrid flashed a smile, pleased for her friend. "Greetings to you then, Your Majesties!"

Falkor stepped forward, grinning, "And Astrid," he said, "is now a Paragon of Orzammar!"

"A Paragon?" Tara said, amazed. Bronwyn raised a quizzical brow.

Astrid smirked, pleased beyond measure. "The Assembly was happy about the thaigs."

They set up camp along the road, and the two parties had much to talk about.

"Quite a crowd you have following you," Loghain remarked. "A lot of campfollowers and support units."

"There's a reason for that," Astrid explained. "We going to fortify Amgarrak Thaig and move into Kal'Hirol to clean it up and make it defensible. I'm bringing some colonists, too. The Assembly has agreed to some serious building along the Amgarrak Road."

Loghain thought that only sensible and proper, and said so. Astrid, in her turn, was curious.

"Why are you traveling the Deep Roads?"

"For the same reason you are, essentially," replied Loghain. "We're avoiding the weather. Since the darkspawn have largely withdrawn, this is the quickest way to cross northern Ferelden. We're on our way to Gherlen's Halt."

They shared maps and discussed routes. Gherlen's Halt was only a day away, but the nearest access point to the surface



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had not been used in many an age and was near the mouth of the mouth of the River Gherlen, where it emptied into Lake Calenhad. It would still be a surface walk of some hours to the fort. A meal was prepared, and afterwards, Bronwyn casually asked Astrid to come for a walk with her. Loghain waved them away, scowling, engrossed in a dwarven map. The two women strolled through the camp, talking of their adventures. When they were out of earshot, Bronwyn had a question.

"Are you leaving the Wardens?"

"Are you?"

"No. Queen or not, the Blight is my first priority."

"And mine as well. I now have sufficient power to force the dwarves to focus on fighting the darkspawn, rather than fighting each other for influence in the Assembly."

"How is your brother taking your rise to glory? He did not — forgive me for pointing what must be obvious to you — he did not seem like one who would be so in awe of a Paragon as to cease his plotting. When he sent me after Branka, he told me that if she would not support him, I should kill her."

"He won't cease his plotting: no. But nor shall I. I also remember that King Valtor did not scruple to turn a Paragon into a golem. Bhelen will always be dangerous, but for now I have control over him. I am a Paragon: I have my own house, I have great wealth, I control the Assembly, and I have two thaigs to command. I have five golems to defend me from Bhelen's assassins. For now, he will not move against me. Bhelen, whatever else he is, is no fool.



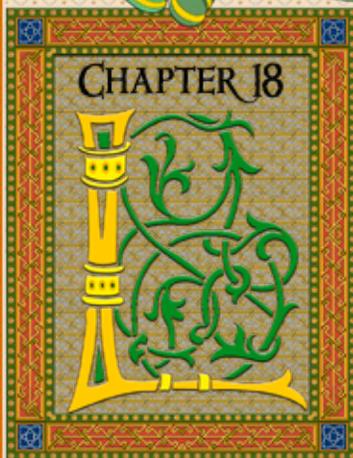
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He knows that the darkspawn are the great danger, the real danger. Whatever he plans against me, he will stay his hand until the Blight is over. As will I."



KING BHELEN OF ORZAMMAR

CHAPTER 18

BROSCA AND
THE AVVARS

LOGHAIN HAD NOT VISITED GHERLEN'S HALT IN OVER THREE YEARS. He thought well enough of Ser Blayne Faraday not to

tell him his business, under ordinary circumstances. These, of course, were not ordinary circumstances. He had set up his office at the fort, and was conducting business in his usual no-nonsense manner.

The march from the Deep Roads exit to the fortress had been hard, and had taken most of a day. It was hard on men, hard on horses and dogs, and hard on everyone's temper. Without the strength of Shale, they would have been forced to leave their supply wagon behind.

Loghain had sent a messenger ahead, warning Faraday of the arrival of the King and Queen. Faraday had been surprised by the visit; not so surprised that Loghain now ruled in Ferelden. Happy enough with it, apparently. With the extra supplies, the garrison was able to enjoy fairly good cheer for First Day.

Ser Norrel Haglin was here, too, of course, and doing

admirable work. Loghain had always thought well of the man, though Bronwyn obviously had little use for anyone who had dared to call himself Bann of Highever City.

After the march, it was a relief to be here, though, and safe. The fort was fairly well supplied, but Ser Norrel Haglin's troops had made inroads into the foodstuffs. It was necessary to relay orders to West Hill, requisitioning additional victuals and weapons.

Along with the fortress of West Hill, Gherlen's Halt was another place where the Glavonak's inventions could do good service. During the Harvestmere attacks, damage had been done to the lower walls and the main gate. Faraday had done quite a bit to repair them in the time he had before the weather grew too harsh. Loghain thought that laying some of Dworkin's explosive grenades in the ditch, to be set off by tripwires, would have a most enjoyable outcome.

The Orlesians were keeping up the pretense that the attacks had been the work of mercenaries, but that pretense was thin indeed. Faraday's scouts included some excellent rangers and mountaineers, and they had observed comings and goings from Roc du Chevalier that confirmed that the attackers were receiving support from the commandant, Berthold de Guesclin. Like the assassination attempts, the attack on Gherlen's Halt had obviously been approved at the highest level.

A clerk appeared at the door.

"The rangers are here, Your Majesty."



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Loghain glanced up. "Send them in, and then ask the Queen to join us."

The rangers were good men – Avvar tribesmen, named Ostap and Bustrum – trusted by Faraday, and they had scouted quite a bit of the area near Roc de Chevalier. They used peculiar devices called snowshoes to traverse the rugged, snowy hills, and had managed to slip over the border and have a look at the Orlesian movements along the Imperial Highway. Not much was on the road at the moment, save some supply wagons from Jader. There was an entrance to the fortress on the Orlesian side, which, though well defended, was not as formidable as the one facing Ferelden.

Bronwyn slipped in during the rangers' report and listened quietly. She was, in fact, one of the few Fereldans Loghain knew who had actually been inside Roc de Chevalier and lived to tell of it. There had been others – agents of his – who had infiltrated in the guise of servants, and had created a fairly complete plan of the place. They had gone back for more information, and had never returned, so Loghain presumed they were dead. For that matter, the agents had never been inside the commandant's personal office, and Bronwyn had.

The Avvars had been somewhere else that interested Loghain. Bronwyn's head shot up at Loghain's next question.

"When were you last in Jader?"

"Last spring, Lord King," said the taller of the two. "The market there is good for furs and spider silk. Once the



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dwarves began their quarrels and sealed Orzammar, we were forced to trade elsewhere. The City Guard in Jader is vigilant for things of value, and took a portion of our goods for themselves, but we still made good coin."

"Not that we left with any," grunted his stocky friend. "Jader also has many places to *spend* coin, and when one plays games of chance, the house always wins."

Loghain snorted, "That's true anywhere. However, I'm not sending you to Jader for pleasure. I expect you to keep your eyes and ears open, and to do nothing to attract the notice of the authorities."

"They will not let us through the gates, King, if we have nothing of value. They are hard men, and do not suffer beggars to enter their city."

Bronwyn said, "I daresay they will let you in if your pouches are well-filled with gold."

"That is true, Lady," agreed the stocky one, making a reverence to her, "but they would call us bandits, and hang us, and take the coin. They would say that a pair of Avvars could not have come by a bag of gold honestly, and that is indeed true."

Loghain frowned, thinking. Bronwyn said, "But what if you came as the bodyguards of a merchant, seeking shelter within the city?" She smiled at Loghain's glare.

"Absolutely not," he growled. "Don't even consider it."

"I'm not," she assured him with a light laugh. "I know I could never play the merchant. However, we are blessed with those who could. Yes, a sturdy dwarven merchant,



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with a pair of stout Avvar bodyguards. Why would Jader not be delighted to take *their* coin?"

Brosca, when summoned and sounded, was thrilled at the idea of sneaking into Jader.

"Hey, I'm from the big city," she bragged. "I know the score. I know Orzammar and now I know Denerim. I'm not scared of Jader. Leliana said the buildings are greenstone. Sounds pretty. I can deal with that. I can hang out at the taverns and listen to the talk. I've done that sort of thing a zillion times. It's like the old days in the Carta!"

Had Leliana been with them, Bronwyn would have preferred to send her, but admitted to herself that Loghain would have vetoed the idea. He was perfectly happy to leave Leliana at Soldier's Peak, far from the Orlesian border. On the other hand, he liked and trusted Brosca to some degree, and believed that she was the best for the job. Knowing how Orlesians treated elves and mages, Bronwyn was reluctant to send Zevran and Tara.

"It's a two day journey to Jader in this weather," said Loghain. "Especially as they have to go round about the hills and over some rough terrain. Camping overnight will be risky."

"I know a hunting lodge where they can stay," Bronwyn told him. "There is a place northwest of here. It's sheltered and out of the way. Brosca has been there, though perhaps she might have trouble finding it again. Perhaps Anders should go ahead and see if he can see it from the air."



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Brosca would use her first name, Freydis, since word might have spread about a Warden Brosca. The Avvars knew where the Wardens lived in Jader, and Brosca was instructed to stay as far from the place as possible, lest a fellow Warden sense her presence.

"What I want you to listen for," Loghain said, "are rumors of troop movements, of a fleet gathering, of any plans against Ferelden. It might come from the Orlesians, or from the Chantry itself."

"I don't give two hoots about the Chantry," Brosca shrugged. "I don't know what their problem is. Bronwyn's obviously got an in with that goddess of yours."

Ostap nodded, very seriously. "We have heard of this. We hold to the gods of our fathers, but clearly Andraste is powerful, and those who have earned her favor are to be revered." Bustrum glanced at Bronwyn and reddened, lowering his head in respect.

Bronwyn bit her lip, trying not to laugh. Loghain was totally unamused.

"I suggest you not say such things in Jader," he growled. "The Chantry would arrest you."

"What's wrong with saying Andraste's powerful?" Brosca asked, confused.

Bronwyn tried to explain. "Priests are very, very particular about the words you use. Andraste is a Prophet, not a goddess. The Chantry only recognizes one god, and that is the Maker."

The two Avvars rolled their eyes. Brosca still looked blank.



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"And whatever you do, don't say that I have an 'in' with Andraste or the Maker," Bronwyn went on hastily. "The Orlesians don't like me. It would probably be a good idea if you didn't say anything nice about me."

Loghain snorted. "It would be best if you didn't mention her at all, in fact."

"Right, I get it," Brosca said, "The Orlesians are the bad guys, and their priests are full of shit. We are but harmless traders, looking for a good time in Jader. We hit the high spots and the low spots, pretend to be drunk, and see what's going on. I can handle it. Piece of cake."

It wasn't: not really. They had to get to the gates of Orzammar, where the Frostback Fair was closed for the winter. The tavern would still open for business, as well as the livery stable. There they would pick up a small wagon and a pair of mules. The Avvars, fortunately, knew how to drive.

Once they had the wagon, they had a long way over rough roads to pass the Jader Bay Hills, get to the Imperial Highway across country, and reach the city. Anders agreed to go with them at least part of the way, and find the hunting lodge where they had held the Joining. Morrigan then insisted on going with him, which Bronwyn thought rather sweet, though the forbidding look on Morrigan's face prevented her saying so. It seemed that Morrigan was determined to protect Anders from any danger.

The mages, once some distance from the fort, flew in their bird forms, while the Avvars introduced Brosca to the



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delights of snowshoeing. It was a long walk to the Frostback settlement. The livery stable owner had a four-wheeled wagon rather than a two-wheeled cart, but they had to take what they could. The party spent the night in the nearly empty inn, and then moved on to the northwest.

"I was in such a daze those first few days on the surface, I'm not sure what I remember," Brosca admitted.

Anders was more confident. "I know I can find it. If all else fails, I'll spot it from above."

He and Morrigan rose up: their feathers black and brown against the white of the snow. The hawk followed the raven, soaring through the hills. The fork in the road was still hidden by a thick pine wood, but the little wooden house and stable were still standing. They appeared to be vacant, as no smoke was rising from the chimney.

The birds alighted on a nearby tree and took a good look about. Morrigan flew to an open window, its shutter creaking in the wind. She hopped from the sill and then flew around to the door. Changing into her human form, she entered the house.

Anders dropped to the ground and shifted. "Morrigan! Wait!" He dashed to the doorway, and found Morrigan already inspecting the shabby interior.

"Someone was here not long ago," Morrigan pointed out, looking with distaste at the filth the squatters had left behind. "Hunters, I daresay, from the mess they made here." She went into the pantry and then walked out again.



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"Disgusting! They relieved themselves in there!"

She shouldered Anders aside and set about cleaning the ashes from the hearth. "Close the shutters," she commanded, "and see if there is any wood for a fire."

If nothing else, there were some broken boards in the stable. Anders used a force spell to shatter them into pieces. Once the fire was going well, he shifted again, and flew off looking for their companions. The wagon was moving far more slowly, and along one stretch of road, the Avvars were forced to get out of the wagon and help push it uphill. Anders swooped down on them, cawing, and shifted to human form. Brosca laughed out loud. The Avvars were impressed.

"That is a noble skill, mage," said Ostap. "If you weary of being a Grey Warden, you and your woman would be welcome among our folk."

"Thanks!" Anders said, pleased with them and himself. "I'll bear that in mind."

By the time the wagon reached the hunting lodge, Morrigan had a good fire going, and the cold inside had lost its edge. She found a willow broom and furiously, muttering curses, she swept out ashes, bits of hide and bone, and other souvenirs of the last tenants' visit. She found the well, broke the surface ice, and brought in a pail of clear water. If not luxurious, the lodge was habitable for the night. If Flemeth had taught her nothing else — and she had — Morrigan knew how to work hard.



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"Yeah, I remember this place!" Brosca beamed, looking about the lodge. "Good times had by all! We had a really tasty stew here, and hot cider. I'd never had that before. It was really good."

Morrigan fussed a little, annoyed at the lack of privacy. The lodge had a loft, but it was low-roofed and too creaky for safety. They camped for the night and prepared a substantial meal. The following morning, the Avvars agreed that it would be wise to clean the place somewhat, erasing the signs of their visit. Morrigan and Anders took to the skies, scouting out the rough road that led from the hills in the direction of the Imperial Highway. It was a circuitous route, but a dwarven trader would attract no notice there. The wagon trundled forth, and soon was a little toy-like image in the distance. Their part of the mission complete, Anders and Morrigan flew back to Gherlen's Halt directly, taking the precaution to shift back into human form out of sight of the fort. They were able to report that Brosca was on her way.

Loghain was busy, planning yet more renovations to the Fort: novel, vicious improvements to standard defenses. Bronwyn had a different scheme before her, and by the time Anders and Morrigan returned and rested, she was almost ready to put it into action.

The access point they had used to reach Gherlen's Halt was close to Aeducan Thaig, which Bronwyn had previously explored and which was clear by the time she

finished with it, some months ago. Admittedly, the darkspawn might have returned, but that would be contrary to their experience so far. Studying the map, she looked at the network of roads around Orzammar. The road to Aeducan thaig, of course, was south, and was the route taken by all dwarves striking out in the Deep Roads. However, there were other, more ancient pathways.

The road that led west from Orzammar was blocked now, and the barrier door never opened. However, it was possible to reach it from the other side by going west from Aeducan Thaig. When one reached the turn in the road that led south to Caridin's Cross, one could continue west, instead. A branch of the roads led up toward the Imperial Highway and stopped abruptly. One could also keep heading west toward another ancient thaig.

Rousten Thaig, so close to Orzammar, had not been lost in early Blights, but was abandoned now. At some point there had been an access point to the surface, which the dwarves used to deal with the elves of the Dales. Laying her onionskin map of the Deep Roads over her map of Thedas, it was indeed clear that the access point was not far from the ancient elven city of Halamshiral.

Bronwyn was not sure she wanted to go that far. Jukka thought it possible that they might find another, closer exit to the surface.

"This whole stretch is pretty close to the surface, anyway—see the elevation, Commander? Look here, right at the Soli-

dor Pass, where the Frostbacks peter out. The Highway runs through it. I don't think they planned a way to the surface there, but there could have been a collapse, like the one at Kal'Hirol. Or we might be able to break through ourselves."

A secret route to the surface just over the Orlesian border would have obvious advantages. Bronwyn planned to take her Wardens and the Legion and look into it. Loghain was all for it. "Wouldn't the *Orlesian* Wardens know about it?"

Bronwyn kept her smile unseen. It was impossible for Loghain to say the word 'Orlesian' without snarling it.

"I don't know. It depends on how diligently they've studied the maps in the Shaperate. That's where our information comes from. I know nothing about any explorations made by Orlesian Wardens. When I was in Orzammar, no one spoke of having seen any other Wardens there recently, which I think is odd. One fellow at Tapster's Tavern mentioned Duncan. I get the impression that everyone goes through the front door at Orzammar, rather than looking for the old entryways, but of course I really know very little about how the Wardens actually function." She shrugged. "If I run into Orlesian Wardens, I have a perfect right to be in the Deep Roads."

"Well," Loghain sat back in his chair, tapping his fingers on the writing table. "See if you can find us a way into Orlais not too far from the border. I'd like it best, if we could get near Chateau Solidor. We could completely ignore the Rock: close it up, dry up its supply lines, starve



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it out." He saw her exasperated look and waved her objections away. "I'm not proposing starting anything. If the *Orlesians* do, we'll want options."

Brosca enjoyed the journey with Ostap and Bustrum. They were good, solid fellows, and she never objected to a lot of muscle on a man. They told her about the best taverns, and she told them about Tapster's in Orzammar and the snobby Gnawed Noble in Denerim. At the end of a long, hard day, they saw the towers of Jader in the distance, and beyond it, the flat grey expanse of the Waking Sea.

"Who runs this place, anyway?" Brosca wondered, drinking from her fine, looted silver flask, a trophy of Kal'Hiroi.

"The Marquis of Jader... Marquis Bohémond de Mauvoisin-en-Fermin," essayed Bustrum, stumbling over the nasals.

Brosca snorted brandy through her nose. "You're kidding, right? What's a markee, anyway?"

Bustrum shrugged. "No, I swear by the Mountain Father: that's the bastard's name... or as close as I can get. A Marquis is like an Arl, I think. Some sort of rotten Orlesian noble. Korth knows the Fereldans can be bad enough! This one wears a fancy mask with jewels."

"Why? Is he that ugly?"

"All rich Orlesians wear masks. Too good to show their faces to the likes of us," said Ostap, shrugging.

"If that doesn't beat all!" Brosca marveled. "I like seeing new things. Are these jeweled masks... valuable?"



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The men grinned, but Bustrum said, "It's worth your head to take a noble's mask."

"Is it now?"

As they came nearer, and the sun drooped lower in the western sky, Brosca admired the city walls. High, thick, and stony they were, with watchtowers spaced out at frequent intervals. The gate they were headed toward was heavily guarded with really big guards. In comparison, Brosca felt fairly small. It helped her put on her humble merchant persona, which was all to the good.

Everyone entering the city was stopped and questioned. Everyone had to pay. Some poor folk — elves, peasants — were turned away, and when they protested, pleading the cold, they were driven back with fists and sword pommels.

"That's friendly," muttered Brosca.

"That's Orlais," grunted Ostap. "It's why we don't come here much." He drove the mules forward into the queue at the gate, and they waited to be questioned and fleeced in their turn.

"Eh! Baudin! Look at the little flower between the two great oafs — pardon, I meant 'oaks.'

His partner sniggered. "Good one, Thibaut!" He smirked at Brosca. "So, *Nainette*, you wish to enter Jader?"

"That's the plan. Can you bold soldiers recommend a good inn?"

Thibaut looked into the wagon, poking at the scanty contents: a few furs, rustic woodcarvings, and a skein of spidersilk. "Business not so good, *hein?*"



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"Could be better, could be worse. I need to rest the mules, have a long hot bath, and restock with trade goods for the rubes up in the hills."

The guards chuckled, not unsympathetically. Thibault said, "First you must pay the gate tax. Ten silver."

Ostap pretended outrage. "The last time I came here, you only charged me two!"

Baudin fixed him with a contemptuous smirk. "Did you have a cart?"

"Yes."

"How many wheels?"

"Two."

"Ha!" Thibault spread his hand. "The price is higher per head and per axle. Ten silver, or go back to the hills and eat snow."

"Fine, fine," Brosca had a separate pouch for silver, and kept her gold in a money belt under her apron. She counted ten silver into Ostap's vast fist. "Pay the man."

"Ah-ah," Baudin wagged a finger. "Perhaps you do not understand. It is ten silvers for *each* of us."

"You could give lessons to some Carta guys I know," Brosca sighed. "All right, another ten."

Thibault gave her a wink. "Try the Paragon's Cup by the Grand Bazaar. It is popular with dwarves, and the ale is not so completely piss as that of others."

They entered through a fortified gate area, and then to the gatehouse in the inner wall. Here they were held up again, this time for only ten silvers. Brosca had decided



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that Jader was a very expensive city, but admired the wide avenue in front of them. Bustrum told Brosca that this was the famous Voie D'Or – the Golden Road – that led all the way through the city to the Grand Bazaar, and then to a huge courtyard called La Place Emeraude, with the Chantry on the south side and the Marquis' palace opposite on the north.

"And to east and west, some noble houses that'll make your eyes pop," grunted Bustrum.

"What's that noise?" Brosca asked, stopping in her tracks. Carried on the air were musical notes, like a giant hand plucking a giant harp. "It's kind of... nice. Like music."

"Bells," said Bustrum. "The Chantry has these big bronze bells, and every hour they ring them. They're like bronze bowls with a bronze thing inside that hits them. They make different pitches depending on the size."

"That's a neat idea."

As they rode on, there were fine stone buildings that Brosca took for nobles' houses, until Ostap informed her that they were barracks. Passing them the other way were some splendid warriors on horseback, wearing shining armor like Loghain's, but with gorgeous masks covering their faces. Some were silver; some were gold; some were like the faces of animals, and some modeled into expressions of laughter or fury. Some had jeweled eyebrows, or were plumed with feathers, or were enameled in vivid colors, giving them faces that were half red and half blue.



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"Don't stare at them," warned Ostap. "Those are chevaliers. If they think you're disrespectful, they've got the right to skewer you on the spot."

"Wow. Makes me feel right at home."

It was a good thing that she was well-supplied with coin, because the Paragon's Cup was not a cheap inn. Despite that, Brosca liked it, because this really was a dwarven inn. The furniture was mostly dwarven-scaled, the chairs and benches low enough that her feet were firmly on the ground, not swinging free like a child's. The tables were also low enough that she had no fear of barking her chin on the edge. A few human-sized chairs were ranged around the walls for human customers. The innkeeper was a fat dwarf with an elaborately braided beard. His daughter worked the bar, and huddled by the fire sat the innkeeper's aged father, now past everything but lap robes and small beer. On the old man's withered cheek was a faded brand. Brosca's gaze paused at the sight of it.

What do you know? Another Duster who made it out!

Brosca looked around the room and saw other marked dwarves. Here and there she saw some who had tried to hide their brands. One dwarf woman wore heavy cosmetics, but they could not disguise the area around her left eyebrow. Nobody here seemed to much care. Certainly Brosca herself roused no particular interest: a blunt-faced, stocky woman in unassuming garments. She sighed a little, imagining the reaction her beautiful sister Rica would arouse.



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It cost plenty to put up the mules and store the wagon in the inn's stable, and then there was the matter of their own lodgings. Brosca insisted she only wanted one room, and that she and her 'guards' would share it. There were raised eyebrows and some shocked whispers, but Brosca sneered at them, and downed her fancy foreign ale, indifferent to the opinions of these Orlesianized dwarves. The food was pretty good, too. Her companions found sufficiently large chairs, and dragged them over to Brosca's table, sitting sideways, since their knees would not fit underneath.

Obedient to orders, Brosca kept an ear open to gossip. Right now, the talk was not about Orlais, but about Orzammar.

"At last we've got ourselves a new Paragon! Ancestors be praised! Paragon Astrid has cleansed the Deep Roads!"

Brosca resisted the urge to correct the drunk, since only one Road was clear, and Astrid had not exactly done it all single-handed. Brosca liked Astrid, but she was hardly due that much credit. It had been something of a shock to learn she'd been made a Paragon. Not that it mattered, as long as Bhelen was still king, and little Endrin was still the heir. Luckily, other voices were already challenging such exaggerated praise.

"How long do you think the Amgarrak Road will be free of darkspawn, Gorbat? Going to try your luck in Kal'Hirol?"

"Why not?" slurred Gorbat. "The Paragon has taken Dusters with her, and they will be given caste and clan as payment for good service! Why shouldn't she take surfacers?"



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"As servants, I reckon. You want to go?" sneered the challenger. "So go. Guess you won't be needing that fine house in Forge Alley anymore."

"Or his fine wife, either," gibed another. "Leave her to me!" The dwarf made a brief, explicit gesture, and Gorbat lunged at him, spilling chairs, table, men and drinks to the floor.

"None of that!" roared the innkeeper, hefting a maul. "Boys! Throw the drunk out or I'll bash him!"

A pair of bouncers grabbed Gorbat by the arms and dragged him away from the bar.

"Hey!" he protested. "I paid for that drink!"

"Fine," said the innkeeper, "Here!" And tossed the brandy in his face.

Wet and angry, Gorbat was thrust outside, and the door slammed.

Into the laughter, Brosca said, "Ah, peace and quiet at last. Tell me more about this Paragon. I've been out in the boonies."

Some of the story was just about right. They knew that Astrid was an Aeducan, and the king's sister. They knew she was a Grey Warden. Lowering their voices, they revealed that she was the best friend of the fabled Girl Warden, the Dragonslayer. Brosca made a face to herself at this part. Astrid wasn't a bit better friend of Bronwyn's than Brosca herself.

"Right," said the loudest talker. "It's the Stone's own truth. The Paragon is best friends with the Girl Warden, and she's now the Queen of Ferelden. I tell you, we've got better



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times ahead, now that we've got some people on top who know how to fight darkspawn!"

There were rumbles of agreement, while Brosca mentally headslapped herself.

Shit!

Shit! Nobody thought to tell the Wardens and Legion who went to Orzammar to shut up about Bronwyn becoming Queen!

Dwarves were the worst gossips in the world. Of course the Legion had told everybody about their adventures with Bronwyn. What Brosca didn't quite get was how news of Bronwyn had slipped over into Orlais.

But that would be the dwarves again. Orzammar was not far from Jader, and there would have been talk about Bronwyn when she was in Orzammar, settling the business of the King; and then again, as couriers went between the army and the King. The Orlesians must know plenty about Bronwyn. They knew where she was when they sent assassins after her, anyway.

Apparently, it was gossip people had to be careful about. The innkeeper interrupted the story, sullen about it, since he liked a good tale as much as anybody.

"Sod the Girl Warden! Talking about her will just bring the Guard down on my inn."

"What's wrong with her?" Brosca asked boldly. "Aren't Wardens supposed to fight darkspawn?"

A dwarf woman sniggered. "Fereldans aren't supposed to be any good at it! They were supposed to come crawling



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to the Empress for help!"

"Right!" roared the innkeeper. "One more word, Myrta, and you'll follow Gorbat out the door!"

Myrta put up her hands in mock submission, and started a card game with the people at her table, grumbling. From outside came the muffled sound of bells again, playing another tune, and then striking the same tone repeatedly to tell the hour. Brosca could not remember if they had anything like that in Denerim. The Wardens' Compound was far from the Cathedral, and Brosca certainly had not heard beautiful tunes in the air.

Another handful of dwarves came in after the bell song, talking about their day. Apparently they were working down at the docks, building something or adding to something, and there were a lot of technical problems.

"Hard to lay stone proper in the cold," one complained. "The mortar isn't drying right. I told that fool Thierry that we should wait until the end of Guardian, but he claims that it has to be *done* by then. Humans are idiots about stonework!"

Hearty agreement and hearty drinking followed. Brosca gave her Avvar companions a wink, and told them to move to a table of their own. If she was drinking alone, someone was more likely to come and sit down with her. Once again she sighed. If she looked like Rica, everybody would be wanting to sit with her. She might even get a free drink.

"Mind if I sit here?"

Brosca gaped at one of the stonemason crew. He was



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youngish, with a soft pale beard and mild blue eyes. He had stone dust under his fingernails that he hadn't quite succeeding in scrubbing away. A mason, for sure.

"Suit yourself."

"I haven't seen you here before."

"Never been here before. I've been trading in the hills. My first time in Jader."

"Well! That calls for a celebration. Let me buy you a drink!"

To Brosca's astonishment, he actually did just that.

"The name's Torvald."

She gaped at him again, before replying, "Freydis." Unconsciously, she touched the mark on her face. The young dwarf noticed it.

"Nobody cares about that, up here on the surface. Freydis. Nice name. Here. Jader brown porter, coming up. When did you get out of Orzammar?"

Brosca snorted. "Am I that obvious?"

"Pretty much," he said cheerfully. "This year, right? Deep down dwarves have that look in their eyes."

When lying, you should always stay as close to the truth as possible. "Yeah," Brosca said. "I'd managed to put a bit of coin together, and I was never going to be able to do anything with it in Dust Town, so I walked out the door. I bought a wagon off an old human guy, and tried trading for the past few months." She jerked her head toward Ostap and Bustrum. "Those two are my guards. I've done all right, but this whole weather thing kind of came as a



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shock. I mean, really – frozen bits of water coming down everywhere! The unfrozen kind is bad enough when it falls on your head.”

They both laughed. Torvald said, “I’m surface born myself, but I’ve heard my grandfather complain about weather often enough. Actually we surfacers complain about the weather all the time. It’s like a spectator sport, since we can’t do anything about it.”

“So what’s it like, here in Jader?” Brosca asked. “I’ve tried the countryside, but I thought I’d try a human city, too, and see if I can do better here.”

He made a face. “Human city? I suppose you could describe it that way. The humans are in charge, for the most part. Actually, they’re a minority. If you add everybody else together, there are more dwarves and elves in Jader than humans. You must have noticed all the dwarves on the street around here. The Paragon’s Cup is on the edge of the dwarven quarter.”

“Is Forge Alley in the dwarven quarter?”

“Yeah. You know somebody who lives there? That’s expensive.”

“No, I just heard people talking about it. I didn’t see any walls or gates around this place.”

“You mean like the Alienage? Stone preserve us! The humans wouldn’t dare treat the dwarves like they do the elves! They need us to keep the city running. Without us the plumbing wouldn’t work and the walls would collapse!”

“I can believe that,” she agreed, her voice dry. “From



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what I’ve seen, the humans are good mostly for putting the screws to people for money. They got thirty silver off me at the gates!”

“Ouch! You must have looked prosperous to them. The City Guard are pretty greedy, but mostly they stay bought once you buy them.”

“How about this Marquis guy? Is he all right, or is he like the usual deshyr bastards?”

Torvald barked a nervous laugh. “Is not like I know him personally!” He lowered his voice. “Full of himself like all the nobility. Doesn’t pay his bills on time – he ordered new armor from my cousin Jervyk two years ago, and still hasn’t paid for it. But that’s the nobles for you. I’ve heard of tailors and dress-makers who went out of business because the nobles wouldn’t pay up. The best maskmaker in town tried to start a policy of cash on delivery, and the nobles raised such a stink about it that the Marquis ordered a mask, and then walked off with it, telling the woman to send him a bill. ”

“Why do people put up with it? Why not go to another city?”

He shrugged. “It’s Orlais. All the cities here are like that. It’s a big deal to uproot yourself and your business and start over. I’m luckier than most. My uncle Magruk over there – he’s got the contract for the improvements to the docks, and if he and his crew don’t get paid, we down tools. The Marquis nearly ordered him beheaded the first time, but he really wants this project done, so the wages have been fairly steady. Afterwards...” he blew out a



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breath. "Well, Uncle is talking about Kirkwall."

"What about Ferelden? Isn't that closer?"

"I suppose. There's a lot of money in Kirkwall, though." The young dwarf turned red, embarrassed that he had let so much slip about his uncle's troubles. In fact, Magruk Showat expected to be arrested and his assets confiscated on completion of his work in the dockyards. It was the Marquis' default remedy when he owed anyone too much coin. The family had a plan in place to take ship just as they received the next-to-last payment. The work would be incomplete, and they would forgo the promised bonuses, but his uncle knew that those were a lie, anyway. And they had not the least intention of going anywhere near Ferelden, having heard what was headed in that direction next spring.

"So... 'docks'..." Brosca paused, as if unused to the term. "Docks are where boats tie up? By the sea? I've never seen the sea. Is it big?"

"Is it big?" Torvald was amused. "Look, it's not dark yet! I'll show you the dockyard where I'm working. It's not for little boats, but huge warships! It's the biggest dockyard south of Par Vollen... or so I'm told. Finish your drink. It's not a bad walk."

He paid for the drinks, which still surprised Brosca, and they pushed back from their chairs. So did the two Avvars.

"My bodyguards," Brosca said, gesturing. "Ostap and Bustrum."

Torvald's eyes widened. "They're... big. Hi!" he smiled weakly, waving at the huge Avvars. He whispered to Brosca. "Do they have to come with us?"



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She whispered back. "They're *guards*. They can't *guard* me if they're not *with* me."

"Do you trust them?"

"They haven't slit my throat yet."

This was not exactly what Torvald had pictured, when he asked an attractive young dwarf woman to go walking with him. Behind them, looming like golems, were two huge and tattooed Avvar rangers. Torvald had seen Avvars before — mostly in the process of winning barfights — and had no intention of offending them. And in a way, it was fairly reassuring, after all. Jader appeared civilized, but was hard as nails beneath the mask. Outside, The sky was shading into sunset colors of rose and gold, and it was not so cold that a stroll was unpleasant.

Torvald, a native of Jader, could show Brosca the sights far more effectively than the Avvars. It was actually a lot of fun. From a street vendor, he bought a skewer of little spicy sausages for each of them, and they strolled along, munching.

"So," he asked, "Isn't it scary, traveling out in the hills by yourself with just those guards? I mean... don't you have... I mean, wouldn't it be easier if you had a husband... or something?"

"You're asking me why there is no man in my life?" The memory of Cullen struck her hard and twisted her smile. "I did. He's dead."

"Sorry."

"It's the past. What's that?" she asked, pointing to a grate at her feet.



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"Sewer drains. Jader has big pipes running under the street to take the runoff when there's a heavy rain. The sewers also take the night soil and filth from the middens and dump it out into the sea."

"How big are these pipes?"

"Big," said Torvald. "They have to be big enough for dwarves to get in and repair them."

"That's interesting." Brosca found the fact that there was a maze of tunnels under the city very interesting indeed.

"What's that gate down there?"

"That's the Alienage. You don't want to go there. The elves are practically feral, I'm told. Every so often the City Guard goes in there and thins them out."

Brosca threw him a glance. A nice guy, but somebody who believed everything he was told. He wouldn't last a minute in Dust Town. When Torvald turned back in her direction, she pasted a smile on her face.

He pointed out the Grain Exchange, and the Guildhall, and took her through Forge Alley, to see the high-class dwarven houses.

"See? They're built just like Orzammar!"

"Er... Yeah." She rolled her eyes. Clearly, he had never been in Orzammar. This was a fantasy version. With a sky. And no lava. "It's nice." That much was true.

It was cleaner than Denerim, for sure. Coming through an archway, they found themselves back on the Voie d'Or. Within a few steps it abruptly opened up into a vast open



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square, dominated by a pair of huge, magnificent edifices.

"Whoa!" Brosca was genuinely impressed. "They're really... green..."

"Genuine greenstone," Torvald assured her. "Really old dwarven construction. That's the Emerald Palace, where the Marquis lives. Up on that tallest tower, they say the Marquis has a pleasure garden, when he can walk without have to look at common folk."

It was quite the tower, Brosca agreed. Nowhere as tall as Fort Drakon in Denerim, and in a far more decorated style, punctuated with balconies and bas-reliefs. The Palace boasted a pair of shorter towers as well, which were obviously used for keeping watch.

Torvald pointed in the other direction, at a massive structure crowned with a bell tower than soared over the city. This, obviously, was where the bell sounds had come from.

"And that's the Chantry, where the humans worship Andraste. Masons come here to study the designs. Now and then it needs repair, too. My uncle's worked on it. There was a huge storm back in 9:24, and a lightning strike melted the lead sheathing up on the roof. " He pointed. "The lead poured down and killed two priests. Really... it coated them in molten lead, and smiths had to melt it again to get the women out to burn them. Not that they needed it by that time. We can go inside the Chantry if you like."

"Maybe later. I'm really excited about seeing the sea." For a moment, she felt a familiar buzzing sensation, but it was



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weak, and she was too distracted by all the sights to worry about it.

Across the street, a pair of Grey Wardens stopped, puzzled, and looked about.

"Did you feel that, Constant?"

"Yes. But who —?"

The man's gaze wandered up and down the street. He saw no Warden brothers, but only a well-off woman and her young daughters, a pair of big Avvar barbarians, and a dwarven couple doing some window-shopping.

"Odd. I was sure I sensed another Warden."

Brosca peered into beautifully decorated windows. A lot of shops in Jader had glass windows and fancy goods displayed in them, which Brosca thought was completely crazy.

"What's to keep somebody from smashing the glass and grabbing that jewelry?"

Torvald was a little shocked.

"Well... at night they shutter the windows, and a lot of shops have guards. And in this part of town, the City Guard would come down pretty heavy on anybody who tried it."

"I see."

The sun had set by the time they reached the dockyards. Coming down some long, elaborate steps, they saw the vast extent of them spread out before them. Brosca did not have to pretend to be impressed. Many of the ships were in dry-



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dock, but some dared the cold. Nearby were merchantmen, broad and high-decked. Further on, beyond a low defensive wall, were a series of piers. To her right, jutting out from a retaining wall, were three large round stone tunnels, each of the mouths carved at the top with a coat of arms.

"Those are the sewer openings?" she asked Torvald.

"What's the fancy design?"

"That's the Jader coat of arms. It's a drake breathing fire."

"Neat. What are all those wooden platforms the other direction?"

"Those are the naval dockyards of the Imperial Eastern Fleet," Torvald told her. "That's where we're working. They need berths for a lot more ships."

"Can I see? Can we get close to the water?"

Rica could have pleaded with a lot more charm, of course. Brosca tried to remember all the tricks Rica's teachers had drummed into her. They seemed to be working.

"I guess. I think I can get you in, but the guards, no."

"I'll be all right," Brosca said to her Avvars, her face innocent as a new-born nug. "You guys get some more sausages while you're waiting."

The guard at the sea wall knew Torvald, but raised his brows at the girl with him.

"She's with me," said the dwarf.

"She looks harmless," shrugged the guard. Brosca gave him Rica's sweetest smile.

Brosca rubbed her hands with glee, once back in the



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privacy of her room at the inn.

"Too bad he has to work tomorrow!" she said. "What a nice guy!"

Ostap nodded sagely. "The Orlesians are building ships. Many warships."

"Not just warships!" Brosca sat on the bed, wrapping her arms around her knees, smug as a cat. "Lots of troop transports, too! I dithered and acted like a silly sight-seeking girl, and Torvald went on talking with that other dwarf at the docks. The guy said that 'everybody knows about the invasion.' And then they talked about improvements to the barracks to hold the troops they're expecting. Yeah, it's an invasion, and they're going to launch it from Jader!"

"We must report to Loghain right away!"

Brosca protested. "We just got here! I bet there's a lot more we can find out. Besides, Torvald gets the day after tomorrow off!"

But it was not to be.

"Brosca! Run faster!"

"I'm running as fast as I can! Turn here!"

It was always something. Just as she was eating breakfast, that pair of Wardens showed up, asking questions.

"Who are you? What are you doing in Jader?"

"I don't see that it's any of your business, pals."

Then it went downhill, with outraged squawks of "Spy!" and "Fereldan Dog!" And "Nug of a Dwarf!" which was actually pretty funny. Luckily, they had no idea that Ostap



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and Bustrum were with her.

Thus, it was no particular trouble to knock them in the head and throw them out the window. Brosca suspected that it was considered bad manners to kill other Wardens, but letting them catch a bit more sleep was only the friendly thing to do. The innkeeper lost his temper about the broken window, and Brosca and the Avvars took to their heels, dashing down the street, pursued by two bouncers, the innkeeper and his maul, and the yells of the innkeeper's daughter, wanting to know "who was going to pay for this?"

They rounded a corner, skidding on a patch of ice, and Brosca pointed, charging ahead.

"I've got an idea!"

It worked because Ostap had no problem lifting half his weight in wrought-iron. They lowered themselves into a sewer, pulled the grille down after them, and then it all depended on Brosca's stone sense underground to head in the direction of the sea.

It wasn't a tight fit, even for the humans. These were huge cylindrical tunnels, part stone masonry and part molded concrete. They stank, of course, though not nearly as badly the Deep Roads. They were a lot wetter, but the water was never as high as the tops of Brosca's boots. They were not even particularly dark, because of the grilles set into the streets above at intervals.

The three of them moved as silently as possible, holding their weapons close against their bodies, pausing when they heard



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voices overhead. Rats squeaked, dashing across their path.

At length they saw a circle of light ahead of them, and hurried toward it. Up close, the sewer mouth, dribbling a thin stream of fecal wastewater, was simply enormous. Between Bustrum's rope and their own brute strength, they managed to lower themselves to the rocks below and make their way along the narrow strip of coast until they were past the city walls.

