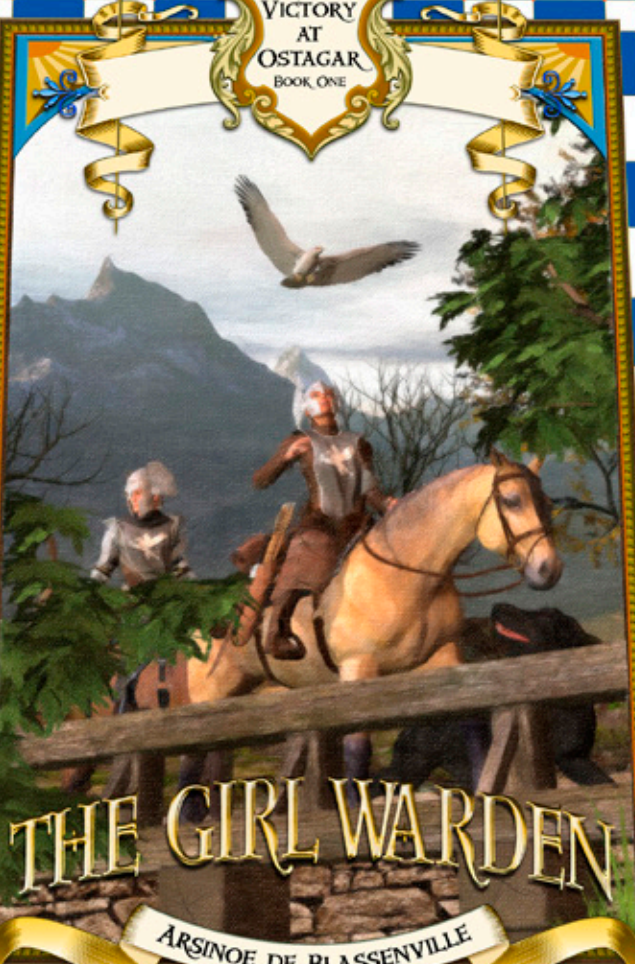


ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION

VICTORY
AT
OSTAGAR
BOOK ONE

THE GIRL WARDEN

ARSINOE DE BLASSEVILLE



A RED HEN PUBLICATION



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THE GIRL WARDEN

VICTORY AT OSTAGAR

VOLUME ONE

BY

ARSINOE DE BLASSEVILLE



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THE GIRL WARDEN

CHAPTER I



THE LIGHTNING -STRUCK TOWER

THE RAIN HAD STOPPED AT LAST. The reek of blood and evil mixed with the scents of sweat and leather and steel. A haze of wood smoke, burnt flesh, and incense hung in the night air, as the sodden pyres slowly consumed their dead. The darkspawn were being hauled into a huge pile at some distance away. They would be burned, too, and the ashes and charred bones buried in a pit that the elves would dig tomorrow.

Victory was theirs, but the time for celebration would come later. When the darkspawn had realized themselves defeated, they had lashed out, and in one final, savage attack, had slaughtered every Grey Warden on the field.

The tall warrior brooding over the valley of Ostagar felt deep relief – even some surprise at the overall casualty rate. Apparently the darkspawn had focused on the Grey Wardens to the exclusion of much else. Any death was a loss for Ferelden, but it was all blood well spent today. The darkspawn horde had been taught a lesson it would not soon forget.

"Ouch! Maker's Breath!" the young king nearby protested.

"Loghain! This healer will be the death of me!"

The female mage was too old to be impressed by the complaints of someone young enough to be her grandson.

"Leave the bandage on until tomorrow morning, Your Majesty. The wound otherwise might become infected."

"Oh, very well," sulked Cailan. "I daresay I'm better off than many..." His eyes grew misty. "Better off than... than..." His voice trailed away into regret.

The mage gave him a compassionate look and a bow as she left.

Loghain snorted, and turned back to his contemplation of the killing field beyond.

Somehow Cailan had survived. Loghain was not at all sure how he felt about that. He had prepared himself for Cailan's death. The foolish boy insisted on standing with the Grey Wardens, even after Loghain had warned him, time and again, that the darkspawn horde was *dangerous*. Apparently the darkspawn horde had concluded that Cailan himself was not.

He knew he had failed with Cailan. Maric and Rowan had failed with Cailan. Cailan, upon whom they had pinned all their hopes, lived in a fantasy world of myths and legends, and clearly believed that the universe would always make exceptions just for him. Cailan's recklessness would kill him eventually, and Loghain had resigned himself to it since they came south on this mad campaign.

And since he *had* resigned himself, he sometimes wished

that Fate would just get it over with. If only Anora would give him a grandchild! He could make a fresh start, and raise the child the way a ruler of Ferelden *should* be raised...

But his royal son-in-law was still very much alive at the moment, sitting on a folding camp stool not six feet away. To Loghain's irritation, Cailan was fussing with the bandage on his head, and moaning once again about that bastard Duncan.

"I can't *believe* they killed him like that! It was — horrible!"

Loghain held his peace, and did not ask what kind of death in battle was *not* horrible. The Grey Warden commander had taken a score of darkspawn with him. He was an impressive warrior — Loghain had always acknowledged that — but in the end they had swarmed over him, knocking Cailan unconscious.

Actually, while the dismemberment and decapitation had been messy, the end had been fairly quick, which made it a *good* death, as deaths in battle went, Loghain decided. He hoped he would be so lucky.

"And the way they went for the Wardens after you charged, Loghain. Every Grey Warden in Ferelden gone. Just — gone! It was as if the darkspawn knew exactly who they were! They *must* have known who they were, somehow!"

That was a thought to give one pause. Loghain had little use for the Grey Wardens, but the deliberate targeting of them could be — ominous. If this *was* a Blight — which he did not believe for a moment — but if it *was* — then some



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unknown power had taken preemptive steps to eliminate the darkspawn's ancient adversaries.

"My lord!"

"What is it, Cauthrien?" He turned to the tall young woman striding through the marble archway.

"Sergeant Darrow reports that there was darkspawn infiltration at the Tower of Ishal. He says they've finished off the last of them, but the creatures seem to have come from below and killed most of the men stationed there."

Cailan was up and pushing past Loghain, his blue eyes wide with horror. "What about Alistair – and the new Warden?"

"Wounded, but not seriously, Your Majesty. From what Darrow gathered, the Wardens arrived at the Tower to find it already taken. They knew they'd never get to the top in time to signal us if they had to fight their way up the stairs, so the girl found some rope and scaled the Tower from the outside, while Alistair and a few of our surviving men cleared it out room by room. The girl got to the top and lit the beacon, and apparently had a scrap with an ogre. The place is a shambles, I hear, but the darkspawn are dead or fled."

"Climbed the Tower?" Cailan wondered, eyes already agleam with the joy he felt at tales of derring-do. "That's – *heroic!*"

Loghain considered the Tower, a pale spectre in the filtered, smoky moonlight. The flying buttresses – the ledges – yes, he could see that someone very brave and very resourceful might manage that. He might have managed it himself, long ago, before he took to wearing heavy plate.



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That was clever of the girl, he granted. Clever – yes – to think of a way to get the job done, instead of slogging up hopelessly through the darkspawn, only to be too late.

His thoughts flinched away from what might have happened if she *had* been too late.

Instead, he coolly remarked, "It appears, Cailan, that there are still Grey Wardens in Ferelden."



"Here's a blanket," Bronwyn Cousland told the half-naked Alistair. "You need rest. We both do."

She had known her new comrade hardly more than a day, but they had already survived a life-time of adventure together. He seemed such a boy to her, dazed and heartbroken at the news that his mentor Duncan was dead. She was cold and shaking and still bloody *terrified*, but she was the one able to think and plan.

So she had led Alistair into the large and opulent tent of the Teyrn of Highever, which was to her like a homecoming. Fergus had brought it with him, along with most of the Highever men and their baggage train. Her brother's traveling chests were here, comforting assurances that she still had a family. That her father's personal belongings were *not* here – and now never would be – was something she would avoid thinking about as long as possible.

The startled tent guard was even a man she knew by name – Siward, from a freehold not far from Highever Castle itself. He had shouted a welcome when he saw her, and soon the

word of her safe arrival had spread through the remains of her father's — no — her *brother's* — soldiers and servants.

"I need to go to the Wardens' tent," Alistair mumbled, stripped down to linen shirt and smallclothes, nearly asleep on his feet. "I've got to take care of things for Duncan..."

"You can take care of them in daylight," Bronwyn said sharply. Alistair was in no shape to face the relics of his dead friends. She spread out the blanket herself, and found a cushion on a folding chair for him to use as a pillow. "Lie down."