Then there was the rough scramble up a steep, snowy slope and a weary march ahead of them

"The innkeeper shouldn't be all that mad at us," Brosca pointed out, sniffing dubiously at herself. "He gets to keep the mules and the wagon."



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CHAPTER 19



BLOOD ON THE TRACK

RONWYN WAS SURPRISED AT HOW WELL LOGHAIN WAS TAKING THE CONFIRMATION OF THE UPCOMING ORLESIAN INVASION, BUT REALLY, IT WAS NO MORE THAN HE HAD EXPECTED.

He had much to be pleased about. Brosca had discovered the staging site of the upcoming invasion, and even given him some idea as to the timeline. In her eager, ingenuous way, she told him a great deal of interesting information about Jader itself and its defenses, since nothing much escaped the tough little dwarf's notice. His map of the city was further annotated. He now had a way to sneak people into Jader. Quite a few people, over time. Why had the Orlesians not put grilles over the sewer mouths?

Perhaps they had tried it, but it had caused trouble. Perhaps the sewer mouths became clogged if something as large as elven or human bodies were thrown into the sewers. There was an ancient sewer below Denerim – a primitive system designed when Denerim was far smaller – but it discharged its contents underwater into Denerim



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Bay. He honestly did not know if there was a grille over the mouth. Perhaps not. He would have to look into it, but it was his understanding that it would be impossible to dive down to the mouth and survive the swim to the upper reaches of the tunnel. He would include that tidbit in his next letter to Anora. It would be difficult to examine in this weather, of course, which reassured him. Swimming for several minutes in freezing wastewater was not a viable prospect for any bard he knew of.

Bronwyn had been useful, as well. She had taken her Wardens to explore the area west of Orzammar and north of Caridin's Cross, doubling back to the ruined western road to Orzammar. There was only limited resistance there: darkspawn stragglers and some disturbing phantoms of dead dwarven warriors. A modest but worthwhile amount of treasure was discovered in the ruins, and Shale had hauled it back, while recounting tales of its checkered past with Wilhelm, as they scavenged the Deep Roads. Loghain did not particularly appreciate being described by implication as a 'scavenger,' but a hundred sovereigns was a hundred sovereigns, and would pay for the construction of three trebuchets and a great many explosive bombs to load into them.

Orlais had a huge standing army, especially if one counted the chevaliers, whose only real purpose was fighting Orlais' wars. They had not done particularly well against the Nevarrans recently. Loghain sneered. They had, in fact, done no better than they had done against Loghain himself.



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Heavy cavalry could strike like a thunderbolt, but there were all sorts of creative ways to counter them: massed archers, ditches, fire bombs. A footsoldier with a billhook could drag a chevalier from his mount and beat him to death with the weighted butt before the chevalier could get to his feet. No doubt a great many chevaliers would be shipped to the targeted ports, but cavalry was also extremely vulnerable when disembarking. At that moment horse and man were not a formidable fighting partnership: they were cargo, being unloaded. Defensive walls at the harbor equipped with arrow slits were a must. The docks could be arranged to allow only a few horses to disembark at a time. Furthermore, there was no beach at the harbor at Amaranthine to allow the horses to swim to shore. It would be highly desirable to capture as many horses as possible. They were valuable; the chevaliers themselves were not, unless they were held for ransom. That was actually not a bad idea. Fort Drakon was large, and there was plenty of room there for guests.

Of course, there was also the possibility of catching the Orlesians whilst they were still in harbor. A few swift, agile craft, armed with ballista and explosive shells, or perhaps those fire-spouting devices... yes... they could wreak havoc within minutes.

His plans here were complete, and it was time to move on. Faraday and Haglin knew his mind and would do their part. It remained to tell Bronwyn that he was leaving.

She was quite surprised when he informed her, late that



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night. She had finished her preparations for her departure tomorrow. Early in the morning, she would lead her Wardens out – he hoped to a successful outcome. If her scouting of the Deep Roads could lead to a way to take Chateau Solidor, Jader would be theirs for all time.

“Loghain, I need to talk to you – ”

He interrupted her briskly. “Yes, yes. I need to talk to you, too.” He stripped off his shirt and scrubbed energetically at his neck and chest. The accommodations at Gherlen’s Halt were fairly spare, even for the King and Queen. They did not run to frequent baths. A basin of hot water, morning and night, had to do. “I’m leaving to inspect the coastal defenses the day after tomorrow.”

“The day after tomorrow!”

Maker’s Breath! She was looking at him exactly the way Celia had looked when he told her was going to Denerim and leaving her in Gwaren. Perhaps it was a woman thing.

“Your mission is not yet complete,” he pointed out. “We need a way to cross the border of Orlais unseen. Faraday and Haglin are busy with the improvements, and now it’s time for me to go east. I must deal with the coastal issues and call Frandarel to account for his double dealing.”

“You want West Hill... and Frandarel’s fortune.”

“Of course I do. The man is a traitor and a greedy swine. I’ve sent a courier to Anora to have an agent search his house for incriminating documents. For that matter, we found quite a bit at West Hill itself. I intend to make an



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example of him. He will be tried, attainted, and executed. Those who sell us out to Orlais will not live to enjoy their gold. West Hill will become a royal domain and be fortified properly against the coming storm. His fortune will be deposited in the royal treasury.”

It was ruthless. It was formidable. Bronwyn had no particular sympathy for Frandarel, who had shirked his duty and played a double game, but she could imagine Loghain doing just this to the Couslands, had Howe seemed more useful than she. To the Couslands or to anyone who stood in his way.

“I see.” She set down her hairbrush and slipped into bed, sitting up, propped on the bolsters. “You won’t be here when I return.”

“Certainly not. I’ve got to get on to Highever and Amaranthine and see that harbor defenses are upgraded. For that matter, I need to get back to Denerim. See what you can do to get us into Orlais. We now have the route through the Jader sewers. Don’t use that without good reason: I don’t want to tip my hand too early. If the Orlesians strike, we’ll infiltrate and seize the city. As to the Rock, I have plans to surround it with counterworks. We’d need an army of sappers to do it, of course.”

“Of course. Perhaps we could hire casteless dwarves.”

He splashed himself again. “A good idea. Keep the lines of communication open with Bhelen. I hope that Warden Paragon of yours hasn’t soured him on the alliance.”

She had something else on her mind, and tried again to tell him. “Loghain...”

Something else occurred to him. "I don't suppose you've had any more... dreams? Nightmares? Any idea what the Archdemon is up to?"

Thinking about something else entirely, she was confused for a moment.

"Plenty of nightmares, but no hint what the Archdemon is up to. I've been thinking about it, though. I think the horde is wintering in the Deep Roads."

He towed himself off, frowning. "Wintering?"

"Yes. We're not the only ones hiding from the weather. Darkspawn are tough, but they can freeze in the cold just like anything else. The snow is just as great an obstacle to them as to us. The Archdemon isn't an idiot. I've done a bit of reading, too. There's some evidence that the darkspawn are never very active in cold weather. Of course, most Blights were further north, where it wouldn't be an issue. Still, I think I'm right about this. I think the Archdemon is waiting for the spring, or if not for the spring, for the first major thaw. The weather should break in late Guardian, and when it does, we'll see the darkspawn again."

Loghain nodded slowly... thoughtfully. It made a good deal of sense. A winter offensive in southern climates was madness. The winter had protected them from Orlais. That it had also protected them from the darkspawn did not strain credulity.

"But there was something else I need to tell you, Loghain —"
There was a knock at the door, and it was a messenger

from Faraday, to give Loghain a progress report on the work on the south wall. Loghain was distracted and asked the man a number of questions. Meanwhile, Bronwyn fumed, hidden behind the frowzy bed curtains.

Why bother to tell him at all? He *obviously* had more important matters in hand. She was not entirely sure herself. Her courses were late — *very* late. She felt a little queasy on occasion and her breasts were sore and swollen. Could it be? Avernus had promised that his improved potion would restore Warden fertility, and she had taken the potion — oh, when was it?

— The twelfth of Firstfall, when Danith returned from Soldier's Peak. Then the wedding had been two days later. It was now the sixth of Wintermarch. It was possible, she supposed, and sighed. It was very possible. How inconvenient, just as she was leaving on what promised to be a long and uncomfortable slog through previously unexplored Deep Roads.

The messenger was gone, and now Loghain was scribbling up some notes. Her resentment rising, she thought of Loghain, lording it over the port captains of Highever and Amaranthine — how much more easily with Fergus in Denerim and Nathaniel Maker-knew-where in the Free Marches. Lording it over them in comfort, too, with an actual bed to sleep in at night. And then he would go back to the palace in Denerim and have everything his own way, without even having to make the pretense of consulting with such a person as the Queen Regnant of Ferelden.

Meanwhile, the Queen Regnant of Ferelden would be sleeping on filthy, Tainted stone, and eating rubbish rations. It was not Loghain's fault – not exactly – but he certainly seemed absolutely fine with sending his young wife into horrible danger. Not a word of concern... not a hint that she would be missed.

She was being childish, and Loghain was right not to insult her by doubting her ability... but... it would be so very gratifying to know he *cared*...

His notes complete, Loghain got into bed and snuffed the candle. Then he sighed deeply when Bronwyn's questing hand reached out for him.

"You should get some sleep," he said. "You're leaving early tomorrow."

Her hand paused. She was so angry with him that she nearly changed her mind, but her body wanted his most insistently, and turning over in a snit without love-making would probably punish her more than it did him. She fought down the impulse to ask him in a most acidic tone if he was actually refusing her, the night before she went into danger... the night before what was likely to be a long separation. In the same situation, if a woman did that to a man, she would be called a heartless bitch.

Instead, she said, rather shortly, "Yes. I need my sleep, and I always sleep better afterwards."

She took the next answering sigh as a long-suffering assent to her outrageous demand, which ratcheted her

temper up another notch. What followed was fierce and satisfying, because she resigned herself to doing all the work from the first. He seemed to like it well enough, and his last sigh was definitely one of pleasure, and not duty. Nonetheless, Bronwyn was still irritated, and did indeed turn over and go to sleep without bothering to kiss him afterwards. At the moment, sex was a vital necessity, but expressing affection was out of the question.

Her temper was no better on awakening. It was dark, bitterly cold, and wretchedly early; and while Loghain did get up to see her off, he irritated her by second-guessing her preparations.

She finally muttered, "I *have* done this before, you know." Never again would he silence or dismiss her as he had last night. Then again, now she had not the least desire to share her news with him.

Loghain gave her a look, but she refused to be bullied. Instead, she sat with her Wardens and had a good breakfast. Loghain joined her, and the conversation was at first sparse and general, since a number of the party – notably Anders – hated rising early. Brosca and Tara, however, were very cheerful, and began bantering back and forth, venturing ideas about sneaking into Jader and pranking the Orlesians, or the Chantry, or anyone else who annoyed them.

Loghain found it so amusing that he only gave them a mild warning. "The secret route into Jader is too valuable to waste on mere pranks."

"What about sneaking in and burning up all their ships in dry dock?" Tara suggested. "Wood and tar... a stray fireball... and 'Whoosh!'"

It was terribly tempting. "Maybe when more of the ships arrive," he said, thinking it over. "What are the barracks made of?"

"Stone," answered Brosca. "Too bad, isn't it?"

"Of course," Zevran considered. "Everything inside is very likely flammable. If they were gutted by fire, it would be difficult to find lodgings for the troops, especially the ones coming into the city. They would have to be billeted on the civilian population instead, which is always so very popular."

Loghain chuckled. "Not yet. It would be better to do it just before they enter the city, for maximum chaos." Even Bronwyn smiled.

"No, thank you," she said quietly, when the servant tried to serve her more eggs. "Just some bread, I think."

It was quite awful. Sitting here with Loghain, she realized that she was no longer in love with him. Not a bit. She did not even particularly like him at the moment. Something burning inside her soured and grew cold, like a candle blown out in the wind. She felt oddly empty.

Well, so much the worse for her. She was still Queen of Ferelden, and he was still its King, and they had plenty to unite them as they strove to defend this kingdom. He has his work, and she had hers, and perhaps it was just as well that she was leaving today.

They marched out into the stark brightness of a cold winter

morning. The snow was soft and deep under a crisp crust. Scout waded through it, huffing. Loghain and a few of the officers were lined up to wish them a good journey. Ser Blayne kissed her hand respectfully. Ser Norrel Haglin had better sense than to attempt it, and bowed deeply instead.

She and Loghain gave each other the grave, formal kisses on either cheek that such an occasion demanded. He frowned a little, looking puzzled at the expression on her face, but after all said nothing. Amber whimpered, unhappy that Bronwyn and Scout were going away. Bronwyn gave the puppy a farewell pat.

"I should be back within a fortnight or so," she said, elaborately casual. "Perhaps I'll return with good news." She gave Loghain a long look, and then turned and headed east.

They were thoroughly chilled by the time they reached the access point. Anders and Morrigan had flown on ahead, and were smugly dry. It was enough to make Bronwyn wish she had been born a mage.

Aeducan Thaig was uneventful, except for a pack of deepstalkers that attacked them. They were newly-hatched, from their size, and absolutely ravenous. Being young, they were quite good eating. Bronwyn thought it best to save their rations as long as possible. They took a different route than the one used a few days before. Bronwyn wanted to cover as much new ground as possible.

They had not walked as far as she had originally



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planned in the first march. The fact was that she did not feel very well: her stomach roiled distressingly; her nose was unnaturally sensitive to the stink of the Tainted Deep Roads. And there was the embarrassing necessity of frequently stopping to relieve herself. It was alarming, the way that she could feel her body letting her down.

All things considered, it was not surprising that she knew no tales of pregnant heroes. No... wait... Andraste had given Maferath several sons. The exact number was still debated. Were they born before the great war against the Imperium? Or did Andraste go into battle after finishing her childbearing? Would a magister fear a heavily pregnant Prophet? More to the point in these days, would any darkspawn fear a heavily pregnant Bronwyn, however sharp her sword?

If this had not come upon her so suddenly, she might have given some thought to delegating this venture to someone else's command... Tara... or... who?

Anders discreetly approached her and whispered, "Are you all right?"

"It's nothing. Perhaps a rejuvenation spell might help."

It did, for awhile. Those who had passed this way before – Anders, Tara, Brozca – enjoyed pointing out the sights. Since Oghren was not present, there was no reason to withhold their opinion of the late Paragon Branka.

"The Boss really gave it to her!" Brozca chuckled. "Branka thought she was all high and mighty, but the Boss took her down – in more ways than one. Can you imagine?"



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That cow had killed all her people to please her pride – all except the women she left to be turned into Broodmothers!"

Aveline had heard the story before, and shuddered. Yes, leaders had to lead, and one did have to look at the big picture sometimes, but Branka's choices were cruel and perverse... and ultimately ineffective as Bronwyn had pointed out. And a woman who could cause another woman deliberately to be made a Broodmother was evil incarnate. Aveline would never forget the horror of the Broodmother chamber near Ostagar. In fact, she was beginning to believe that Wardens should be making a special effort to hunt down and destroy all darkspawn breeding grounds.

There were marches. There were sleep periods. At length, they were back in Caridin's Cross, which was eerily silent.



"This is where we turn off," Bronwyn said, glancing again at her map. "We move west from here, not north." The two Dalish, Cathair and Darach, edged further along the corridor to scout. Bronwyn sat on a rock and frowned at the map, feeling slightly dizzy, trying to make sense of the scale. Scout sat down beside her, and put his head on his paws.

"So where are the darkspawn?" Toliver asked Aveline. "I mean, these are the Deep Roads, aren't they? They're supposed to be crawling with darkspawn."

"Toliver," Aveline said wearily, "I think complaining about it is completely inappropriate."

"And stupid," Brozca agreed. "The Deep Roads aren't bad at



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all without darkspawn." She tossed today's prize — a glowing, rough-cut sapphire — into the air and caught it deftly. They she squinted to hold it in place over one eye and leered.

"Looks good," Sigrun remarked. "If you lose an eye you could wear that instead. It'd be a lot nicer than a patch."

"If you lose something vital, you might as well get fancy with your replacements," Brosca agreed. "Did you see Astrid's golden hand? That was pretty spiffy."

Tara lowered her voice. "If you want gorgeous green eyes like Bronwyn's, you could always ask a Broodmother to spit in your face."

"Ew." Sigrun made a face at Jukka, who grimaced and shrugged.

"Cara, I do not wish to think of that very dreadful day." Zevran put an arm around Tara's waist, and led her aside.

"Yeah, Broodmothers are nasty," Brosca said, a little glum, not even cheered by her sapphire. "We're bound to come across more. I mean, it only makes sense. I've been thinking. How long do they live? How many darkspawn can they pop out? Does anybody know? If the fancy Wardens in Weisshaupt know, why aren't they telling?"

Morrigan fussed over her bag of herbs again. Something had put her in a temper. Anders moved away and watched Bronwyn from a distance, wondering if he dared a diagnostic spell without permission. Why not? He needed line-of-sight, for it to work, but perhaps if he stepped behind that boulder over there, he would be out



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of sight of everyone else, and thus avoid awkward questions. He dodged away, as if relieving himself, and cast quickly, hands blooming blue.

Ha! Now that was... well... it was what he had expected, but he wondered what Bronwyn was thinking. This was the last place she should be, and it was his duty, as the party's Healer, to tell her so.

"She is with child, is she not?" Morrigan's voice was right in his ear, making him jump.

"Maker, Morrigan! Don't do that!"

"Do not be such a girl. Bronwyn is with child, is she not?"

"Ssshhh! Yes. Yes, she is. Only recently. Only about six weeks along, I'd guess. Still, this is a bad idea. We should go back."

"And you think it likely, when she has been given this mission by the all-powerful great Loghain himself? She is to put her tail between her legs and trail back to that wretched grubby fort, her mission a failure?"

"Someone else can handle it. Tara can lead us."

"You have been with her all this time, and yet you know her so little?" Morrigan's eyes slid over to watch Bronwyn, and her face was not without compassion. "She is proud. If you do not know that, you do not know her." She shrugged. "And she is at odds with Loghain, and does not wish to lose face before him."

"At odds?" Anders looked around, to see if anyone could see them and conceivably overhear them. "What makes you say that?"

"'Tis perfectly clear to me. Bronwyn's romantic infatuation has crashed head-on into unattractive reality. The man

she doted on has proved himself to be not all she hoped. Did you not observe her at breakfast? She is angry with him. He is leaving the west and going off to manage things in his own way. He evinced no particular concern for her. Either he knows that she is with child, in which case he is a callous brute; or he does not know, which means that Bronwyn has not told him. If Bronwyn has not told him such an extremely important piece of news, it is because she is too angry to confide in him, and too proud to appear weak and pitiful. I could tell her I told her so — for I warned her — but 'tis most unlikely she would thank me for it."

Anders, as a man, saw things rather differently. "Loghain is reserved, but he does care about her. I've seen him look at her sometimes... well, I think he thinks a lot of her. It's just not his way to get all... sentimental." He sighed. "Of course, since Bronwyn is with child and all stirred up, she's likely to be unreasonable."

"I do not think," Morrigan said, frost in every syllable, "that it is unreasonable for a young woman who has given power, riches, and her body to a man to expect him to show her a certain degree of public regard. And that her feelings should be discounted simply because she is carrying a child — a child that may someday rule a kingdom — is the sort of odious, thick-skinned bumptiousness of which only your sex is capable."

With that, she turned on her heel, and strode away towards Bronwyn, her slim back radiating fury.

Anders winced. "That could have gone better," he muttered to himself.

"Do you intend to continue this mission?" Morrigan asked Bronwyn bluntly.

Bronwyn looked up at her in astonishment. "Of course. Why ever not?"

"Your digestion is not troubling you? Your stomach is not queasy?"

She knows. Bronwyn's face set into mulish lines. "I'm wonderfully well. This should not take more than a few days. I have work to do, and cannot take to my bed for such a small matter."

Morrigan laughed sharply. "A small matter now, indeed, but one likely to grow big enough for all to see! Perhaps some of my tea would not have gone amiss!"

"Morrigan..." Bronwyn bit her lip and looked away. "The two of us were brought up to regard this matter in very different ways. For a noblewoman, bearing heirs is the major and absolutely essential task. It is only since receiving Avernus' improved potion that I had much hope of producing an heir of my own. I cannot trifle with that. Using any contraception would be wrong and selfish. I admit that it is not very pleasant to find myself carrying a child in the Deep Roads, but it is all part of my duty. My mother was in hiding throughout most of the Rebellion, and was pregnant for part of that time. She could not refuse to produce an heir for Highever, simply because she



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was not living in comfort."

"I did not think your brother was that old," Morrigan said. "He cannot be thirty!"

"He isn't." Bronwyn felt ill, remembering the stories. "I am my mother's fifth child. Fergus is her fourth. They had no Healer with them during the Rebellion."

Morrigan did not reply in words, but simply raised her brows, giving Bronwyn a hard stare.

"Yes," Bronwyn said bitterly. "I take your point. However, I do have a very good Healer with me, and this is a mission of limited duration. We are to find a way to the surface beyond the Orlesian border, and then return with the news. Once that is accomplished, I promise to be prudent."

"You owe me no promises. Perhaps you should consider what you owe yourself – and this child. Furthermore, contrary to your belief, it is not only noblewomen who are called on produce children under inadequate circumstances; nor are those children in their eyes less precious than a Queen's."

Bronwyn blushed, quite thoroughly chastened. She knew it was no more than she deserved for her arrogant words. "What I meant, I think," she said, "was to say that producing a child is so important that I never even thought about contraceptive teas and the like. I never needed them before my betrothal to Loghain, and so never had such a thing on hand. And ordinarily, once I married, I would never have used them, unless I rapidly produced so many children I needed no more. I suppose that happens, since



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most noblewomen stop at two or three."

"Very well. then. Let us accomplish this mission as expeditiously as possible, and return you to the dubious comforts of Gherlen's Halt!"



At the end of the day – or a long period of marching – since there was no "day" or "night" in the Deep Roads as surfacers understood it, the companions sat down to a meal and a conference afterward that did not go entirely as Bronwyn had planned.

Anders and Morrigan were staring at her, and then Anders said, "Bronwyn has an important announcement."

The last thing Bronwyn wanted was her companions fussing over her, but perhaps it was best to get it out in the open, especially if she were to keep stopping the march because of all the ridiculous things her body was demanding.

"Er... yes... I suppose so. Anders performed a diagnostic spell on me today, and determined that I am expecting a child."

A fearful, unholy screeching rose up in the Deep Roads, as Tara, Sigrun, Catriona, and Brozca screamed in unison, and rushed to give her hugs. Aveline smiled kindly and enveloped her in a strong embrace as well, her good wishes a bit wistful and not nearly so noisy.

"I knew it!" Catriona told Aveline. "She was eating dry bread and stopping to pee all the time. I knew it!"

Shale seemed nonplussed and rather put off by the idea. "It is... *breeding*? Now? Here?"



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"Maker! I hope not!" Bronwyn laughed. "Perhaps — if all goes well — the child will come in early Harvestmere. Perhaps earlier. My mother always said that babies make their own time."

The reactions of the male members of the party were rather more subdued. Some, like Cathair and Darach, expressed kind hopes for a healthy child. Dalish women, after all, endured all sorts of hardships in their constant travels. Jukka and Toliver were more intimidated, and to Bronwyn's annoyance, began looking at her as if she had suddenly become a piece of rare porcelain. Zevran, to her surprise, was rather of this party, for he was open about his concerns.

"This place cannot be healthy for you in your condition, since it is not healthy for anyone," he said frankly. "It would be best for you to return to the surface."

"And so I shall," Bronwyn replied, "just as soon as we complete our mission." He still looked doubtful, so she pulled out their map.

"Look here. It is perhaps two days to the outskirts of Rousten Thaig. The elevation indicates that it is quite close to the surface in places. We'll look for any sign that we can access the surface without significant effort. Remember that even in Ortan Thaig there were cracks in the stone that let in distant sunlight. We might well see something of the sort. If it can be widened into a place large enough to slip through, we will be finished, and we can return to Gherlen's Halt immediately. We've been lucky so far. The darkspawn have gone elsewhere, and this is our chance.



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We might not have another."

Everyone then began looking at Anders. "Bronwyn," he said, "we want to help you, but you've got to be careful. We've got to take it as easy as possible. You really don't want to strain yourself and risk a miscarriage."

Bronwyn saw their anxious faces. Their concern for her was well meant, so she did not dismiss them. Instead, they moved at a easy pace through the Deep Roads, while the scouts doubled their vigilance. They came across some newly hatched spiders and more deepstalkers, but the only darkspawn they found were dead.



The Deep Roads forked where Bronwyn had previously led her people up to double back to the closed west gate of Orzammar. They passed through high and silent halls for some time, until they came to a branch that led off from their path. As they passed it, a horrible stink drifted out: immensely vile, foul, and repulsive. Scout lowered his head and growled.

Bronwyn shuddered. "I know that stench."

"So do I," whispered Aveline.

"And so do I," said Anders. "Broodmother. But this is a bit different."

Darach looked at Tara first, as he always did, and she jerked her head toward Bronwyn.

Seeing his question, Bronwyn said, "Yes, we have to investigate. We can't leave such a creature behind us."

So they turned left, and moved down the tunnel, cau-



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tiously and repulsed. The stone was softened underfoot by dry and crumbling matter that felt almost like soil.

"Bring a light closer," Bronwyn ordered. "What is this?"

It was a very dark brown, and a nasty odor clung to it. Hesitantly, she reached down with her gauntleted hand and gathered a handful.

"Look at how it spread out up the walls," Morrigan remarked. "I think—wait. I know what this is."

Bronwyn did, too. She dropped the handful of filth instantly, and was on her guard.

It was Broodmother matter, but no longer wet and spongy and rank. This was dry and old. The smell was the same, though much fainter. A few empty sacs were present, and had slid down from the walls. These had long since opened to birth the young darkspawn. Rounding the tunnel, the area opened out to a wide chamber, and there they saw the creature.

Definitely a Broodmother.

Definitely long dead.

It was difficult to determine the species. Deepstalkers had scavenged the immense, slumped corpse, and the head was little more than a skull. There were no new darkspawn — hurlock, genlock, or sharlock — to identify the mother. This was a vast lump of decayed, Tainted flesh that had once been the habitation of a lost soul.

Shale approached it without fear. "Ah, interesting. Substantial ribs there. Personally, I find a hard shell more satisfactory



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than a skeleton. Golems can be slain, but we do not rot."

"That's... very nice for you," Zevran replied, rolling his eyes at Tara. He was careful to touch nothing here; not even the tempting chests of shiny things that the darkspawn had collected out of instinct. Not, at least, until Tara had purified them thoroughly with fire.

"As far as I can tell," said Anders, poking gingerly through the remains. "She wasn't killed. She died, which indicates that darkspawn have a defined lifespan. I just wish I knew what it was."

"She was dragged down here," Bronwyn murmured. "She was dragged down into this darkness, and she spent the rest of her life staring at that side of the cavern, unable even to look behind her. Then she died. How long does a Broodmother live? How many children can she produce?"

To that, no one had an answer.



They all had need of rest after that. They walked far enough to escape the dreadful smell, and made a camp and a fire.

"How about a story?" Tara suggested. "Something to take our minds off all that?"

"Let's see..." Bronwyn thought about it. "Whose turn is it? I suppose we'd have to go by precedence. I don't have my recruiting roster here."

Catriona said instantly. "I was the very last. I know that."

"Right," Bronwyn considered. "Sigrun, were you and Jukka Joined before Aveline or after?"



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"After!" Sigrun chirped hastily, her eyes very wide. "Way after! Aveline was one of the first."

Aveline knew better, of course, but was not about to get into an argument, when Sigrun and Jukka were so clearly horrified at the idea of coming up with a story.

"All right, I'll do it. Sigrun will be next, though, and Jukka after her."

"That's fine," Jukka agreed, gratitude in his homely face. "I just... need some time to come up with something."

"All right, Aveline." Bronwyn said. Now that she thought about it, she was almost sure that Sigrun and Jukka had been in the group before Aveline's, but she would let it pass for now.

"Are you going to tell us about Ser Aveline, Knight of Orlais?" asked Toliver. "The one you're named after?"

"No," Aveline gritted out. "I'm *not*. I hate that story. Ser Aveline is famous for being defeated and slain in a tournament while disguised as a man. I've always failed to see what was so special about that. If she were really the hero she's cracked up to be, she would have killed that bastard Kaleva instead of letting him kill her, or at least whipped his miserable arse."

Leliana had told Bronwyn the story, and her own reaction had been somewhat the same. While she sympathized with the wish of the heroine of the story to prove herself a worthy knight, in the end Aveline had failed to win the contest of arms. Yes, Ser Kaleva had been a brute to kill her, but he was within his rights in that kind of melee combat. Those were the risks of battle, and a woman



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should not complain if she *was* treated like a man. Kaleva would likely have killed anyone in those circumstances.

Besides, Ferelden had produced earlier and greater female heroes. Haelia Cousland was vanquishing werewolves and claiming a teyrnir three hundred years before Ser Aveline. Her accomplishments — especially as she had successfully protected her people — seemed far more worth emulating than the Orlesian girl's.

Aveline said, "I had an old servant who told me this story, and it's stuck with me. Don't blame me if it takes you by surprise."



AVELINE'S STORY OF THE OTHER CINDERELLA

You've all heard the story of Cinderella. Or maybe you haven't, since it's Orlesian. The stepdaughter is sent to the kitchens, she's helped by her mother's mage friend, she goes to the ball and wins the heart of a prince, and then her identity is verified by fitting into a glass slipper too small for any other woman in the Empire. My nurse knew that story, but she said that there was more to the story.

The fact is that Cinderella was not the only unhappy and mistreated young woman in Val Royeaux. Minette, the daughter of the Lord of Ghystaine, was sitting by the warm ashes of her uncle's kitchen hearth that very day the heralds proclaimed the slipper test.

"The human maid who can don the glass slipper shall be Prince Florizel's bride, and the future Empress of Orlais!"

"That is a prize worth winning," said Minette to herself.

She was bitter about her circumstances, for her uncle had stolen her inheritance, and she had been relegated to the servants' quarters of his chateau. The chateau had been her father's, but the property was entailed on the heirs male. Thus, when her father died, her uncle, her father's younger brother, inherited everything. Even the gold and jewels that were Minette's dowry had been taken by him, and there was none to gainsay him, for he was the executor of his brother's estate. Now he was talking about sending Minette to the Chantry.

Naturally, the herald and Prince were going to the great estates first. Outside there was a great music of lutes and flutes. Minette ran up to the garret, to the topmost window the house, and watched the procession go by: the Prince on a white horse, his face concealed by a mask of silver and gold; a great train of nobles, also masked, walking with dignity; the High Seneschal carrying a dainty glass slipper resting on a cushion of rich purple velvet. Minette despaired when she saw how tiny it was.

"Does the Prince wish to marry an infant or an elf? Are women to be judged worthy of a Prince based on the size of their feet? Absurd!"

Of course, the world itself was absurd, or she would not be a servant in her own home.

"But how can I change the size of my feet?"

She pondered the matter desperately, for the procession had emerged from the house of the Lord and Lady de la Rivière, with no joy and no bride in sight.

"I still have a chance!" cried Minette. "Now, how—*how* shall I make

my foot—my left foot—small enough to fit that glass slipper?"

Everyone had crowded into the street to see the Prince go by. The servants had run outside, too, and Minette was alone in the kitchen. Steeling herself, she reached for the butcher's cleaver, and with a shrewd blow, she cut off her toes. Swiftly, before she could faint, she bound up the terrible wound and covered it all with her stocking.

"It does not matter," she whispered, clenching her jaw against the pain. "When I am Empress, I shall not have to walk."

At length, the Prince came to the house of the Lord of Ghystaine, and Minette was commanded to come forth and be tested, as were all the young human women within. Minette hobbled out, keeping a brave face before them all. The slipper was put on her foot by the High Seneschal himself. The pain was worse than the tortures meted out to traitors. Minette felt like she was being stabbed by knives and flayed by rasps, but the slipper was on, and fit, after a fashion.

The Prince was not pleased. "I am quite sure that this is not the lady with whom I danced last night, for she removed her mask for me when we were alone."

The nobles trembled, for the Prince's anger was to be avoided. However, the Lord of Ghystaine, Minette's uncle, was elated. It would be a great thing to be uncle to a Princess of the Empire. And then, too, the Prince had not worded the proclamation to say that "the lady with whom he danced last night would be his bride." He had quite explicitly said that he would marry "the human maid who could fit the slipper," and Minette had done so.

There was nothing to be done: the Prince's word was pledged. Everyone bowed to Minette, and a great cloak of cloth of gold was laid over her shoulders, and a coronet of pearls set upon her hair. She was given a mask, too. It was shaped like a butterfly, and glittered with diamonds. Outside she was set upon a white palfrey and led through the streets, while all acclaimed her as the Prince's Bride.

Only one person, a little elf child, saw that something was wrong. In his small voice he cried out,

"Prithee, look back; prithee, look back,

There's blood on the track.

The shoe is too small;

At home the true bride is waiting thy call."

But the flutes shrilled and the lutes strummed, and no one could hear the child above the shouts of the people.

Minette was led before the Emperor, who indulged this whim of his son, as the girl was of good birth and not disfigured. The betrothal was made known to all, and magnificent apartments given to Minette. The wedding was to be within seven days, which was the absolute minimum necessary to stage the necessary spectacle.

But in the night, Minette was taken ill. Red streaks snaked up from her wounded foot. She fell into a fever, and the next day she died. The Prince took up the glass slipper once more, and the procession again went from house to house, searching for Cinderella.

"A clever tale!" Morrigan approved. "And a good touch, the ambiguity of the Prince. One suspects that there was nothing very prepossessing under the mask."

Anders groaned. "Morrigan, that was a bloody depressing story!"

"If all stories had happy endings, the world would be dull indeed!"

Shale found it all inexplicable. "How utterly grotesque! Do squishy creatures often lop off inconvenient bits?"

"No, not *often*." Tara grimaced. "She probably would have been better off in the Chantry. Imagine *me* saying that!"

"She should have run off to the army," Catriona said. "If you don't like it at home, the army is the place. They turn you all creepy and perverted in the Chantry. And the Grey Wardens are best of all, if you survive the initiation."

Bronwyn gave a surprised, shocked laugh, glad that Leliana was not present to hear that. What kind of life had Catriona come from? Why would she say such a thing about the Chantry?

"Chopping off her toes took stones, though," said Brosca. "Pretty tough of her."

"Yeah," agreed Sigrun. "But she should have cauterized the wound with fire, and then it wouldn't have bled and probably wouldn't have gone bad."

"That's right!" Jukka said, impressed by Sigrun's quick wit. "That would have done it! I've seen that in the Legion."

Cathair exchanged a glance with Darach. "The very idea of a maiden crippling herself to achieve a bizarre shemlen standard of beauty is truly staggering."

"It happens, though," Bronwyn admitted. "I heard of a noble girl who was so fixed on having a thin, fashionable



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figure that she corseted herself until her ribs were deformed. She was thin, true, but could hardly draw a deep breath."

Anders was disgusted. "Wynne told me about a rich family she was called on to serve. The mother wanted a classic, sunken-cheeked look, and bullied Wynne into removing her back teeth."

"Ow!" Brosca yelled, hand over her mouth.

Tara reassured her. "It wouldn't have hurt! Not a bit. I'll bet it felt weird, though."

"Antivan ladies," remarked Zevran, "have been known to dose themselves with small quantities of arsenic, in order to enhance their radiant complexions."

"Maker!" cried Tara. And then she asked, "Does it work?"

They all laughed. Zevran said, "Yes, until it kills them. That, too, can happen."

In the northern reaches of Rousten Thaig, they found just what they were looking for, and they found it because of a bird.

"Whoa!" yelled Toliver, as a tiny winged body sped past him. "Was that a bat?"

"*Creatore!*" cried Zevran. "It is a sparrow. How did a bird come to the Deep Roads?"

Wondering greatly, they had their answer as they entered the vast main cavern of the thaig. Thin, brilliant spears of light pierced the massive stone of the chamber ceiling. Looking closer, they made out three openings to the north that illuminated the dusty gloom of the thaig. They



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were high up – only a little lower than the top of the ceiling.

"Big enough for a bird!" cried Bronwyn. "We can climb up there!"

"I can't believe it!" Brosca grinned. "The top of the cavern is above surface level. Whoever built this must have been half a cloudhead himself!"

They had ropes, of course, because Bronwyn had learned that lesson beforehand. She knew she would be messing about climbing rocks and had come prepared. A ladder would have been even better, but they had no such tall ladders. Instead, they first sent up their own birds to scout out the openings.

Morrigan was off like an arrow, winging up to the light. Anders threw Bronwyn an anxious glance and then was in pursuit. It appeared that they were able to squeeze through the openings to the outside, and then they were gone for some minutes.

Jukka slapped his hand flat on the map, crumpling it in his satisfaction. "Right! We're at the surface here. Look at the old map... see the elevation? Since this was drawn, the valley has eroded... the soil's washed down that stream marked on it, and the the valley floor is lower than it used to be. Luckily, we've got some good bedrock holding the roof up, or this would have collapsed ages ago."

It was promising... it was all very promising. In a few minutes, Anders was back, and then Morrigan, who had been enjoying her brief escape from the Deep Roads.



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"I could see a big castle near the Imperial Highway," Anders told them. "Or at least it looks like the Imperial Highway. It's in better repair than in Ferelden. Don't hit me for saying that, but it's true."

"'Tis surprising that more creatures have not found their way inside," Morrigan added, alighting. "Or... perhaps not so surprising. No doubt the smell fends them off. The left opening is large enough for any of us, man or woman, to squeeze through. However, coming from outside, one would fall all the way to the stones. And from inside, 'tis a forbidding climb."

"We'll want to block up the entrance somewhat before we leave," Bronwyn said. "We don't want animals seeking shelter here or hunters pursuing them. But we'll worry about that later. Let's have a look!"

Anders winced. "Bronwyn, I really think you shouldn't do that. Let Morrigan and me do the scouting."

"Can you take measurements?" Bronwyn asked. "Can you sketch out the castle?"

"No, but..." He stood his ground. "Don't do it. I'm advising you as your Healer. Somebody else can climb this time."

"I can!" Jukka volunteered. "I've done a bit of rock climbing, when I scavenged mines. Give me the gear."

Bronwyn hesitated, torn between simple common sense and the certainty that she was a better climber than anyone else in the party. Anders looked so earnest that she decided not to refuse his advice.



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"Give it a go, Jukka," she agreed. "I'll spot you from down here. I'll need you to describe what you see very, very carefully."

"We can come back another time," Aveline said. "With bits of a stout ladder we can assemble on the spot."

"Good idea. We'll do that the next time we're here." She thought it over. "All right. Some of us will stay here. Jukka, Anders, me... Morrigan, if you like. Shale, we'll need you, too, to give Jukka a boost. Tara, I want you to take the others around the thaig and map it out in detail. Take Scout with you. Yes, Scout I want you to go with Tara. If anyone can sniff out darkspawn, it's you! Look for any hidden tunnels or secret darkspawn nests. Oh, Tara – see if you can find the treasury, and if there's anything left in it!"

"With pleasure!" laughed Tara.

"Ummmm..." Zevran considered. "If I may, perhaps it would be best if I were stay here..."

"Zevran!" Bronwyn laughed. "I'm not going anywhere. You're the ones who may run into darkspawn. Go on, go with Tara. You know you want to."

A flash of white teeth, and Zevran joined the little mage. In short order, the party prepared to move out.

"I'll be back soon!" Tara called over her shoulder.

"Find something shiny!" Anders called back.

Jukka would need the pitons and the grappling hook they carried, and Bronwyn helped him harness up securely. The wall had some cracks and outcroppings that would help, but the curve overhead made for an awkward



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ascent. Shale could lift him up to a rock shelf, but after that, Jukka was on his own.

The first part of the climb did not go badly. Jukka hammered in the pitons and made steady progress. Bronwyn felt he was rushing a bit.

"Go slow!" she called. "Take your time!"

The last third was trickier. Bronwyn fidgeted, wishing she were doing it herself. There were some precarious near-slips, but at last Jukka managed to reach the ledge just under to the side of the far-left opening. If he leaned over, clinging to the edge, he could look outside.

"Hook up a safety line!" Bronwyn shouted.

"I'm fine!" Jukka said. "See!" he pounded on the stones. "Solid!"

"Hook up a safety line anyway!"

"Yes, Boss." The dwarf gave a piton a tap or two and wrapped the slack of the rope around it. "Safe and sound!"

"All right! Be careful!"

With one hand he reached into the bag slung across his shoulders, and pulled out parchment and a graphite pencil. "I'm looking west-north-west," he announced. "I'll annotate that on the sketch."

"I need the estimated distance to the Imperial Highway, and the estimated distance to the castle. Is it on our side or the far side?"

"Far side," muttered Anders.

"Far side!" yelled Jukka. "They used a lot of the local stone to build it up pretty high. Four towers around a keep. Kind



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of fancy. Doesn't look built for serious fighting. Could have some blind spots. When was it built?"

"After the fall of the Dales," said Bronwyn. "Maybe seven hundred years old. Maybe less. As far as I know, it's never been tested by combat."