He remained standing, swaying slightly, eyes glazed. Bronwyn hissed in annoyance, and snatched a spare shirt out of a chest to towel off Alistair's short, spiky blond hair.

"Ow!" he complained, when she bumped a bruised spot.

"Do it yourself, then," she said, chucking the shirt at him. "I'm not up to playing nursemaid." She sank onto the chair, her aching head in her hands. She was so *cold*. If she ever had the strength to remove her armor, she would have to see if Fergus had brought anything that might fit her. She had fled Highever without even a change of linen...

Her big black Mabari, Scout, padded into the tent, and gave himself a mighty shake. Water splattered around him in a halo of mist.

Bronwyn growled at Alistair, "There now. Try it Scout's way. I really don't care."

"Can't," he groaned. "My head might not stay fixed to my neck if I move it too much."

The tent opening rustled again, and a white-haired mage popped her head through. The candle on the trestle table flickered, casting wild shadows on the inside of the tent.

"I heard that you were wounded. What can I do to help?"

Bronwyn thought she had a remarkably soothing voice. The mage stepped into the tent, looking with concern at the stained bandages wrapped around Alistair's right arm.

"My name is Wynne, if you do not remember it."

"Yes — Wynne —" Bronwyn answered, distracted. "Forgive my lack of manners. I'm a bit tired, I confess. Please come in. We should be most grateful for some healing. Alistair is still bleeding, and the darkspawn weapons might have been poisoned."

Mages were certainly wonderful creatures, Bronwyn thought for not the first time. Wynne had already persuaded Alistair to lie down on the blanket, had removed the makeshift bandages, and under her spells, his torn flesh was already knitting into soundness.

"My lady?" one of the elven Highever servants — Dariel — she remembered, made an appearance, and stood timidly awaiting orders. "My lady? It is you! We heard you were in camp, but you hadn't come to the Highever tent..."

"I'm here now," Bronwyn said wearily. "I want some hot wash water, as soon as possible, and I want you to see if there's anything to eat. Oat gruel will do, if nothing else — for my mabari, too. Or fruit. Or cheese..."

"Cheese..." Alistair murmured dreamily.

"— and there must be some wine about." She stumbled up and groped into one of the partitions in the back of the huge tent. "Yes! Thank you, Father," she whispered. To the servant, she said, "Take this and warm it up a bit. There must cups somewhere. Hot wine is just what we need. Three cups, since I imagine that you, Healer, would be glad of it as well."

"That is very kind, my lady." Wynne smiled, covering the dozing Alistair with another blanket. A teyrn's wine was something to savor. It might be Antivan... She looked more carefully at the other Grey Warden.

"I should have a look at those bruises on your throat, I think."

Bronwyn roused herself from her mental puddle of misery and exhaustion. "Yes — thank you. A good idea. My shoulder — is not very comfortable either..."

Wynne's gentle hand was on her brow, and almost instantly she was murmuring, "Shock. We must get you out of your armor."

Bronwyn flung out her arms. "Be my guest. I don't see how I'm going to do it myself, actually. My fingers are so stiff..."

The weapons were removed and the armor unbuckled. The wet leather was stubborn, but eventually, Bronwyn was divested of her chainmail and wrapped in a luxurious fur coverlet filched from Fergus' cot.

Bronwyn sat quietly, enjoying being looked after. Scout rested his muzzle on her knee and generously allowed her to scratch his ears. Gradually, she began putting behind her the terrors and urgencies of the battle — the roar of

thunder, the screams of the dying — the feel of rain-slick stone under her boots as she scrambled up the side of the Tower. The bone weariness of her shoulder and arm as she threw the bloody rope with the makeshift grappling hook again. And again. And again.

She was no hero: she knew that now. Lightning had struck nearby when she was two-thirds up the side of the Tower, almost paralyzing her with fear. She had stupidly looked down, and had remembered the time she dropped a jar of strawberry preserves on the stone floor of her bedchamber. Would she have looked like that jar, had she fallen? She could see it before her now: splintered fragments, seeping a thick crimson into the remorseless earth below; an object so completely altered as to be unrecognizable...

And then, at last, the summit attained. A smirk at danger vanquished as she leaped from the window ledge into the beacon chamber. And saw the ogre.

And the ogre, turning, looking back at her...

She made her mind a blank, watching the pretty lights of the healing spells. Another spell, and she felt herself grow a little warmer and more herself. She must ask the hard questions now, and not hide like a child behind her nurse.

"So it's true?" she asked Wynne. "The other Wardens — fell?"

"I am sorry. It was a terrible thing to witness."

"Poor Alistair. They were like his family. And it really seemed the darkspawn sought them out on purpose?"

"There can be little doubt of it."



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Scout gave a low, mournful whine.

Bronwyn blew out a long breath. "That — can't be good."

"If I may say so, the attack on the Tower might have been in hopes of slaying the two of you. The darkspawn would thus have destroyed all the Wardens in one blow."

"But the King is all right?"

"Knocked aside by the darkspawn. A bump on the head that should be gone by tomorrow. Our casualties otherwise are lighter than anyone could have hoped."

"That's something, at least."

The servant, bless him, arrived, with three fellow elves just behind. Dariel carried a tray of apples and cheese, sliced to bite size, arranged with a generous helping of crisp, thin oat cakes. His fellow bore the pot of hot wine, and poured it into silver goblets engraved with the arms of Highever. Another set a good-sized basin of reasonably warm water on the table. And Scout was not forgotten, for there was a bowl of clean water and another bowl with the kennelmaster's best mix of chopped meat and oats.

Bronwyn dismissed them. "Thank you. That will be all for tonight. Get some rest, for we shall have much to do tomorrow." After the servants were gone, she cocked her head at Alistair, wincing as her muscles objected. "Do you suppose he's asleep? All the more cheese for us."

Very drowsy, Alistair murmured, "I always wake for cheese..."

He stirred, and forced himself up to a sitting position. Wynne passed him a goblet and held the tray of food for



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him. Bronwyn noted that he chose the Rainesfere Blue and the smoked Amaranthine first. A man of taste, it seemed...

There were footsteps outside the tent. The guard called out a challenge in a low voice.

"You approach the tent of the Teyrn of Highever. State your business."

A deep voice, flavored with a hint of Gwaren, rumbled back, "Are the Wardens here? I've a message from Teyrn Loghain."

"My lady is weary, and a Healer is with her and the other Warden. Can't it wait?"

"It's all right, Siward," Bronwyn called. "I want to hear what the Teyrn has to say."

A big ginger-bearded soldier shoved the tent flap aside, and gave a curt nod as he entered. Under heavy brows, he glanced about the tent, and his curious, interested gaze paused on Bronwyn and the bandaged Alistair. No doubt he had been asked to assess the condition of the Grey Wardens, as well as send word to them.

Scout looked up briefly from his feasting, and evaluated the visitor. Apparently he sensed no threat, for he uttered a "Whufff!" and returned to the contents of his silver bowl. The soldier eyed the mabari in his turn, rather admiringly, and then said his piece:

"Teyrn Loghain's compliments, Wardens. He has learned of your good service in the battle. On the morrow he and the King will take counsel together, and he wishes the Wardens to be present, if their wounds permit."



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Bronwyn felt herself flush, warmed by the pleasure of being acknowledged by so great a man. "My congratulations to the Teyrn on his victory. I shall certainly be there," she assured the soldier. "And Alistair, too, I believe..."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Alistair added thickly, trying to talk with his mouth full of oat cake and apple.

Bronwyn rolled her eyes. She turned to the soldier once more. "The hour is late, and I thank you for your trouble. I remember you from the Tower, when I was coming down... What is your name?"

Surprised, the man turned red and stammered, "Darrow. Sergeant Darrow, my lady — er — Warden. At your service."

"Well, Sergeant Darrow, I believe we have a bit of hot wine left. Will you drink an old Highever health with us on this occasion?"

"Don't mind if I do, my lady..."

A cup was produced, the wine poured round once more, and Bronwyn lifted her silver goblet in salute.

"To the victorious dead!"

No one else in the tent was from Highever, so Bronwyn was confident that they did not know the rest of the saying:

"— Poor bastards. Better them than us!"



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CHAPTER 2



AS THE SUN RISES

HE ARCHDEMON'S BELLOWED CHALLENGE AWAKENED BRONWYN FROM HER RESTLESS SLEEP.

A nightmare. Charming. Not surprising, I suppose, all things considered. But it seemed so real... Where am I?

A dim light seeped through tent walls, turning them a lowering dark blue. The Highever tent. She was unnaturally comfortable, lying on a wide and cushioned cot. Scout was on the ground beside her, whimpering in his sleep.