"I'm not an artist, but I can sketch it out for you." Pressing the parchment up against the wall, and his tongue protruding with concentration, Jukka roughly sketched out the general appearance of Chateau Solidor, while those on the ground discussed future plans.

"We'll come back," said Bronwyn. "We'll scout it out very thoroughly. Let's use that barrier spell Tara learned to keep the curious out of here and disguise the openings a bit."

"We could do that somewhat from the outside," Morrigan suggested. "And leave enough space to slip through ourselves in our bird shapes. The barrier can be added afterward."

Anders said, "Why don't we have another look before we go? It's not all that far to the castle as the raven flies, so to speak. We can see what kind of force is there — "

"— and keep our eyes open for bored archers!" Morrigan said tartly.

"Obviously. I think — "

"Bigger it!" swore Jukka, above them. "I dropped my pencil."

Bronwyn glanced up, and was alarmed. "Jukka! What are you doing?"

"It rolled outside. I can reach it..." The dwarf leaned out precariously, groping out of the opening for the lost pencil.

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There was a faint cracking sound, and grit trickled from the piton securing the rope.

"Stop it! Come down now!"

"Give me a minute... I can reach it..."

There was another scabbling of pebbles, and a terrible grinding. Abruptly, the piton came loose and the rope tore free. So did part of the stone wall of the cavern. Time stopped.

"Oh, *shit!*" screamed Jukka. A huge stone smashed him down from the ledge. Shale trundled forward, massive arms out to catch him, but too late. The dwarf was swept along in a thundering rockfall. In a moment, Jukka and Shale were enveloped in rubble, dust rising in clouds.

Bronwyn turned to run, but stones came down on her helmet, bouncing and rattling. Flashes of light shot from the mage's staffs as they frantically cast shielding spells. Another rock bounced off Bronwyn's helmet, and she stumbled, her vision gone black. A blow struck her between her shoulders, stunning as a the stroke of a berserker's maul. Sense and consciousness fled. She went down, down to the trembling dust, and was buried.

The awful cramping in her belly roused her first. Scout was whining and whimpering. Then she saw Anders' distraught face, dirty and bruised, looking down at her. There was noise in the cave, loud and echoing. Voices. Her friends' voices. Everybody was trying to see past Anders.

Tara was shoving... Give them some!"

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Bronwyn coughed. "I forbid it," she croaked. "I absolutely refuse."

Did anyone hear her? Possibly not. They were all shouting at once.

"She's going to be all right, elfkins," Anders was saying. "And the Ashes won't help poor Jukka now."

Bronwyn tried to sit up and gasped at the pain instead. "Where's Jukka?" she whispered

"Dead and given to the Stone," Brosca told her. "Don't worry about him, Boss."

"He was Legion," said Sigrun. "Technically, he was already dead. This just makes it official. We're more worried about you."

"Lie still," Morrigan ordered. She looked strained, and there was a smudge on her nose. "We must remove your armor."

There was an ominously sticky wetness between her legs. Bronwyn tried reach down, but Morrigan caught at her hand, eyes fierce.

"Lie still."

"Oh, no..."

Oh, but yes. Anders could patch Bronwyn back up, but he could not repair what had torn loose. The cramping rolled over her in wretched waves. From the corner of her eye she saw that Shale was there, clearing away rocks. She might have known that a rock slide was only a temporary inconvenience to a golem.

Scout settled down beside her and licked her face.



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"You're going to sleep now," Anders told her, his voice tender. "Sleep..."

"Wait..."

She slept quite a long time, evidently, while her body healed. They had cleaned up her up quite thoroughly, and she was rather glad to have been unconscious at the time. They had food and a warm mug of tea for her, when she awakened. Scout clung to her side like a ghost, not letting her from his sight. Morrigan helped her while she went off to relieve herself – a painful process – and was comforting in her hard-headed, pragmatic way.

"At six weeks, it could hardly have been called a child, anyway. Anders sees no permanent damage from the miscarriage. It is unfortunate, but rest and proper food will see you right. Tara and Zevran have been attempting to slip you their Ashes of Andraste, but Anders does not like the idea. He thought you would not wish them forced upon you without your consent. Perhaps you should please Tara by taking a little. I suspect that every grain has a value."

Bronwyn knew that she meant well, and tried not to show how much the witch's words hurt her.

"Are you all right?"

"In the end, I flew to the ceiling and avoided everything but the dust. Anders was beaten about a bit, despite his spells. Everyone else heard the noise, and came running. We have been busy while you slept, knowing that it would worry you if you mission were incomplete. Shale was able



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to retrieve the drawing that the dwarf had begun. I went out for another look at that castle, but I am no engineer. Two of the openings here in the roof have enlarged into one. Rubble is piled up in front of them, and all is sealed with the barrier spell. Now, that is enough of work and worry. You must lie down, and we will manage the rest. Some of us are actually quite competent, you know."

"I know." Very carefully, she lay back down on her blanket, and was asleep again in seconds.

The next time she awakened, she did indeed take some of the Ashes Tara and Zevran were pressing on her: the tiniest bit from each, a few grains clinging to a fingertip. She washed them down with tea and was astonished and rather awed by the effect.

"Better?" Their beautiful elven faces were so anxious and hopeful that tears welled in her eyes.

"Much, much better. Thank you, my friends."

"We found some nice things," Tara told her. "Quite pretty. We're so sorry we didn't get back in time."

"There wasn't a thing you could have done. It all happened so suddenly. I think Jukka might have been dead before he hit the ground."

Zevran gave her a mild, stern look. "We have done here all that can be done without stout ladders and perhaps even some carpenters to make a proper scaffolding. As soon as you are able to move, we should return to Gherlen's Halt."

Bronwyn managed a smile for them. "As soon as possible."



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Anders was so concerned about Bronwyn that he wanted Shale to carry her, and Bronwyn at first submitted to this briefly, though it was grotesque and humiliating. Shale said nothing at all, after Anders' took the golem aside and made horrific threats. Scout disliked Bronwyn being so high up and far away from him, and was suspicious of the Walking Rock Thing.

Half a day's jarring was so distressing that Bronwyn put a stop to it. Instead, she walked, and agreed to let her companions carry all of her gear but her personal weapons.

Anders hovered insufferably, but Bronwyn had not the spirits to order him away. Nor would it be wise, for she truly felt terrible, though more in spirit than in body.

She had made a mistake; a terrible mistake born of anger and pique. She should have delegated this mission. She should have told Loghain outright that she was with child, and that she would stay behind. Now she must bear the consequences for the rest of her life. Her innocent child was lost, and there was no guarantee that there would be others. She walked, head down, one foot in front of the other, not wanting her companions to see the tears in her eyes. Not looking at them, she could not see that they were also grieving – grieving for their dead companion and for Bronwyn herself.

She remembered little of the march back. The mission had been, from the military point of view, quite a success. They had found a secret way into Orlais, near the fortress



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of Solidor. They had even seen Solidor and speculated on its weaknesses. A future scouting party could watch the Imperial Highway and little would go into or out of Jader that they would not know about.

Loghain might well think that all this was quite worth the loss of one Grey Warden. Bronwyn could not allow herself to consider what else he might say. At the moment she did not much care.

Blinding white air and shocking cold greeted them when they unsealed the access point.

"What a wind!" said Catriona. "It'll knock us over if we go out."

"It's late, too," agreed Tara. "We couldn't make it back to the fort until after dark. Bronwyn, I think we'd better stay here until morning."

Distracted from her thoughts, Bronwyn need Tara to repeat herself before coming up with an answer.

"Yes. Yes... of course. We'll camp here and leave at dawn tomorrow."

"Good idea," Anders said at once. "You need to lie down, and I need to see how you're doing."

It was quite touching how kind her friends were about giving her privacy and support. Anders pronounced her to be healing well. Bronwyn suspected a great deal of it was due to the minute amount of Ashes she had consumed, but Anders, too, had done his part.

"But you still need a lot of rest, Bronwyn. We'll have a hard day tomorrow, and once we get back to the fort, you



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need to stay in bed a few days and then take it easy after that. And..." he hesitated.

"And?" she prodded.

"Er... it would be best if you didn't indulge in any... marital relations for at least a month. Grey Wardens heal fast, but you can't risk any further injury or infection."

At the moment nothing could sound less appealing than what Anders, in his gentlemanly way, was referring to as "marital relations." She shuddered. Revulsion blended with the anguish of loss and failure.

"I think I can safely promise that. Loghain told me he was going off an inspection tour of the northern port defenses. Very likely we won't see one another for some time anyway."

"Well, that's good." Anders said, happy to drop the subject. "Try to get some rest now, and we'll be out of here before you know it."

That was not entirely true. Time seemed to drag. Bronwyn tossed restlessly, sleeping and dozing and waking by turns. Her companions talked softly around the fire, and Bronwyn tried hard not to eavesdrop. Her dreams were unpleasantly near the surface; not buried in deep sleep as usual. Dark-spawn cackled and gabbled, pleased at some trick or other.

In the morning, they found that the snowfall had been heavy, and Shale walked in front, making huge footprints for them to step in, shoving masses of snow before it. It helped a good deal, though it was still miserably cold. Plunging and snorting, Scout leaped from footprint to



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footprint, ears laid back.

"I think the inside of my nose is frozen," Sigrun complained. "It feels funny."

Aveline and Catriona tore strips of cloth and showed the dwarven girls how to bind them over their faces, leaving just their eyes showing. Everything was incredibly crisp and clear, and it was not long before they reached the narrow pass and saw the battlements of Gherlen's Halt.

"My feet are cold," Brosca grumbled. "And wet. I hate snow. I wish we had snowshoes. Maybe Bustrum and Ostap can make us some more."

Morrigan flew off to apprise the fort of their imminent arrival. Anders refused to leave his patient, and insisted on walking next to Bronwyn, watching her like an anxious mother hen. Bronwyn thought it kind of him, but incredibly irritating.

She was a *Cousland*, and she was Queen of Fereldan. She could not falter now. The loss of the child was a constant pain, but she had work to do, and perhaps that would be the best remedy. Loghain had departed this place, and she could manage things here as she saw fit while her body recovered.

At the gates of the fort, she was met by both Ser Blayne and Ser Norrel, who bowed in greeting.

"Good day to you, Your Majesty, and welcome back to Gherlen's Halt," said Ser Blayne. "I hope your mission was a success."

"It was, Ser Blayne. I thank you." Her eyes slid to Ser Norrel, and she was unable to restrain her frown. "My



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companions and I are in need of food and a warm fire. Tomorrow, we shall meet, and take counsel together."



SER NORREL HAGLIN OF AMARANTHINE



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CHAPTER 20

T

LADIES OF NEVARRA

THE MEN ON HORSEBACK RODE FAST, THE RUGGED OUTLINE OF THE VIMMARKS SHRINKING AND FADING INTO THE

SOUTHEAST. Two of the riders were engaged in hot debate.

"I don't believe you."

"But it's true!"

Fenris rolled his eyes at Carver Hawke. "I do not believe that your Queen Bronwyn rode a dragon. According to you, she has slaughtered darkspawn, defeated werewolves, vanquished demons, and slain dragons. She crowned the dwarven king of Orzammar and raised armies of elves and mages. She found the lost Tomb of Andraste and survived incredible dangers to retrieve a pinch of the Prophet's Ashes. Now you wish me to believe that she flew on a dragon's back. My suspension of disbelief has snapped like a rotten slave tether."

"She did so ride a dragon! I saw her! She rode it right in front of everybody. Then she killed it. And it's not the first dragon she killed, either. She's not called the Dragonslayer



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for nothing! Besides, she's a Grey Warden, and Wardens used ride griffons. It's the same thing!"

"A dragon is not the same thing as a griffon."

"Well, she rode it anyway, and it flew!"

"Jowan," asked Fenris, "did you see this?"

"No..."

"Ha!"

"But I did see her kill a huge High Dragon in the Korcari Wilds. She jumped on its back, and stabbed it at the base of its skull. It couldn't fly because its wing was damaged."

"That's as may be," Fenris said, stubbornly holding fast to reality. "It is not possible to ride on a dragon. And your Queen sounds like an invention. I find it difficult to believe that there is any such person."

"Adam!" whined Carver. "Fenris doesn't believe in Bronwyn!"

Adam had been talking in a low voice to Nathaniel, but that tone and pitch always caught his ear. He gave his arl a rueful smile. Nathaniel, not amused, scowled and looked behind him. He slowed his horse to join the other riders.

"What's this?" he asked sharply. "What do you mean, he doesn't 'believe' in Queen Bronwyn?" He gave Fenris a dark stare. "Her Majesty Queen Bronwyn is the ruler of Ferelden. That is a matter of fact, not belief."

"I do not mean to disparage your Queen. Carver has been abusing my credulity with fantastic tales, in which she is always the heroine. It is clear that you all regard her highly, and that she is a just and virtuous woman. All the



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more reason not to tell ridiculous stories about her."

"What ridiculous stories?" Adam asked, raising his brows.

"The latest is that she was pursuing a Master Darkspawn into the Deep Roads, and rode a dragon about a vast and palatial cavern."

"Oh, that," Nathaniel agreed, with a shrug. "She did that. I was there. The dragon kept trying to scrape her off against the walls, but she killed it first. It was terrifying. I thought she was going to fall to her death."

"See?" said Carver, smugly triumphant.

"She rode a dragon?" Fenris repeated, somewhat dazed.

"I don't think she meant to," Nathaniel admitted. "She leaped on its back to better dig her dagger into its spine, and it took off. She held on, though, so yes: it definitely counts as flying on the back of a dragon."

"I see."

Carver went on, singing the praises of the Girl Warden, the Dragonslayer, the Red Queen of Ferelden. "Red," not for the color of her hair, but for the color of her dragon armor, which was a deep crimson. Bronwyn was kind and clever; she was brave and just. She was a good friend to dwarves and elves, and hated oppression and slavery. Her brother was a very good man, who had put a stop to the enslavement of elves in the north of Ferelden.

There followed a lengthy story about a band of Tevinter blood mages who had infiltrated under Denerim. They had built their own secret compound, and used it to



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kidnap and enslave people. Bronwyn had gone in and cleaned them out from end to end. Usually she was merciful, but she had not spared the slaver blood mages. Fenris approved greatly of that.

Carver declared, "She's worth a hundred of Empress Celene, who only knows how to dress up for balls and play politics to gain power. I'd like to see Empress Celene face a dragon!"

Adam overheard and grinned at Nathaniel. "Actually, I really would. I would love to see Empress Celene facing a dragon."

Nathaniel thought that over. "I'd prefer to *hear* of the Empress facing a dragon. If we were present, it would be our duty as gentlemen to try to rescue her."



Nathaniel had not been prepared for Nevarra. He thought he had. He had lived in Kirkwall and Markham. He had seen lofty Ostwick and sunny, white-cliffed Hercinia. He paid visits to Tantervale, Hasmal, and even Starkhaven, which was a large and rich city indeed. He had read books about foreign lands, and heard detailed descriptions of the magnificence of Val Royeaux and the Grand Cathedral. He was fond of his home city of Amaranthine, and was devoted to Denerim, though anyone who had traveled at all would recognize its limitations. Not one of those things had actually prepared him for the alien grandeur of Nevarra.

Skirting the edge of Wildervale, his party had remarked on the fine inns and the prosperous-looking villages. The



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growing season was longer this far north, and some fruits could be grown here that were unknown in Ferelden. Of course, it was still winter, but winter here was quite a different matter from the harsh cold of home. Here, summer greens had faded to greys and browns, but the breezes were mild and fresh.

Most startling was just how well-kept everything here was, especially once they crossed the border into Nevarra.

Nevarrans were great lovers of beauty; more obviously, they were great lovers of paint. Houses in the villages were mostly timber and plaster, with the timbers set in elaborate patterns. The plaster parts were whitewashed and in places painted with primrose yellow and that special shade that was justly called Nevarran Blue. It was a product of the root called woad and was widely used. Even the poor wore it, in its unrefined version: their garments like pieces of summer sky.

Every village had a statue of some local hero; every village had its Chantry with fine images of Andraste and her disciples. Rubbish was cleared away into walled middens; one hardly saw a beggar on the street. When innkeepers were queried about such oddities, they were informed that Nevarra had something called the King's Poor Law.

Apparently there were institutions called "workhouses," when the poor could go to live. They were given work to do in exchange for food and shelter, which the Fereldans thought was remarkably generous. These workhouses

were paid for by county taxes, for Nevarra was divided into a number of counties, each ruled by a count or countess, and each county had its own workhouse, its own orphanage – allowing children to remain until they were twelve, or otherwise apprenticed – and its own hospice, where the poor went to die. Its own prison, too, for many malefactors were thriftily put to hard labor for a period of time commensurate with their crimes. Such a degree of civilization was somewhat awe-inspiring. If there was time, Nathaniel hoped to inspect such institutions.

And the food and drink were very good, if different from anything to which they were accustomed. The wine was delicious, but pale yellow – sometimes almost greenish yellow – rather than red. The kind of grapes grown in this part of the Minanter Valley were called “white” grapes, though it sounded like they were actually pale green. The ale – or rather beer – was very good and very substantial. The food was hearty and not as fussy as Orlesian *grande cuisine*. The locals made a dark bread of mixed grains that was excellent with their good butter and mild cheeses; they made a tasty pork stew seasoned with red pepper and garlic – the latter was not widely known in Ferelden; and they served all sorts of dumplings: apple dumplings, plum dumplings; dumplings containing potatoes, pureed vegetables, or finely chopped pork. Nathaniel was not tired of them yet, and doubted that he ever would be.

They reached the Imperial Highway and were impressed

by its high degree of repair. The road could have been built that very year, for there were no broken stretches, no collapsed pillars, and no crumbling ramps. No one dared to take stone from the road to repair their own homes, for such a crime was harshly punished.

Nathaniel wanted to see the famed necropolis, too, but first he must present himself and his credentials to the Court Seneschal, and apply for an audience with the king. And he really must have a bath.

They rode, they saw the sights, they reached the city gates, and were there directed to a fine and expensive inn, which had a bathroom worthy of the entire journey.

The next day, the letter of introduction was presented to the court seneschal. This was a tricky process that occupied most of the morning for the two knights and half the guard. Nobles could not risk the loss of face that waiting on palace steps would inevitably involve, and so spent the morning cleaning themselves up and having the servants make certain that their best shirts and doublets were fit to be seen.

Carver and Jowan were more forthright in their own mission. The innkeeper of course knew where to find the Nevarran Grey Wardens, and even sent one of his boot boys as a guide. It was something of a walk, and so the two men took their horses from the stable and Carver, not caring what these foreigners thought of him, let the boy ride – behind him – since the puppies were draped over



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the front of the Wardens' saddles. This generosity paid dividends, since it made the boy all the happier to point out the sights. At the end of a long, tree-lined avenue, they approached a wide plaza, dominated by a magnificent edifice that resembled nothing they had seen before. It was not a fortress, certainly. It was wide and fronted with carved pillars; and a long staircase, as wide as the building, led up to the great bronze doors of the entrance.

Two long buildings, also colonnaded, were on either side of the big plaza. To their astonishment, the building to the left was a stable, but grand enough for a noble's house. The plaza itself was inlaid with a mosaic depicting griffons in flight.

"There!" Their young guide pointed. "Griffon House!"

Carver paid him and let him slide down. The boy dashed away, happy at the prospect of a leisurely stroll through the city, with coin to spend. The two Wardens stared about them in disbelief.

"Well, we've found Grey Wardens," said Jowan, thoroughly intimidated.

Carver felt like a country bumpkin himself, but was greeted in a friendly enough way by a group of Wardens who were lounging on the steps. These men – and one woman – nudged each other and pointed, already aware that the newcomers were Wardens.

"What a darling puppy!" said the woman, who saw Jowan's Lily first. "Oh!" she said noticing Magister, who



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was struggling to get down. "You have one, too!"

Carver liked her at once. She was not a pretty woman, nor very young, but she had a warm smile and liked dogs. Her long arms and lithe movements suggested that she would be useful in a fight.

"Greetings, brothers!" said a short but muscular fellow with a luxuriant moustache and a Warden tabard of embroidered silk. Carver could barely understand his accent. "Where are you from?"

"Ferelden," Carver declared, and swung off his horse. "We're supposed to deliver a letter to the Warden-Commander."

One of the Wardens whistled for a groom, who hurried from the stable, bowing.

"Your horses will be cared for," said the short Warden. "Ferelden, you say?"

"They have dogs, Borthus," shrugged one of his friends, grinning. "I thought they'd be bigger, though."

"They're *puppies*, Garamis!" the woman rebuked her comrade. "And they're quite lovely. You want to see the Warden-Commander? I'm sure he'd be delighted to meet brothers from afar – once he's finished with sword practice. I'm Athis. Senior Warden Athis. Come on."

They passed some casual young Warden-recruit guards, who waved them through in friendly fashion; and then were ushered through a pleasant anteroom, where a fountain played. A huge bas-relief of Wardens, twice life-size, was softened by tall green plants. Down a corridor, they



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heard the distant sound of voices and wood clattering against wood. Another door opened, and they stepped into a huge inner courtyard. Carver was surprised that they could so ignore the winter weather, when he looked up and saw the vast skylight overhead.

It was an immense practice yard, and it was full of Wardens. Carver and Jowan felt a pleasant buzzing under their skin; an embrace by scores of their brothers and sisters. People looked up, interested in the strangers and the inquisitive dogs trailing at their heels.

"There must be over two hundred Wardens here!" Jowan whispered, excited and impressed by the beauty of the Warden headquarters. This was a Warden palace... a Warden temple. In contrast, Soldier's Peak and even the Denerim Compound seemed primitive and shabby.

"Maybe more," Carver agreed, trying to count them. It was difficult. Everyone was in motion. Wardens were practicing archery, fencing with every kind of practice sword. They were dicing and card-playing, and drinking, and talking, and laughing, and flirting, and one appeared to be writing a poem and reciting bits of it as he worked. A more staid group of men and women in robes were listening to one of their number as she displayed a complex diagram of a magical glyph. Jowan had no idea what it was, and longed to eavesdrop.

Along one side of the courtyard were elegant marble statues, and to the Fereldans' astonishment, not one of them



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was of Andraste. Nor were all of them fully clothed – even the female figures. Jowan found himself blushing. Carver thought it was something Ferelden would do well to emulate.

More and more Wardens were looking their way. Most were human, but there was a sizable minority of dwarves and a smattering of elves – mostly archers.

At last, they were led before a tall man with keen amber eyes and salt-and-pepper hair cut short. The man set aside a practice sword and raised a quizzical brow at the puppies.

"Fereldans, Warden Commander," Athis announced. "Fereldan brothers, come all the way across the sea to deliver a letter."

"Then I suppose I'd better read it." The man put out his hand to Carver and then Jowan. "I'm Hector Pentaghast. Let's go and have a talk. And bring the dogs."

Carver and Jowan left the meeting feeling that they had been wrung out and left to dry... but in a *good* way. Certainly they had never meant to give the Nevarran Warden-Commander so much information, but it seemed perfectly natural at the time. Hector Pentaghast now knew the names, ranks, and numbers of the entire embassy and the complete history of the Blight in Ferelden. At least Carver was able to include the Bronwyn-riding-the-dragon story. It was his favorite, after all. Pentaghast listened in silence, not betraying how horrified he was by the episode with the Architect, and how even more shocked he was by the knowledge that there was –

or had been — however you looked at it — a prison established by Wardens in the Vimmark Mountains, and subsequently deserted, which had contained an ancient magister. It must be true. These two innocent lads simply did not have the wits to make up such stuff.

They were given some wonderful brandy and a delicious snack, while Pentaghast read Bronwyn's letter.

He nodded over it, his face a courteous mask, and then offered the hospitality of Griffon House to his visitors.

Jowan and Carver felt they could not accept it, even though they really wanted to.

"At least not tonight," said Jowan. "Arl Nathaniel and Carver's brother would worry about us. We'd love to come back and see more, though."

"An excellent idea!" Pentaghast approved, encouraging and genial. "Come tomorrow. I think you will find our lodgings more pleasant than any inn. Warden-Queen Bronwyn wishes you to learn all the Warden lore you can during your stay. Our library will be at your disposal, and our scholars will be happy to share their findings with you."

As soon as the Fereldans were gone, Pentaghast called in Senior Warden Athis.

"The Fereldans are part of a larger embassy. Very likely they will return tomorrow. Make friends with them. Get them to talk. Things are happening in Ferelden that we need to know about." He gave his trusted officer a significant look. "The Acting-Warden-Commander... that Girl

Warden who wrote a few months ago... she has gone and made herself Queen of Ferelden!"

Athis nearly burst out laughing. "The Empress won't like that!"

"I'm not sure anyone will. Weisshaupt, possibly. The First Warden might approve of it as a precedent. However, it's done. The prior Warden-Commander should have been more careful about recruiting too near the royal line of succession. Between the Orlesians and the Blight, the Theirins have been thinned out." He passed the letter to Athis. "Have a look at it. It's not badly written. Perhaps this young barbarian queen has a good secretary. Perhaps she is a prodigy. Perhaps our understanding of Ferelden is outdated. Her Wardens certainly regard her as a hero. I shall think on it before I answer."

Athis glanced through the letter. "The darkspawn have withdrawn from the southern offensive. She thinks they are inactive in very cold weather. The observation that Taint can be destroyed by freezing is interesting."

"Very. There has never been a Blight so far south, and so we are seeing new phenomena. Sensible of the girl to pass on the information. Freezing spells might be as destructive as fire, when it comes to clearing Taint. You never know when you might need to know such a thing."

"They do seem to have pushed the darkspawn back."

"Well done, of course. Whether they've defeated an actual offensive or thwarted a mere feint, the girl has been doing her duty. It's a shame we've been forbidden to do ours. How-



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ever, since the Fereldan Wardens are here, I see no reason why they should not learn all sorts of useful things. No official communications, you understand. Nothing that would outright defy the Orlesians' – I mean to say, the First Warden's orders. No. Just some brother and sister Wardens chatting in a friendly way about common interests."

"I imagine a great deal of information could slip out that way."
"Make sure that it does."

Carver and Jowan did not leave Griffon House immediately. After a whispered word from the Warden-Commander, Garamis used the pretext of some errands to take them on an impromptu tour, passing by the library, the mage's study room, the potions laboratory, Garamis' own pleasant quarters, and the inviting Great Hall. They also stopped for a look at the incredible marble baths, which included a pool large enough for swimming, and which was kept warm enough for the purpose even in the winter. Then they had another snack. The puppies were admired, and the Fereldans were happy to answer endless questions about them. With one thing and another, it was mid-afternoon before they returned to the inn, bickering a little about how to retrace their route.

The innkeeper was waiting for them, and came out to speak to them before they could dismount. With him were four official-looking guardsmen

"You're to go to the Royal Hostel, Wardens. The rest of



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the party left a little while ago. They took your gear with them. These guards remained here to escort you."

The man was good enough to explain that the Royal Hostel was a residence for distinguished visitors. Their credentials had been examined, and the King had commanded that His Excellency the Fereldan Ambassador Count Nathaniel Howe and his party were to be a royal guests, and under the protection of the Nevarran Crown.

Carver muttered to Jowan. "That means they want to keep an eye on us. I wish we'd stayed with the Wardens!"

"So, Van Antem... what do you think of our Fereldan guests?"

"More civilized than I expected, Sire," the First Minister replied instantly to King Baltus, with a little shrug. In the Privy Chamber, they could speak frankly.

"They are certainly what they claim to be," he continued. "I had an agent identify Count – or rather Arl, as they say in his country – Nathaniel Howe. He was educated in the Free Marches. Very likely he is the most polished they have to offer. Brave, courteous, and not without a certain innate decency. He is a high noble of the kingdom. Ferelden has five counties – or arlings – as well as two principalities, and a number of free lordships. Amaranthine is the richest of the counties. As you know, the town of Amaranthine is a substantial port city, trading extensively with the Free Marches, Rivain, and Antiva. The young noble with him is the lord of that city, and Howe's chief vassal. An attrac-

tive and not witless young man, if inexperienced in diplomacy. Howe's principal seat is a castle called Vigil's Keep, and it is quite ancient, even by our standards, though I daresay it is crude and poor enough."

King Baltus smiled. "They brought their dogs."

"They did, Sire, and fine beasts they are. Lord Adam's mature specimen evinces some of the remarkable intelligence rumored of the breed. The two Wardens have puppies, though they are as large already as our gaze-hounds."

"Lord Adam's brother is one of the Wardens, I take it."

"Indeed, and the other is more scholar than warrior. They have gone to meet with Hector. I daresay he will find them refreshing."

"What is it that they want... what is that they *really* want?"

"I believe it is as straightforward a matter as they say. They wish us to continue to oppose Orlais. For us, it is a matter of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Ferelden is still deeply embittered by decades of harsh occupation. Our sources indicate that Orlais is looking to take advantage of the darkspawn incursion in the far south."

"Our dear Hector insists that it is a Blight."

"He knows best, I suppose." The First Minister shrugged. "Though why the darkspawn would trouble in the savage wildness south of a barbarian land is indeed a puzzlement. At any rate, it is clear that the Fereldans are worried about Orlesian pressure. There was a very flagrant attempt on Queen Anora's life a few months ago: an attempt that

killed a number of nobles at a wedding. There have also been attempts on Loghain Mac Tir, and the 'Girl Warden' who is now Queen."

"What does Hector think about that?"

"I think we should summon him and find out. The Fereldans speak of their queen quite freely and favorably. My people have been busy making friends with the servants, who gossip like all servants. They tell some wild tales, and some of the stories are clearly old folk tales refashioned for a new heroine. On the other hand, she is clearly remarkable and charismatic enough for folk like the servants to credit such tales, and what she accomplished in Orzammar is beyond question. A great many people claim — including those two young Wardens — to have seen her kill a High Dragon, though as part of a larger expedition. Loghain was also there, and he appears to have successfully used mobile ballistae against the creature in the course of the fight. Explosive bolts could be useful out west where the dragons are making a comeback."

"Young Cassandra will enjoy hearing about all that."

Van Antem huffed. "That young spitfire may not approve of the Dragonslayer. There are rumors that the Fereldan Queen and her consort Mac Tir — that's an ill-assorted pair I'd pay good coin to see! — are tolerant of mages, and are encouraging them to serve as healers and battlemages in the army. Of course, ages ago during Blights, the Grey Wardens called up on the mages to serve, but under their



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own aegis. This Bronwyn Cousland has set a dangerous precedent, not just in taking the throne, but in her relationship to the Chantry.”

“The Chantry should stay out of international politics!” Baltus said, rather testy about it. “It’s well known that the Orlesians used the Chantry in their seizure of Ferelden. They’ve tried the same rubbish in the western cities we’ve captured – preaching about the will of the Divine. They’d best not overreach themselves!”

“Our own Grand Cleric Alexandra is loyal, Majesty,” soothed Van Antem. “She does not tolerate treasonous talk among her priests. The troublemakers have been sent to cloisters.”

“Quite right! So... what can we actually do for Ferelden? Is it worthwhile to do anything for them at all?”

Van Antem rubbed his beard. “Yes. Absolutely. And we must move quickly, since any help must reach the Fereldans before the Orlesians are upon them. We cannot risk that Bannorn of theirs falling to the Orlesians. That would produce grain enough to fuel a renewed assault against our western borders. They are not asking for troops, after all, which would be inconvenient. We can keep the Orlesians occupied for our own sake. Indeed, we have little choice with the chevaliers champing at the bit to regain lost lands. We can give the Fereldans a bit of gold. Really, a trifle will seem a fortune to those southern barbarians. Perhaps some other material assistance, like a ship or two. Some pretty trinkets to keep the Queen and her ferocious



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spouse happy. And establishing some ties between our two nations is not at all a bad idea. We can spread our culture and influence in the time-honored way: by disposing of some surplus females in marriage.”



“What is this Court of Love, anyway?” Adam asked, tugging at his doublet. He took another look at himself in a huge, gilt-framed mirror hanging in the common room of their quarters. Quarters, which were, frankly, more opulent than anything he had ever seen or imagined.

Nathaniel shrugged. “I’m informed that it’s the Queen’s salon, held at the full moon every month. The important ones are the ones in the spring and summer, but she holds them every month without fail. It’s largely a social event, in which noble daughters are put through their paces, and noble ladies display their own accomplishments. Nevarran women are very well-educated. We’re mostly accessories. If the ladies want to dance, then we’re there to dance with them and pay them compliments.”

“I can do that.”

In fact, barbarians or not, the foreign count and his vassal lord were looked upon as attractive additions to the rather thinly-attended Wintermarch Court of Love. That they were both good dancers was greatly in their favor. There was a definite shortage of men at this time of year. Most of the ladies present were royal, or their poor relations. Van Markhams, Pentaghasts, Rosenthals, and Van



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Antems were represented, but not many ladies from the more far-flung fiefdoms.

One dark-haired young girl of about fifteen years scowled at them from the sidelines. She had fine amber eyes and a smooth olive skin, but was coltish and awkward, and snarled at anyone who tired to dance with her. Someone had dressed her in an expensive gown of coppery silk, but she seemed uncomfortable in it, and fidgeted as if encased in scratchy wool.

"Who is that young lady?" Adam asked of his partner.

"Oh, Poor Tragedy!" whispered the girl. "That's Cassandra Pentaghast. Don't trouble yourself about her! She's a ward of the Crown, and pestering the Queen to be permitted to take Chantry orders."

"She wants to become a priest?"

"My lord, she wants to be a Seeker! Or at the very least, a Templar! Yes, she's training to be a warrior... Of course, I understand that's not uncommon in Ferelden. Your own Queen... Forgive me if I offend."

"Not at all. Not all ladies are suited to such a life. Queen Bronwyn manages to be at once a great warrior, a beautiful lady, and a splendid dancer, but she is unique."

"Oh, I'm sure! So many rumors have reached us. She's very tall, I understand. Is she as tall as you?"

Adam grinned charmingly, and cocked his head, thinking it over. "Almost. But my voice is deeper."

His partner trilled a laugh, well pleased with him. "Well,



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I was talking about little Cassandra. She's only a fourth cousin of the Queen, but still a Pentaghast. Her brother was killed by mages! Isn't that horrible? Anything can happen in the borderlands, I suppose. That's why I prefer the Court."

"I rather like the Court myself," Adam admitted, "though one is just as liable to be killed here – though by a pair of pretty eyes, rather than a mage's spell!"

Nathaniel's dances were carefully arranged by Queen Melantha, who was always interested in young nobles of good estate. Very properly, the foreign count danced first with Princess Sophia, and then with Princess Porphyria – because Melantha was very interested in what her clever Porphyria would make of the young man. His appearance was dark but comely, his manners polished. He really was not at all like a barbarian, which disappointed the girls somewhat. Nor was that Lord – or Bann – what an odd term! – Adam likely to cause a disturbance. Very handsome, very eligible. Her sources told her that there was noble Kirkwallor blood on the mother's side, which explained his civil demeanor. He had brought a very large dog with him, who appeared to understand everything said to him. Queen Melantha wondered if the dog could do tricks.

Porphyria took her seat by her mother, and whispered in her ear. "Very nice. Serious, but quite nice. Not stupid, and brought up to respect women. Very devoted to his Queen Bronwyn. He'd be a nice husband, I think. Can we keep him?"

"Of course not. We want to send him home married –

and married to a high-born, well-educated Nevarran lady. No, my dear, not you. A Fereldan count is not sufficiently exalted for a Nevarran princess."

"Pity. I think I should quite like him."

"Now if the heir-presumptive were available, we might arrange something for you with *him*. I have heard of the Couslands, and the man is a prince, which is far finer than a count. However, Count Nathaniel says that Prince Cousland is already betrothed to Mac Tir's daughter, who was queen to the last king. Not surprising. And he is only an heir-presumptive, after all. Nonetheless, we shall find someone charming for Count Nathaniel. It is an opportunity to build ties with another nation. Of course, the girl we send will likely never return to Nevarra."

"A hard fate. Still, there are those the King might wish were far away."

"Very true, my dear. I already have someone in mind. Your father suggested her. I see you've already guessed the name. An honorable marriage for her, and less friction for us here at home. I shall not send her alone, for all that. We shall find someone for the young lord, too, and then there will be the servants. Tell Callista I wish to speak to her, and then, I think, you must dance with Lord Adam."

"A dangerous business, but someone's got to do it!"

Nathaniel was in due course formally presented to Lady Callista Pentaghast, the Queen's niece, and they danced a slow sarabande together, which permitted them to con-

verse and look each other over thoroughly.

There was nothing for Nathaniel to complain of in the lady. She was much like her Pentaghast cousins: black-haired and fine-boned, with large and expressive amber eyes. The black brows over said eyes met in ironic amusement at the sight of the foreign noble, for she was not a slow-witted girl, and grasped immediately that he was to be her fate. She was dressed to very great advantage in the deep jewel-like colors favored by Nevarrans in the winter months, and on her head was an elaborate circlet of gold, pearls, and amber, the latter of which exactly matched her eyes.

"So, my lord... I hope you have found this city agreeable?"

"Very beautiful, indeed, my lady; and the people most gracious."

"And have you visited the Cathedral?"

"Yes, yesterday."

"And the Royal Armory?"

"The day before yesterday."

"And the Necropolis?"

"That is scheduled for tomorrow."

"Then we are done with the sights and may begin upon the weather, I suppose. Do you think it will rain?"

Nathaniel smiled. "You are very brisk in listing your country's beauties. I believe there must be much more to see."

"Perhaps if I visited Ferelden, I would find much of interest there that the inhabitants take for granted."

"True. I am looking forward to seeing the Necropolis, but I would also like to visit some of your charitable institu-



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tions. I might have much to learn there.”

He really was very nice, and not at all savage. Perhaps he had taken on the coloration of his company, and would revert to wearing skins and smashing skulls when amongst his own people. He might look rather good in skins, actually. He had the broad shoulders and slim hips to carry them off with a certain style.

“Lord Adam has his great mabari with him, but you do not. I thought all Fereldans had dogs.”

“Many of us do. I had the honor of a mabari’s companionship when I was a young boy. She died bravely, saving my life from a bear.”

“I am sorry. I don’t mean to speak lightly of such matters. I once had a hawk of which I was very fond, but one day he flew away and I never saw him again. I should have kept closer watch on him.”

“He might not have deserted you. Perhaps he met with a misadventure.”

“I would rather he be alive and free, even if he left me, than dead.”

Nathaniel looked at her keenly. “Many would choose differently.”

The Queen watched the two young people with great complacency. They were talking easily, which was a good sign. The Fereldan knew his dances, and moved well. The two of them made a handsome couple. Their colors should be better coordinated. Queen Melantha liked to see cou-



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ples dressed to complement each other. She would send the noblemen Nevarran court garments, as a mark of favor. The lace collars would set off their muscular throats. Yes, if they could exile Callista permanently from Navarra, Baltus might forgive Melantha’s brother’s treachery, and provide Callista a dowry from the confiscated estate.

Now, who for Lord Adam? An idea came to her. The Fereldans did not wish to prolong their stay. If they left quickly enough, they might never find out about the Aestragon girl’s mage brother! Quickly, she spoke to a lady-in-waiting, who passed on the summons to a guard officer. It should not take long for the young lady to make her appearance. Berenice was not as good-looking as Lord Adam, but not many were. Callista was friendly with her, and the Aestragons knew Berenice had few prospects since the scandal. Considering Lord Adam with an artist’s eye, she was glad she had commanded the girl to wear green. It might make the girl’s unfortunate red hair – very unfashionable among Nevarrans – almost tolerable.

There was a pause in the dancing, and Queen Melantha addressed Lady Callista.

“My dear, it has been long since I heard you sing. I beg you to indulge me. Lord Nathaniel, your charming partner is quite the musician.”

“I look forward to hearing her, Your Majesty.”

A lute was brought, and Callista sat on a little stool at the Queen’s feet. She disguised her nervousness by care-



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fully tuning the instrument, and then sang a song that was a favorite of her late, lamented, beheaded father's.

CALLISTA'S SONG

*In Love, if Love be Love, if Love be ours,
Faith and unfaith can ne'er be equal powers:
Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all.
It is the little rift within the lute,
That by and by will make the music mute,
And ever widening slowly silence all.
The little rift within the lover's lute,
Or little pitted speck in garner'd fruit,
That rotting inward slowly moulders all.
It is not worth the keeping: let it go:
But shall it? answer, darling, answer, no.
And trust me not at all or all in all.*

She had quite a pretty voice, luscious as ripe plums. Nathaniel had heard many fine musicians, most notably Bronwyn's Warden bard and the Nevarran minstrel who had been summoned to the Palace. Callista Pentaghast was not a professional, but she was very well-trained and talented, and would not be embarrassed to perform anywhere. Clearly, the Queen knew of her talent, and wanted to show it off to Nathaniel.

So, she is to be the one.

He could live with that. He had come here knowing that



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he would likely leave Nevarra a married man. Callista Pentaghast was attractive, high-born, very well-spoken, a graceful dancer, and now he found she was an excellent musician. She seemed to be capable of real feeling, as far as he could tell on such short notice. No doubt she would be a very good Arlessa. He sighed a little, wishing he had more to offer of himself, but this nice girl would never be Bronwyn Cousland. He could at least, however, treat her better than his father had treated his mother. Come to think of it, his father was a perfect model as a husband, if Nathaniel's behavior was the complete opposite.

What would she think of Ferelden? He would not apologize for his home, but there was no reason that he could not make it more comfortable. She would likely have a very good dowry, and that could go to improving her apartments at Vigil's Keep and upgrading his Denerim townhouse. As far as he could arrange it, she would have a good life in far-away Ferelden.

A large and distinguished party visited the Necropolis, traveling in state carriages. Such visits were not rare, for it was customary for Nevarrans to pay calls on their dead. Queen Melantha enjoyed showing off the grandeur of the royal tombs as much as the First Minister, who had ostensibly been given the duty. A luncheon was served in the state dining room within the palatial tomb of Queen Electra II, which proved to be a miracle of mosaic floors, painted fres-



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coes, and lily-shaped columns. The furniture was carved and gilded, and the tomb's kitchen was equipped with every convenience. To the Fereldans, it was nothing short of bizarre, but the food was good, and they all smiled gamely.

Nathaniel escorted Callista, and Adam escorted Lady Berenice Aestragon, whom the Queen intended he should marry. Adam would have preferred some choice in the matter. He thought Lady Berenice good-looking enough, since Fereldans had no cultural prejudice against red hair. Hers was very red indeed: blazing red and wildly curly. She had the classic redhead's stone-pale complexion, too. She did not have much to say for herself, and seemed not to want to talk about her family. She was perfectly polite to him, and perfectly polite to Carver, once he was introduced as Adam's brother. Her only genuine smiles, however, were for the dogs. It occurred to him suddenly, as he watched her push her meal about her plate, that perhaps she would have liked to have had some choice, too. It was something of an epiphany.

There was nothing wrong with her, of course; and certainly nothing wrong with her dowry, which was simply staggering by Fereldan standards. It was all happening so *fast*. Rumors had reached him that her wedding dress was nearly ready. Some clauses in the marriage contract were odd, especially the one setting aside a portion of her dowry for construction of her tomb. Lady Callista had such a clause as well. The clauses for dower properties were nothing unusual, but the idea of large sums going for a



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place to put a rotting dead body struck Adam as rather macabre. The tombs were not intended to be such marvels as the one they were currently dining in. They were more likely to be stylized versions of a Nevarran house, with a vestibule, a reception room, and a bedroom, where the sarcophagus was placed. And there would have to be guards. Yes — there would certainly have to be guards in Ferelden, or squatters would move in and *live* there.

It was annoying that Carver had taken it into his head to be jealous of the marriage. He was so jealous, in fact, that he was taking the trouble to flirt with Lady Berenice, and worse, he was encouraging Magister to be winsome and *cuddly*. Adam exchanged a look at Hunter, who rose to his four feet, sighing deeply, and went over to the red-haired female to ingratiate himself.

Carver and Jowan were staying with the Grey Wardens, and had gone on insufferably about the facilities there, until Adam had shut them up with the equal glories of the royal hostel. A plunge bath, large enough for swimming, was a very agreeable thing. Perhaps some of Berenice's dowry could go for that, once they were back in Amaranthine.

Queen Melantha was talking. "Yes, I understand, my dear Count. You must return to Kirkwall for your own ship. That can be arranged very easily. But gently reared young women cannot be expected to gallop through the Vimmarks with their dowry in their saddlebags! Instead, carriages can carry people and their possessions so much



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more easily and comfortably down the Imperial Highway to Cumberland. A royal transport can convey everyone to Kirkwall, protected by an escort of three warships. The vessels will then sail all the way to Denerim, once your ship joins with the rest. Is that not a good, prudent, *sensible* plan?"

It really was – and generous, too. Nathaniel thanked her, only suggesting Amaranthine as the ultimate destination. This was immediately agreed to as a tremendous improvement, and the Queen praised Count Nathaniel's good sense. Understandable that he should wish to end the journey swiftly, since those four ships, along with a considerable amount of gold, were being made over to Ferelden as a belated wedding present from King Baltus and Queen Melantha of Nevarra to their respected friends, King Loghain and Queen Bronwyn of Ferelden.

For himself, Adam was relieved at the prospect of not traveling with a new bride on the same ship as Captain Isabela. They must stop at Kirkwall, certainly, and the SIREN'S CALL would carry some of their cargo... but Berenice and Isabela in close proximity? Er... no. But Queen Melantha's plan involved spending day after day on a ship, and Adam felt rather queasy at the prospect.

He whispered to Nathaniel, "Do you suppose Queen Melantha has even been at sea?"

Nathaniel nearly sighed. "I shouldn't think so." He had reservations about the Queen's plan, but those ships were too valuable to reject.



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They walked down wide avenues, admiring the monuments to past heroism or beauty or fantastic wealth. They spent some time at the Pentaghast tombs, which were filled with tributes to the dragon-hunters. Carver and Jowan nudged each other, the reliefs and mosaics filling in what they had been learning from the books in the Wardens' library. Some dragon-hunters relied on missile weapons; some used nets; some lured dragons up to towers or hills; some used a combination of the various tactics.

As for the betrothed couples, there was no opportunity for privacy. They would have to become friends as husbands and wives... if they could.

Another day saw a visit to the Princess Corinna Orphanage, named for a long-ago royal who died in childhood. The orphanage took children of all races, gave them a rudimentary education, and arranged employment for them... usually as servants. They were neat and clean and carefully well-behaved – at least on the day of the royal visit – and were not learning petty crime on the street. The hospice seemed a worthy institution. The workhouse was grimmer than Nathaniel had expected, and he did not approve of the way that the genders were separated, and husbands and wives kept apart – and their children were taken away to the orphanage – but it was certainly better than starvation.

As for the prison, he thought it a far better incentive to honesty than hanging, since the manifest misery of the chained and shaven-headed felons, working on a road



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gang, struck him as far worse than death. They certainly kept the highways in superb condition.

Other visits were paid to more pleasant establishments: to libraries and schools and the Merchant's Exchange. They paid visits to the headquarters of the Royal Army and saw their drill, which was crisp and admirable, but no more polished than that instilled by Loghain. The days passed quickly, and almost before they knew it, they found themselves in Nevarra Cathedral in front of the Grand Cleric, who performed a ceremony between Nathaniel and Adam on the one hand, and two noble ladies dressed in traditional Nevarran bridal costume on the other.

"Look, Berenice, they are returning. You really should tell him."

Within four days of their weddings, the embassy party was being hosted by Callista's cousin, the Prince of Cumberland, heir to the throne. Everything was being conducted civilly, but with dispatch, for the Fereldan lords were anxious to return home as quickly as possible. The two young Nevarran women stood looking out over Cumberland's harbor, watching the activity below, as the ships were prepared for their departure the next day. The people were hardly bigger than ants, but Arlessa Callista Howe had no trouble making out Nathaniel's long figure.

"It's too late," said Lady Berenice Hawke. "I didn't dare tell him before. If I tell him now, he'll probably kill me, once he gets me back to Ferelden. Or he'll toss me overboard, when



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we're at sea. If only I were prettier! If only I weren't cursed with this awful hair! Remember the old song about the lady and the knight of the Southland? Once he had her alone by the sea, he made her take off her wedding clothes so he could sell them after he drowned her like his other brides."

"And if *you* remember, the lady threw the knight in the sea instead, when his back was turned! Lord Adam would never do such a thing. And even if he wanted to, Nathaniel would not permit it."

It was like whistling in the dark. Everything seemed to be going well enough. Nothing, surely, could be as embarrassing and frightening as their weddings nights, each of them put into bed naked in bedchambers at the royal hostel, sheets pulled up to their chins; each with a strange young man – a handsome young man they hardly knew – beside them, equally naked. The Grand Cleric had offered prayers, and the priests had sprinkled them with holy water. Then the guests – including the King and Queen in Callista's case – had departed in formal procession, and the door was shut.

It could have been quite horrible, and had been rather the opposite. Nathaniel was a gentle lover, and Adam's charm was not laid aside in private. Nevertheless, both girls wondered if all this courtesy and consideration were assumed for the benefit of the alliance. They would be alone and unprotected in the wilds of Ferelden. There was no end of stories, like the one Berenice mentioned, telling what happened to such girls. And if Lord Adam were to



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discover that there was magic in Berenice's family...

True, the Fereldans were all perfectly friendly with Warden Jowan, who was an actual mage himself. Of course, he was a Warden, and this was a Blight; but it was a little frightening to see him performing magic. The King and Queen had Healers among their servants, but they were carefully guarded by Templars, and were never seen in public. Life among the Fereldans was certainly run on very different lines than in Nevarra. After tomorrow, nothing would ever be the same.

Callista and Berenice were glad that the journey to Cumberland had been undertaken under heavy guard. Twice the party had been attacked, the second time by a very strong force. The two girls and their maidservants had clung to each other in their carriage, listening to the clash of swords and the screams and curses of fighting men. Once, someone had rattled the door latch, and then there had been a horrible chopping noise, and a gurgle, and a thud. The elven guardsman, Fenris, spoke to them from outside in his beautiful soothing voice, assuring them that they were perfectly safe. For all that, they noticed the blood on the carriage door when they next stepped out of it.

Nevarran noblewomen knew politics, and they knew that their attackers were no mere bandits. There were Orlesian agents in Nevarra, even though there was currently no Orlesian ambassador, since a state of war existed between the two countries. There might even be ships



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waiting to attack them at sea. It all depended on how quickly the agents had ridden south, how large a force they could muster, and if they had managed to cross the Waking Sea and persuaded anyone to give them ships.

In case of such pursuit, the story being told was that they were sailing to a Fereldan fortress called West Hill, while actually they were going to Amaranthine. Berenice had heard their husbands talking, and so knew that they had not thought it wise to insult the Queen by refusing her plan to ride to Cumberland. However, sailing from Cumberland meant that Orlais was on the other side of the Narrows of the Waking Sea. They must pass the great port of Jader on their way to Kirkwall, and the voyage would last at least three days. Much could happen, between the weather and hostile warships.

The Prince gave them a festive dinner, and his best wishes. His good humor was no doubt enhanced by the prospect of the daughter of an attainted traitor leaving her homeland forever. Callista smiled dutifully, but something in her face caught Nathaniel's notice, and he took her hand in his.

It was a slight gesture, but at the moment it meant all the world to her. She managed a better smile for her husband, and for the first time believed that a new start in a new country might really be the good thing that Queen Melantha had told her it was.

Berenice was not so hopeful. She did not tell Adam Hawke about her brother that night; nor did she tell him the next night, as Nevarra faded into the horizon behind them.

CHAPTER 21

WINTERMARCH



FERGUS AND ANORA ANNOUNCED THEIR BETROTHAL AT A DINNER PARTY ON THE EIGHTH OF WINTERMARCH. The wedding

was to take place on the twelfth of Guardian, and had scandalized many people by its early date. The two most concerned, however, agreed that the marriage could not wait. Either the darkspawn or the Orlesians could be upon them at any moment. If they did not marry now, who knew when they would?

Arl Leonas Bryland and his arlessa were not yet back in Denerim to attend the dinner, though they were expected within a few days. Arl Wulffe was also down in his own fiefdom. Arl Teagan had taken his young bride to his manor at Rainesfere. Loghain had left orders for all his nobles to muster for duty on the tenth of Guardian. Some, either too old or unsuited to arms, would be sending the captains of their militias instead. Fergus and Anora had set the date for the wedding to take place during the muster, since this would allow more people to witness their wedding than

would ordinarily be present in the capital.

In preparation for this, most nobles were out in the country, giving last-minute instructions to their stewards and seneschals. Thus, the only other great nobles at the dinner were the Arl and Arlessa of Denerim. Anora would not have chosen Habren as a companion at any time, but on this particular occasion it was especially unsatisfactory. Habren certainly appeared to be satisfied with herself. It was harder to read her husband's face. It was unbelievable to Anora that he could like Habren, much less be in love with her, but she had to give him credit for tolerance. Whenever Habren said anything that could reasonably be expected to raise a blush, Kane wisely did not seem to hear her. What was more unpleasant was the expression on Habren's face when any woman dared to speak to her handsome husband... or even to look at him.

Two new nobles were at the table, looking desperately uncomfortable. Bann Alistair and Bann Cauthrien at least were properly dressed. Anora had sent Cauthrien a gift of two gowns, so her childhood companion could not make the excuse of having no clothes. Anora had no idea where Alistair had found his own finery, but he looked quite nice, and just as he should. Some young ladies tried to flirt with him, but he stared at them all in exactly the same way: like a deer run down by hounds. He managed to exchange a few, nervous words with Cauthrien, whom he knew. Anora could not hear what they were talking about.

In the end, Anora and Fergus focused on each other, which



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was the nicest outcome, anyway. It was growing harder and harder to resist their mutual attraction and keep faith with their plans. Nothing must cast a shadow on the legitimacy of any prospective heir. Yes, there were herbal teas, but Anora had never before used them, and she began to now, there would inevitably be talk. They were public figures; they had no reasonable expectation of privacy.

"I predicted the match," whispered Lady Seria Mac Coe, immensely smug. "Didn't I?"

"Most of Denerim predicted it," her daughter-in-law whispered back. "Who else could she marry? If a man climbed a tower to rescue me from poison and carried me all the way down, he'd deserve proper thanks for it!"

"Another match between Gwaren and Highever," muttered Bann Ceorlic to his mother. "That's a lot of power for just two families."

"At least," his mother, the Dowager Lady Rosalyn sneered, "that peasant girl can no longer Queen it over us. She'll be a subject, like the rest of us. And the poor King's ashes hardly cold..."

"A subject married to the heir to the throne!" grunted Ceorlic. "And for that matter, she was a more civilized choice than her father! There's nothing to choose between Loghain and Bronwyn and Anora and Fergus: both ways we've got a Cousland and a commoner. You'd think the Couslands would have more pride."

Their conversation was attracting attention, so Rosalyn gave her son a hard nudge, and began talking loudly of the weather.



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Teyrn Fergus had engaged a very fine musician for the evening, who brought with her a little elven apprentice. The Nevarran woman played quietly throughout the meal, and then sang songs and told stories. The little elf danced charmingly, dressed in a costume that evoked a delicate snowflake. Afterwards, some of the guests politely called a servant with a silver platter over, and put coin for the performers on it. Other guests, less considerately, threw the coins at the child's feet, and chuckled to see her scramble for them. Mistress Zoe bowed, thanked the nobles for their generosity, and afterward used the experience to teach her apprentice something about noble titles not guaranteeing noble behavior — a lesson that Amethyne already knew too well. In the end, coin was a good thing, and one could despise the uncouth in private. Between the Queen and her brother the Teyrn, they were better protected than other musicians who had no powerful patrons.

During a lull, Anora spoke to Arl Kane, on her left.

"And how are your dear little sisters faring? It is so fortunate that they have each other's company."

"My thanks, Your Majesty. They're well and happy. They've got a clever governess and they're very good girls to begin with. They never give me a moment's trouble."

Habren bridled at his words. She had told Kane, again and again, all the wicked, mischievous things those wretched little brats had done, but he never seemed to hear her. It was so infuriating. He was her husband, and should believe whatever she said. What difference did it



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make whether what she said was true or not?

And those girls... they schemed together and tattled on her behind her back. Habren just knew it. Worse yet, one of the bitches in the Denerim kennels would whelp soon, and Kane had said that the brats would have the first go at imprinting the puppies. Clearly, Habren should have precedence.

She glared at Lady Clemency, who was leaning over the table, staring at Kane. What a slut, and her husband right there beside her. It was disgusting, how women were always leering at Kane. He was Habren's, and they would do better to chase after that bastard of Maric's, though he was a hopeless bumpkin. Really! His mother must have been a washerwoman.

And that governess of theirs was another sore point. The girl was nothing more than a servant, when all was said and sifted, and Kane paid entirely too much attention to her. Why did she have to be young and pretty? Why couldn't she be old and ugly and a good disciplinarian who would whip the little brats when they deserved it? Habren had asked Kane to get rid of the girl, but he always changed the subject; giving her compliments or presents, smiling at her in the way that was so distracting. Sulking, she did not bother to listen to the rest of the Queen's conversation.

Kane had to, and was faintly annoyed. The Dowager Queen expected him to preside in the monthly judicial sessions, overseeing the civil and criminal cases and hearing petitions. So far, the seneschal had done that for him, but everyone seemed to think it was his duty to make



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an appearance at some point. Kane hated debate and discussion and nitpicking. His brother was always suing someone or other, and going on and on about the wording of the laws. To this day, Kane was bored witless even thinking about it. If the Dowager thought it all so Maker-blessed important, why didn't she do it herself?

She anticipated his objection, being a horribly clever woman.

"It is a duty I would undertake myself, but my office as Chancellor makes it impossible. I must hear cases at a higher level – for example, if one noble has a claim against another. I cannot hear the city cases as well. I think you would find it interesting, my lord; and you would learn much about the city in such a way."

This was worse than Loghain telling him that he should take an interest in harbor defenses. Much worse. Kane could see the point of defending his property against an attack by foreigners, but he could not care less about slum dwellers pilfering small clothes off a laundry line or elves knifing each other. Maybe he really ought to have a fine suit of armor made, and walk down to the harbor with his officers. If he did that, he'd have an excuse to avoid the law court.

"I say it's time to go," Alistair declared, thumping the long table in the Wardens' Hall. "We've had plenty of rest and spent enough coin here in Denerim. I want to have a look at Soldier's Peak, and then go west and help Bronwyn."

"And you should have a look at that land of yours," Petra

advised. "Maybe it's nice."

"Maybe," Alistair muttered, looking hunted, trying not to imagine the horror of presenting himself as a nobleman before the people of Stonehaven. At least he would have a mabari beside him. Fondly he rubbed Scrapper's ears. Imprinting his very own mabari was an honor and a privilege beyond any he had ever dreamed. One being in all the world put him first. It was better than being a bann. For that matter, he thought Scrapper would be a more impressive bann than Alistair himself. But why worry about that that? There were the darkspawn to hunt down, first of all.

"Let us go then," Danith agreed, rather tired of the shemlen town. "But perhaps we should leave a few here in case there is word from any of the other parties."

"And nobody who hasn't already been to Soldier's Peak," suggested Maeve. "Everybody should go there at least once."

"I'd like to *live* there," Quinn said wistfully. "I could go hunting."

Nuala and Steren exchanged a glance. They could not agree more. The boy was a good, sensible boy, even though he had, unfortunately, been born a shemlen.

"I'd like to go," Niall said quietly. "It's a better, safer place for mages. I know that Bronwyn's done wonders, but Uldred and his people are either locked up in Fort Drakon or traveling with army units. It's out on the street that I feel uncomfortable. The soldiers are friendly, but plenty of the common folk are still suspicious. And the Templars are watching."

"But up at Soldier's Peak there's that horrible old blood mage," Petra objected. "I can't say I'm looking forward to meeting *him*."

"He knows a lot, Petra," Niall said, mild and soothing. "He knows more than just blood magic. And it's like speaking to a history book. Avernus is really *interesting*. Besides," he added, for her ears alone. "Being up at the Peak.. in the Mage's Tower.. it's like having our own Circle, far away from all the rubbish of the Chantry. The other Wardens have no trouble with us. We could —" his voice dropped to a thin whisper "I've been thinking that we could take in some apostates... maybe some children with magic. Really run an independent Circle. No Templars at all."

Petra looked at him in astonishment, and then remembered that he was an Isolationist. "We can't do anything until the Blight is over."

He bit his lip, and sighed. "Right. After the Blight is over."

Ketil and Idunn agreed to stay at the Compound. Both the dwarves enjoyed the city life of Denerim, and were not thrilled at the idea of a march through the snow, even though most of the journey would be underground.

"We'll pass on any messages," Idunn assured Alistair. "It looks like most of the action is in the west anyway, out by Orzammar."

Ketil shrugged. "And if I never see Orzammar again, that's fine with me!"

The party had the maps and the notes. Alistair could hardly wait to escape from Denerim, with its fancy din-



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ners and the pressing attentions of strange young ladies. Nonetheless, he knew he could not simply slip away and disappear. Anora made him nervous, but Fergus was a friend, and so it was to Fergus he went.

"All right. It sounds sensible. Better to find your way before spring, certainly," the Teyrn of Highever agreed. "I'll let Anora know. You can be excused from the general muster, since you're a Warden, and you've never had a chance to raise a levy on your bannorn. We'll want to write some letters to Bronwyn and Loghain and send them by you. Maker only knows what they're up to. Go to your Warden fortress and see if you can watch the sea from it. Bronwyn didn't tell me about that. We're worried about an invasion fleet this spring."

Feeling wretched, Alistair wished he had the nerve to tell Fergus that Wardens were supposed to be neutral. They should be totally focused on the Blight. It was hopeless. He had since heard how the Orlesian Knight-Divine and that Duke had come and threatened everybody. Couldn't Rior dan and the other Orlesian Wardens make them understand that what they were doing was wrong?

Fergus had originally planned for Bann Cauthrien to go with Alistair, taking along a strong unit of Maric's Shield with them. Fergus and Anora agreed that at this point Loghain would want to be reinforcing the west. However, now there was a task for Cauthrien and her soldiers to undertake in Denerim. All things considered, it would be best for Cauth-



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rien to handle it, and then wait for Loghain's arrival. If he wanted to take her west, there would be plenty of time then.

Anora had shared with Fergus and Cauthrien Loghain's secret message about Bann Frandarel. She had not been slow to act upon it. Agents had already been dispatched to make a discreet search of the premises and to bring back anything incriminating they found. For that matter, there were some scraps and notes concerning him among the documents belonging to a notorious Orlesian bard that Bronwyn had unmasked. Altogether, Anora was confident that they would have plenty of evidence against Bann Frandarel, that notorious sybarite. Father was furious at the state of West Hill. He might well be furious at the luxury and the secret treasures in the bann's Denerim mansion.

By the time father was back in Denerim and the nobles assembled, the evidence against Bann Frandarel should be enough to satisfy even the most suspicious noble. And within a day or two, Cauthrien would make the arrest. Frandarel's estate was heavily guarded. In case of a fight, the City Guard was not adequate.

At that very moment, Loghain was in West Hill, stiffening the defenses of the ancient fortress in a way that brooked no opposition. Lackadaisical guards now stood at attention, their drill much smarter, their appearance less disreputable. His people were spreading out, scouting the bannorn, making new maps. They had found the



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old building Tara had declared to be the location of the Aeonar prison. Loghain went out himself to take a look, and was unimpressed. If the time and necessity came, there would be no problem locking the place down.

He was more concerned with the general condition of West Hill itself. Aside from the dilapidated fortress, the whole bannorn was seriously underpopulated, and it took time for Loghain to understand why.

After a thorough perusal of the bannorn's accounts, it became evident that Frandarel had been demanding excessive tithes and taxes of his freeholders, and then when they were unable to pay, he was evicting them and seizing their lands. Part of his motivation was to eliminate inconvenient witnesses to his secret dealings with foreign powers. Then, too, he had decided that he needed a great deal more pasturage for his flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. Destroying the freeholders created great swathes of land for said livestock. It had not been evident at first, since the animals were being sheltered for the winter, but now Loghain knew. It was difficult not to dash back to Denerim at once, since what Frandarel had done was exactly what the Orlesians had done to Loghain's family, decades before. It would not stand. A large prosperous freeholding class was the backbone of Ferelden. It was the foundation of its productivity, and the source of its war-time levies. Frandarel's livestock would be seized along with the rest of his holdings, and it would feed the army very well indeed.

He tasked a clerk with making a list of the dispossessed



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freeholders. Perhaps some would return and be repatriated. West Hill would be a royal desmesne, its coin flowing into the kingdom's treasury. Frandarel was unmarried and childless, so there was unlikely to be a blood feud.

What to do with the man's sprawling Denerim estate? That would be seized by the Crown, too. Anora had an idea in her head about some sort of school. What was it called? A college... a university? It sounded like nonsense to Loghain, since Anora only wanted such a thing because the Empress had one. It would be useful only for the idle children of the nobles, who had better things to do. However, if there was some sort of school to teach real, practical things, *that* might not be such a bad idea.

He thought about it at length, alone in the rooms he had made his in West Hill. Sipping his wine and scratching out some ideas on parchment, Loghain became more and more reconciled to the concept of a school.

Why should the Chantry have a monopoly on education? As they taught, they taught lessons in obedience to the Divine and her priests. Maybe another school, teaching loyalty to the kingdom and respect for its traditions might be a very fine thing. The children of freeholders and merchants and artisans could go there for a year or two, and learn their numbers and letters and the history of their country with a minimum of twaddle. They would go home and spread their learning, like yeast in bread dough. Educating a young woman was tantamount to educating all her future children.



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A library was not so bad, either. Loghain disliked the idea of other kingdoms keeping knowledge from Ferelden. They could have a collection of books for people to study, and some guards to keep the books in the library, where they belonged.

But the estate was so large. Surely only a few rooms were needed for the school and the library. Perhaps a portion could be given to Cauthrien or Alistair for a townhouse. Perhaps there was enough for both of them. He must think it over. Bronwyn might have some ideas.

Now that she crossed his mind, it occurred to him that she had not been in good spirits when they parted at Gherlen's Halt. Something was troubling her, poor girl, but he had not had time or leisure to discover it. When she was in the mood to talk, she would talk, and no doubt inform him that he had forgotten some important date or anniversary. Come to think of it, he realized that he could not remember her naming day. Was that what had put her in a temper? He must give her a nice present. That had always worked fairly well with Celia.

Of course, it could be something far more serious, and if so, he was sorry for it, but there was no way he could put off defending the Coastlands.

Thinking of Bronwyn caused him to think of Highever. In a day or two, it would be time to go there. Fergus had set people to work repairing the damage, but Loghain wanted to make sure they were following their teyrn's orders.

He must get Cauthrien out here, and some of his other



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first-rate officers. For that matter, Alistair needed to come out and survey his new lands. Loghain wanted someone watching the Jader Bay Hills.



Alistair enjoyed the journey north, glad to be away from the nobles. Scrapper trotted along sturdily at his side, sniffing here and there. Alistair had been given the story of the Architect and the taking of Kal'Hirol. He knew about Soldier's Peak and how it had been cleansed of its plague of demons. It was a quiet journey, full of cheerful talk and reminiscences.

He had wondered if Adaia would ask to stay behind in Denerim, but she had not. Months in the south had changed her, and she felt herself to be a warrior among warriors. And so she wished to remain.

"I want to see Soldier's Peak, too! It's supposed to be great! I wonder if the mountains by the Coastlands look like the mountains by Ostagar. Maybe we should set up a workshop at the castle like we had down south."

"Not a bad idea," Emrys remarked. "If there's an explosion, we won't bother the neighbors."

"Oh, you!" Adaia laughed. "Anyway, it's good to be on the move again. If we'd stayed any longer in Denerim, my father would have arranged another marriage and had me washing pots and some man's dirty shirts, Warden or not!"

Alistair smiled tightly. Whatever ideas he had cherished about Adaia had been proved delusional. It embarrassed him now. He had been as silly as Cullen over Tara.



ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

Why would an elf be interested in a human – someone from a race that had oppressed and humiliated elves? Adaia would do nothing that would hurt her father and her people, and they would be horrified if she took up with Alistair. For that matter, he now realized that she had never given him any real encouragement.

All he wanted was someone of his own. Well, an actual female, since he already had a dog. Grey Wardens were not forbidden to have families, and a family would be worth more than some fancy title and a bannorn – or even the name "Fitzmaric."

Fitzmaric. Alistair understood that Loghain wanted to reward him for good service. Bronwyn and Teagan meant well, too. They simply did not understand him. Being a Warden was the best thing in the world... as long as he could be a Warden with a wife... and maybe a child. Maybe two, but he didn't want to push his luck. He wanted to be the best Warden he could. He'd also like to be the best husband and father anybody had ever seen. As long as he did things as differently as King Maric had, Alistair figured he would do all right.

Not that he could say that in public. Everybody always went on about how great King Maric had been, but Alistair had not exactly been allowed to see the "great" part. Loghain seemed to have done the heavy lifting for the king, as far as ruling was concerned. Queen Rowan had died young, and from what was rumored, not very happy in her marriage.



ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

Maric had raised Cailan, and while Alistair disliked thinking ill of the dead, it was impossible not to recognize that his half-brother had been spoiled and self-absorbed: a bad king and a bad war-leader. Maric had tossed Alistair away like an unwanted kitten. Maybe Alistair was not very important in the grand scheme of things, but he knew he would never treat any child of his the way Maric had treated him.

He wished he could have chosen his own name. Bronwyn had told him that they had considered Fitztheirin or Fitzroy. Alistair liked either of those better than Fitzmaric. Or maybe he would have preferred Fitzwarden. Fitzduncan...

Fitzfiona. Wouldn't that be a kick in the Landsmeet's flabby, collective arse? He couldn't blame his mother for what had happened. The Wardens in Weisshaupt and Orlais had been hard on her. All she could do was get her child to Maric and ask him to help her. If Maric had felt anything for her, he certainly had not felt enough to do much for her son. Probably it was one of those whirlwind romances, born of shared danger and hardship. Petra said that was not a good basis for a relationship. Petra was fond of giving him advice. She thought that shared interests and similar views and backgrounds were a more reliable grounding for a relationship. And then Niall pointed out that nobody in the Circle was actually allowed to have a real relationship, unless she counted hasty, furtive couplings out of sight of the Templars, so she was not exactly speaking from experience. Alistair grinned, remembering. Petra had got so *furious*...



ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

Maybe he should be looking somewhere else for a special someone. All the female Wardens seemed to have their own goals and their own agendas. Or they were too intellectual or too bossy. Or they wanted to keep to their own kind. It would be really nice if someone would put Alistair first. Just once. Other than Scrapper, of course. He glanced fondly at the mabari.

First there was Bronwyn, who Alistair had thought must be the girl of his dreams: beautiful and brave and kind to him. That last should have been a clue. Bronwyn had always treated him like a kid brother. She thought she knew what was best for him, and expected him to do as he was told. She might even love him, but it was a big sister's love. Bossy? That was too weak a word.

Leliana was really pretty and really sweet, but she had never given him any encouragement. At all. Morrigan — in that nasty way of hers — had once remarked that Leliana probably fancied Bronwyn more than Alistair.

He had thought Astrid was interested in him. She had helped a lot and really encouraged him when they were down in Ostagar together. There had been times when she had put her hand on his arm and stood close, and it had made him feel sort of... warm. Maybe if he had paid some attention in return it would have been different. Now she was off in the west, and he had no idea that she was even alive.

Adaia. He wasn't even going to think about that. He was an idiot.



ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

Petra was really smart. Good-looking, too...

No. He wasn't going there. It was time to accept that his Grey Warden sisters were really like... sisters.

They walked, and kept walking. Alistair followed the map, proud of his acquired skills. He was getting really good at this, and traveling underground was not bad at all, when they weren't being attacked by darkspawn.

A party of Legion of the Dead was at Kal'Hirol, cleaning and repairing. Word had been sent to Orzammar, giving the specification for two sets of barrier doors. If they could be manufactured and installed, Kal'Hirol might be fairly defensible.

"*Atrast vala*, Wardens!" a Legionnaire greeted them.

It was a real success, the retaking of this thaig. The Grey Wardens had achieved something really important here. Bronwyn had felt that the Wardens were not doing enough to help the dwarves, but the Fereldan Wardens were making up everyone else's deficiencies. They set up camp in what used to be the market district. A lot of the Taint had been burned away already, and the dwarves were proud to point out some of the restored art work that had survived.

And all the Wardens were getting on fairly well. Alistair had not worked with Danith a great deal, and had been warned that she was touchy and hostile to humans. However, he had not had any great problem with her. She preferred the company of the other elves, but everyone had special friends among the Wardens. Nobody could claim that Danith favored the elves to the point of giving them easier duties. She



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ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

certainly wasn't behaving in the way that Aeron had complained about in Velanna, whom Alistair hardly knew at all.

Best of all, it was not snowing when they made the easy walk outside to Soldier's Peak.

"Well! This is not bad!" Oghren rumbled. "Not bad at all!"

"Not bad?" Alistair burst out. In the clear winter air, the massive outline of the castle soared up to the roof of the world; every stone, every tower realer than real. A pang of tender anguish tugged at his heart, imagining Duncan at the gate, master of the Warden's keep, at home with his brothers and sisters. *If only...*

He mustn't, mustn't think that way. Duncan would be proud of them, and that was no reason to be sad.

He flung out his arms, and yelled. "It's beautiful!" Scrapper jumped and barked, happy his human was happy. People began emerging from the building surrounding the open courtyard; people with friendly faces and words of welcome.

"An impressive fortress, if antiquated," Sten agreed, with measured approval. "The approach is particularly defensible. I understand that Bronwyn has ordered that steps be taken to make it self-supporting. That is wise, given the unsettled nature of this country."

The rest of the party dissolved into pleasant conversation as they made their way to the castle.

"I can't wait to see Leliana's improvements," Maeve said to Quinn. "She's already done so much!"



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ANDRASTE'S CHAMPION

"I hope our quarters are nice," Aadaia whispered to Siofranni. "They'd have to be pretty amazing to beat the Wardens' Compound."

Siofranni agreed. For a place built by shemlens, the Wardens' Compound was extremely comfortable — almost unnaturally so. "I think it will be pleasant to live here in the mountains," she said softly. "How blue the sky is!"

Niall touched Petra's arm. "That's the mages' tower. It doesn't have all the beautiful details or colored windows that we had at the Circle," he said, almost apologizing. "But no Templars will be watching us sleep! And we'll have private rooms... with doors."

Petra smiled. Blood mage on the premises or no, *that* sounded good to her.

The double doors opened.

"Alistair?" called Leliana. "Is that you? Oh, it has been so long since I saw you! You have a puppy!"

She gave him a hug, but she gave everybody a hug. It was warm inside, and Leliana immediately began showing them the place, promising food and warm drinks.

It was a good day.

Alistair liked the meal and the prospect of a decent bed. He approved, half hearing Leliana, all the plans and schemes for improvements. He let her show him the Peak, including, it seemed, every pot, every length of rope, and every barrel of apples.

"We have done all we can do before the spring," she nat-

tered on. "The weather is too bad for glaziers and lumber wagons. In the spring we shall set to work, and in no time the Peak will be quite a different place. We have not yet gone to the Mages' Tower. You must meet Avernus, of course, but I shall let Niall make the introductions. I cannot bear that dreadful old man, and he always keeps to his tower..."

"Tower!" Alistair almost shouted. "Leliana, I saw that really tall tower. I need to go there. Can you see the sea from there?"

"I suppose so," she answered, a little confused. "The staircase is very rickety and must be repaired in the spring. It is too narrow for anything practical. There seemed little reason to go up there, and it is so dusty..."

"Humor me."

From the upper level of the main keep one could access a door. A narrow winding staircase spiraled up and up to shafts of light overhead. Startled bats squeaked and flapped out of the way. Scrapper barked and dashed after him. The tower stank of droppings and small dead animals. Alistair paid no heed to any of that, and ran up and up, round and round, chasing the elusive sunlight, until he was almost dizzy.

Abruptly he burst in bright sunshine again, stumbling on rough stone. The conical roof of the tower was almost skeletal. The battlements here — the most exposed to wind and weather — had deteriorated badly: mortar was crumbling in places, and the whole thing looked ready to collapse. Alistair noted it absently, entranced by the view, looking in every direction. He picked up Scrapper, so he could see, too.

"This is amazing!" he shouted down into the black cylinder below. "I can see everything!"

He should have brought the map up here. Another time. The northeast stretched out over a great broad plain, the rightful domain of the Wardens. He could see the Coast Road, as it curved to the south: a thin grey line against the dark green of the pines. Further south he could make out what must be a village, the nearby fields a dull patchwork of brownish squares. The west was a wild and snowy mountainscape, but in the foreground were the remains of orchards, the bare trees set in neat rows. And due north —

"The sea! The sea! I've got to tell Bronwyn!"

Beyond the mountain peaks glittered the Waking Sea, reflecting sunlight like a warrior's shield. Sea met sky: grey to burning blue, misty at the horizon. Alistair realized that he had never actually seen the sea before. Even when he was in Denerim, the Warden Compound was on the other side of the city, and Alistair always had work to do. There had been no reason to go to the docks, and no one had ever mentioned that the sea was so *beautiful*. No wonder people wanted to be sailors.

"Alistair!" Leliana's voice was faint and echoing. "Are you all right?"

"Yes! You should see this!"

"Come on down! You need to meet Avernus!"

Reluctantly, craning his neck to catch a last bright glimpse of the view, Alistair put down his puppy and

went down the stairs, turning and turning. If this tower was not on Leliana's repair list now, it would be just as soon as he got down to her and added it himself.

His visit with Avernus was not so agreeable. Interesting, yes, but not very pleasant. The old man was creepy: creepier than Sten, even, which was saying a lot. The newcomers were given a new version of the Joining potion, and Avernus explained its advantages in detail. Maybe too much detail. Petra, on the other hand, was listening, and even asking questions. The old man wanted to keep a mage with him. He seemed really pleased with the recent crop of Wardens, which was nice, Alistair supposed. What he didn't like was the hungry gleam in the old man's eyes. If he had needed one, here was another reason for Alistair to be glad he hadn't been born a mage.

He was given a cursory tour of the big workroom, and various doors were pointed out to him. Apparently there was space for quite a few mages, and Petra and Niall vanished down a staircase to claim their own quarters. Alistair was led back to the main keep and down to the barracks and given his own, a nice little private room.

To his embarrassment, it was clear that everyone at the Peak regarded him as their Senior Warden, and – unfortunately – *in charge*. He supposed he was. Bronwyn had named Danith a Senior Warden, but he had nearly a year on her as a Warden. Right. He had practiced up a bit, down at Ostagar, and was not so completely hopeless as he had

once been led to believe.

He was in charge, therefore. What should he do? He loved Soldier's Peak. It was a great place, and a true home for the Wardens. It would be very pleasant to lay about here at the Peak, eating and drinking and sparring, and talking about all the things they would do when more materials and craftsmen visited. But what should he do *now*?

There was no doubt in his mind. He should go find Bronwyn. Somewhere, out in the west, whatever was going to happen would involve her. He needed to get out there and do his part.

And so he said at breakfast the next morning. There were murmurs and whispers, but Leliana supported him.

"You are right. We have done here all that can be done for the time being. We need to look for the Archdemon. I think we should all go with Alistair."

"What?" Quinn blinked. "Already?" He had planned to go hunting today: a long walk through the white and silent forest.

"Well..." Alistair allowed. "Not this minute. The day after tomorrow we'll go to the Deep Roads. I guess some people should stay here..." He left his next thought unsaid, but it hung suspended in the air, for all sensible Wardens to understand.

...*In case the worst happens.*

Anders was hovering again.

"Are you sure you're up to this, Bronwyn?"

She was so irritated that she nearly punched him, but



that would have been rotten of her.

Instead, she got a grip on her temper and squeezed his shoulder, with a laugh.

"Yes. I'm up to this. Moping alone in my room would be far, far worse."

Very quietly, with maximum secrecy, the Wardens were building a staircase and a wide platform at the chamber in Rousten Thaig where they found the openings to the surface. Once everything was built, they could put a regular watch on the Imperial Highway and Chateau Solidor. It was painstaking work. The stairs must be sturdy, since a large number of soldiers might well be using them someday. The rockslide had been mostly cleared away. Jukka's broken body had long since been given to the Stone. It made Bronwyn sad to be here, but it was better to face up to the task at hand and get it done, than shrinking away like a coward. Her body had healed rapidly; her spirits were still low.

Anders face assumed a most disgusted expression. "I understand the importance of keeping occupied, but these are really not the most pleasant surroundings. How about reading a nice book? Listening to music? Taking up embroidery?"

"Don't speak of embroidery to me," she warned him. "If you knew what I went through in my misspent youth..." She laughed again. "I'm a horrible seamstress. I absolutely loathe embroidery and I'm no good at it at all."

Catriona was passing by, carrying lumber, and stopped in surprise. "Really? I love to embroider. I do blackwork.



It's so relaxing."

Bronwyn blinked, trying to associate the bold archer Catriona with dainty embroidery. "Well, to each her own. If I need any blackwork done, I shall call upon you."

"Do. I really love it."

Toliver was enjoying his time to shine. He actually knew quite a bit about carpentry, and thus had designed the project and was supervising it. Supervising in the sense of doing much of the work. Cathair, too, knew how to work with wood, and his contribution had been to make the staircase good-looking as well as functional. The rest of the team carried lumber and nails, held the joists in position, and were occasionally permitted to hammer, once Toliver was convinced they could manage it. He had a growing regard for Aveline's skill.

The various pieces had been cut out and numbered back at the fort by sappers and civilian craftsmen, without telling them where this was to be installed. Not even Ser Blayne or Ser Norrel knew exactly where the Queen had taken the load of lumber.

Well, of course Ser Norrel knew nothing. Bronwyn hoped it was as unpleasant for him as it was for her to live under the same roof. In fact, it was a major factor in her going back into the Deep Roads. The project was important, and it got her away from a man who had dared to call himself Bann of Highever City. And not only that, but who had supervised the looting of her home and had not given a

decent pyre to her family. How very nice that he had been so loyal to his liege lord. Bronwyn would never forgive him.

He was playing his part, however; that she must admit. She had ordered him to see if he had any mountaineers among his troops, and he had found some excellent men. Someday, they might find a way into the Rock, and it would not happen by storming the castle from below. No. Perhaps the way could be achieved by ropes and grappling hooks on a moonless night.