Perhaps if she curled up under the soft, warm covers, she could sleep a little longer. Perhaps she could sleep forever, or at least until Mother came to wake her and tell her that none of this had happened.

There was a sick, gnawing emptiness in her stomach. She wondered bitterly if it was grief or fear or just plain hunger. Mother was gone. Father was gone. Oriana and Oren were bloody corpses. Nan would never tell her those stupid stories again, no matter how much Bronwyn wanted to hear them.



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Now Duncan was gone, too. It had been so easy to let Duncan slip into the role of parent on the long road from Highever. She had loved his warm, deep voice, and had tried her best to be a good daughter: to learn all he taught her of Grey Warden history, of the lands he had journeyed through, of his adventures, of wood lore and cave lore and battle lore. By the camp fire and on the march, he had talked of the races and peoples he had met, and about the people she would be meeting. Much more would be revealed to her, he promised, once she was truly a Grey Warden. There were secrets known only to members of the order...

So much for that. Duncan had died and taken his secrets with him. Bronwyn felt cheated and bereft, like a child whose naming-day is forgotten. She and Alistair were the only two Grey Wardens in Ferelden, and what she knew about being a Grey Warden would fit on a single sheet of parchment. On one side.

Duncan had had nightmares, she remembered. Nearly every night. He was good at hiding it, but after a while she could tell. Maybe all Grey Wardens had nightmares. Well – if one spent one's days and nights fighting horrors like darkspawn, it was perhaps only to be expected.

Alistair must know more. Alistair...

She heard low moans from beyond the canvas partition. Perhaps he was having a nightmare, too.

Scout was awake now, and had stood up with a shake, gazing at her with loving eyes. She reached out to give



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him an ear-scratching.

"At least I've got you, old boy." She looked at him with some concern. After that first patrol, Scout had seemed to be sickening, but had been himself within the hour. He had a few scratches from last night that she had seen to at once. One could not be too careful around darkspawn...

A lick and a faint whine, and Scout's ears were pricked up, attentive to the distressed noises from her fellow Warden.

"Right. Let's go sort him out."

Blast! She had no clothes. No clothes at all. She had even removed her ragged undergarments. She grabbed up the fur coverlet and wrapped it around her, then pushed the curtain aside.

The Teyrn of Highever's tent was partitioned into four rooms, but three of them were smallish cubicles along the back: one for storage and two for sleeping. The front room, which accessed the outside, took up two-thirds of the space, and was comfortably furnished with a trestle table, with folding chairs, with chests and crates and maps and all the little luxuries that only great nobles possessed.

Alistair was sprawled in a tangle of blankets in the middle of this room, thrashing and muttering. He was certainly a handsome fellow, Bronwyn thought, admiring the strong legs and broad, muscled shoulders – even if he *had* drooled a bit. He reminded her a little of Ser Gilmore – sweet and diffident...

No. She was not going to think about Gilmore or about



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any of the dreadful things that must have happened to him. This was Alistair, and he was her comrade in arms after last night.

"Alistair!"

It might not be a good idea to shake him. Warriors sometimes reacted badly to that, especially when fresh from the battlefield – battle tower – whatever.

She leaned closer. "Alistair!"

Scout sniffed at him, interested, and then trotted over to the remains of the tray of cheese.

Bronwyn sighed. "Oh, all right!" Scout liked the smoked Amaranthine, too, even when it was a bit dry and stale. She tossed him one cube, and then another.

"Alistair!" she called over her shoulder. "Wake up before Scout gets the last of the cheese!"

"Hunnh?"

Her fellow Warden reared up on his elbows, mouth open, eyes blinking. He paused, and then slumped back down again with a groan.

"It really happened," he said flatly.

"Yes. I'm sorry. It's horrible. You were having a nightmare, I think." She opened the tent flap a crack, and peered out. "It's not sunrise yet. How do you feel – I mean – how are your wounds?"

He tugged at the bandage. "Fine. That mage knows what she's doing. Amazing, really. Was it part of my nightmare, or do we have some sort of meeting this morning?"



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"We do, but not for hours. You could sleep some more, if you don't mind me poking about here. I've got to see what my brother brought by way of linen. Oh – and Wynne said she'd be by to see you. You might have been asleep by then."

"Wynne is the mage. Right." He sat up, and took the offered platter from Bronwyn, picking through it for the bits he liked best. He ate hungrily, but in silence, not looking at her.