Morrigan much preferred flying, as she put it, "to grubbing about in the Deep Roads like a worm." Nor was she interested in learning carpentry.

Because of this, Bronwyn found her a task far more to her taste: the minute scouting and infiltration of both Chateau Solidor and Roc du Chevalier. There were few places that a hawk could not penetrate. She would return, report what she had seen, and correct Bronwyn as the latter made detailed schematics of the buildings.

Sometimes Anders went with her; sometimes she went alone. She was shot at a few times, and once a young hopeful falconer tried to catch her. It was amusing to tease the youth, but she had serious business.

The wind rushed past, lifting her up, up. Icy air was foiled by fluffed brown feathers. She soared and looped through lofty towers, she discovered sally ports and hidden defenses, she looked down on open courtyards and secret gardens. No one was in the gardens, due to the

cold weather, but they might still be interesting.

Today she visited the Chateau, and decided to penetrate to the place that Bronwyn said must be the ladies' bower. Large windows looked out upon it, and thus Bronwyn thought that the windows must belong to the solar. Morrigan thought it would be interesting to see who lived in such a place. She dropped like a stone, and then alighted easily on a bare mulberry branch. A door was nearby, which would let out into the private little pleasure ground on warm days. Unusually large windows let in the sunlight.

This was the top of one of the bigger towers. There was a watchpost beneath them, since apparently soldiers were not permitted to ascend to the very top. Very likely this was a safe and secure haven for the lord of the castle.

Edging forward on a twig, she peered in through a mullioned window.

Not the lord, then. His wife and daughters? Or sisters? The frosted panes hid details, even from the keen eyes of a hawk. The room was opulent: filled with glittering knickknacks and draped with rich silks. Two of occupants of the room were well-dressed elves, certainly servants, who were attending four gorgeously attired human women, one much older than the others. Three of the women sat in throne-like carved chairs, heaped with velvet cushions. A fire was blazing, framed by a marble mantelpiece. One woman was reading, one was sewing on a huge embroidery hoop, another — the old lady — was feeding a fat little

lapdog sweetmeats from a painted box. The fourth, who appeared to be the youngest, was walking restlessly about the room. It was not long before Morrigan was noticed.

"Oh, look!" cried the young lady, pausing in her pacing. "The poor bird! It must be so cold!"

Hawks, alas, could only smirk inwardly. Morrigan fluffed up her feathers to the puffiest degree, and shivered pathetically. Instantly, bolts were thrown and the door was cracked open.

"Here, you poor little thing! Come and get warm." Morrigan was annoyed by the simpering, high-pitched Orlesian voice. And she was not a 'little thing.' The girl was speaking to her as if to a babe in arms. Still, a warm fire was a warm fire. Morrigan cocked her head as if considering the matter. The girl opened the door further.

"Eglantine!" complained the embroideress. "You are making a draught!"

Seizing her chance, Morrigan flew in and perched on a gilded lampstand. Aside from the girl at the door, every female in the overdecorated solar shrieked in alarm.

"Ah! A bird!" screamed the reader, dropping her book. "It will dirty the portières!"

"It will tangle its horrible claws in my hair!" screeched the embroideress.

The old lady squawked, "It will eat my poor little Chou-chou!"

Morrigan had no idea what "portières" were, but the rest sounded like fairly good fun. The dog was certainly just the right size. Perhaps later. She was here to spy, not

to terrorize useless females, so she demurely hid her head under her wing, looking put-upon.

"How can you be so cruel?" cried the young girl. "It is a perfectly beautiful creature." She gave a little curtsy to Morrigan. "*Bonjour, Monseigneur Faucon.*"

Amused, Morrigan lowered her wing and stretched out her neck, almost bowing in her turn. The girl laughed in delight. It gave Morrigan a chance to study the occupants of the room. The three girls ranged in age from no older than seventeen to perhaps twenty-seven. They were not bad-looking, if one liked golden hair and hands that had never done labor. The old lady was not so comely: corpulent, daubed with heavy cosmetics, and wearing an immense — and immensely curly — red wig. She glittered with some quite nice jewels. Morrigan eyed them with a touch of envy. Something else to pursue later, perhaps.

The youngest girl cautiously reached out and stroked the hawk's head with a delicate forefinger. Morrigan permitted the caress, aware that it would be the easiest thing in the world to snap the finger right off the silly girl's hand.

"You see? The poor creature simply craved shelter. It is not screaming and crying, though who could blame it, enduring such a noise!"

The old lady's jowls quivered with fear and rage. "Eglantine, I command you to get rid of that filthy creature immediately!" The lapdog, used to echoing its mistress, uttered a wheezy little bark. Morrigan cocked her head.

She could wolf down the creature in a flash. As if sensing its precarious situation, Chou-chou cowered among vast purple velvet skirts.

"No, I will not!" the girl replied, saucily defiant. "You might have robbed me of my kitten and you might have had my white ferret killed, Madame la Comtesse, but I shall make a pet of this beautiful hawk, even if only for a moment."

"You will do as I say!" snarled the old woman. "The Empress gave you into my care, and put you under my direction. She has no use for traitors, cousins or no. You should thank me on your knees that you have not been kneeling to the headsman instead, long ago!"

"I'm not a traitor, you miserable old cow!"

"Eglantine, don't!" whispered the reader, a girl some years older. "You'll just make it worse."

"I don't care!" Eglantine shot back. "I'm sick of her petty tyrannies and little cruelties. The hawk stays!"

"Then I," said the old lady, glaring at the girl, "shall send for the captain of the guard and he will make short work of this creature! I shall have it killed and plucked and roasted for your dinner! How will you like that, Your Imperial Highness?"

More screaming. The girl who had been embroidering knocked her frame over and began pleading with the old battleaxe.

"Please, Madame Coquelicot, the bird has done nothing. Eglantine, apologize to Madame la Comtesse."

"I won't!" shouted Eglantine, "Celandine, she is foul and vile and I hate her! I hate her!" Her voice broke, and she began crying.

"You! Wench!" the old woman pointed at one of the frightened elf girls. "Fetch Monsieur le Meurtrier at once!"

The girl fled, calling for the guardsman. Spurred to action, Eglantine rushed to the door and flung it wide.

"Fly! Fly away, Monseigneur Faucon! Fly before it is too late!"

Absurd theatrics, really, but it was certainly time to be off. Morrigan had learned all she would today from this pack of dithering imbeciles. She took off and flapped around the room, creating maximum chaos. Women shrieked and clutched at their hair, their jewels, their hearts; they made little futile gestures with lily-white hands. The embroideress, overcome, slumped fainting among her cushions. The lapdog wheezed out a series of shrill barks. Morrigan dived at him and sent him fleeing under a chair.

"Chou-chou!" wailed the old lady, but Morrigan was not done with her. The hawk's talons extended, and a furry object was snatched away, to the horror of all. Morrigan banked and speeded through the open door. Just past the battlements, she dropped the furball with careless malice.

The girls all shrieked with horror, thinking that Chou-chou would be dead before he hit the ground below. The old Countess was shrieking too, but not with any fear for her dog. Chou-chou was quite safe under the chair.

The Comtesse Coquelicot's wig, however, was doomed.

Her spirits much lifted by Morrigan's tales of high adventure, Bronwyn thought about the story, and tried to

dredge up bits of what her tutor Aldous had taught her about Orlesian genealogy. It had been a long time since she had thought about it. The Empress had trounced a number of her uncles in her successful bid for the throne. Who was this Eglantine? If she was an Imperial Princess, she must be the daughter of one of those quondam uncles. Bronwyn had heard that they were dead. Celene had not killed all their children, of course, since they were useful as pawns or playthings.

Eglantine. Had she read that name somewhere? Possibly, but there were quite a few Imperial princes and princesses, and their names ran together in her memory. She remembered Prince Florestan, of course, the one that Howe had believed she was going to marry. Bronwyn's imagination failed – in epic fashion – to imagine a world in which she herself was a mask-wearing, Game-playing Orlesian Imperial Princess.

This girl was, though, which could make her a useful hostage. What of the other young women? They had addressed her by name, which suggested that they must be sisters or at least close relations. In the privacy of their solar, the ladies had not worn masks, which enabled Morrigan to describe them in detail.

Of course, the Empress might also consider herself well rid of them if they were taken. Perhaps she would smirk and tell the Fereldans to do as they liked. No, Bronwyn set aside the exciting plan as impractical. Solidor was worth

a great deal, a captive princess was not.

Jader was worth more than a double handful of Orlesian princesses. Loghain's plan so far simply involved infiltrating Jader and damaging its facilities, making it unusable as a base from which to attack Ferelden. The more she thought about it, however, the more Bronwyn wished they could simply annex Jader. Brosca's stories about made it sound so very rich and glamorous. It would round out their west border so very nicely. A foolish dream, of course, but a beautiful one.

She returned to Gherlen's Halt to unarmor and wash, with the new information churning in her mind. As long as Morrigan was willing, she had an unparalleled opportunity to find out more about the enemy's strongholds. She must send Morrigan to the Rock again. Tomorrow, perhaps.

The cressets were lit, and they were summoned to dinner. The unappealing stodgy food was gobbled down by hungry Wardens, Bronwyn among them. Her people were cheerful enough. They did not speak openly of what they had been up to, but there were grins and winks and smug looks. For that matter, the morale of the garrison as a whole seemed fairly good. Some of that was certainly due to Loghain's appearance. Bronwyn hoped that some was due to her presence.

Her mind was too awl to sit and listen to jokes and stories. As soon as her dinner was complete, she retired from the hall. Everyone rose and bowed, and she gave them a grave nod of acknowledgment. Anders watched

her anxiously, not entirely reassured by her wry smile. She was not alone, after all. Scout was at her heels, keeping pace with a mabari's natural dignity.

Her quarters were the best the fort afforded, but they were spare and gloomy enough. A narrow window looked west, giving her a fine view of Roc du Chevalier: splendid and ominous. The castle was too primitive for fireplaces, and thus her room was heated with a brazier filled with charcoal. There was a bed with a lumpy mattress, and a rough table with a candlestick and two unlovely chairs set opposite to one another. A trunk for her clothing, a weapons stand, and another stand for her armor composed the rest of the furnishings. At the moment the red dragon armor was displayed on the stand, like another Bronwyn, keeping watch by the door.

A servant lit her candle and added charcoal to her fire, and was dismissed.

She paced around the room, vaguely uneasy. The window drew her, and she gazed out for some time at the Rock, white in the moonlight. She paced a little more, her thoughts in thorough disorder. After some time she paused, studying her armor. Scout raised his head from his blanket in the corner, and then got up and padded over to her. His human needed companionship and attention.

"Scout, you are absolutely my best friend," she said, her hand falling comfortingly on the silky head.

That was too true for comment, so the mabari simply

stood alert, pressing warmly against her leg.

"We mustn't let ourselves be distracted. It would be too easy to focus on the Orlesians and forget about the darkspawn. I hate both of them, of course, but there are some good Orlesians, like Riordan, and no good darkspawn at all."

She drifted back to the table, Scout at her side, and picked through the platter of snacks she had commanded to be provided whenever she was in the castle. She tossed Scout a rind of smoked cheese — his favorite — and then a piece of venison sausage. She popped another piece in her own mouth and munched, thinking.

"On the other hand, the Archdemon did not choose to be hunted down and Tainted, while the Empress *does* choose to be vicious and underhanded and greedy. Then, too she could, I suppose, repent of her evil ways — not that I expect it — while the Archdemon cannot free itself of the Taint. If one looks at it that way, one could say that the Empress is actually more evil than the Archdemon, since she harms others of her own free will."

Another piece of sausage. It was quite good. Why could they have perfectly nice cheese and sausage, while the cook could only make the same undistinguished stew, night after night?

"And I'm simply wasting my time," she continued, explaining her thoughts to Scout. "I'm wasting my time trying to choose between them. They're not likely to give me a choice. Each of them is equally my enemy, and I can only hope they don't attack simultaneously. That would be... unfortunate."

Scout regarded her gravely, and then gave a slow blink. Then another.

"And yes, we should go to bed! Off with you!"

The mabari found his blanket, turned around three times, and settled down with a grateful sigh. Bronwyn blew out the candle and undressed in the dim firelight of the brazier.

"Ugh!"

The bedclothes were freezing. That was one thing Loghain was good for: warming her bed. Literally. Still, this time alone would clear her head of nonsense and regrets. She composed herself for sleep, brushing aside tomorrow's tasks with grim resolve, slowing her breathing, until sleep came to her...

That night she dreamed that she was once again in Highever.

The castle was so much larger than she remembered, and full of friends and smiling faces. Mist clung to corners and tangled in her hair. Bronwyn moved from room to room, absently answering greetings from people she knew well. In the guest quarters Lady Landra smiled at her, for once not tipsy, though she lifted a silver chalice in salute. Iona reached out, touching her shyly.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for caring for my child."

She was gone, whipped away as Bronwyn descended a staircase. In the library, Aldous was tutoring those two little squires. He looked up, faded eyes crinkling, pleased at the sight of her. In the study, Dairren was reading. He glanced at her, his smile a little rueful. He lifted up the book for her to see.

"THE DRAGONS OF TEVINTER. It's really interesting. You should read it again. Carefully."

"Have you seen my parents?"

"They're in the Great Hall."

She found herself in the kitchen first, though. Nan stared at her, and then crushed her in her arms.

"You're not supposed to be here yet. What are you up to this time?"

"Oh, Nan! I'm so glad you're not really dead!"

"Of course I'm not. Nobody's ever really dead. Pass me the flour. Now you get on to the Great Hall, and don't keep people waiting."

Bronwyn whispered, pointing at the door to the larder. "They're not in there, are they? I can't bear to look."

More gently, Nan replied, "Of course they're not there. Why would they want to be in there?"

She was abruptly at the door to the Great Hall, and gave it a tentative push. It was very bright inside, and far more beautiful than it ought to be. Cheerful talk and laughter drew her to the great hearth. Her people were expecting her.

Oriana said, "We have a visitor!" Next to her was a handsome young man, painfully like Fergus.

"Oren?"

"Did you think I'd be a child forever?"

"You're taller than I am!"

"That I am, Auntie. Our time is not your time."

"Pup," said her youthful, carefree father, his hair as dark as her own, smiling in mild rebuke. "Did you have to ignore absolutely everything I told you?"

"It wasn't you," she whispered. "it wasn't you I spoke to in the Gauntlet."

"It was and it wasn't, but I was certainly there, and I hold to what was said. Still, becoming a Queen of Ferelden is a very great accomplishment. We're very proud of you. But now you need to meet Trystan."

Her mother, radiantly beautiful, kissed her, and drew a young man near.

"This is Trystan."

"Trystan."

Bronwyn stared, bewildered, at the tall figure. He was broad-shouldered and lean, his long hair dark brown and waving, his eyes glittering like pieces of sky. He looked at her quizzically, almost teasing. He had a strong nose, and his dark brows drew together in a way she knew well.

"He came to us," said Eleanor, "and we named him. I've always liked the name Trystan. He was never alone, you see."

The boy touched her cheek, and spoke, his voice warm and mellow. It seemed that she had known this voice all the days of her life.

"I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond.

*For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light
And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost."*

They were not alone in the Great Hall, nor was this really the Great Hall. It swelled and soared, higher and wider, and was filled with people with her nose or her jaw, or with her father's smile. They were her grandmothers and great-great-grandfathers; her great-great-granduncles and distant cousins. There were other people, too, more and more of them: a tall man with his arm

around a pretty woman with Loghain's eyes. Sitting by their feet was a beautiful mabari with a shining chestnut coat. Against the wall leaned a young woman with a silverite sword and a roguish grin. Bronwyn recognized her from a picture as Bryn Cousland, a heroine of the early Rebellion. There was Princess Deirdre Therin and King Darlan himself. And there was an elf! He winked at her and put his fingers to his lips for silence. There were more elves, taller and fairer than she had ever seen before. Everyone was here, elves, dwarves, and humans: people she had never known; people she had killed; people who had tried to kill her. She shut her eyes briefly, frightened at what she might see next. The Hall grew and swelled, and encompassed all the world.

Wynne's voice whispered in her ear. "It's going to be all right. In the end, everything is always all right."

And just as the ceiling cracked open, and a great golden light suffused them all, Bronwyn felt something tremble under her feet; and she fell, down, down, down, into darkness, grasping futilely at the roots of Heaven.

Time passed endlessly as she hurtled down; past mountains and sea, past the limits of the upper world. At length she thudded onto hard stone. Furious, she hissed, and flames licked at Tainted walls under the earth. Her tail flicked out, and rocks cracked and splintered.

The Archdemon, triumphant, gazed down into the abyss. Thousands of lights glittered in the chasm; torches held by her minions. The horde was gathered...it was hers... it was ready. Her scouts were climbing, up to the hated and desired surface,

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shivering under the waning moon. Scabby hands pawed at the snow; hideous faces lifted into the icy wind. They listened, expectant, for the liquid song of melting water. In vain.

So. It was not yet time. But it would be, very soon.



IMPERIAL PRINCESS EGLANTINE OF ORLAIS

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CHAPTER 22

T

THE WATER IS WIDE

THREE DAYS OUT OF CUMBERLAND, THE NEVARRAN SHIPS WERE ATTACKED BY AN ORLESIAN SQUADRON FROM JADER.

Three Orlesian agents had ridden hard to Cumberland. One paid a fortune to hire a ship to take him to Val Royeaux to make his report. The second waited in Cumberland, looking for an opportunity to infiltrate. The third bought passage to Jader.

The Marquis was absent from the city, paying court to the Empress in Val Royeaux. Thus, it took a combination of honeyed flattery and threats of the Empress' signal displeasure to convince the Marquis' steward to lend his assistance, but by the next day three ships set out to find and destroy the Fereldan embassy.

Even so, the Orlesians could not quite credit that the Fereldans were shrewd enough to make common cause with Orlais' other hostile neighbor. Perhaps if they had, they would have launched an even more formidable force against them.

The opponents crossed ways a little north of the Waking Sea Islands. Taken aback to find themselves outnumbered, the

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Orlesians relied on their greater size and amount of canvas they could raise to try to run down the Nevarran vessels. The plan was to seize and sink the slow-moving, largely defenseless transport that was thought to be carrying the Fereldans. There was no way that the Nevarrans could make the port of Kirkwall before the enemy was upon them.

The seas were heavy, and there were plenty of those aboard, sailors and passengers alike, who were wretched with sea-sickness. Most of them found that there was nothing like deadly danger to take their mind off their nausea.

"Jowan!" shouted Nathaniel. "Get up here!"

Glad of the splash of the salt spray, Jowan staggered up on deck, clinging to anything in reach: rails, ropes, and cursing sailors.

The Arl of Amaranthine was drenched, and likewise his friends and soldiers. Over the wind, he shouted. "What can you do about *that*?"

Jowan gulped. Behind them, and a little to starboard, a big Orlesian man-of-war was bearing down on them. Another trailed behind at a short distance, and the third rather farther away. Slowly but inevitably, they were closing the distance. Jowan could see the men on the closest ship crowding forward, preparing to board. Archers were arrayed on the high forecastle, ready to fire down on them.

"Well..." he thought about it. "I suppose I could try a fireball..."

"Good man!" Nathaniel snapped. "You do that!"

"I need to be a little closer," Jowan confessed.

"Don't worry! They're getting closer all the time. Darrow!

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Keep Warden Jowan covered!"

A big shield covered his face. Jowan gave Darrow a sickly smile, and pushed the shield aside – just a little – to see. More spray smacked him in the face, and he wiped his eyes, sneezing.

"It would be really great," yelled Carver, "if you could do something before we're within crossbow range!"

"Er... right."

Everyone was looking at him. It was worse than his classes at the Circle. Still, he could do this. He focused on long, slow, deep breaths, and gathered his mana...

Meanwhile, it was pandemonium in the luxurious stern cabin, where the women could see their doom approaching through the wide, wide windows.

"Ah, my lady!" wailed a maid. "Must we die?"

"Don't scream," Callista ordered her, forcing her voice down from hysteria. "It doesn't help a bit. Pray to the Maker."

The girl sobbed, "*O Maker, I am heartily sorry for having offended you...*"

The other maid joined in, her voice high and panicked. "*...and I detest all my sins, because of Your just punishments, but most of all because they offend You, Maker...*"

Berenice was red-eyed and trembling. She whispered to Callista, "I've been thinking about what will happen if they break in here."

The maid broke off their prayers, and began screaming. "Stop it!" Berenice shouted, her hands over her ears. "Stop it!"

Her maid shrieked back at her. "You will be ransomed, but we will be raped and murdered!"

Berenice lost her temper completely, and slapped the girl's face. "Shut up! Shut up! Screaming doesn't help! It just makes men want to kill you!"

Callista grabbed the two maids, an arm around each, and made them sit with her on the bed. "We're going to be quiet," she urged in a low fierce voice. "We're going to be quiet as mice. If we're quiet and dignified, they'll be ashamed to harm us."

Berenice rolled her eyes, and Callista glared at her.

"We're not dead," she insisted, with a semblance of calm, "until we're actually dead. We have brave men on deck who will defend us. If the worst happens," she went on, almost babbling, "we are valuable hostages and will be permitted to have you as our servants. We're going to be fine."

She was relieved when Berenice sat down heavily with them, her head in her hands. Her own assumed calm was on a knife's edge. She was not so much afraid of the Orlesians as she was of sinking. The voyage had been a nightmare for her. She had been seasick, and all of Nathaniel's kindness did not relieve her shame at appearing so ugly and useless and stinking before him. She had leaned over the rail, and seen the sea creatures below as she vomited. How vast the sea was, and how little and insignificant she was herself. The cold, angry waves could sweep her away, and she would go down into the depths, drowning and helpless, scavenged by the

vast monsters of the deep. She pressed her lips together, her nausea reawakened at the thought.

If only she could do something to protect herself! She had thought Cassandra ridiculous, but at the moment she infinitely regretted never learning to use any kind of a weapon. She did not have so much as a dagger. Perhaps, if they lived through this, Nathaniel would teach her to shoot with a bow. He was supposed to be a great archer.

Nathaniel! What if he fell, defending her? What if he died in the first sweet glow of their marriage? It struck Callista like a knife to her heart, the realization that she did not want to be without Nathaniel. She wanted him to live, and to live with her. She wanted him to take her to see his castle. The idea that he might be killed, and that the Orlesians might heave his long body into the sea was simply beyond endurance. Tears burst forth, and ran hotly down her cheeks.

Berenice clenched her fists. "If I live through this, I will never again go to sea. Hear me, Maker!" She made herself look out the window, and thus was a witness to a shocking, astonishing sight.

It was a good fireball; a really good one. It was the sort of fireball that not even Enchanter Torrin would have criticized. Even Tara would be impressed.

So bright that it dazzled their eyes, the fireball exploded a little further back than he had aimed. The forecastle dissolved in a roar and a flash, spars and splinters from the

shattered timbers as lethal as a thousand arrows. Men were tossed into the air like toys. Many were already dead before they struck the water. The foremast sagged and swayed, and the foresail ignited, tongues of fire licking up and spreading into a sheet of flame. The entire ship shuddered and wallowed. Tortured screams came to them over the water. Sailors whooped and cheered at the sight. Even the nobles cheered at the impact. Only Fenris watched in silence, inscrutable, as scores of men perished by the power of magic.

"Well!" the Nevarran captain managed, blinking. "That's... very... Do it again. Warden," he added, with careful courtesy. "Aim at the waterline."

Jowan stared at his handiwork, sickened. This was worse than anything he had done with blood magic. Still, they were the enemy, and would do the same or worse to them if they could. What were his powers good for, if not to protect his friends?

"I need a minute," he said. It took a minute or so to recharge the spell. Everyone was watching breathlessly. The distance to the Orlesian ship had widened. Jowan took another deep breath and cast again, timing the fireball to strike when the ship was at the crest of the next wave and most completely exposed.

It was not perhaps as impressive as his first effort, but it did the job. An Orlesian warship was too solidly timbered for Jowan's fireball to blow a gaping hole in the bow. Not quite gaping, no; but the hull was breached, and the ship juddered violently. The bow dipped lower at every wave;

nodding in submission to its fate. The Orlesians were quite past attacking. They were beyond everything but trying to save themselves, and it was quite a desperate business. The Fereldans and their Nevarran seamen watched the spectacle with little sympathy.

Below, four women watched in awe.
"Was that," gasped Callista, "magic?"

The other two Orlesian ships were slowing, their pursuit slackening, as they tried to improvise some new strategy against this overwhelming menace. One Orlesian captain suspected magic; the other, even more horrified, wondered if the Nevarrans somehow had gained access to Qunari gaatlok. That was a terror weapon that no one wanted to confront. The closer ship moved in to start picking up the men in the water.

Grinning triumphantly, the Nevarran captain shouted to the steersman.

"Two points to north east! We make for Kirkwall!"

Behind them, the wounded Orlesian vessel was going down by the bow. Flames had spread to the rest of the sails. Little dark heads bobbed in the water, pleading for help.

Nathaniel watched the disaster unfold, his face stern. A few were saved; more slipped away beneath the waves. He turned aside, and went to reassure Callista, guiltily certain that she must have been terrified. Adam followed him a



KIRKWALL, CITY OF CHAINS



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moment later, grinning. Perhaps their maidens fair would be grateful for their salvation from the big, bad Orlesians. Their welcome was better than they could have imagined.

The next day, their little flotilla arrived intact in the City of Chains. The only unfortunate thing about their arrival was the awful truth that they would have yet another voyage. The women did not take it particularly well.

Berenice mustered her courage to face Hawke.

"But *why* must we go to *Kirkwall*?"

"Unfinished business, fair Berenice." He gave her a kiss and a bewitching smile. "We had to meet up with our own ship and retrieve some of our belongings. We'll be on our way tomorrow."

Her expression, poor girl, was indescribable.

"I suppose there's really no way to get to Ferelden just by... walking?"

"No. I'm sorry. But it's a really, really short voyage to Ferelden now. We'll pick up some fresh water, and have a good meal and a good night's sleep before we set out again. All things considered, the Arl and I think it best for you to stay aboard here. Ordinarily, we'd pay a state visit to the Viscount, but things are too unsettled."

Dangerous, he meant.

"But you're going," she said, jealous of the chance to walk on dry land, and worried about his safety.

"Yes, I'm going ashore," he told her, discreetly emphasizing the correct terminology. "I must. We'll be back soon, I promise."

Leaving the ships under heavy guard, Nathaniel and Adam gathered their knights and men-at-arms — and their Wardens — along with them to find the Hanged Man, and Varric Tethras.

And then Isabela arrived.

"Permission to come aboard!"

The Nevarran captain actually knew Isabela. Why was Hawke surprised? Isabela very likely knew everybody.

"Isabela! You're looking..."

"I know. So, where are the — oh, Hawke! How was Nevarra?"

"Splendid," Adam said easily. "It's a wonderful country, and the people were... very friendly. The Arl will be up shortly, and then we're off to meet Varric. Coming with us?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

"My lord?" Berenice heard his voice, talking to someone on deck. Perhaps he had decided not to leave, after all. She climbed the few steps carefully, holding her skirts out of the way.

Her handsome husband was chatting with a woman. An extraordinary-looking woman. Nearby was the elven guardsman, Fenris, and their captain.

And what sort of woman was this? Berenice wondered, with a thrill of delighted horror, if she was seeing... well... a bad woman. She wore very little, despite the brisk weather. But rather than having a painted face, the smooth dark skin was warmed by a great deal of heavy gold jewelry.

And on her back were sheathed a pair of wicked daggers.



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"My lord?" she repeated. Hawke's smile grew a little fixed.

"My lady," Adam put out his hand to her. "Lady Berenice Hawke, this is Captain Isabela, skipper of our other ship, the SIREN'S CALL."

Isabela looked like she might burst out laughing. "Lady... Hawke?"

"Yes," Hawke said with perfect ease. "Lady Berenice did me the great honor to consent to be my wife. We were married seven days ago."

"That's... very nice," Isabela said, her eyes wickedly bright. "My sincere congratulations."

"Thank you, captain," Berenice said faintly. There was something there. Adam knew her. Had there been something between them? Surely not. He was a noble, and she was a ship's captain.

"And you seem to have picked up quite the fleet."

Here the discussion turned to the Nevarran's donation, and Isabela, who knew this particular transport, had to stride across the deck and have the warships pointed out to her, while she sized them up with keen dark eyes. She and the men began a brisk technical discussion of their merits, and Berenice felt, once again, completely at sea.

Nathaniel and Callista came up on deck, talking about their plans for tomorrow. Captain Isabela was presented to the new Arlessa, and bowed, giving her felicitations with almost mocking grace.

Callista, like Berenice, was not entirely pleased to be left



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on the ship herself, but Nathaniel felt strongly that she would be safest there. The guards were enjoined to be particularly watchful, and the Fereldans departed, talking and laughing among themselves in the twilight. They rounded a corner, and the flash of Fenris' white hair was the last they saw of them.

"I suppose it's for the best," Callista sighed. "Everyone knows that Kirkwall is a haunted, corrupt place. We're much safer here. The cook tells me our dinner will be served directly. It is not unpleasant, being on a ship, when it is swaying gently like this."

Berenice stared out into the dockyards. "They weren't worried about *that* woman's safety. Did you see how she was dressed? I could see..." she sputtered and lowered her voice. "I could see her bottom!"

Callista began giggling. "She must not care what anybody thinks! It's rather admirable, in a way. A ship's captain." She thought about that. "I think she must be incredibly brave, going to sea and ordering the men about."

"I wish I could order Adam about," Berenice agreed, rather grumpily.

Isabela waxed hilarious at Adam's expense. She did not go so far as to tease Arl Nathaniel, but Bann Adam was fair game.

"And now," she nudged him, "we see Adam Hawke, the married man. Looks like they paid a fair price for you! What does a Fereldan bann fetch these days?"

"Isabela!" he muttered, rather chagrined. If only she



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knew. Yes, you could say that the Nevarrans had bought him. He would have been mad to turn down the dowry, even if there had been no question of the alliance.

"Seven days married," she sighed. "She still has the shine on her, I noticed. You've done very well for yourself."

"Don't."

Carver had overheard only part of the exchange. "Mother and Bethany will like Berenice. A honeymoon at sea is pretty romantic, Even with the part about being attacked by Orlesians."

"Believe it or not," Isabela said, with a curiously hard smile, "I know all about 'honeymoons at sea.' I'd much rather hear about how you dealt with the Orlesians."

So they talked about that, and slapped Jowan on the back. Isabela was intrigued.

"I have totally got to get a mage for myself. You'd think I could find one in Kirkwall, of all places. A good-looking one would be nice."

Fenris spoke into the merriment. "A mage without Warden discipline might be more a danger than a defense!"

They argued the point for most of the walk. Fenris granted that Jowan's skills had been more than welcome during the battle with the Orlesians, but maintained that this was a situation of a mage contained within a command structure – much like mages within a Circle.

Jowan found it impossible to swallow that. "Fenris, the Wardens are nothing like the Circle. And even before I joined the



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Wardens, I wasn't running rampant, summoning demons. I was out defending people from the darkspawn on my own!"

"That is admirable," Fenris said stiffly, "but the fact is –"

A shout interrupted their debate.

"It's the Fereldans!"

"Get 'em!"



Kirkwall was full of gangs. Varric had warned them, and he should know. The Coterie and the dwarven Carta were the biggest and strongest, but there were dozens more: The Guardsmen Pretenders, the Invisible Sisters, the Redwater Teeth, Sharpe's Highwaymen, the Bloodrangers... New gangs cropped up every month. And if the local gangs weren't bad enough, you had the Tevinter slaver gangs, the Antivan Crows, and incursions of apostate mages. Supposedly, Kirkwall had a City Guard, but their function appeared to be entirely decorative.

Nathaniel had no idea who these people were. They were not Orlesian, but they very likely had been hired by an Orlesian sympathizer. How could such a person know they were in Kirkwall, not three hours after their arrival?

"Don't kill them all!" he shouted, his bow twanging. He brought a man down by an arrow to the back of the knee. Without magical healing, the fellow would be lame for life. Too bloody bad. He was unimpressed by the quality of his attackers. Whoever had sent them must think Fereldan noblemen were as gormless as their Kirkwaller counterparts.



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His people were mopping up. Adam and Carver had caught one of the gang between them, and were gleefully going in for the kill. Adam's dog Hunter was worrying a man's throat. Fenris was mowing the fools down like weeds. Captain Isabela appeared to be having a glorious time, performing some sort of throat-cutting dance.

Darrow and Kain had pounced on the wounded man, and dragged him along by his wounded leg, ignoring the screams.

Where were the good people of Kirkwall? Nathaniel glanced about him. Where they always went at the first hint of trouble, evidently. Far away, and behind locked doors, their hands over their ears.

He stalked over to their prisoner.

"Who hired you?"

The man grinned up at him through bloody teeth. Adam grew impatient and kicked him where it would hurt. Nathaniel snarled.

"Who? This can take all night if you want."

"Boss... sent us out. Just the usual. Kill the marks, and loot the bodies."

"You knew we were Fereldan."

"I'm not Fereldan," Isabela declared, eyes sparkling. "I just go to their parties. Such lively occasions!"

Nathaniel gave her a look, and she responded with a saucy wink, but subsided.

"What exactly did your 'boss' say about us? How did you know who we were?"



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"Boss told us what you looked like. Said you were a tall sort with black hair and a big nose..."

Nathaniel scowled.

"... and that you had a weird elf with you with white hair, and you let him carry a sword..."

Fenris scowled.

"...And that you had a couple of Wardens with you with a pair of mangy mutts."

Jowan and Carver scowled. Lily and Magister growled.

Nathaniel considered kicking the man himself.

"Where is this boss of yours? I'd like a word with him."

"What?" gawped the thug. "Take you to our secret hideout?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't do that!"

"I think you can."

Carver suggested, "Why don't we start with the small, unnecessary bits, and work our way up? Magister's hungry after that fight."

Magister yelped a quick bark of agreement.

In the end, they got a location, and then dragged the thug along, threatening him horribly. Their path led to a Lowtown hovel, which was briskly cleared of defenders. Sadly, their informer perished in the course of the dispute.

The 'boss' was a broken-nosed bruiser with a lisp from missing teeth, and quite exceptional weapons. He, in turn, had an interesting tale to tell.

Their next stop was a posh Hightown mansion. Nathan-

iel was quite beyond good manners, so as soon as the butler opened the door, he was shoved aside, and the entire party trooped in to pay a call on the Comte de Launcet.

His lordship, it seemed, was busy. In the study. So the Fereldans walked in and found the nobleman sharing pleasant chat over some fine brandy with an able seaman from their own ship. This able seaman was the third Orlesian agent who had ridden ahead of them out of Nevarra, and who was now deeply regretting his brilliant plan of going to sea with the enemy.

Things, unsurprisingly, went downhill from there. Before the sailor could bolt, he was disarmed, bound, and gagged. Their ship was destined to be short a crewman, but there was important information to be had from the fellow. The Marcher nobleman, who had enjoyed a long-term retainer from the Empress, had all his papers confiscated.

"I shall complain to the Viscount!" he blustered.

"Complain all you like," said Nathaniel. "Complain to the Empress, for all I care. I'm sure your Viscount would be pleased to know how busy you've been, working for Orlais. Your friend here is a spy, and you wasted quite a bit of coin trying to kill us tonight."

Nathaniel thought it impolitic to kill the men outright, since he did not intend to murder de Launcet's family and every servant in the place. Ferelden did not need a major breach with Kirkwall. On the other hand, he did not need to have the pathetic City Guard attempting to impound his ships, so he proposed a middle way. The spy was rolled

up in a rug, and slung over Carver's shoulder, looking like nothing so much as a purchased household furnishing. Then Nathaniel turned to the Comte.

"Put on your cloak, your lordship. We're all going to the Hanged Man. You'll be in our company until we set sail tomorrow."

"I shall go nowhere with you, Dog Lord!"

"All right, *don't* put on your cloak."

They frog-marched the man to the door, pressing a dagger to the small of his back, where they were accosted by his blonde and dim wife, the Comtesse Dulci.

"Guillaume! Where are you going at this hour?" Her eyes widened. "With such people?"

Nathaniel swept her a bow. "Pardon, Comtesse. There is an urgent political matter of great delicacy that only your husband can resolve. Good night."

Guillaume de Launcet was carried off, and the Fereldans gave a series of nods, grins, and little waves to the befuddled Dulci. Isabela crowded close to the Comte, and while he was distracted by the exquisite discomfort of a dagger's questing point, she picked his pocket with practiced skill. Then she faded back to the rear of the party, contemplating her latest acquisitions.

"That's nice." She tossed the ruby from hand to hand and slipped it into the little pocket sown into the top of her heavily-boned corset.

On the way back through Hightown, Fenris paused, gazing up at a tall facade.

"I... shall be along later. I have business here."

"Friend of yours?" asked Adam.

"Not exactly. The house belongs to my... former... master. I wonder if he has arrived in Kirkwall yet."

"You can't go alone," said Carver. "Why don't we call on him, too?"

Guillaume de Launcet's eyes nearly popped. "Messere Danarius is a respected Tevinter noble!" he protested.

"Right," scoffed Nathaniel, "A respected slave-trading Tevinter blood-mage. I am in awe. How could I leave Kirkwall without paying my respects?"

Isabela picked the lock and got them in, unable to stop laughing. De Launcet and the spy were kept under guard by Mapes and Dudgeon, while the rest of the party went to introduce themselves to the man who had enslaved, tormented, and pursued their companion.

Magister Danarius, alas, was not at home. It was an imposing mansion, boasting a labyrinth of large rooms, but it was derelict and abandoned. Danarius had not lived there in a long, long time.

But he had left demons to fight for him. Clearly, he had not expected Fenris to return in the company of a mage, and a strong party of warriors. The demons were nasty, but dealt with.

"He left quite a bit of good stuff here, too," said Kain, poking at a chest with his boot. "I reckon he owes you for services rendered."

"I want *nothing* of his," snarled Fenris.

Darrow shook his head pityingly. "That's not looking at

it the sensible way. Leaving the stuff is high-minded, right enough; but it sort of plays into his hands by not doing him any *inconvenience*."

"He's got some nice books," remarked Jowan. "He might miss them."

Ashamed to confess that he could not read, Fenris said. "By all means, take anything that you wish."

Darrow picked up a fat-bodied lute. "I've always fancied the idea of learning to play music."

They paused to gather more choice items, though Nathaniel's instructed them to give any coin to Fenris. Before they left, Isabela obligingly sprinkled the fine magisterial robes in the wardrobes with a very nasty and unnoticeable powder. She smirked at Fenris.

"If he puts on any of this lot, he'll flay himself bloody, scratching."

Fenris gave her a long, admiring appraisal.

"That is... a pleasant thought."

They galloped downstairs, retrieved their captives, and marched cheerfully to the Hanged Man.

They took a room, and proceeded to lock Guillaume de Launcet in with his guards, who promptly demanded that he play Wicked Grace with them. Understandably, considering his state of mind, he lost, heavily and repeatedly. The guards checked to see if the spy had suffocated — he had not — and left him on the floor, to be retrieved and taken



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to the ship later on. The rest of the party went to look for Varric, who greeted them in his expansive way, wanting their stories. That Guillaume de Launcet was being held in the next room until the Fereldans sailed was sufficient for him to stand them all drinks. He was amused and delighted to find that the single noblemen he had bade farewell to so recently were returning as sober married men.

"The classic way to contract an alliance. Practically a living, breathing metaphor," the dwarf chuckled. "I hope, for both your sakes, that they are reasonably good-looking?"

"They are lovely ladies," Nathaniel informed him, rather starchy. A true nobleman did not discuss his wife in a tavern.

Adam, not so practiced in the art of nobility, had no such reservations. "She's a redhead. Quite pretty. I like her, thank the Maker."

He did like her. She seemed to fancy him, and was taking to the more intimate aspects of their relationship with pleasant enthusiasm. He had once promised himself that he would marry for love, but he had been given little choice in Nevarra. They could have married him to a prune-faced horror, but they had not. He had got himself a pretty redhead, with plenty of spirit and a fine fortune. His luck had held.

It was not so lucky, true, that they had carried an Orlesian agent on board all the way from Nevarra. Varric found that interesting, too.

"De Launcet can't be the only Orlesian sympathizer in Kirkwall. At that, I think it's only a part-time gig for him, curry-



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ing favor with the Empress. What the whole chapter shows is that there are also Orlesian agents in Nevarra, which is not exactly shocking. The Empress has people everywhere."

Hawke snorted a laugh. "Well, she won't have this one much longer. We'll have a talk with him once we're at sea tomorrow."

"Serves him right for being caught. I take it, then, that you don't need to have me put you up in the old family mausoleum?"

Nathaniel blinked, having recently come from Nevarra, where, he supposed, someone might actually spend the night quite comfortably in one of the great tombs. In fact, many of the great tombs were far more comfortable than Vigil's Keep. It was an embarrassing realization.

"Er... we are staying on our ship. The Nevarrans gave us a transport and an escort of warships."

"Quite the dowry," Varric approved. "If you don't mind being seasick."

They discussed the political situation as freely they could with someone who was not Fereldan. Carver and Jowan mentioned that they had learned a great deal from the Nevarran Wardens, but were not at liberty to reveal details.

"Nobody wants the Blight to spread," Varric snorted. "Nobody sane, anyway. Bad for business. My brother Bartrand wants it to be over as soon as possible, so he can go on a scavenger hunt in the Deep Roads."

That was interesting. Varric explained that there was a short window of opportunity at the end of a Blight, before the darkspawn retreated underground to breed again.



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During that time, ancient thaigs could be rediscovered, and their treasuries plundered. Jowan and Carver glanced at each other, wondering if anything had been found in Kal'Hiol or Amgararak Thaig.

Their party had long ago created the story they would tell everyone but the King and Queen of Ferelden about their curious adventure in the Vimmark Pass.

"There is an abandoned fortress in the Vimmark Mountains," Nathaniel told Varric, his tone elaborately casual. "The Grey Wardens used it, long ago, but no one even remembers it. The Nevarran Warden-Commander had never heard of it. Quite the fortress in its time, but empty now. No doubt some robber band will move in and make use of it."

Varric spread out his map, and the place was duly marked. The dwarf shook his head.

"Strange. It's not supposed to be there."

Jowan swallowed, and said, "There might have been magical protections that finally wore off. It's there, all right."

Caver added, "It's got a big tower. With griffons on it."

Nathaniel made arrangements to contact Varric for information on a regular basis, using the cover of more lumber shipments. Varric could offer them a proper Merchant Guild contract, which was then signed by himself, the Arl of Amaranthine, and witnessed by the Bann of the city.

"And next," said Nathaniel, "we leave on the dawn tide."

It was dark and late by the time they returned to their ships with their prisoners. The spy was chained up in the



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brig. The Comte was held in polite captivity on one of the warships, to be released when they weighed anchor. Isabela gave them all a wink, and went off to the SIREN'S CALL, to make ready for the voyage.

Fenris watched his companions, irresolute, and then followed them on board. In the men-at-arms quarters in the forecastle, he set about collecting his belongings. They amounted to a great deal more than they ever had before. The others watched him as they began settling into their hammocks, and then Darrow grabbed Mapes.

"Fetch the bann," he growled. He approached Fenris, and asked, "Pushing off, are you? Why?"

"You are returning to Ferelden," Fenris said quietly. "You can have no further use for my services."

Kain rolled his eyes at his friends. "We reckoned you were going back home with us."

"It is not my home."

Adam came down the ladder and squinted at them, puzzled. "What's going on?"

Darrow jerked his thumb at Fenris. "He reckons you don't need him any more."

Adam, tired and wrong-footed, gaped briefly. Then he said, "Fenris, could we talk?"

"Of course, Lord Hawke."

The men-at-arms leaned in, listening breathlessly. Adam grimaced at them.

"Alone?"

He must tend to Berenice, who had not gone to bed, but had waited up for them with Callista. Still, this man was a veritable jewel in the dust, and must not be made to feel superfluous. Adam liked him, too, and had his own ideas about what would be best for an escaped Tevinter slave who was also a prodigy with a greatsword.

They climbed up on deck and Adam shepherded the tall elf forward, away from the stern cabins. Hunter saw them, and trotted in their direction. Maker curse it, Nathaniel had already vanished, gone to join his Arlessa.

"Fenris..." he began. "I thought you did not dislike our company. We certainly have come to respect and value you."

The elf was taken aback in his turn.

"You and the Arl have been most... generous. It has been a most interesting adventure. You, however, are going home to Ferelden across the sea, and I still have accounts to settle with my former master."

"Oh, to the void with Danarius!" Hawke burst out. Hunter whuffed, a bit startled. "Sorry, boy," muttered Hawke. "Look here, Fenris, why waste you life and your skill waiting for someone who may never come? And if he came, and you succeeded in killing him, what then?"

Fenris looked away, out into the harbor toward the darkly glimmering shapes of the colossal Twins; eternal slaves wracked with eternal anguish.

"If I live long enough to kill him, then I have lived long enough."

Hawke wondered what he could say to someone who

had suffered so much. "We have a saying in Ferelden: *The best revenge is living well.* Do you understand what we mean by that?"

"I am not sure. In Tevinter, we say: *Revenge is a dish best served cold.*"

Hawke found himself laughing. "Well, yes. We say that, too. Everybody says that, and it's true. But you can be more than Danarius meant for you to be. Your whole being at the moment is focused on Danarius; I think it's very likely that he doesn't think much about you at all. He sent some mercenaries, yes; but hasn't come himself. Why let him rule your life, however far away he is? Come with us to Ferelden. Make a new life for yourself. I know for a fact that Arl Nathaniel looks upon you with great favor. You'd be a free man-at-arms, with good wages. With talent like yours, you might even rise higher. If the Queen met you, she'd probably want you to Join the Grey Wardens. She certainly has plenty of elven friends in it!"

Fenris, at least, was listening, his silvery head bent. Hawke caught at a flicker of memory, and went with it.

"You heard about how Queen Bronwyn cleared out those Tevinter slavers. She's furious with the Tevinters, and believe me, they're no match for her. Carver tells me she and the King have put a watch on the coast for Tevinter vessels. They know that there's a regular ship that comes in to relieve the slavers every six months or so. Queen Bronwyn's planned an ambush. Unlike Kirkwall – this overpriced snakepit – we don't toler-

ate slavers and Tevinter magisters in Ferelden. I've got people watching the harbor in Amaranthine, too. Instead of facing magisters alone, why not come to Ferelden, where we stand ready to give them a short, sharp lesson? Your knowledge could be crucial." He leaned forward, a smile playing across his handsome face. "Imagine the looks on their faces. That would be a cold, cold revenge indeed."

Fenris was tempted. "It would be interesting to see Queen Bronwyn the Dragonslayer with my own eyes," admitted Fenris. "Though I have no great desire to be a Warden. I do not share your brother's enthusiasm... well... for *anything*."

"No one says you have to. You'll always have a place in my guard, as long as you like. Or the Arl's, which is grander. Look here: why don't you sleep on it? I have got to see to my wife, poor girl —"

"I apologize," said Fenris, deeply embarrassed. "I did not mean to keep you from your lady."

"No, I'm glad we talked. I'm just a bit tired. I promise we won't let you oversleep and carry you off with the dawn tide. That would be cheating. None of us want to force you to do anything you don't want to do. We haven't the right anyway. You're a free man. It's just that you owe it to yourself to do the best for yourself that you can. Marchers and Orlesians — and Tevinters — might call us barbarians and Dog Lords, but Fereldans love freedom. You'd have a good life with us. Sleep on it. Don't let Danarius — or his memory — tell you what to do."

"You've been fighting," Callista said to Nathaniel. She was not accusing, but merely observing. At the moment she was already warming their narrow bed. The slow sway of the ship was quite relaxing. Quite seductive... She was so glad she had pretty nightwear among her trousseau.

"Kirkwall's certainly the place for it," Nathaniel agreed. "We found out we had a spy on board. He ran off and told his employer, but we've dealt with it — and him." His armor was laid aside, and he scrubbed off with a basin of luke-warm water. Callista admired the lean body, wishing she had the nerve to offer to help him. Even in the best cabin the ship had to offer, it was rather close quarters. Once they were settled on land, however, perhaps it would be easier.

"Did that woman captain fight, too?"

"Captain Isabela?" Nathaniel chuckled a little. "That she did. She's very impressive."

"I feel so useless," she blurted out. "I can't do anything like that."

"Nobody expects you to."

"Would you teach me to shoot a bow?"

He paused, and then smiled. "If you like."

He stripped off the rest of his clothes, and slipped into bed with her, dousing the lantern. Moonlight flooded in, casting shadows on the planked floor. He gathered her up in his arms, and she smiled as she nestled close, listening to his heart quicken.



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Someone was strumming a lute on one of the other ships. The music drifted over the harbor, sweet and sleepy.

*"The water is wide, I cannot get o'er
Neither have I wings to fly*

*Give me a boat that can carry two
And both shall row, my love and I.*

*A ship there is, and she sails the sea
She's loaded deep as deep can be
But not so deep as the love I'm in
I know not if I sink or swim..."*



The sun rose, pink and fresh. It was a fine day for a new adventure. With the dawn, the tide turned, and Nathaniel and Adam were up early, giving orders.

Heavy-eyed and sulking, the Comte de Launcet was set ashore. He had the nerve to complain about the lack of breakfast, and was handed a mug of small beer by a sailor.

"You can keep the mug, too," called out Carver, with a mocking salute.

Fenris came out on deck and watched the sailors make ready. Signals flickered among the ships. The elf gazed out to sea, and then back to the towers of Kirkwall, and out to sea again, struggling. At length he went down below to join the others for a quick meal, and made no move to leave when they cast off. Hawke gave him a smile, and whispered a word to Nathaniel, who nodded, very pleased. Slowly, they moved out of the harbor, those on deck shivering a bit in a cold wind,



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while the seabirds wheeled and shrilled overhead.

Carver joined his brother, looking eagerly ahead for the first glimpse of open sea beyond the long chasm-like passage out of the harbor.

"So," said Adam, looking back at the docks. "That's Kirkwall. Maker's Breath, I'm glad Mother didn't talk us into immigrating."

"As I recall," Carver said, with a snort. "Mother *did* talk us into immigrating. Or at least you. I was already a Grey Warden, lucky for me. If Charade and Uncle Gamlen hadn't shown up, you would have turned up on the docks with no home and no prospects. I think I would call the current situation a big giant escape."

Hawke laughed. "So do I. I think it also calls for a drink, early morning or not."

Carver leaned in, and murmured, "You need to tell Berenice about Bethany. Let her get used to the idea."

Adam grimaced. He knew he should. He should tell her before she was miserable with seasickness, too.

"I'll go find her."

Nathaniel had overheard. He needed to talk to Callista about the Howes and their current political status, including his father's shocking crimes. Someone was bound to say something cruel, and she needed to be prepared.



Callista said to Berenice, "You need to tell Adam about your brother. Let him get used to the idea."

"I know I should. I should tell him before I start throwing up." She blushed, rather nervous about facing the men on deck. "I hope," she ventured, "that I did not... wake you up last night."

Callista turned pink with laughter, remembering the cries of rapture that had penetrated the thin walls of their cabin. "I wasn't asleep at the time. You sounded very happy."

"I was. That's all going very well. I mean," she added in a rush, "it's very different than I expected. It's quite fun, really."

"Yes, it is. And it shows that Adam is unlikely to throw you over the side. So go to him now, when he's in a good mood."

They went out on deck together, determined to enjoy feeling comfortable, clean, and well fed before the inevitable nausea. A few pleasant words were exchanged, and then Berenice said, "My lord? May I speak to you privately?"

They went off to the port side, talking in low voices. Nathaniel gave Callista a quizzical look.

"Berenice needed to tell Lord Hawke more about her family. We ought not to keep foolish secrets from one another."

"You're right," he sighed. "I should tell you more about Ferelden, for that matter."

He gave her the awful story of Rendon Howe. How he was enthralled by blood mages. How he murdered his liege lord and the man's family. How he had engaged in slavery. It was an ugly story, but Callista listened, not horrified or disgusted. She knew none of the people involved, and Nathaniel was not his father. If the Queen and her brother the Prince could make that distinction, so too could Nathaniel's own wife. Yes,

there would be enemies, and it was good that Nathaniel told her who they were, so she would not make foolish mistakes.

"After all," she said softly, "my own father was killed as a traitor. My mother died of grief soon after. Yet I am no traitor. Your Queen is wise to make the distinction between the innocent and the guilty. I wish my own aunt and uncle could have been so fair-minded."

"No one is nobler than Bronwyn," Nathaniel agreed. "You'll understand how we feel about her when you meet her yourself."

Now that the worst was past, Nathaniel could tell her more about the nobility of Ferelden itself, and coach her in the first things she must learn.

"After the King and Queen, the teyrns are the premier nobles of Ferelden. The Teyrn of Highever is first: Fergus Cousland. The King is also the Teyrn of Gwaren. After the teyrns come the arls. The Arl of Amaranthine is first in precedence, and then Denerim, Redcliffe, South Reach, and West Hills. That means that only the Queen and the Queen-Dowager take precedence over you in Ferelden. The last I heard, the Queen-Dowager was likely to marry Fergus Cousland, which would make her the Teyrna of Highever. After you in precedence is the Arlessa of Denerim, Habren Bryland. She won't like you taking precedence of her, but don't let her bully you. Originally the Arl of Denerim was first, but there are historical reasons why that changed. Habren is definitely after you."

Callista laughed lightly, "No woman is going to 'bully' me out of my proper place, I assure you. Who are some of

the other Court ladies?"

"Arlessa Kaitlyn of Redcliffe is next: a very sweet young girl. Arlessa Leandra of South Reach is Adam and Carver's mother. She and Arl were recently married. Arl Wulffe is a widower, and it's likely that Adam's cousin Charade will marry the heir. And there's something about Adam's family you should know. Er... he has a sister.."

"Your sister is a *mage*?"

"Your brother is a *mage*?"

A moment of consternation, and then Adam Hawke burst out laughing: rich, musical laughter. He flung his head back, unable to stop. Berenice had clapped her hand over her mouth, and then she too began laughing helplessly. It was awful; it was embarrassing; it was likely to cause all sorts of messy complications in the future.

"And the Queen allows her at Court?" gasped Berenice. "She is not locked up in the Circle?"

"Bethany has never lived in a Circle. We kept her free, but she's a trained mage. The Queen proclaimed her free after Bethany saved a lot of lives during an Orlesian assassination attempt. The Chantry isn't happy with Ferelden at the moment because we're being reasonable about individual mages, and because we've made use of the ancient Grey Warden treaties to bring mages into the fight against the darkspawn."

"But of course mages must help! You cannot tell the Grey Wardens how to the fight the darkspawn!"

Pleased with her, Adam said, "The Orlesians think they can. We've said no. So yes, Bethany is free. She's a sweet girl and a wonderful sister. She's also a brilliant Healer, and she feels it's important to use her talents to help people."

Berenice was torn with any number of conflicting feelings. Mages were to be dreaded and quarantined; other people feared and hated them. Her own brother's high birth had not saved him when he was discovered. Instead, the Templars had come and dragged Troilus through the streets from their mansion to the Circle of Magi. Since then, they had not been permitted to know if he was even alive. For a moment, she longed to beg Hawke to turn the ships around and save him; to storm the Circle and free her brother, as his sister was free.

Obviously, that was impossible. The ships must go to Amaranthine, and Ferelden could not afford to so grossly offend Nevarra. She was silent a moment, collecting her thoughts.

Finally, she said, "What if we have a child who is a *mage*?"

He took her hands, and gave her a crooked, endearing smile. "Then we will love that child, and no one will take him — or her — away."

In his heart, of course, he decided simply to trust to his luck, which had not yet failed him.

As the sun rose, the Twins were passed, and then left behind. The waves grew choppy, and the ladies retired below. Through grey sea and under greying skies they sailed, the weather worsening. It grew colder.

The spy had to be dealt with. After questioning, it was clear that he was a low-level but long-time agent of Orlais. Some names were extracted, and the Nevarrans would be informed eventually. The man knew more names; obviously of contacts in Kirkwall, but also in a few other cities in the Free Marches. He had the name of a contact in Denerim, too; a woman named Marjolaine.

Afterwards, there was nothing to be done but to drop his body over the side after dark. A disagreeable business, but necessary. While the man had offered to turn his coat and serve him, Nathaniel saw no reason to trust him. Yes, having an agent of his own would be useful, but not a man like this. In a sense, Varric was their agent in Kirkwall, and a better man they could not find.

A fierce squall sprang up out of nowhere, and they were harried by high seas and foul winds. Those prone to seasickness hoped only for death. Those who were not were rather more concerned about the ship sinking. From arl to servant, every capable person was pressed into service, manning the pumps. Their escort was scattered out of sight. Hawke hoped that some higher power was not trying to teach him a lesson about pressing his luck too far.

Berenice had sunk into unconsciousness the night before, hardly expecting to awaken in the world of the living. Her eyes opened to sunlight, and hardly any rocking at all. To her surprise, Adam's dog was sleeping

peacefully on his blanket by their bed. Berenice stretched awkwardly to avoid stepping on him as she eased out of bed. Adam was nowhere to be seen, and her maid was either in her little bunk nearby, or dead. Rather than start pounding on doors, she set about trying to dress herself. Her hair she would simply comb through, and leave down.

The dog awakened and looked up at her, giving himself a slight shake.

"I see that you're alive," muttered Berenice. "Since you're not howling, I presume Adam made it, too."

The dog responded with a low *'whuff'*, entirely at his ease. Berenice found it very odd to share a room with a dog, especially a dog who appeared to understand everything said to him. Hunter rose and padded to the door, looking back at Berenice.

"Yes, yes, we'll go find him. Just let me tie my belt..." She took another look at the dog. "I suppose you don't mind sharing him with a wife?"

Hunter stared at her. Why would he object to Adam having a mate? Mating was a very pleasant thing. Hunter himself mated whenever the opportunity arose. If his human liked the red-haired bitch, then that was all to the good. Hunter himself was training her in the arts of ear-scratching and treat-giving. She seemed to be not without a certain aptitude.

They stepped out of the cabin, and once on deck, found themselves surrounded by a sea as smooth as glass, the countless little waves reflecting back brilliant sunshine.

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Adam was on deck, talking with Nathaniel and Callista. To port was a long, gray haze.

"Good morning!" she greeted them, and then pointed to the horizon. "Is that Ferelden?"

"More or less," Nathaniel answered. "It's Fair Isle, a large island north of Amaranthine. All we have to do is follow its coast to the south. The storm hurried us along last night, though we were lucky that it calmed when it did. The Amaranthine Archipelago is lined with reefs and filled with bandits and wreckers."

Seeing her frown of incomprehension, he explained. "Wreckers are bandits who prey on beached vessels and castaways."

"Well!" Berenice managed. "I'm glad we won't be meeting them, especially before breakfast!"

Adam laughed. His eyes were dark-circled from the night's exertions, but his charm was still in evidence. "You feel up to eating something, then?"

"I'm starving!"

"So am I," agreed Callista. "Let's see if the cook's skill is equal to our appetites!"

They ate, and then watched Fair Isle go by. A speck in the distance grew into a ship, and was the SIREN'S CALL, catching the wind with clever sailing. They slowed to let her catch up, and eventually Isabela herself was seen, waving at them from the bow of her ship. Over time, two of the Nevarran warships joined them. The last of them, a tiny dot, was visible but still distant in the mid-after-

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noon, when a smudge appeared on the southern horizon, stretching out as far as they could see.

"There now," said Adam. "That's home."



CAPTAIN ISABELLA OF THE SIREN'S CALL

CHAPTER 23

TREASON HIGH
AND LOW

LOGHAIN'S IMPRESSIONS OF PARAGON ASTRID WERE VERY DIFFERENT THAN ALISTAIR'S. On his way to Highever, he stopped at Amgarrak thaig, and found the admirable dwarven princess hard at work at creating a self-sustaining, highly defensible fortress. Her people were clearly devoted to her, and her unique take on dwarven customs enabled many casteless to find purpose under her aegis. She seemed to have plenty of gold as well, which roused a bit of curiosity, but which was clearly none of Loghain's business. Just as Loghain was strengthening his own land against attack, she was doing likewise, with impressive single-mindedness.

Alistair, on the other hand, was impressed during his own, separate visit, by how very superfluous he was to Astrid's current agenda. He met her as she was on her way to Kal'Hirol and he coming west from Soldier's Peak. She was friendly, of course, and perfectly happy to see fellow Wardens. She was full of information about the current state of the Deep Roads and the current political situation

in Orzammar. She could point out all the little twists and tunnels where darkspawn had been found and killed, and she had her golems repairing and building without rest. That special interest that he had once sensed in her down in Ostagar, however, seemed to have evaporated.

Was it the loss of her poor hand? Alistair's heart clenched at the pain she must have suffered. Her new... tools, he supposed he must call them... were elegant, or useful, or even terrifying. She seemed to have become part-golem herself. She was on her way to oversee some activities in Kal'Hirol, which needed immense work simply to clean it out. She bade them all farewell in a brisk manner, and did not look behind her.

Alistair discussed those changes with Loghain, whom he met east of Amgarrak Thaig. Loghain was on his way from Highever to Amaranthine, and using the Deep Roads to speed his journey. They made camp together and had a long talk. Loghain noticed Leliana among the Wardens. He frowned, and led Alistair far enough away that they could not be overheard.

Their dogs, Scrapper and Amber, renewed their acquaintance: cheerful litter mates, exploring and playing in the deeps underground. Alistair himself had come to be comfortable with Loghain, who spoke his mind and gave clear orders. The only thing he really had against his new king was that he had made Alistair a bann, though some of the blame for that must be the Queen's.

"And how is Bronwyn?" Alistair asked. "For that matter, *where* is Bronwyn?"



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"Hard at work in the west. I left her based at Gherlen's halt. She's scouting out more of the Deep Roads there, trying to sense something from the Archdemon. She's had her share of nightmares, poor girl. What about you?"

Alistair made a face. "Nightmares, of course. Do they mean much? I'm not sure. Recently I saw the Archdemon in the Fade looking smug about something. The horde is certainly gathered, but nobody's sensed a large body of darkspawn anywhere. Maker only knows where they are. One thing I'm positive of. They weren't near Ostagar, and they're not anywhere here in the North. Of course, there are probably tunnels and caverns unknown to us. Maybe deep under the mountains..."

"I suppose that's another reason why Bronwyn's out there in the Frostbacks," Loghain agreed. "Look here, lad, I'll tell you a bit of what's going on, so you won't be surprised. I'm making my way back to Denerim, once I've done inspecting the northern ports. I've called a muster of Fereldan nobles. You're exempt, since you're already heading out on duty. While we're organizing our forces, there will be a trial. There's no harm in telling you, since the man's already in custody. Bann Frandarel's been playing games with the Orlesians and I want him out. The Crown will take West Hill as a royal domain and I've got people working on strengthening the fortress there. When the Orlesians come, we'll be ready."

"Maybe they won't."

Loghain barked a laugh. "And maybe the winter will last



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forever! They're coming, all right. The Knight-Divine said as much outright. We sent little Brosca into Jader, and she saw where they're building onto the dockyards to accommodate the rest of the invasion fleet. It's an open secret. Bronwyn will likely send more agents into the town, one way or another. They're coming, and it won't do you Wardens any good to try to be neutral. The Orlesians won't let you."

Alistair refrained from saying that the Orlesians weren't the only ones who wouldn't allow anyone to be neutral.

"You'll be wanting to see Bronwyn of course," Loghain went on. "She'll be glad to see you, too. She needs her friends with her. See what she wants of you, and if nothing else, have a look at your bannorn — especially on the western borders. Keep an eye on Jader. They're going to strike just as soon as they can trust the weather. Maybe the darkspawn, too. Bronwyn thinks they're likely to be active as soon as it thaws."

Alistair shuddered, imagining being attacked by Orlesian chevaliers on one side, and savage darkspawn on the other. "It's so wrong in so many ways for the Orlesians to attack us during a Blight! I wish we could just back away and let the two of them fight each other instead."

Loghain's laugh was more genuine. "And so do I! If there's any way I can see my way to manage it, I'll try to arrange just that!"



Some nobles refused outright to attend the muster. Most had the sense to send a representative in their stead to



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captain the levies they could manage to raise. Loghain noted the uncooperative. Some were old or otherwise unfit, and a proxy leader was simply a good idea. Some were too lazy or too intent on trying to play a double game to want to commit themselves to combat. Everyone was about to have a short, sharp lesson in what it meant to be a traitor.

The trial of Bann Frandarel was to be held in the Landsmeet Chamber, before those nobles who had come to Denerim. The arls would all be present, even Nathaniel Howe, returned from his Nevarran embassy, which had proved something of a triumph.

Bann Adam Hawke, too, brought home a Nevarran wife. The two girls were presented to the king, who thought them quite comely and well-behaved. They seemed taken with their husbands, and the feeling was apparently mutual. Anora was pleased with the new noblewomen, especially with Arlessa Callista, who of course would be in close company with her. Loghain thought pretty girls all very well, but three sound warships and a transport were far, far better. And the chest of Nevarran gold was best of all. Arl Nathaniel brought back a treaty of friendship and mutual assistance with him. Fereldan's obligation was to resist the Orlesians, which Loghain had every intention of doing anyway.

Unsurprisingly, not everyone was pleased with the Nevarrans. That two eligible noblemen should be snapped up by foreigners did not sit well with many. Spiteful remarks were made about accents and fashions. The most



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vocal of these critics was one who hardly would have been in the running to marry either of the gentlemen.

"What hideous clothes!" sneered Arlessa Habren at a dinner held by Bann Sighard. "I wonder that they have the shamelessness to go out in public with their throats exposed."

Kane thought the two Nevarran girls quite pretty, and he had no problems with fashions that showed a bit of skin. Habren was in a foul mood these days... even more than usual.

While it was hard to put up with her, at least her temper had a reason. She was with child, so all his hard work had paid off. And since she was with child, he need not sleep with her, since he had paid off a Healer to tell her that such things could cause miscarriages and other gruesome outcomes. And she was sick quite a bit, which meant that she stayed a great deal in her luxurious apartments. She had managed to come out tonight, but judging from her expression, the experiment would not be essayed again very soon.

A number of nobles were stirred up about the arrest and upcoming trial of Bann Frandarel, but Kane had no sympathy with that.

"If he didn't want to be arrested," Kane told one grumbler plainly, "then he shouldn't have had dealings with Orlesians. No good ever comes of that. And Orlesians always cheat."

These words were duly reported to Loghain, who was more or less satisfied with them. Arl Kane was not good for much, but at least he had the sense not to make deals behind Loghain's back. He showed up in a very pretty set

of armor from the workshop of Master Wade, looking the part of the handsome warrior, though Loghain doubted he knew much more of swordplay than that the pointy end went into the other fellow.

Habren was bored. Her stupid elven maid was huddled in the corner, nursing her slapped face, sniveling.

"Dallena! Stop that noise, or I'll have you whipped bloody! Can't you see that I don't feel well?"

Being pregnant was hideously dull. Some of their vassals – or their women – came to call, but Habren found their insipid talk hard to bear. It was mostly about their own childbeds or their own ugly, useless children. Lady Parna told gruesome stories about children born without legs or arms... or without heads... or about twins born conjoined who died gruesomely within a few days. Or she would talk about labors that had lasted days and had killed the mothers. It was sickening and terrifying, and Habren had finally screamed at her to shut up. The lady had done so, but had not called again.

At least she wouldn't have to see those horrible Nevarrans again very soon. They had called, oh so sympathetic and kind, bringing gifts for the baby... some of which were quite nice. It was a humiliating thought, that now there was someone else she had to give place to: an Arlessa of Amaranthine. The redhead was nobody – the wife of Habren's stepbrother, a mere jumped-up bann – but Arlessa

Callista had precedence of Habren herself. How could that be right or fair? Denerim was the most important place in Ferelden. The Arlessa of Denerim should be next to the Queen in importance. Habren had dropped a few hints about what she thought of foreigners getting above themselves. The women hadn't been back since.

There was nothing to do but have shopkeepers come to the estate so Habren could buy their wares. Silks, furs, jewels... it was pleasant to see all her things piling up around her. Kane was giving her odd looks, as if he disapproved. Well, too bad!

Father was coming soon, and he would see that people treated her as they ought. He'd give Kane a talking to about neglecting her. Kane was always going out, either to take his place in the Council, or to take to talk to his captains – though he did look very handsome in his new armor. The captains should come here, so Kane could spend more time with her. There were plenty of things that Kane could do to please her that wouldn't harm the stupid baby. He could use his mouth, his fingers... he could surely come and talk to her and flatter her!

At least she didn't have to see his horrible little sisters. They were far, far away, upstairs and on the other side of the mansion. They had their meals there, for Habren had got her way about that. They were too young to be permitted to dine with their elders and betters. Father, of course, had allowed Habren to dine with the grownups from the

time she was thirteen, but she was a born lady and a special case. Those common brats would not be fit for decent company until they were at least fifteen... er... sixteen or seventeen. Or quite possibly never.

And now that Loghain was back in Denerim, Habren saw even less of Kane. Couldn't that uncouth peasant manage things without bothering them?

"I'm bored!" she shouted at the walls. She stalked over to the cringing maid, and yanked on her arm. "You! Dallena! Get up and help me change. I want to wear the new pink gown."

"My lady," whimpered the maid, "it is not finished."

Of course that was absolutely the wrong thing to say. Habren was not interested in excuses.

"Then you'll just have to finish it *right now!*" she screamed. "Get those worthless knife-eared wenches here and get to work. If it's not done by dinnertime, I'll throw the lot of you out!"

Dallena fled, shaking. Habren followed her to door, shouting down the hall.

"And I'm hungry! I want honeycakes with almond milk!"

A guard looked her way, irresolute.

"Get them!" Habren snapped.

"My lady," he said, "I'm not permitted to leave my post."

Habren reared back, her mouth working. "I am your Arlessa, and I command you to get to the kitchen and fetch me honeycakes with almond milk, or I will have you hanged for treason!"

The guard winced. He did not believe for a moment that

the arl would permit any such thing, but that bitch would keep yammering at him until he did her bidding. He would have to report it to the officer of the day. He might even be flogged, but on the other hand, everybody knew about the arlessa. He gave her the most cursory of bows and turned his back on her, hurrying down the hall. On his way he passed one of his mates.

"You're supposed to be on duty in the family quarters!"

"She — " the guard jerked his head behind him " — said she'd have me hanged if I didn't fetch her honeycakes. She's been screaming all day. Her maid ran out of there, looking like she'd seen a hurlock."

"Don't know how the arl puts up with her," said the other, disgusted. "My woman had a hard time when she was expecting our first, but I've never heard of anyone acting like that."

"The arl's not a bad bloke," agreed the guard. "I've got to get on, before Her High-And-Mightiness pops a vessel."

His friend snorted. "Right. Too bad if she did the world a favor."

Back in her chamber, Habren was lashing herself in a fury, since she had nothing better to do. Pacing back and forth, she admired how the train of her dressing gown whipped around when she turned. She felt powerful, fearsome, in command. Within her own estate, there was no one to keep her from doing whatever she liked.

Her maid Dallena crept through the door, followed by the seamstresses, also all elves. Habren preferred elven servants, since she towered over them. She glared at the



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girls as they curtsyed.

"What are you waiting for? Get to work!"

"If you please, my lady, we'll take the dress to the sewing room..."

"You will not! You'll work right here where I can see you. I won't have you slacking off!"

So the pieces of the gown were distributed, and the quaking women sewed in dead silence, while Habren hovered over them, criticizing every stitch.

"You have too much thread on the needle! Must your stitches be large enough to span the Drakon River? Do it over!"

The tirade paused when the guard appeared, accompanied by a footman carrying the arlessa's snack. It was beautifully arranged on a tray. Framed by her favorite silver bowl, the honeycakes were plump and round, half submerged in the sweet almond milk. Her special gold spoon lay on a pink silk napkin.

"Put it down on the table and get out," Habren ordered. She seated herself, ready for a treat, and set about greedily devouring the cakes, licking her lips in satisfaction.

The elves kept on with their sewing, desperate to finish the dress before sundown. The youngest of them, only thirteen years old, was still shaking. Tear quivered on her lashes.

An older girl whispered, "Don't cry. You can't cry, no matter what. You mustn't get tears on the silk!"

Habren snarled, "I hear whispering! I'm not paying you to talk!"

Enraged that they would dare talk about her — for what



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else could vacant-minded elves be gossiping about? — she pushed angrily away from the table and stalked over to oversee the work.

"Your hand is shaking!" she fumed at the young girl. "Are you some sort of cripple? What use is a palsied knife-ears to me? I don't think you know how to sew at all! Let me see what you're doing —"

She yanked at the sleeve in the sobbing girl's hands. The needle slipped through the girl's fingers and pricked Habren. With a startled cry of pain, the arlessa flinched away.

"You stupid wench! You stabbed me with that needle!" She put her finger in her mouth, sucking at the pinprick, and then looked at the sleeve, where a tiny drop of blood stood out; red clashing with the pale pink.

"You've ruined it!" she shouted. "You've ruined my dress, you little whore! You stabbed me and then ruined my dress. I'll have your ears for this..."

The sewing maids' cries and pleas rose, counterpoint swelling against Habren's shouts. Most threw themselves on their knees, begging for mercy. Habren clouted the luckless girl over her ear, and then grabbed furiously at her hand. Her rage rising like flames, she fumbled for the needle, still hanging by its thread to the sleeve, and rammed it into the girl's hand.

A shriek, shriller than a bird, cut through the stone walls like a beam of mage fire. The rest of the maids screamed out, wild with terror. The girl struggled helplessly against the



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bigger, stronger human. Habren twisted the needle, her face contorting with something like ecstasy, a voluptuous sensation warming her belly. She pulled the girl's hand fast against her, and push hard against the needle, forcing it all the way, until the point emerged from the screaming girl's palm.

The guard burst through the door, wondering if the arlessa was being murdered. His first impression was that the arlessa was trying to kill her maid. He did not dare lay hands on a noblewoman, but threw the door wide open, hoping the poor silly girls would have the sense to run. They did: crying, stumbling, half-blind with tears.

Habren shoved the screaming girl at the guard.

"This knife-ears attacked me! I want her whipped!"

"Yes, my lady!"

The guard dragged the elf away, and Habren sat down suddenly on a chair, winded and rather nauseated. The honeycakes, so enticing before, now seemed sickeningly sweet.

"Take this slop away!" she ordered, and then realized that she was alone.

Where had they all gone? Where was Dallena?

She felt dizzy again, and threw herself onto her bed, watching the ceiling spin above her until she dropped off to sleep.

Outside in the corridor, the guard, unable to stand all the hysteria, tried to calm the girl, and then, when he saw what was hurting her, took the trouble to wrench the needle out of her hand.

"It wasn't my fault," the girl sobbed. "The arlessa grabbed



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up the dress and pricked herself with the needle!"

"That's as may be," the guard replied, not doubting her for a second. "But she's still the arlessa. Here, bind that up with your kerchief." Once that was done, he grabbed the girl's wrist and pulled her along to the upper dungeon.

There, the portly, unshaven jailor was unsure what to do with her.

"Wants her whipped?" the man asked. "With what? The cane, the quirt, the horsewhip, the knout, the scourge? How many lashes? And where on the body? This is all very irregular!"

"Dunno. She just said, 'I want her whipped!' Just like that. Pricked herself on a pin —"

"— a needle," whimpered the girl.

"And flew into a passion about it. Ran the needle through the girl's hand, but I pulled it out."

"Does she want her locked up, too?"

"Didn't say anything about locking her up..."

The girl began crying again.

"Stop that sniveling, or I'll give you something to cry about!" The jailor turned a professional eye on the hapless girl. "All right. Here's what we're going to do. Twelve to the bottom with the cane for a simple domestic offense, and it's into the cells for you, my girl."

The guard hesitated, "You could let her go after," he suggested mildly.

The jailor scoffed at that. "If her ladyship's in a temper, she'll want to make sure this knife-ears learned her



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lesson. You, wench, strip down and bend over that bench there. Get on with you! Strip down, or I'll rip your dress off myself. I'm doing you a favor, using the cane. If her ladyship had said 'flogged' I'd have to use the scourge, and that would," he chuckled, "mark you."

Sick with fear, the sewing maids huddled into the little cubbyhole they shared. Habren's maid Dallena huddled with them, dismally aware that she would have to return to the arlessa's apartments and her own dark little closet there. One girl had crept out to hear the news, and slipped back in noiselessly.

"They've taken Tessa to be whipped. She's in the dungeons."

One girl muttered. "That's where we'll all end up someday. I hate that shem bitch! I wish I could kill her!"

"Don't say that!" Dallena hissed. "They could hang you for those words!"

A dull, miserable silence followed.

"I've got to go," Dallena groaned. "If she can't find me, Maker knows what she'll do to me!"

Another girl whispered, "Better you than me! I hope she dies in childbirth!"

Dallena hissed again, terrified. You never knew who might be listening. For that matter, it was far from unlikely that one of the maids might tattle on the rest, hoping for favor or at least milder punishment. She glided down the halls, trying to make herself invisible. No guard stood in the corridor. She pushed at the arlessa's door with trembling hands.



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The inner door to the private bedchamber was open, just as they had left it when they ran. Dallena peeked into the room, and glimpsed Habren sprawled out on her bed. She came closer, hoping that the arlessa would not wake anytime soon. On the table by the bed was the silver pitcher of pale, cool wine that the arlessa demanded be kept filled. A half-filled goblet was near at hand. Dallena wondered what she ought to do. Surely anything was better than this. It was useless to go to the Alienage. Her people were gone; sold to the Tevinters. Her cousin, though...

Yes, her cousin liked her work at the Wardens' place. Dallena would go there, and even if they wouldn't take her on, it was a place to hide. Dallena darted into her poky, windowless cell, and threw together her few belongings. Before leaving the arlessa's apartments, she paused, and then spat, full and heavy, into Habren's silver goblet.

Leonas and Leandra Bryland, Arl and Arlessa of South Reach, called at the Arl of Denerim's estate just as soon as they arrived in the city and could wash off the travel stains. They had had a wonderful time in the south. Bethany and Charade were in cheerful spirits and very good looks. The two young boys were markedly less pleased about visiting their sister the arlessa, and trailed after the others as if going to their doom.

Kane, of course, greeted them politely, and said and did all that was proper. Habren was pleased to be the center of



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attention, once her announcement was made.

"What wonderful news!" Leandra said kindly.

"How are you feeling, my dear?" Leonas asked his daughter.

She shrugged, a little sulky. "Mostly terrible. Nobody understands what I'm going through."

Leandra smiled. "Well, I certainly do! I'll be happy to help you in any way I can."

Habren glared at her, and did not bother to respond.

Charade, sensing trouble on the way, asked, "Have you picked out any names?"

Habren rolled her eyes. Kane answered for her. "I was thinking about Annawyn for a girl; but Habren likes—"

"It's going to be a boy," Habren said. "I don't want to waste my time on girls. It's going to be a boy and I'm going to name him Rupert."

Kane smiled suavely, determined not to saddle any child of his with such an awful name. Still, there was no reason to pick a fight in front of Habren's father. Things had been tense here at the estate. Habren was having trouble keeping a maid. One had run off, and Habren had told him that the elf had robbed her of some jewelry and coin. At the moment the City Guard was looking for the girl on the charge of petty treason, and Habren would insist on Kane hanging her when she was taken.

He had not missed the looks of terror cast in Habren's direction by the remaining elves. Something was wrong there, but no elf was worth Kane's domestic peace. Habren was going



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to give him an heir, after all. Habren disliked human maids, but would have to make do with them. Likely they wouldn't let her bully them as she'd want. Kane had no illusions about Habren's temper. Her father was an important man and Kane's ally, and must be kept on his side.

And the arlessa was a good sort, who asked after the girls. Kane had them sent for directly. The girls and their governess entered, pretty and well-mannered as ever.

"The last time I saw you," Leonas teased, "you were trying for a puppy. Did you imprint?"

"No, my lord," said Faline. "There were only two puppies that time, and they were darling, but they liked other people. But another litter was whelped not long ago, and we're going to try again."

"Well, good luck to you!"

"I hope you get a mabari," said Corbus. "Look how big Killer's grown. If you had a mabari, it could be friends with mine!"

Kane glanced at Habren, willing her to do the polite thing and invite them to dinner. That was hopeless, so he issued the invitation himself, and they agreed on the next evening.

"We'll be busy all day at Council," said Leonas. "The King wants Frandarel's trial to start as soon as possible. I'll be interested in looking over the evidence."

Kane knew something about that. "Cousland thinks the evidence is pretty clear. Frandarel has more coin than he ought to and he's been corresponding with the Orlesians. The King was furious when he discovered that the bann

had a golem in his treasure vault. It's been confiscated."

"Any word about the Queen?" asked Leandra.

Habren huffed a quick, rude noise. Her father could not ignore that and gave her a level look.

"No," said Kane, who could and did ignore Habren. "She's still in the west, shoring up the defenses in the mountain passes. Adam and Carver are in town, though, back with Howe from his trip to Nevarra."

Leandra stared at him. "Nevarra?" she gasped. "Nevarra? They went to *Nevarra*?"

Leonas Bryland winced. With an attempt to be debonair, he merely asked. "And was it successful?"

Kane began to grin. "So it seems. Howe and Adam brought home a pretty pair of Nevarran wives."

He was unsurprised when visit ended abruptly. Leandra was desperate to track down her errant sons and see them—and Adam's new wife — for herself.

"Did you know about this?" she asked Leonas.

"My dear, it was a state secret."

"And Adam is married!" Bethany cried, thrilled at the idea.

"You won't like her," Habren scoffed unhelpfully. "She's perfectly hideous, and you can barely understand a word she says."

"I think she's a charming girl," countered Kane. "Do bring them all to dinner tomorrow, won't you?"

Jowan and Carver returned to a nearly empty Wardens' Compound. It made for sleeping late and no trouble

using the bathing facilities, but after a few days they were growing restless.

Ketil and Idunn were living there quite happily, more or less playing house. Ketil's usual grumpiness had dissipated. Idunn, whom Carver had always thought of as the usual plain-faced dwarven woman, looked much prettier, now that she and Ketil had come to an understanding.

"The Senior Warden left us here to keep the place running," Idunn told them. "He took the rest and went north to see Soldier's Peak. I don't know what he intended past that, though I think he might mean to go west and find the Commander."