Which was fine with Bronwyn, struggling as she was to keep the fur around her while looking through the chests. Fergus was a big man: tall and broad-chested – not unlike Alistair here. All his things would be huge on her, but that was why the Maker gave the world needle and thread. And elves to wield them.

There! One of the shirts was made of a particularly fine and soft linen, and she made it hers at once. It would keep her armor from chafing, at least.

Where was Fergus, anyway? He had been out scouting, she knew, and had not been expected back before the battle. But he had returned for it, hadn't he? Bronwyn tamped down the stirrings of unease and set her mind on household tasks. There was only one cot in the tent – her brother's. He would want it when he returned. She must see if the quartermaster could find another.

One of the chests in storage surely contained money and treasure. Fergus must have the key. She had precious little coin of her own, and large purchases must wait until



her brother returned.

"I can't believe Duncan's gone," Alistair said suddenly.

Bronwyn turned to look at him. He was miserable. They must have been close, she realized. She had grown fond of Duncan herself.

"He'll be missed," she said wanting to comfort both Alistair and herself. "He died very bravely, protecting the King at the cost of his life. We won't forget him, and he'd want us to do our duty as Wardens."

"You're right," he agreed listlessly. "It's just — " He asked, "Have you ever — lost — someone close to you?"

She hissed involuntarily, feeling the words like the slash of a rusty knife. "Yes," she answered, rather coldly. "My parents were murdered not long ago. Duncan helped me escape the attack that killed them."

"Oh — *oh!*" He looked even more miserable. "I'm sorry! Then you know — "

"Yes, I do. There's nothing I can do about it. They're dead. Duncan's dead. We just have to get on with it and honor their memories. We're still threatened with a Blight, and now there are just the two of us." She tried to think of words that would put heart in her companion. "Duncan would want us to be brave and carry on for him. That's what we'll do, starting today."

She grabbed up a handful of the apples — now dark brown and soft — and gobbled them down. They were still food and she was surprisingly hungry. A few oat cakes followed.



"After the sun is up, I'll have the elves make us some porridge. That's the proper thing to help us face the day. We must be strong and confident when we meet with the Teyrn."

" — and the King," Alistair added.

"Of course. We all have to stand together to face this danger, and it's up to us to represent the Wardens with honor. I've got to comb out my hair, put on clean linen, and polish my armor a bit. You should do the same. And you need a shave."

"Right — clean linen — polish armor — shave. I'll go to the Wardens' tent..." His face fell into wretchedness again.

"Why don't you use some of Fergus' things for now?" Bronwyn suggested, hiding her impatience. If she had to be strong, then so did he. If you let yourself go all soft and weepy it was just easier for men like Howe to kill you.

She said, "Maybe after our meeting, we could make time to visit the Wardens' tent." Privately, she hoped there would be things there they could use. Two dozen men — almost none of whom she had ever met — must have had heaps of gear. She knew enough from Duncan to know that a dead Warden's gear was the property of his brothers — and sisters.

Which means me. I wonder if any of them was a bit shorter than the rest?

She hoped so. She owned no clothing but her small clothes and a shirt — no — two shirts. She had to wear her armor constantly because she had nothing else. She needed socks and a warm cloak and a pair of breeches

— and — well, so many things! Furiously, she ransacked Fergus' belongings for a comb. It would be weary work, untangling her hair, but by the Maker, she was a *Cousland!* She would not go before the descendant of that jumped-up Calenhad looking like a beggarmaid.

After a tactical retreat behind her curtain, she was clothed in fresh, soft linen; and after much cursing and muttering, she managed to tame her snarled brown hair. She braided it and wrestled it into a knot, and let the curling tendrils in front follow their own sweet will.

Andraste's nightgown! I'd like to wash my hair again before I die.

Some of the leather bits of her armor were still damp, but there was no help for it. The chainmail was strapped on and buckled, and she emerged from her little canvas bedchamber to find Alistair similarly armored and on his feet. And devouring the remaining crumbs from last night's tray.

"My lady?" called Dariel's soft voice.

"Come in."

The elf came in to retrieve and empty the basin of last night's wash water. "I am heating more water for you now, my lady. We heard you stirring."

"Thank you. I'd like porridge for myself and my comrade here. Do any of you know how to sew?"

"All of us, my lady. Is there something you need done?"

"Not yet, but soon."