"Sounds good," Carver said, joining them at the long table in the Hall for the midday meal. "I want to go too, but I can't, not right away." He gave Jowan a gloomy look. "I've got to see my mother and the rest when they get back into town. She'll rake me over the coals for going overseas without telling her."

"We were under orders," Jowan comforted him. He sat down himself, and reached for the bread basket. "We *had* to go. I do think we should leave to find Bronwyn fairly soon, though."

Cups of mulled cider were served, and a pitcher put on the table. Carver looked up to thank a pretty elven girl with a honey-colored ponytail. She bobbed a timid curtsey and hurried away, eyes averted.

"She new?" Carver asked.

"Niniel's cousin," Idunn told them, munching contentedly. "Good girl. Quiet. Never goes out. Didn't notice her myself until a few days ago."

"So what were those foreign Wardens like?" Ketil rumbled.

That was a rather exciting topic of conversation. Carver described the magnificent Nevarran digs in detail, with Jowan adding his own observations.

"I guess you could say," Carver concluded. "That they're rich. Really rich. They don't get down the Deep Roads a lot. They spar and train and swagger around the city. It's a good life. They've got a lot of traditions. Their commander is a decent sort. Very aristocratic."

"Don't say it like that," Jowan rebuked him. "Bronwyn's very aristocratic, too."

"Yes, but —"

Mistress Rannelly bustled in.

"You've a visitor, Wardens!"

Fenris was once again at loose ends when they arrived in Denerim. Up to that time, he had been part of a small, elite team that had pulled together and become close. He had been accepted among the Fereldans as one of them — as a friend, even. It had been a unique, and uniquely wonderful experience. The noblemen and the knights had treated him with courtesy and respect; the men-at-arms and servants with good-humored camaraderie.

However, here in Denerim, it had all changed. The men of the embassy had been chosen by the King, and were not the arl's men. Arl Nathaniel resumed his place as a great noble, busy with great affairs. Lord — no, *Bann* Adam Hawke

— he must accustom himself to these Fereldan terms — had his own life and a new wife. Fenris' comrades, like Darrow and Kain, had returned to their barracks at Fort Drakon, since they were soldiers of Maric's Shield, the best of the king's army. The knights had gone to visit their families, and the rest back to their duties at the Palace. Fenris could claim a place among the arl's guard, but he was unknown to the men here, who looked askance at a foreigner and an armed elf. A few remarks had been made, though the sergeant had come down on the troublemakers.

"If he did the arl good service, that's good enough for me!"

"But he's an *elf*!" protested a guardsman. "Nobody's saying he shouldn't have a place, but let him stay where he belongs, in the servants' quarters with the elves!"

In truth, Fenris had expected no better, and had feared a great deal worse. Sleeping in the barracks... feeling so much an intruder... was thoroughly uncomfortable. In time it might become dangerous.

He had been assigned no duties, and therefore his time was his own. Hawke had counseled him to buy a money belt, back in Amaranthine. Fenris had done so, and so his small fortune was on his person at all times. Leaving his little chest with his personal items at the barracks, he decided to go out and see this strange southern city for himself.

The other things he had purchased in Amaranthine had been a warm hooded cloak and a pair of stout fur-lined boots. Fenris had never worn such things before,



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and found the sensation odd. The sensation of ice and snow on bare feet, however, was worse.

To one who had seen the wonders of Minrathous, greatest and wickedest of cities, who had traveled among the Qunari, who had seen Antiva, the Free Marches, and the splendors of Nevarra and Cumberland... well, to speak plainly, Denerim was a poor and squalid place. The kingdom of Ferelden itself was poor, and thus had been the victim of constant attacks by its rich and powerful neighbor. Such was the world: the powerful preyed on the weak; and the weak must defend themselves or submit and be made slaves. Fenris granted that the Fereldans were determined on the former. He respected that.

Where could he go? He could fight for a place in the arl's guard. He could return to Amaranthine, where the captain had been told about Fenris at length. Neither prospect was particularly appealing. He was a warrior, and would go where the war was. It was clearly not in Denerim. There was another option, however...

Everyone knew how to find the Wardens — even rather confused people who insisted on also telling him how to find the Alienage. Fenris had not the least interest in the Alienage. He had never lived in an Alienage, and had felt no connection to the city elves he had come across. The Wardens, however... Carver and Jowan had been friendly, and did not seem to think themselves above his company. Yes, Jowan was a mage, but he was first a Grey Warden, and had shown no signs of any craving for power or any



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need to inflict suffering for its own sake.

Fenris knocked at the thick, rugged door. It opened, and he was greeted by a pretty elven maid and a friendly, middle-aged human woman. Neither woman blinked an eye at him; they were supremely unsurprised to see an armed elf at their door. He was immediately admitted to the Wardens' Compound. This was a good sign...

"You've a visitor, Wardens!" called the woman.

"Fenris!" called Carver. "Come on in!" He turned to the other Wardens. "Hey, everybody! This is Fenris! He met up with the Arl's party in Kirkwall, and he's amazing with a greatsword."

The two dogs, knowing Fenris well, did not bark, but trotted over to renew his acquaintance.

"Hello, Fenris!" waved Jowan. "Come and have a bite with us."

Idunn narrowed her eyes, considering. "You're not a Warden."

"No, he's not a Warden," said Carver, a little sarcastically. "He's a friend... like Zevran or Sten." He explained to Fenris. "They fight with us, but they're not Wardens."

"Ah," replied Fenris, for lack of anything better to say. He sat down and directly found a cup of mulled cider and a bowl of savory stew set before him by a shy young elf girl. Still, this was interesting... and rather promising. One could fight alongside the Wardens without actually joining the mysterious Order. Fenris wanted to belong to no one but himself.

"Would you like to stay with us?" asked Jowan. "I know that the Arl and Carver's brother must have made you offers, but I think, since this place is so empty, that we could

actually give you a room of your own. Isn't that right?" He appealed to Rannelly. "Isn't there a room for Fenris?"

"Of course, Warden dear," soothed the housekeeper. "We always have a place for friends of the Wardens. Just give your things to Niniel or Dallena, Master Fenris, and we'll get you settled in a wink."

"I left my trunk at the Arl's," said Fenris, "but I can retrieve it..."

"We'll go with you!" said Carver. "I should find out if my Mother's come back to town yet."

"I need to pick up some things at the Wonders of Thedas," said Jowan. "A shop," he explained to Fenris. "It's the nicest shop in Denerim."

"Actually," Carver contradicted. "That would be Master Wade's. He's the best armorer in Fereldan. Really talented."

"We can go there, too," Jowan compromised.

"After we eat!"

Fenris hesitated, and then dug into his stew. Where everything else had changed, these Wardens still treated him the same as ever.

It was pleasant to be staying together at the Howe mansion in Denerim. Callista and Berenice still felt very odd and out-of-place here, and the companionship of a familiar face was very welcome.

Berenice sighed, as they sat and sewed together in the privacy of a little parlor that Callista had claimed for her own.

Sewing might ordinarily be a mere pastime for ladies, but today they were sewing with definite goals in mind. Something must be done to make this place liveable. The walls were rough-cut stone, softened only by a few threadbare hangings depicting dogs. The chairs were plain and uncushioned, and the windows small, grudging any passage of light into the room. The fireplace was crude, a mere recess in the wall with a earthenware flue. Most of the smoke scorned to travel up it, rendering the room unpleasantly hazy. Unappealing as the place was, it was the best prospect for a sitting room in the entire house. The lack of luxuries the young women could accept; they had not quite expected the lack of comfort and even sometimes what they regarded as basic necessities. Did Fereldans really not understand how to build a working fireplace or to construct decent furniture? The women had each brought a few pieces, but those had been left in Amaranthine.

"It's not as if we weren't warned that Ferelden is a rude and barbarous country."

Callista gave her a look. "Are you saying, rude and barbarous or not, that you would prefer to be an outcast in Nevarra?"

"No," Berenice said, very decisively, stitching on a cushion cover. "I'm not saying that at all. I adore Adam, and it's all a great adventure. However... oh, Callista really! It is fairly barbarous. Or poor. What have you. I didn't mind Amaranthine. It's not a bad little provincial town, taken all together. The view of the sea is magnificent. It's much smaller than I pictured, but it's not bad, and Adam likes

my ideas for making something of his keep..." She gave Callista a significant look.

Callista clicked her tongue, annoyed. "Yes, I know. Vigil's Keep really is quite primitive. The Great Hall is handsome, but the rest needs work. Nathaniel *knows* that, my dear. He traveled for many years in the Free Marches, after all. He's going to live in a very different style than his late, unlamented father. No... no don't quote me. Nathaniel really does mourn his father. While no one else has much good to say about the man, Nathaniel seems to have loved him. Setting that aside, however, Nathaniel has seen the world and has broader views than the other nobles we've met. His housekeeper Adria is a sweet woman, and understands what I want for my own apartments. One room at a time, I shall set in order our bedchamber, a family parlor, a dining room, the solar, and a few rooms for guests. And... a nursery, of course. I see little point in complaining about the rest. After all, Berenice, Vigil's Keep is above all a *fortress*."

Berenice thought that over. "You could say the same about Denerim! It looks shabby and mean, but I can see that whatever coin the kings have had has gone into the military. Not surprising, after being conquered by Orlais. King Loghain clearly cares only about the army. I suppose nothing here makes sense without the Orlesians."

"That's very true," Callista agreed. "Compare the magnificence of Fort Drakon with that dismal little 'cathedral' of theirs! It's no better than a village chantry at home! Or

compare it even with the Palace, such as it is. Nathaniel is hoping to open Ferelden up to the world and make it more civilized, but of course that cannot happen until the darkspawn are destroyed and the Orlesians thwarted." She glanced about her, at the unlovely little room with the smoky little fire. "And as for *this* place..."

A short time later, a maid told them their presence was requested downstairs, for the Arl and Arlesa of South Reach had come to call. Berenice looked and Callista and swallowed nervously.

Introductions were made. Both Nevarrans instantly recognized the Arlessa of South Reach as a fellow civilized woman. Better yet, she was warm and kind, and eager to make them feel welcome. The presence of the Arl's two little sons, children from his earlier marriage, made everything cheerful and easy. There was a half-grown mabari who seemed to know Adam and Carver and their dogs as well.

For Carver was present, too. He had come to visit his brother and was in time to see the rest of his family. He looked rather exasperated at his mother's remonstrances about going on long, dangerous journeys without telling anyone. Arl Nathaniel was faintly amused.

The little boys made their bows like proper gentlemen, first to the Arlessa of Amaranthine, and then to their step-sister-in-law, Lady Berenice Hawke.

Berenice was pleased to be able to recognize everyone from Adam's excellent descriptions. That pretty dark-haired girl

was Bethany, the mage. The other, with the cloud of brown hair, was the cousin, Charade, who had grown up in Kirkwall.

"What beautiful hair!" Bethany burst out, admiring Berenice's flaming locks. Berenice blushed, but heard no mockery in the girl's words. Adam liked her hair, too. Fereldans did not share Nevarra's view on red hair and its possessors.

"We just called on Arl Kane and Arlessa Habren," Leandra told them. "The Arlessa is expecting! Such exciting news."

"Yes," Callista said politely, with a carefully pleasant smile. "We have met Arlessa Habren."

The two boys, knowing the real Habren better than anyone, immediately caught the undertones of the arlessa's reply. They nudged each other.

Adam glanced at Nathaniel, who kept his face blank. Both of them had had an earful from their wives about the shocking rudeness of the Arlessa of Denerim. To avoid that particular topic of conversation, Adam launched into a recounting of the Nevarran adventure, beginning with their journey to Kirkwall, since the information about traveling the Deep Roads was to be kept as quiet as possible.

Leandra was horrified and indignant to hear about the current tenants of her family estate. Adam did not mention that they had actually slaughtered the slavers: he simply produced some family souvenirs he was able to lay his hands on. Arl Leonas filled in the blanks for himself. As far as he was concerned, slavers deserved everything they got.

Adam excused himself briefly, and brought back the

little portrait of Leandra they had liberated.

"What a lovely picture, my dear," Leonas approved. "We'll have to display that next to the new portrait of the two of us."

Carver glanced anxiously at his brother, but Adam skipped over the Warden prison. That would unnecessarily frighten their mother, and did not need to be made public. Most of the time was spent on their time in Nevarra. Nathaniel and Carver added some remarks about the beauty and grandeur of the city, and the new brides happily contributed their own stories about meeting their dashing husbands for the first time.

The skirmishes on the road and the final battle at sea were done full justice. Nathaniel smiled grimly, remembering it all.

"Warden Jowan proved himself that day, if he hadn't before!"

Leonas listened, and smiled his assent, but tucked the information away to discuss it further with Loghain. He must have already taken the young men's report. Had he heard this part? The use of mages at sea would be innovative and shocking to some, but if the Orlesians were building an invasion fleet, this would put paid to it, and be great fun to watch in the bargain.

The treason trial of Bann Frandarel was quite the social event. Seats were provided in the Landsmeet, and everyone appeared, dressed in richest raiment to witness the ritual disgrace and condemnation of one of their own.

Some nobles were rather nervous about Loghain's

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assault on the nobility – and the accompanying attainder and confiscation of wealth – and whispered that it smacked of tyranny. Still, the evidence against Frandarel appeared genuine, and the growing fear of an Orlesian attack earned Frandarel no friends.

Loghain, however, had won a few. In her search of the treasury Cauthrien had found a remarkable holy relic, a vial containing the reputed Tears of Andraste. These Loghain had tendered to the Chantry. They had no known powers, but were still a rarity. The Grand Cleric had been very grateful. It had given Loghain's prestige a boost.

And so had the Nevarran embassy. The gift of four ships and substantial financial support had bolstered the newly-made king's reputation. The alliance reassured many who were apprehensive about the future.

There were those who were not particularly happy about the current situation, however, and some of them were unhappy because they regarded themselves more as partisans of the Queen. Where was she? Why was she sidelined in the wilds of the Frostback Mountains, while Loghain laid down the law in Denerim? Quite a few nobles had been deeply impressed by the revelation of her special relationship to the Prophet herself. Then, too, there were those conservatives who regarded her as the true monarch by blood, and Loghain only as her consort. Bann Alfstanna was the most vocal of this group, which included most of the northern banns. Nathaniel Howe himself had tenuous ties to the faction.

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Fergus Cousland was not exactly of that party, but he understood that those individuals considered him his sister's proxy at the current time. Petitions were being addressed to him in his sister's place, most notably by the city elves, who looked to Bronwyn as their patron and protector. Some ugly things had occurred at the Arl of Denerim's estate, and while a nobleman had special authority over his domestic staff, Fergus was looking for a favorable moment to take Kane aside and tell him the harm that Habren was doing to his public image.

But that whole family party was together and looking quite happy. Arl Leonas looked as content as a father of a fine family should be. The boys were with him, their growing puppy well-behaved. Corbus was growing, too; in no time he'd be a man. Perhaps everyone was looking happy because Habren had to stay home due to ill-health. That aside, word was that Arlessa Leandra was delighted with the young noblewoman her son Adam had brought home from Nevarra. She certainly looked it today, leaning past her son to converse with her daughter-in-law, both of them smiling. Rumor was that the dowry had been splendid, though it probably did not compare with the princely sum that Arlessa Callista had brought to her marriage with Nathaniel.

Nate was looking happy, too. You had to know him to see it clearly, since he was one who had always kept his deepest feelings to himself. He was not grinning toothily like that ponce Kane, but his face was relaxed, his posture comfortable, and he was sitting as close to his bride as good man-

ners allowed. Fergus admired Callista: a pretty girl, her exotic coloring distinguishing her from the other ladies; her manners proper and her demeanor sweet and pleasant. Anora had taken a liking to her, which was a good thing, since they would be seeing a great deal of one another.

It was interesting to see her, anyway, since if Fergus had not been committed elsewhere, he likely would have found himself married to her himself. The Queen of Nevarra's niece was certainly well born enough for the Teyrn of Highever and the heir-presumptive of Ferelden.

A fanfare rang out: the crowd quieted, voice hushing to murmurs as Loghain stalked in, wearing his armor and followed by his daughter, the Queen-Dowager. Anora looked for Fergus and gave him a quick smile all his own. She, worse luck, was being worked to the breaking point; hardly given time to help plan their own little wedding.

Only three more days. The wedding, perforce, would be very small and private. Quite a few people were scandalized that a full year of mourning was not being observed. Too bad for them. Only the high nobles and their families were invited, since obviously such an important dynastic union must be witnessed. At least their relations with the Chantry had thawed sufficiently for the wedding itself to be held in the Cathedral.

Some might consider an event with only twenty-five celebrants a small matter, but to Fergus and Anora it was crucial to their happiness. They had debated whether the children should be invited or not, but Fergus carried

the day there. The children were uniformly good people; better than some of the adults. Anora, with a sigh, had agreed that it was so. If it came down to it, she would rather see Faline Kendells at her table than Arlessa Habren. That the adult children should be invited was simply good manners. Bann Adam Hawke and his new bride were not invited for their own sakes, but because Bann Adam was the son of the Arlessa of South Reach.

Loghain was enthroned; Anora took her smaller chair a step down on the dais. The Queen's throne stood empty, but Fergus knew that she was hardly forgotten. And stepping out from behind a hanging was the golem that Loghain had claimed from Frandarel's treasury. It was a formidable-looking guard.

The king made a peremptory gesture to the herald, who called for order. Fergus fixed his attention on the proceedings.

"All here attend to the King's Justice! Bring in the accused, Frandarel Holcombe, Bann of West Hill!"

Fergus spared a shard of pity for the man, who looked quite undone. Loghain must not be holding him in comfortable confinement. He was escorted to the open center of the Landsmeet floor, and given a three-legged stool to sit upon. A good idea, for the bann appeared close to collapse.

Loghain spoke, his dark glare focused on the wretched man opposite him.

"Read the charges."

The herald held up a scroll and declared: "Let it be

known that Frandarel Holcombe, Bann of West Hill, is accused of various crimes against the Crown and Kingdom of Ferelden; to wit: that he has corresponded secretly with foreign powers, offering aid and comfort to the same; that under pretense of loyalty and honor, has laid his demesne open to plunder and decay, and has thus undermined the security of the kingdom; that he has falsely and dishonorably used his subject, impoverishing and evicting him to their ruin for his own enrichment and for the purpose of further unpeopling and unguarding his demesne from our enemies. For these reasons and under proof before the Maker and His Prophet Andraste, let it be known that Bann Frandarel is to be tried for the crime of high treason and for the lesser cause of malfeasance in office."

Loghain let the words sink in, and then abruptly addressed the defendant.

"Bann Frandarel Holcombe, how do you plead?"

Another pause, as the man stared at Loghain, panicking. Finally, he cried out, "I am innocent!"

Whispers rustled from stone wall to stone wall. Loghain's voice rang out above them. "We shall see."

It was a long morning. Clerks read out the appropriate statutes, and the confiscated letters were presented as evidence. Frandarel did not deny writing the letters, but claimed that they were being taken out of context; that they were being deliberately misunderstood; that *he* was misunderstood. Bann Cauthrien testified about her find-

ings at Frandarel's estate, her testimony clear and soldierly.

The bannorn accounts were presented, and people yawned at the sums from the wool trade, and the wheat trade, and the charcoal trade. They yawned yet the more at the evidence that freeholders' taxes had been inflated and the people evicted in a pattern that suggested that Frandarel wanted certain areas open and unwatched. Loghain sensed that most of the nobles cared nothing for the fate of the freeholders, and were not pleased at the idea of any restrictions on a nobleman. Fergus had warned him that this was not a popular cause, and would get them no sympathy, but Loghain had hoped for better. Seeing that Fergus, irritatingly, was right, Loghain returned to the treason evidence, and presented his own assessment of the deterioration of West Hill; of its scandalous lack of preparation in the face of the Orlesian threat that the entire Landsmeet had heard only a few months before.

This point carried more weight, since it involved the security and well-being of the nobles themselves. Besides, Loghain clearly wanted the man dead, and very few were willing to risk anything for the sake of Frandarel, who would not have risked anything for them.

The children were not the only ones growing restless. Anora whispered something to her father. Loghain snorted and gave her a nod. He immediately opened the case to the Landsmeet for questions and debate.

This was more agreeable and interesting, to the adults as

least. Grudges and feuds decades old were brought up; like opening musty trunks of moth-eaten garments. Fergus was called on to speak, and had no trouble giving witness to the fact that this vassal of Highever had given no assistance after the massacre, in itself construable as a form of treason.

Corbus whispered to his father, "Are they going to kill him?"

Leonas frowned, but did not want to lie. "Yes. In the end. He has failed to do his duty, and chosen to be greedy and selfish instead of brave and loyal."

Frاندarel tried to save himself, but he had few options. He might demand a trial by combat, but he had the loyalty of no one who would dare lift a sword against Loghain, whom everyone assumed would act as his own champion. He could request a trial by ordeal, but apparently did not consider himself sufficiently pure in heart to hold red-hot metal in his hands and be unscorched. His only other option was to plead guilty and throw himself on Loghain's limited capacity for mercy.

"Maybe that's why this is happening when the Queen is on the other side of the kingdom, eh?" wondered Bann Sighard to his son Oswyn. "She might show the man a little forgiveness, and at least allow him to take orders as a holy brother in a cloister. Loghain won't, though."

So it proved. The Landsmeet judged the attainted bann guilty. As to his punishment – mercy had no great part in Loghain's character. The farthest he would go – when urged by his daughter – was to condemn the bann to

beheading, rather than the statutory punishment for high treason of hanging, drawing, and quartering.

And it was not mercy that persuaded him, for that matter. Loghain knew that while the nobility might submit to the execution to a wayward member of their own caste, they would be roused to rebellion by his lingering public torture. With a show of magnanimity, Loghain agreed to the lesser punishment.

"Frاندarel Holcombe, in consideration of your noble birth, you are to be taken from this place, and at dawn on the morrow are to have your head struck off. May the Maker turn His gaze on you."

The condemned man, senseless with terror, was carried away, and the Landsmeet rose, ready for its dinner. There was a general feeling that they had done a good day's work, coupled with a minority view that Loghain had no right to tell a Fereldan noble what to do on his own land.

"But it wasn't simply limited to his own land!" argued Bann Alfstanna. "By plotting with the Orlesians, he was harming us all. I would think *that* that would be obvious to the meanest intelligence!"

Leandra whispered to Leonas, "Surely you won't take the boys to the execution!" A horrible thought occurred to her. "Surely you don't expect me to attend?"

"No, no, of course not, my dear..."

Leonas had wondered what to do about the boys, and was of two minds. It was not as if his sons had not witnessed violent death. The Orlesians had done them harm,



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and Frandarel, by plotting with them, might as well have done the deed himself. Lothar was perhaps too young to witness a beheading, but he would not understand if Corbus went and he did not.

His son-in-law solved the problem for him.

"I was thinking of asking the boys over tomorrow. Faline and Jancey would like to see them. Maybe a few other children could come..."

"What a wonderful idea!" Leandra exclaimed, with a grateful look at Kane. "That will take the children's mind off this dreadful affair. I know you will have to go, and poor Habren needs her rest, but I could stay with the children and keep them entertained."

Kane blinked, not realizing until that moment that he would be expected to go to the execution. Not that idea bothered him in the least, but it seemed a waste of his own time. Another stupid ceremonial performance.

"That's very nice of you," he answered. "I'll make the arrangements. Maybe Teagan's little brother-in-law would like to come, too."



Habren would not have missed the beheading of Bann Frandarel for the world.

She did not feel so ill this morning. The event gave her the opportunity to wear her gorgeous ermine cloak. With it was a matching muff and a little hat, ermine trimmed with a kind of coronet of gold filigree set into the crown. It was very becoming. The event would be comparatively short – not like



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the trial which Kane had told her was hours of boring legal precedents and speeches about duty and honor and country. Kane said he'd had a long talk with Teyrn Fergus, but he wouldn't say what it was about. Sometimes he gave Habren odd looks, but if he wasn't going to tell her, Habren wasn't going to worry her head about it. It was likely just dull politics. Today was too enjoyable an outing to waste. Not many ladies were here, so Habren stood out in her finery in contrast with the men's somber appearance.

Best of all, the dreadful children were locked up in the nursery with her horrible stepmother and the other poor relations, and Habren was here, beside her gorgeous husband. They were the handsomest couple in Denerim – in all Ferelden. On a day like today, she did not even resent his chestnut-coated mabari bitch, standing up so proudly on his other side. The mabari avoided Habren, which was offensive, but even Habren knew better than to try to come between a man and his dog. Today the dog made them look even more striking. If Habren could just imprint a dog of her own, it would be perfectly symmetrical.

Such a grim affair. Too bad they couldn't put off the execution for a month or two when the weather was better. People talked about how gorgeous Anora was, but Habren could see that the cold had rendered the Dowager's nose unattractively red. How awful if she should come down with a cold only two days before her wedding. Habren bit back a grin, and pitied poor Fergus Cousland even more.

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The King made a long, boring speech, and then Bann Frandarel made a speech too, though it was hard to understand him because he would burst out in tears, now and then. Really, how ridiculous. They should just kill him and get it over with. And then the crowds in the Landsmeet courtyard were so loud and smelly. At least Bronwyn wasn't here. For that matter, Habren was a bit surprised that Loghain wasn't wielding the axe himself. He must have learned how, back in the days when he was a farm boy, slaughtering pigs.

Finally, they had come to the entire point of the event. The Grand Cleric made everyone pray, and said a blessing; Frandarel knelt down, trembling, at the block, and the headsman raised the great double-axe, up, higher... higher... My, this was thrilling! Habren clutched excitedly at Kane's arm, eyes sparkling.

The axe thudded down, well-struck. The head bounced away and rolled, and jets of blood pumped from the neck. The crowd screamed in unison; women fainted. Habren herself cried out at the sight, unable to take her eyes away. The headsman held up the dripping, severed head and declared: "Behold the head of a traitor!"

A hearty roar of approval echoed from the walls. After that, it was rather anticlimactic: some holy brothers put the body in a wagon to take it away to be burned, and the head was taken up to be displayed above the door of the Landsmeet. Habren craned around to see the head better. At the moment, Bann Frandarel looked quite horrified. It would

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be interesting to see how his face changed, over time.

Her good mood lasted until she returned home, and learned that the children had gone out to the kennels in her absence. Her stepmother happily informed everyone that Faline had imprinted on a mabari puppy.

Anora studied herself in the mirror for a long time. With what different feelings she had gone to her first wedding. It had been a fairy-tale wedding — of a sort — shadowed by the disappearance of King Maric and the Landsmeet's decision that he must be deemed dead.

But she was young and beautiful and about to marry a handsome prince who — in his own way — was in love with her. Their wedding night was all a girl could wish. But after the fairytale wedding came the real work of living together, and that had not gone very well in the long run.

She would make the most of this second chance. Fergus, for one thing, was far more intelligent than Cailan, and he respected her without resentment. He found her beautiful, too; but did not desire her only for her beauty. Their marriage would be a partnership; a true team of equals. Anora had seen that kind of marriage before in the union of Bryce and Eleanor Cousland. Fergus had grown up with that, and that was his expectation of a wife.

There would be great changes after today. She was moving out of the Palace and into Highever House. Fergus had showed her the charming rooms that were to be hers.



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There was little she wished to see changed, for Eleanor's taste was exquisite. She had asked to go to the rooftop garden, where she had many memories of private chats and heart-to-heart confidences. The garden was deep in its winter sleep, but Anora still smiled, anticipating the spring, when the roses and lilies would burst forth into new life. Her things had already been transported by wagon to her new home. It would be strange, finally not to be living under the same roof as her father.

Her dark blue gown became her. The hood of the fox-trimmed cloak framed her face and would keep her warm. After the ceremony in Cathedral, they would go to Highever House for a dinner. Fergus was disappointed that his sister would not be here to see him married, but everyone had to make sacrifices at this time. Truth to tell, Anora was a bit disappointed herself.

Her maid sighed, "Oh, Your Majesty! You are beautiful!"

Anora laughed and thanked her. After today, she had decided to set aside the style of "Majesty," and be satisfied with the title of Teyrna of Highever. "Your Grace" did not sound like a woman desperately clinging to lost opportunities. Besides, she hated being a "Dowager" anything. The very word brought to mind ferocious old hags with more jewels than sense.

Father arrived to escort her to the Cathedral, and not in armor, as she had requested. This was not a day for warlike posturing. An honor guard would ride with them, and wait outside, since the ceremony would not last long.



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Smiles and bows met her everywhere, accompanied by the kind wishes of staff and soldiers. Outside, crowds were gathering; eager for a spectacle despite the weather.

It was a cold, cold ride through the streets. Anora was glad of her cloak and boots. A few snowflakes drifted down from a pearly sky. At her side, Father was silent, apparently sunk in thought; but Anora saw his eyes shift watchfully.

Poor Father. So suspicious of everything and everyone.

He must be missing Bronwyn, too, though he had said nothing about it. But when did Father ever discuss his personal feelings, unless they were personal feelings of hatred toward Orlais?

In fact, Loghain was indeed thinking of Bronwyn at that very moment, and his thoughts were fairly unhappy. They each had their duties, but it seemed that for all Bronwyn was giving, she was getting precious little in return. While the ladies of Ferelden — and their lords — played politics and slept in soft beds, Bronwyn was out at Gherlen's Halt, sifting through the Deep Roads, and eating the slop fed to the rest of the garrison. For that matter, he was living in luxury himself.

That would change, of course. He comforted himself with the fact that with the completion of the muster, he would return to the west and rejoin his young Queen. His plan was detailed and exacting, and he had shared some of it with the Council. Cousland would go north to Highever; Howe would bring his people to West Hill, while his young bann defended the city of Amaranthine. Loghain was most



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concerned with the far west. The Orlesians would want their force at sea for as short a time as possible; sea voyages were notoriously hard on horses. That was why they were staging in Jader, after all. Were he the Orlesian commander, he would strike at West Hill, so close to the North Road. With an attack through Gherlen's Pass and another at West Hill, the Orlesians might believe they could roll up Ferelden, from west to east, with terrifying speed.

Those ships — those wonderful Nevarran ships — would be sent to patrol the Narrows. Leonas Bryland had been struck by the tale of how Warden Jowan had sunk an Orlesian vessel single-handed. Loghain had taken it to heart as well. He had given orders to Uldred to find a mage for each of the new warships. Two, if they were available. Captain Isabela, who had proved reliable, had been given her letters of marque, but would also be ordered west. Perhaps they should find a mage for her, as well.

Fergus was already at the Cathedral, talking over strategy with the noblemen. Bryland's two boys insisted on standing with their father, intent on seeming manly and well-versed in military matters. Loghain's elaborate plan was a sound one. It was certainly far more detailed than the one presented against the darkspawn last year. Cailan's strategy had largely been, "Ride like the wind, confront the uttermost evil of our time, then destroy it in a single glorious battle that will echo down the ages."



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Without the input of a young and wayward king, Loghain's plans contained no uplifting appeals to heroism and deathless fame. They were based in exacting logistics and made use of the remarkable weapons developed by his dwarven engineers. Loghain, as far as Fergus could see, planned to defeat the Orlesians by sheer attention to detail.

Teagan would hold the west shore of the lake, watching the Sulcher Pass, while Wulffe and Bryland would bring their men up to the Neck and support Maric's Shield. Kane — with the guidance of some of Loghain's reliable officers — would garrison Denerim.

"You'd think, Fergus," Bryland laughed, "that in consideration for his daughter's marriage, he'd leave you in Denerim!"

Fergus smiled and shook his head. "I'm needed in the Coastlands. If anything, I'll try to persuade Anora to join me. If we bring a wagonful of clerks, we can run the kingdom from Highever as easily as from Denerim!"

Kane arrived, accompanied by his pretty little sisters.

"Habren's sick this morning," he told them, not expecting any disappointment, especially after hearing from Cousland about Habren's goings-on with the elves.

"Where's your puppy, Faline?" Bryland asked kindly. "Little... Jewel, was it?"

"Home, my lord. It's too cold for her today. She was having a nap by the fire when I left."

Kane gestured to the group of ladies not far away. "Look, girls, there's Arlessa Leandra. You go visit with her."

Corbus stood puffed up importantly by his father. Faline tossed her head and skipped off, dragging Jancey along with her. How silly boys were, she thought. The big ones, too.

Without Habren, the ladies were having a very pleasant time while they awaited the arrival of the bride and her father. It was warm in the Cathedral, and the air was perfumed with incense. Callista and Berenice exchanged looks as they once again took in the inelegant interior, but they could not complain of the company. Berenice had found Adam's mother to be everything she could hope for in a mother-in-law. Callista thought Arlessa Leandra cultivated and gracious. Leandra's motherly charm had quite won over Kaitlyn Guerrin, too, and the young girl loved to hear the Nevarran ladies talk about their strange, distant homeland. Altogether the two Nevarrans felt quite accepted in this rarified circle, though Berenice still gaped occasionally at Bethany Hawke: so pretty, so sweet-natured, so *normal*. Why had the Templars been so harsh with her own brother, when Bethany was proof that a mage could live in the world and do no harm?

The noise at the doors of the cathedral heralded King Loghain and the Dowager Queen Anora. The Grand Cleric welcomed them, and without delay they were before the holy fire and the vows were being exchanged.

There were nudges and discreet smiles from the witnesses, as they saw how Fergus and Anora looked at each other; so happy — so seriously happy — and so earnest. Loghain did not smile, though he entrusted his daughter

and her happiness to Cousland with far more sanguine hopes than he had to Cailan. Anora was no doubt glad to catch the greatest man in the kingdom after himself. Now if Cousland could do his duty and get Anora with child, Loghain would like him better yet.

The vows were spoken, a hymn was sung, a prayer recited, and the blessing given. The bridal party fell into a procession, and moved out the doors into full winter. The Grand Cleric was coming with them to dinner, and a priest arranged a heavy cloak over the old woman's shoulders. The snow was coming down heavily. Despite it, there was a mob at the front of the Cathedral, shouting and cheering, pushing and shoving to see the bride and groom. Bunches of fragrant evergreen were thrown. One struck Anora in the face. She smiled graciously, brushing away pine needles.

"Guards!" shouted Loghain, "Keep those people back!"

There were more bouquets: of snowdrops and holly, of wintersweet and balsam. A young woman broke through the cordon of guards and pressed one into Anora's hands, as she walked to her horse. Before she could be caught, the girl gave another to Callista Howe, startling her. Nathaniel scowled, and instinctively pushed Callista behind him.

A man dashed out of the crowd, his hands full of flowers, his face wreathed in smiles. He rushed up to Leandra Hawke, beaming, and with his left hand thrust a handful of holly at her, pricking her fingers though her gloves.

"Oh!" she cried. "Thank you, but —"

Still smiling, the man, with his right hand, buried a dagger to the hilt in Leonas Bryland's heart.

"Magic exists to serve man!" declared the assassin, his face radiant, "and never to rule over him!"



ARLESSA LEANDRA OF SOUTH REACH

CHAPTER 24



ROUGH JUSTICE

DEATH STRUCK QUICKLY. Stabbed in the heart with a sharp steel dagger, Bryland had only time for a gasp of shock, a moment of regret, and a glance at Leandra's terrified face, before he slid down the doorway of the Cathedral, and sat there, propped up, his eyes open, his life over.

Leandra screamed, falling to her knees, clutching desperately at Leonas' shoulders. His head lolled, and his body fell sideways, blocking the doorway.

"No! Daddy!" cried Lothar.

In the ensuing pandemonium, Bryland's attacker might have escaped. He made no such attempt, but stood there, holding his dripping dagger as if posing for a commemorative statue, babbling the same text, until Loghain lunged at him and slammed his fist into the smug fool's face. Corbus had been frozen with horror until then. Loghain's blow broke the spell, and the boy threw himself on the assassin; pummeling at him, shouting, cursing, sobbing.

The roaring crowd surged forward, causing Anora's

horse to rear. Fergus made a grab for the reins and held on. Nathaniel drew his sword, and edged back, Callista behind him. He made a grab for Lothar, pulled him close, and Callista wrapped her arms around the terrified boy. The Kendells girls uttered the ear-splitting shrieks of little girls, rushing back into the Cathedral, jumping over Bryland's feet, shoving past the confused mass of guests and priests. Kane ran after them, nearly knocking Arl Wulffe down.

Teagan Guerrin had been directly behind Bryland, and yanked Kaitlyn to the side, behind the safety of the Cathedral's walls. He caught hold of Corbus and gently pulled the boy away from the unconscious murderer.

"What's happening?" cried Bethany, hearing her mother's screaming amidst all the rest. "What's happening? Let me through! Mother!"

The order of precedence had relegated the younger Hawkes to back of the procession. The Grand Cleric was behind them, still fussing with her cloak pin. The girls saw nothing but the back of men's heads.

"Bethany!" wailed Leandra. "Bethany! He's been stabbed!"

The stunned guards finally did their duty, and pushed the crowd back. The jammed confusion at the doorway sorted itself out. Adam and Carver plunged through, making a path for Bethany to get to her hysterical mother.

The Grand Cleric fumbled for her pocket. Stabbed? Who? She tried to push past the men, while her hand dug deep in her robes, trying to find the little envelope of Ashes.

The men in the doorway stepped out of her way, and Bethany gasped with shock at the scene. Instantly she was at the arl's side to offer help and healing, but it was clear that it was simply too late. She put her hand over Bryland's staring eyes, and gently closed them.

"He's gone, Mother. There's nothing to be done."

"No! No! It's not fair! Leonas!"

Orders were shouted, and gradually some sort of order prevailed. The scene cleared, and snow fell, hiding the blood on the Cathedral doorstep.

Kane blew out a breath, exhausted. It was a relief to get the girls home in one piece. They had cried in the carriage after Kane detached them from poor Arlessa Leandra. They needed their own beds and a good night's sleep. So, for that matter, did he.

It was a damned shame about Bryland. The Arl had been a good friend to him and treated him right. Loghain would get to the bottom of it, though it already seemed clear the fellow was an Orlesian hireling. Something needed to be done about the Orlesians. Nobody was safe.

"My lord!"

The captain of the household guard rushed up, wild-eyed.

"My lord! Thank the Maker you're back! We've got a situation."

Kane blinked at him. "The Orlesians attacked here, too?"

"What? I mean —" The guard stared at him, flummoxed.

"No... I mean. My lord, there's been trouble here. The

arlessa is locked in her room." The man turned red, and looked frightened. "I ordered her carried there. She was carrying on so, and she tried..." He glanced at the little girls. "My lord, could we talk privately? This isn't for the young ladies' ears."

Something bad had happened. What had Habren done now?

"All right. Girls, go up to your rooms and have Mistress Manda see to you."

"Er... my lord... Mistress Manda's not there." The guard leaned closer, and whispered. "She's in the dungeon."

"What?" Kane glared furiously at the hapless man. "Girls. Stand over there. I need to talk."

Teary-eyed and exhausted, the girls crumpled up by the door. Jancey began sniffing again.

"All right. What *happened*?"

Pulling himself together, the guard said. "There was a fight. The arlessa was in one of her moods, angry about being left behind. She felt better after a bit, and went upstairs to have a look at Lady Faline's new little pup."

His heart sinking, Kane's thoughts raced ahead to horrible possibilities.

"Mistress Manda and the maid were up there when she came in. I don't know exactly what happened, but the guards went in when they heard the screaming. The ladies were fighting over the puppy, and the window was open. The arlessa... tried to throw the poor little pup out the window."

Kane's face hardened. "Go on. Was the dog killed?"

"No, my lord. Hurt, but not killed. The arlessa's the mistress here, sure enough, but the guards knew you wouldn't like the little girl's pup dashed down on the stones."

"I *wouldn't*," Kane growled.

"We got the dog away, whimpering and crying as it was. The arlessa told us we'd all be hanged. Fair out of her mind she was. In her condition it couldn't be good for her. I was there by then, and I... ordered two of the men to carry her to her room and lock her in. Gently. The young lady... the governess... well, she'd hit the arlessa in the face, so we didn't know what to do except put her and the elf in one of the cells till you got back and decided what to do to them."

"Where's the puppy?"

"The kennelmaster's looking after her. He thinks she'll recover in time, but she might be lame. I know we disobeyed the arlessa, my lord... but... a *puppy*..."

Kane rubbed his aching forehead. "You did right. Look... it's been a bad night. Arl Bryland's just been killed, and my sisters saw it."

The captain gaped in horror.

What to do? If Bryland hadn't just been killed, Kane would have sent for Bethany to cure the puppy. Considering everything going on, that would not go down well. Who could help?

"Send a man to the Wardens' Compound," he finally said. "See if they've got a mage there. Tell him he's needed here, and I'll pay plenty. Do we have a respectable maidservant left in

this place? Or what about that guardswoman I saw the other day? Dishwater blonde? She spoke nicely to Jancey."

"That's Loveday, my lord. She's a good sort."

"Get her here right now, and have her take my sisters upstairs and help them get to bed. With all that's going on, maybe they need a guard of their own, anyway. I'll go to the dungeon once she's got them and have a talk with Manda."

Then he had to go to the girls and lie, telling them that the puppy had a little fever and that Manda and Kyriel had taken him to the kennelmaster. If anybody told them the truth, he have them skinned.

His mind racing, he wondered what to do about Habren. She could not allowed to run wild, thinking she could hurt his sister's own mabari. Bryland wouldn't like it if he came down hard on her. And then he remembered that poor old Bryland was dead.

Well. That makes things a lot more simple.

Kane thought a little more, trying to come up with anybody who would make a fuss over Habren. No. No one. She had alienated just about everybody. The guardswoman came. Kane gave her harsh, brisk orders, and then stalked off to hear the rest of the story.

Kane liked Manda Everly. She was the poor relation of a minor noble family, and came highly recommended as a governess. She was not beautiful, but "pretty enough" as people said. She was not at her best at the moment, with a

torn gown, a scratched face, and her hair in tangles. The elven maid, Kyriel, hid behind her in the shadows. There was another elf girl in the next cell, and the girls were whispering when the door was unlocked and Kane came in. The jailor carried a torch, and slid it into a bracket. Before their arrival, the place must have been in pitch-darkness.

Manda got to her feet, her hand up to shade her eyes against the light. The two elves followed suit, bowing low.

"My lord?" Manda quavered. "Is the puppy all right?"

It was just the right thing to say at the moment. Manda had proper priorities.

"I've sent for a Healer. The kennelmaster thinks she'll be all right. I've told the girls that the puppy had a fever and you two took her to the kennelmaster. I don't want them upset. They just saw Arl Bryland stabbed to death right before their eyes."

"Arl Bryland!" cried Manda, horrified.

"Bloody Orlesians," grunted Kane, already thinking about something else. "You." He jerked his chin at the little elf in the next cell. She was a mess, and no mistake. "Who are you?"

"Tessa, my lord," the elf whispered. "Sewing maid."

"Why are you here?"

"My lady... pricked herself on a needle."

"The arlessa, you mean?"

"Yes, my lord."

"How old are you?"

Surprised, the girl stared at him, and then replied, "Thirteen, my lord."

"Just my sister Faline's age. All right, you can be my sisters' sewing maid. Kyriel already has plenty to do keeping their rooms." He turned to the jailor. "Unlock the doors. I'll have them wait in my study."

"Right you are, my lord."

Warden Jowan arrived, blinking and confused by the rumors in the streets, more than a little startled when he discovered that his first patient was a mabari pup. Not that a puppy was beneath his notice. Lily, his own mabari, nosed at the hurt puppy sympathetically. Jowan, working with the kennelmaster, analyzed the injuries, and then set about healing them.

"Wish I could do that!" the kennelmaster declared. "Fixed her up a treat, you did! That your mabari? Fine bitch."

"She is," Jowan agreed proudly. "The best friend anyone could have."

Arl Kane gathered up the puppy carefully, and carried her himself, his own mabari trailing at his heels. Jowan followed, for apparently there was more work for him to do.

In the arl's study were three women: a human lady and two elf girls. All needed help. Jowan quickly healed their injuries, lingering over one of the elves, whose hand was infected.

"All right," said Kane to the women. "Go on up to my sisters. Here, Manda, take Jewel with you. I hope the girls are asleep by now. We'll eventually have to tell them the truth about what happened, but not now, for Maker's sake. Warden, come with me, if you please."

They moved quickly through the long, carpeted corridors. Something was wrong, but Jowan knew better than to ask questions.

"My wife, Arlessa Habren," Kane began. "She hasn't been... right... lately. She's with child, and everything upsets her. She attacked my sister's mabari... yes, that was her, all right... and she attacked those women you just healed. She flies into rages, like she was..." he lowered his voice, looking shamed. "Just like she was *mad*. It must be the baby, but I'm afraid she'll do herself... or someone else... an injury. It's reached the point I'm afraid to leave my sisters with her."

"That's terrible, my lord," said Jowan, genuinely horrified. He hoped the arl wasn't going to ask him to heal the arlessa's mind. He would have no idea how to do that.

"Now," Kane said heavily. "I've got to break the news to her that her father's been killed. Yes. Didn't you hear? A crazy Orlesian stabbed him just as we were leaving the Cathedral. Killed him on the spot. Terrible. The king'll sort the fellow out, but it'll just about kill my wife. Worshipped her father, she did."

Jowan longed to ask questions about Arl Bryland, whom he had thought a very fine man, but they had reached the arlessa's apartments. Kane was looking worried. Jowan had heard plenty from Carver – and even some from Adam – about Habren's horrible temper and general nastiness. And now her husband thought she was getting worse? Jowan wondered if it could be some sort of brain lesion. That would be a disaster, for he knew no one who

could cure such a thing. Even Anders had failed, during the Grand Cleric's conclave.

"Aren't there some medicines that would keep her calm and quiet?"

"Yes, but you can't use them all the time," Jowan explained. "Especially when a woman is with child. They could harm the baby."

"Oh," said Kane, disappointed. "Wouldn't want that." He brightened. "I suppose I'll just have to keep her to her rooms until she's better. Come on in. She might have got herself hurt when she attacked the puppy."

There was a sitting room first. It was littered with shattered crockery. The hangings were ripped down from the walls, and the furniture was knocked over.

"She was in a passion, wasn't she?" remarked Kane. Jowan glanced up, not liking the man's tone. There was no time to consider this further, for they entered the arlessa's private bedchamber. This, too, seemed to have been struck by lightning. The only things undisturbed were the bed itself, where the arlessa was snoring, and the bedside table, with a pitcher of wine and a goblet.

"Does she drink a lot of wine?" Jowan asked, greatly daring. "Not that I'm criticizing her... but a lot of wine isn't good for babies either. Many new mothers don't know this. Cider is better, or small beer. Something not so... strong."

"Really?" Kane looked at him with great interest. "I didn't know that either. My thanks, Warden. I want this baby to

be born happy and healthy. What else does she need?"

It was a very odd scene, standing in the confusion of the arlessa's bedchamber, giving a basic lesson in prenatal care to a concerned young father, while the mother herself was sprawled on the bed, oblivious and reeking of wine. She had a bruise on her cheek, a split lip, and other bruises on her wrists and ankles where someone must have restrained her. Jowan described what he knew about proper diet and hygiene, and Kane even took some notes.

"Just a small cup of red wine at night, then. Plenty of fruits and vegetables. Go easy on rich sweets. I think I've got that. I'll give orders to the kitchen. I'll see she eats right. She's got a bruise or two. Maybe you'd better go ahead and heal her."

"It's likely to wake her," Jowan warned.

"That's all right. Hit her with one of your sleep spells if she gets rowdy. Heal her, and then I've got to tell her about her father. Bloody shame, that. I liked Arl Bryland."

That certainly sounded sincere. Jowan gathered his mana and spread a general healing spell over the arlessa, concentrating on her visible, minor injuries. He sensed nothing else. At the burst of healing light, Habren opened her eyes and sat up.

"Kane!" she cried. "Thank the Maker you've come! The servants are revolting!" She touched her cheek. "That bitch Manda struck me! She struck me!"

His voice mild, Kane said, "You shouldn't have tried to

throw the puppy out the window, Habren. That sort of thing gets people stirred up. Now, you need to be quiet. Warden Jowan here just fixed you up, and I need to talk to you."

Habren staggered to her feet, her skirts hiked up scandalously, ignoring Jowan as she would any underling.

"But Kane! You need to *do* something! The guards locked me up in here. They put their hands on me. Every one of them needs to be flogged and hanged! They should be racked until their joints—"

Kane shouted, trying to be heard above her ranting. "Habren! Your father's dead!"

That silenced her. Jowan winced in sympathy. Habren's jaw was hanging. She stared at Kane.

"That's not funny. Don't say that."

"I'm sorry, Habren. It's true. He was killed by an assassin just as we were leaving the Cathedral. The king knocked the killer down, but nobody could do anything, not even your stepsister —"

Habren's eyes stretched wide, and she let out a shrill scream. Jowan flinched away from the screaming, the worst and wildest he had ever heard. Habren shrieked again and again until she was hoarse. Her eyes rolled up and she fell backwards. Kane caught her and eased her onto the bed. Jowan checked her vital signs, but she was only unconscious.

"See what I mean?" Kane asked Jowan, looking down at his wife. The force of her screaming had broken blood vessels around her eyes. Jowan set about healing them,

while the arl watched.

Kane mused, "I don't think she's right. I'll give orders to keep her here, locked up, until she's herself again. We can't have her wandering about like this."

Jowan had been shaken by the arlessa's behavior. Something really was wrong with the young woman. "I can mix up a calming draught for her. Just for the next day or so, until she gets over the shock. As I said, more might harm the child, but just now she needs rest... I'll go now, and send the potion to you right away. She should take it with something to eat."

"What if she won't drink it?"

Jowan bit his lip. The woman seemed genuinely unhinged. "If she won't drink it voluntarily, you can pinch her nostrils shut. She'll swallow it then. But she should still have something to eat."

Kane patted Jowan on the back, sincerely pleased. "You've been a great help, Warden. I said I'd pay plenty, and I wasn't lying. Let's stop at the treasury, and I'll give you a purse of twenty sovereigns."

"Really, I couldn't ask..."

"A donation to the Grey Wardens. And I'm sure you fine fellows deserve that and more..."

Rather than going to a wedding feast, Loghain, Fergus, Nathaniel, and Wulffe accompanied the prisoner to Fort Drakon, taking care that no co-conspirator should kill the fellow out of 'vengeance' before he could be thoroughly

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questioned. He was tied to the back of a horse, submitting rather docilely. Loghain had already identified the guards who had failed to guard the wedding. They would be flogged and cashiered, if they were not guilty of worse than incompetence. He had also ordered taken into custody the woman who had given flowers to Anora and Arlessa Callista, as well as a number of the crowd who had thrown things. Some might be innocent well-wishers, but no one could afford to take the risk.

Kane had already gone home with his sisters. The ladies took Arlessa Leandra to Highever House, guarded by Teagan and Rothgar, and by Bann Adam and his brother Carver. Bryland's body was loaded into a wagon and taken with them. Teagan's estate was closer, but Highever House was already prepared to receive guests. They took Bryland's two distraught boys with them as well. Seeing their father murdered before their eyes roused Loghain's strongest feelings of empathy and anger. Just boys, and forced to witness this...

The Grand Cleric went to Highever House as well, tears in her eyes, the useless Ashes still in her pocket. Who ordered this crime? That Bryland was the specific target was perfectly obvious. She recited prayers and soothed the women as best she could, while her mind raced, considering the possibilities. Her conclusions were ugly but incapable. There was someone in Denerim who very likely knew quite a bit about Orlesian agents, and he was a prisoner in comfortable confinement in Denerim Cathedral.

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He would know, because he probably brought them here in his own ship. He might possibly have seen something of the scene from his narrow window. Yes, she must talk again with the Knight-Divine, but perhaps the conversation should not be so private this time.

In a big chair softened by cushions, and covered warmly by a fur cloak, Leandra fell into the sleep of deep shock. Bethany sat at her feet on a little stool, miserable. Charade squeezed her shoulder lightly and whispered comfort in her ear.

"She didn't mean what she said in the carriage. You know she didn't."

"She meant it. How can I blame her?"

Her mother was distraught, but not out of her mind. Of course she was bitter that Bethany, for all her magic, could not save her husband.

"What is it good for, all the magic? What is it good for, then?"

Bethany had sometimes wondered that herself.

Anora had work to do, undertaking her duties as hostess, feeding what was supposed to be a wedding feast to shocked and grieving people. So far, she was quite pleased at the conduct of the noble ladies who had rallied around Arlessa Leandra.

And those poor boys, too. While they evidently loved Leandra, at the moment they seemed to need the company of men, and were clinging to Rothgar Wulffe and their Hawke stepbrothers at the far end of the table. Teagan had gone, off to join Father and Fergus at Fort Drakon to sort out that murderous lunatic.

Chairs were rearranged by the big dining table so the ladies could sit together and talk quietly.

"What will happen to the arling?" asked Callista. "Who is the heir?"

Anora hoped Arl Bryland had left clear instructions in his will. All the kingdom needed was Habren stirring the pot of civil strife, angling for South Reach in addition to Denerim.

"As far as I know," she hazarded, "his eldest son is the heir to the arling. His daughter is a grown woman, but already the Arlessa of Denerim. Of course Corbus is young and will need a guardian. I presume the guardian of his body will be his stepmother the arlessa. The regent of the arling might be the same, or might be different. For all I know he named my father the king, or perhaps my lord husband."

She felt very self-conscious saying that word. She and Fergus had exchanged only quick, businesslike words since the awful event. Would they even see one another on this, their wedding night? It was useless to repine. There would be other nights... many more.

"We should find out where we stand," she said, rousing herself. "I shall send to Arl Bryland's house and have his secretary send the will to me at once."

Those orders given, she felt more herself, and less like a mere housekeeper. The arling's succession would be established; order maintained. The City Guard was on alert, and a curfew had been declared, to keep people off the streets and stop them from attacking the houses or shops

of those known or thought to be Orlesian.

Corbus forced down his food, his misery swelling at Lothar's soft sniffing beside him. Tears burned in his eyes, but he was turned fourteen now, practically a man in every way that mattered, and he hated to shame his father by crying like a baby.

"Come on, Lothar," Carver urged him. "Eat up. A soldier always eats when he has the chance."

"My stomach hurts," Lothar whimpered. He kicked at his chair, and wiped his nose with the back of his sleeve.

"Try some of the almond pudding, then," said Rothgar Wulffe. "It'll go down easy. Carver's right. You have to keep up your strength."

Corbus chewed mechanically, the tender roast beef dry as ashes in his mouth. Killer put his head on Corbus' knee and looked up at him soulfully. Corbus rubbed his mabari's ears. This would all be so much worse without Killer.

A black anger surged through him. He snarled, "I hope they torture him to death! I hope they *kill* him!"

Killer whined and licked his hand.

"Oh, he'll be executed," Adam said smoothly. "But you do understand that the king did the smart thing, don't you? They've got to talk to him — find out if anyone was helping. Maybe there was a conspiracy. They've got to find out everything first."

"I understand," Corbus said, with a sharp jerk of his

chin. The almond pudding did look good. He pulled the dish between himself and Lothar, and they dug in with their spoons. "But when they kill him, I want to be there."

Most of the Council was gathered at Fort Drakon, solemn as judges – which indeed they all were – while the assassin was put to the question. Teagan arrived later than the rest, whispering that the ladies were at Highever House, and safe. Loghain gave him a nod, while also noting the absence of Kane. Fussing over those sisters of his, no doubt, who could easily have been left in the ladies' care so the arl could discharge his responsibilities. The man was useless. Loghain's lips thinned, filing away this offense for future retribution.

The prisoner had been shown the instruments first, as prisoners always were. To their disgust, it was clear from the first that the man was half-witted – almost childlike. A pawn, then, or rather a puppet; carefully primed and trained for this particular attack by an agent working behind the scenes. He shrieked at the first turn of the rack, babbling inanities. He showed no resistance whatever; he was perfectly willing to tell them everything he knew, which was not as much as they would have liked.

He wanted to protect Ferelden from filthy mages, he said. The Wicked Arl was working with mages and darkspawn to destroy them all.

"The Wicked Arl!" Nathaniel exclaimed. "You call Arl

Bryland 'the Wicked Arl?'"

The assassin stared at him, his watery eyes blue guileless. "Everybody knows about the Wicked Arl. He sold elves as slaves, and has a blood mage whore as his mistress." Leaning forward, he confided. "He might even be a mage himself!"

If the Wicked Arl were killed, their eyes would be open to their danger and everyone would be safe. Andraste would bless them, and they would sit at the Maker's right hand.

A good man had advised him... a wise, good man who had treated him kindly and taught him what he needed to do.

"Take him down from the rack," Loghain ordered, muttering. "Talking will work better than torture at this point."

The trembling fool was set on a bench, and the nobles, forcing themselves to be calm and reasonable, set about interrogating him. It was slow, uphill work.

After some questioning, it appeared that Goodman was the name the fool had been given. He did not understand them when they asked about an accent. He did not know what that was. Goodman spoke beautifully, yes, and taught him what he must say when he killed the Wicked Arl. He had learned words from the Chant of Light that he was to recite when the Wicked Arl lay dead.

Loghain was not surprised that it had taken some time to find such a useful catspaw. To find someone so gullible, to train him... it must not have been easy.

Teagan drew a deep, indignant breath, but was silent. Trying to remonstrate with a madman or a fool... trying

to make him see reason... it was pointless. Fergus was doing best with him, talking in a low, calm, reasonable voice, asking about Goodman, and how he had discovered the Wicked Arl's evil deeds.

In this way, they discovered quite a bit. Goodman had traveled from far away to choose a helper... a hero who would free the people of Denerim. Goodman had given him a room and good food, but he had not seen anyone else, for Goodman had sent him to his room when he had visitors. They were able to discover where he had been living, and Loghain instantly sent men to search the place, even though it was likely that the mastermind behind this crime was long departed.

What they could not discover is if this so-called "Goodman" had trained any other assassins. It was a disturbing thought.

"We know that there were some who slipped off the Orlesian's ship before they appeared at the Landsmeet," said Loghain. "Burrowing like maggots, working their schemes. I'll put out a bounty for information."

"We're likely to net quite a few harmless immigrants as well as spies," Fergus pointed out. Then he shrugged. "We'll have to sort them all out, I suppose. I daresay the worst of the spies might well have made themselves look the most honest."

It was late and dark by the time they finished. As to the guilt of the assassin, there was no doubt: he had confessed outright. Loghain briefly declared him guilty of the crime of high treason, as he had drawn weapon in the king's

presence; he was guilty also of murder, assault, conspiracy, mischievous use of a knife, and making a public disturbance. His limited mental capacity would not protect him. His execution was set for noon the following day.

"That will allow us all to actually get some sleep," said Loghain, with grim satisfaction. To the head jailor, he said, "I want him alive and conscious tomorrow. I do not, however, want him making excuses or reciting religious texts!"

The Jailor saluted. "I see to it, Your Majesty! This one won't be able to say anything after I'm done with him."

"Good."

Leandra awakened, shut her eyes in absolute misery, and then forced herself to get up and see to her children and stepchildren. She knew she must apologize later to Bethany... she must make things right between them... but she simply could not at the moment.

"Your Majesty... Your Grace," she said to Anora. "I am so deeply grateful for your sympathy and forbearance. I must take my family home now, and see that they go to their beds and that I see to my dearest Leonas."

That was a consideration. The Arl's body must be prepared for the pyre before it stiffened so much that handling it was another trauma.

"You would be most welcome to stay," Anora assured her. "I shall have the servants prepare rooms"

"No. I thank you, but no. I would be easier at home." She



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did not say that she wanted to sleep in the bed that she and her husband had so briefly shared, while something of his scent might remain on the pillow.

"Carver and I will come with you, Mother," said Adam.

"Of course," Carver agreed. "I'd better send a message to the Compound, so they know where I am."

"A good idea," said Anora. "I will send one of my own men to the Palace – or Fort Drakon, if necessary – so my father will be apprised of everyone's situation."

Anora thought about telling Leandra the contents of the will, but decided against it. Leandra would hear the provisions when she was more rested and collected. Anora, as Chancellor, had already sat down with the rest of the party and gone over the will, and Bethany could take it back with her. According to the contents, Leandra was to act as executrix of his will, and was to be entrusted with the guardianship of the two boys. If she was unable to act due to death or ill-health, the secondary guardian was Fergus Cousland, as a close cousin. The Arl's testament made clear that under no circumstances were the boys to be put under the guardianship of their elder sister or her husband. Bryland had loved his daughter, but had not been so blind as to miss her hostility to her younger brothers.

Likewise, Leandra was to act as the regent of South Reach, as its Dowager Arlessa, exercising the votes that the arling held in the Landsmeet. Corbus was named as the heir, with Lothar his heir-presumptive. Lothar was



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willed the bannorn of Pryce Valley, a decent holding. In the event that Leandra were to bear a child or children of the marriage, those children were to be given specified manors and coin in the amount of five hundred sovereigns each, at the time of their majority or their marriage, whichever came first. Leandra's dower properties were carefully specified. Habren was also bequeathed a life interest in a small manor of her own, "just in case." The case was not specified. Bryland had evidently considered the possibility that Kane might force a separation, if she became utterly impossible.

There were other bequests. Charade was left jewels and some elegant furnishings. Bethany was given an annuity and a modest house in Denerim in the Market District. Both his stepsons were to have keepsakes, and then the will continued, making provisions for friends, old soldiers, and faithful servants.

It was a thoughtful, detailed document. It showed care and consideration for all the parties involved. It was everything that Cailan's will should have been, but was not. Anora sighed, and then smiled, a little ruefully. Surely Fergus would come soon, and the new chapter of her life could begin. She would not let Orlesian plots rule her heart or happiness.

The group broke up: Callista and Berenice to go to the Howe townhouse; Kaitlyn to the Guerrin estate, deeply grateful that Bevin had seen none of this; the Grand Cleric,



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after a brief word to Anora about her own suspicions, to her quiet refuge in the Cathedral.

The South Reach carriage was called, and the Hawkes' horses. Rothgar, as Charade's fiancé, rode with them back to their home to give support. The men talked quietly about the funeral. Something must be arranged, and the Arlessa must have the main voice in that. Who would give the funeral speech?

Leandra might be too overcome. Spouses generally did not attempt such an effort. Who was the most appropriate person? Kane, as Arl Leonas' son-in-law? Adam, as his stepson? Fergus Cousland, as his most distinguished cousin and friend? Carver shivered in horror at the thought of putting himself up in front of everyone, preferring to face a score of hurlocks. They moved off, deep in discussion, leaving Highever House quiet once more. The servants came in to clear away the feast.

"Set the table in my sitting room for two, if you please," Anora directed. "The Teyrn and I will dine privately."

At length, there was the clatter of hooves in the forecourt, and the doorkeeper opened to the master of the house. Fergus had come; tired, but smiling at the sight of her. Anora, her heart racing and her blood fevered, welcomed her husband to their home, and for a little time at least, they could set all else aside but each other.

The execution was well-attended, despite the heavy snow. Bethany, after conferring with her brothers and cousin,



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slipped the boys and her mother a calming draught, with some herbs to help settle their stomachs. She herself had resolved to see as little of the hideous proceedings as possible. Today the execution; tomorrow the funeral.

Everyone who was anyone was expected to attend; it was a way for the nobles to show solidarity against the foul assassin who had lifted his bloody hand against his natural superiors. The condemned would be put to death on the Landsmeet steps. Chairs were provided for the noble witnesses; hanging, drawing, and quartering the man was going to take some time. Among the distinguished guests was the Knight-Divine, Chrysagon de la Crue, under guard, but permitted to see the end result of Orlesian scheming.

Kane arrived, sombre but dashing, winning the hearts of the Denerim washerwomen with his handsome face. Habren's condition was considered a legitimate excuse to stay at home. A number of people – especially women, unhampered today by Habren's glares – offered their condolences to the Arl. Bryland had been a popular man.

An execution for treason, carried out with the full penalty of the law, was not something to which most would bring young children. Corbus and Lothar, however, attended, the elder boy fierce and red-eyed. He seemed to have moved from child to young man overnight, and had surprised his family that morning, as they debated the matter of the funeral speech, by his decision to perform that duty himself.

"He was my father. I'm his eldest son. I'll speak for him,



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and I'll light the pyre."

After some anxious looks, Adam laid his hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "I'm sure your father would like that."

The death of the assassin was a memorable spectacle. There had not been an execution for high treason in some years. A hastily erected scaffold held the necessary short-length gallows, the bench and manacles, and the block and axe. The crimes and the sentence were read out by the royal herald, to the horrified edification of the public. The pitiful wretch, his mouth still bloody from the loss of his tongue, was hauled up to the masked executioners. He was stripped naked in the cold: necessary, because of the task at hand.

He was hanged first; flailing, screeching, voiding urine and feces in his rigors. He was not allowed to strangle to death, but was taken down, and the butchery began with his castration and continued with his evisceration. There were cheers, yes; but also groans and quite a few people sicking up. Even a few noble ladies, who had overestimated their nerve, swooned away. Even after his intestines and stomach were removed, there was still life left. That was ended with an axe blow, decapitating him, and then further blows to render the corpse into the requisite quarters. The head was displayed to the crowd, and then sent away to hang over the Great Gate. One quarter of the corpse would be sent to South Reach, to assuage the mourning of the arl's own people. Amaranthine and Highever would receive a quarter each. The last, well-packed in salt, was



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put on a trading ship as a present to Her Imperial Majesty, with a note from Loghain.

The following day, at sunset, was Bryland's funeral.

He had a fine pyre. His friends and many well-wishers gathered. Arlessa Leandra, pale but calm, was ready for this, dressed in mourning, her arms around Corbus and Lothar, with her daughter and her niece on either side to support her. With Leandra were her tall sons and her pretty red-haired daughter-in-law. A fine family. The calming draught of the day before made the horrors of the execution seem a vaguely-remembered bad dream. A lighter draught today made the arlessa able to answer condolences with dignity.

Anora stood with her hand in the crook of Fergus' arm. She had been obligated to watch the execution yesterday, and it had been terrible. She knew that her father and Fergus had seen even worse things in battle, and she did not want to be a coward. It was to be hoped that such an awful punishment would act as a deterrent, and make whatever agents remained in Denerim think twice before making any more such attempts. There were scores of people in Fort Drakon at the moment, arrested by the City Guard or denounced by informers. It would take time to sort through them. She had ordered that transcripts of the interrogations were to be forwarded to her office. Nothing must slip through the cracks; neither should inno-

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cents suffer due to malicious false testimony.

If only they did not have to work so hard, at this time in their lives. She and Fergus could be so very happy, if they simply had more peace and privacy. *That* part of their marriage was going... very, very well. Anora smiled a little to herself, happy and proud, and squeezed Fergus' arm. He patted her hand, looking down at her fondly, a little snow dusting his dark hair. He was such a lovely man, and he had made manifestly clear that he found her desirable...

Kane's little sisters were clearly grieving for Arl Bryland, who had been kind to them; and even more for Arlessa Leandra, whom they loved. The older girl was carrying her new little puppy in her arms. It was a particularly endearing creature, all fluffy, pale gold fur and big brown eyes. Fergus smiled kindly, and could not resist scratching the silky ears.

"What a pretty little girl," he said.

"Thank you, Your Grace," Faline replied gravely. "Jewel should pay her respects, too."

Habren had not come to her own father's funeral. Kane said she was not up to it, and perhaps she really was ill. According to her husband, she was having a very hard time with her pregnancy, and with that and the shock of her father's murder, had retired to the seclusion of her apartments. Anora spared a moment's pity for her, imagining what she herself would feel if something were to happen to her own father.

He was looking fit and healthy as a prize stallion – as

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usual – and was in armor, glaring at the Knight-Divine, whom the council had interrogated today. At length. The session had been unsatisfactory. So far, Ser Chrysagon was refusing to tell them anything at all. Racking a Knight-Divine was a step too drastic even for Father, but there were other, more gradual ways of working on a Templar. Those would be undertaken. At least the man was not looking quite so smug at the moment. Quite tired, actually. Most likely they would get little of any value from him, because two months had passed since his arrival, but they no longer felt much need to treat him with respect. He certainly had none for them. Breaking him would take time.

Time of course, was something they could not waste. The further interrogation of the Knight-Divine must be left to others. Father was ready to march west, and the rest of the lords with him, to their respective deployments.

It was something of a surprise that young Lord Corbus – no, Arl Corbus – had decided to speak his father's funeral oration, but perhaps the boy needed to do this to help purge his grief. It seemed to Anora a healthier way than watching the torturous death of a cat's paw.

The boy was in armor today... a light but well-made suit of leathers, made warm by a fur-trimmed cloak. Beside him was his fine mabari, who trotted smartly at his boy's heels, ears alert. Corbus took his place by the pyre, and raised his young voice against the light wind and the torch's smoke.

"When the Orlesians attacked us back in Harvestmere,



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my father wasn't afraid. It didn't matter that we were at a wedding. It didn't matter that he wasn't in armor. He drew his sword and did what had to be done. He saved a lot of lives. It was a terrible day, but at least I got to see my father fight. He was good at it. I'm not surprised that this time they didn't give him a chance to fight, because he would have beaten them again. The only way they could kill him was by a dirty trick. The killer gave my mother flowers with one hand, while he hid a dagger for my father in his other.

"The Orlesians want us to be afraid. They want us to grovel and beg. And even that wouldn't be enough for them. They won't be satisfied until all of Ferelden is theirs again, and every one of us ground down under their boots or dead.

"They didn't care that my father was a good man and a good arl. They didn't care that his two sons and his wife were there to see him killed. They didn't care that we loved him. They probably thought that was *funny*. All they wanted was to get him out of their way. All they wanted was for us to be afraid.

"Well, I'm *not* afraid of them. I'm going to live my life with courage, as a freeborn Fereldan, just like my father. He taught me that the only way to deal with Orlesians is to stand up to them. I'm not afraid of their chevaliers or their bards or their sneaking, vicious ways. I'm not afraid of them when they hide behind the Divine and act like they have the right to rule us because the Grand Cathedral happens to be in their country. I'm not afraid of the



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Empress either, because she's a coward who wouldn't be caught dead in anything so unfashionable as armor. The Orlesians have had a long run, but their time is *over*.

"Last year was a hard one for Ferelden. We faced a Blight, and pushed back the darkspawn. Instead of helping us, the Orlesians tried to undermine us and attack us. By doing that, they've shown us what side they're on. They've allied themselves with the darkspawn, with the Taint, with the proud, ancient magisters who tried to seize the Golden City. They stand for everything wrong and evil in our world.

"It's a new year. I don't what it will bring. I don't know what's going to happen. What I do know is that I have the power to face it as my father's son. I know that we're going to fight and that we're going to survive. I know that my father is at the Maker's right hand at this very moment, and that he watching all of us, wishing us well, hoping that we'll make him proud. I won't let him down.

"Farewell, my lord Father, until we meet again. I love you."



The army began moving out the next day. Various components had differing schedules. In many cases, non-combatants traveled with spouses. There was music; there was pageantry; there were more than a few passionate farewells.

Corbus insisted on leading — at least as a figurehead — the South Reach troops. Arl Wulffe agreed to take him along. The West Hill and South Reach men were going to be working in conjunction, anyhow.



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"First, though," the old man gruffly advised the boy, "you'll have to do your share of soldiering before you do any generaling!"

Corbus bid farewell to his brother and his stepmother, calm and dry-eyed. Lothar hugged him, promising to join him just as soon as he could comfortably sit a full-sized horse. Leandra kissed him goodbye, and prepared to depart for South Reach, to take over administration of the arling. Bethany and Charade went with her. Leandra was trying to be strong, but was still in a fragile, traumatized state, and would need support.

Loghain departed, the first among many. In his host were the dwarven engineers and a collection of wagons carrying some remarkable war engines, all wrapped up tightly. Along his way he would leave some of these personnel with their toys: in Amaranthine, in Highever, in West Hill. And then, in parts west.

Anora and Fergus quietly waited for Loghain to depart. Neither of them was ready to say goodbye to the other, for their marriage was too sweet and new. Once the king was gone, there was nothing to prevent them doing what they wished. Loghain would be informed, but not until he was far enough not to make his displeasure felt. There was absolutely no reason why the kingdom could not function with Anora in Highever. Her office was wherever she and her secretaries were.

Certain arrangements were made. The Knight-Divine had been quietly transferred to Fort Drakon, and his



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lyrium supply stopped. When he was desperate enough, he would talk. Meanwhile, they could not delay all operations waiting for his information. Anora left some very good people to deal with him.

The fact that many of the units would be traveling under the earth was revealed in due time and startled many a soldier. It startled some of the nobles as well, who had been conditioned to believe that to step into the Deep Roads was to experience death by darkspawn. There was some hesitation, overcome by main force and by the manifest fact that the way was clear.

While Berenice would be with Adam in the city of Amaranthine, Callista would not be staying in Vigil's Keep. She saw no reason that she could not go with Nathaniel to his posting at West Hill. He agreed, glad of her company, though privately ready to send her home at the first hint of danger.

Within a few days, Denerim was becoming a ghost town, drained of most of the soldiers crowding its barracks and taverns. Arl Kane settled down to an easy life, taking the occasional stroll – heavily guarded – about town in his new armor, while Loghain's men ran things as they pleased. He moved his bedchamber to another part of the mansion, tired of the screaming and door-pounding from Habren's apartments. She did not seem to like the two servants he had assigned to her. They were tough-minded women and would stand for no nonsense. Kane directed his attention to finding some good ponies



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for the girls. When the weather turned in – probably in a few weeks – they would like riding out into the foothills below Dragon's Peak.

The last troops to leave Denerim were those of Redcliffe, under Arl Teagan. They marched through the Great Gate, where the head of Bryland's assassin might have seemed to watch them, had not the ravens already picked out his eyes.

END OF VOLUME FOUR



AUTHOR'S NOTES

CHAPTER 1:

The Arl of Denerim's estate is clearly from the outside not all on ground level plus dungeons. There have got to be some staircases to upper floors: a case of the outside not matching the inside.

My excerpt of the Lay of Hafter is a shameless pastiche, using of bits of Beowulf taken from various translations: the impossible-to-translate opening from Burton Raffel, and other parts from Seamus Heaney, Howell Chickering, and R. M. Liuzza. A huge debt is owed to the brilliant site Beowulf in Hypertext. And some of it I just made up.

CHAPTER 3:

Soapwort is real.

While the monster in Amgarrak Thaig is labeled The Harvester in canon, I see no reason why my characters would know that. To them, it's just a Thing.

CHAPTER 4:

Thinking more about the golem controversy, I recently did a dwarf noble playthrough in which the Warden chose Harrowmont and supported Branka. The outcome, long-term, is pretty horrible. Yes, the DN gets to be a paragon, but Harrowmont follows the most traditional and isolationist policies: crushing the casteless, cutting Orzammar off from most contact with the surface; reinforcing the privileges of the upper castes. As for Branka, when Harrowmont refuses to give her more dwarves to make

golems, she starts raiding the surface, abducting humans and elves to create yet more golems. Hideous outcome, and it does not bode well for the long term health and survival of the dwarven people.

That said, that outcome is not easily predicted, especially by someone personally concerned with dwarven survival, which is why I believe that Bronwyn and Astrid, two intelligent warrior-aristocrats, would see the question very differently.

CHAPTER 5:

In canon, the Architect claims that all the Wardens brought to him were already dead, but that is clearly a lie. It's not clear to me why people assume the Architect is making his offers in good faith. And no one ever seems to consider what they would mean to the dwarves.

In canon, the Architect's bolthole is that tunnel that leads from the gallery above the big, ornate dragon chamber. The Architect blocks pursuit with a rockslide when he flees down it. The next time we see him, he is at Drake's Fall. I posit that there are connecting tunnels and remains of the Deep Roads under Amaranthine that connect the silverite mine, Vigil's Keep, Kal'Hirol, and Drake's Fall. Otherwise, somebody might notice the Architect as he's hiking through the arling.

CHAPTER 6:

A mandore is a small, four-stringed lute; an ancestor of the mandolin, and also known as a mandora or a man-

dola (Loosely, there are variations in the instruments).

I decided that a Grand Cleric would genuinely think that being a Templar was a better thing for Alistair than being a Grey Warden.

Cassus is the formal Tevinter name for the month of Haring

CHAPTER 7:

Chess, of course, is the game of kings. Grateful appreciation to Dorothy Dunnnett, and her Lymond Chronicles.

CHAPTER 8:

Loghain's speech on chess is paraphrased — stolen, really — from George Eliot's novel Felix Holt, Radical.

In the rules of chess, if a pawn has the luck and perseverance to reach the far side of the board, she may become a Queen.

"Fitz" is a Norman patronymic used in early medieval times to indicate the father's name. Later on it was specifically used for acknowledged bastards. Fitzgerald, Fitzwilliam, Fitzpatrick, etc. Or Fitzroy ("son of the king"). In rare cases, the term indicated a more noteworthy mother: for example. Henry II of England was known as Henry Fitz Empress, since his mother Matilda had once been married to a Holy Roman Emperor; and even after marrying Geoffrey of Anjou she was always referred to as Empress Matilda.

Bargello is a type of needlepoint consisting of upright flat stitches laid in a mathematical pattern to create motifs. Traditionally, bargello was stitched in wool on canvas.

Embroidery done this way is remarkably durable. It is well suited for use on pillows, bedspreads, and upholstery, but not for clothing. The patterns are geometric and can be intricately shaded. All stitches are vertical with stitches going over two or more threads.

CHAPTER 9:

In Voltaire's satire *Candide*, for failing to successfully engage the enemy, an admiral is executed "to encourage the others" (Fr. "pour encourager les autres"). Of course, this is ironic: the intention is actually to terrorize the man's peers.

In a conversation with Sebastian Vael in DA2, we learn there is indeed a Rite of Confession in the Chantry, and that brothers and sisters as well as priests are empowered to take confession. Nothing is said about Templars, so I presume they cannot.

CHAPTER 10:

Umbralis is Firstfall in common usage (November).

In canon, we never hear of a mage being sent to the Aeonar, "the mages' prison. That seemed to me very curious, and to suggest that its current use was something quite different.

CHAPTER 11:

Bronwyn quotes Tennyson's *Ulysses*, one of my favorite poems.

CHAPTER 12:

The first song is used in Act II, scene 7 of *As You Like It*. The second song is from Act II, scene 3 of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

CHAPTER 13:

Letters of marque and reprisal – these early licenses were granted to specific individuals to seize the king's enemies at sea in return for splitting the proceeds between the privateers and the crown.

The title is from *HENRY IV*, Part II, Act III, scene 1.

CHAPTER 14:

The story, *Rhapsinitus and the Clever Thief*, is adapted from an Egyptian story preserved by Herodotus.

It seemed to me that the early experiences of the Tevinter-bred litter would incline them toward humans, who had run the kennels and fed them. Elves, when they smelled or met them, would have been low-status, not-pack... almost prey. Alistair, for all his self-deprecation, smells very high-status indeed, based on the way other people behave to him.

CHAPTER 15:

Dragon's Breath is much like Byzantine Greek Fire.

In canon, while Frandarel owns the half-empty and decaying fortress of West Hill, he also owns a huge and sumptuous estate in Denerim, filled with rare and precious collectibles. Since he doesn't seem to have a sufficient

population to make much money in agriculture, since he has no large seaport for legitimate trading, and since we hear nothing about extensive mining in West Hill (unlike, say, Amaranthine), I presume that his riches are ill-gotten. He's on the coast, so smuggling is a real possibility.

CHAPTER 16:

Fenris' encounter with Nate & Co occurs before his canon meeting with Hawke in DA2. He had escaped from Danarius considerably earlier, we know, and might well have been hiding from Tevinters – and fighting off slaves – for months.

No more Corypheus. Fenris got him before he had a chance to possess anyone.

CHAPTER 19:

After consideration, I hold to my idea that the darkspawn go underground in cold weather. I think it's supported by canon, which permits you to visit Ostagar – Blight Central – when the snow is on the ground. You are opposed only by a small force, composed mostly of stragglers, with only one very strong boss, the Necromancer. The March to Denerim obviously happens after the spring thaw. We know from canon that darkspawn can be frozen. Thus, the Archdemon would protect its forces by keeping most of them underground, save for a small garrison, which is sheltered by the commodious ruins of Ostagar, with plenty of snug stone rooms and fires. It also explains why

Blights can be so long and dragged-out.

Aveline's story uses a rhyme from the Brothers' Grimm version of Cinderella.

CHAPTER 20:

The poem is from Merlin and Vivien in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Berenice references the ballad "*May Colvin*."

CHAPTER 21:

Trystan Mac Tir quotes the *Canticle of Trials*, 1:10.

CHAPTER 22:

In later medieval shipbuilding, a ship of war was usually equipped with a tall, multi-deck castle-like structure in the bow of the ship. It served as a platform for archers to shoot down on enemy ships, or as a defensive stronghold if the ship were boarded. A similar but usually much larger structure, called the aftcastle, was at the aft end of the ship, often stretching all the way from the main mast to the stern.

Having such tall upper works on the ship was detrimental to sailing performance. As cannons were introduced and gunfire replaced boarding as the primary means of naval combat during the 16th century, the medieval forecastle was no longer needed, and later ships such as the galleon had only a low, one-deck high forecastle.

CHAPTER 23:

Dallena is the slumped, wretched elf girl seen with Habren in the Denerim market in canon.

CHAPTER 24:

The point of the assassination attempts was to destabilize Ferelden, and soften it up for the Orlesian invasion in the spring. Bryland had made himself a target, by defying Chantry law about mages. Parties and weddings are ideal opportunities for assassinations because they are public, and the assassins are given a place and time.

I was not very explicit about some of the details of the execution. I based it on English usage for male prisoners in the 16th century. If you want to read about an even more horrific event, look up the execution of Robert-Francois Damiens, who slightly wounded Louis XV of France. Casanova was a witness at the death, and utterly horrified. He left a full account in his memoirs. The execution was controversial. Both Thomas Paine and the legal philosopher Cesare Beccaria cited it in their works: the former, as an example of the cruelty of despotism; the latter as a case study in his arguments against judicial torture and the death penalty.

COLOPHON

The layout and formatting of this document was created in Adobe InDesign. Interior decorations are from a variety of sources. Illustrations are from a variety of sources. Several were done in the DAZ Studio and composited and postworked in Photoshop. Dragon Age Art is used with permission of Electronic Arts, Inc.

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