The elf remained, looking at the ground. Bronwyn noticed him waiting, and asked, "Was there something else?"

"My lady —" the elf ventured. "There is a terrible rumor — we have heard that Highever Castle was attacked — that the Teyrn is dead. Is this true?"

Bronwyn sat down suddenly on the nearest bench, overwhelmed with shame. How could she have been so cruel?

"Forgive me," she managed. "I have been so wrapped up in my own grief. I am very sorry...of course you want to know the news...I hesitated to tell anyone because I wanted to tell my brother myself."

Alistair was watching in confusion and concern. She shook her head at him.

"Dariel, call in the other servants. I'll tell you all at once. I must tell the men as well..."

What a selfish pig I am, she groaned. *Many of the men had friends and family in the castle. Everyone needs to know.*

She felt sick. Dariel's sister and Hamm's mother and Trinian's son — and all the rest. Not only Couslands had died.

And Howe was up north, no doubt gouging the tenants and pretending to be Teyrn. There wasn't a Highever man in the army who wouldn't be affected.

The elf was gone in a flash, and returned almost as quickly, with a small crowd of elves and a few humans.

Bronwyn stood up straight, and spoke clearly.

"You all know me. I arrived two days ago with the Grey Warden Duncan. He was visiting Highever Castle on the day my brother Fergus departed for the war. My father and Arl Rendon Howe planned to follow together, since

the Arl claimed there had been some delay in mustering the men of Amaranthine.

"He lied. His men were lying in wait. After the Highever men were gone – late that night – they attacked. Howe's own guard were already in the castle and turned on my family – and on everyone else dwelling there. My father –"

She stopped a moment, and collected herself, lifting her chin.

"My father was treacherously stabbed in the back. My mother and I found the bodies of my brother's wife and my nephew Oren."

"Not the little boy!" cried out one of the elves, horrified.

"Our guests Lady Landra and her son Lord Darrien were murdered as well. Howe's men seemed bent on killing everyone in the castle to keep secret his betrayal. My tutor Aldous – Nan –"

She stopped, seeing the desperate questions on every face.

"I did not see any dead elves," she told them, "though I am sure they were also targets. Our own plan was to escape through the servant's door in the larder. When we found my father there, the door was ajar, and so I would guess that many had already made their escape. I pray so. At least, when I went through the kitchen I did not see your sister, Dariel, and she was not in the servant's quarters. My mother and I fought our way through a great deal of the castle, looking for my father and gathering other survivors. I saw Mintha and Delvina in the servants quarters, and they were running toward the kitchen. I

don't know what happened in the stables, Trinian. I am sorry. There was fire and confusion everywhere. "

"What happened to the Teyrna?" asked an older human servant, his face pale.

This was the worst moment of all. "Almost with his last breath, my father commanded the Grey Warden to carry me to safety, so that there would be someone to bear witness against Howe. Duncan did so, despite my –" She blew out a breath. "He did so. My mother insisted on staying with my father and covering my escape. Archil and the guardsman Herben stood with her. There is no doubt in my mind that she is dead, and her loyal retainers with her. I came at once to the King, to tell him of Howe's treachery."

The horror and anguish her story wrung from her servants made her realize that she must not lose any time telling the soldiers as well. Her own tent guard was ashen-faced as she stepped out into the early morning light, with Scout at her side.

"Fetch an officer. I must speak to the men directly."

She knew the captain who hurried to meet her: Fannon, a distant cousin of the Couslands. He had her father's height and ruffled hair, and her heart caught, thinking of home. After they exchanged a few words, he sent word to the sergeants to round up all the men who were fit to stand after the battle.

To her surprise, Alistair was walking down to the lines of tents with her.



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"You don't have to be here, Alistair."

"Of course I do. I can't believe all you've gone through. You've got a Blight on one hand and a traitor on the other. Thank the Maker Duncan was there!"

It was kind of him, she felt, to lend his support. He was a loyal comrade, as he had proved yesterday. She was lucky in that, at least.

And thus, within a few minutes, she stood between Alistair and Fannon and told the awful tale once more. The soldiers were louder, angrier, more used to violence, and by the end of her story, they were ready to explode.

"If they're dead, then what are we doing here?" shouted one freeholder's son. "Why aren't we marching on that bastard Howe?"

"We shall!" Bronwyn shouted back. "I had to bring word to the King that Howe was a traitor. I have spoken to him already on the matter, and he has promised us vengeance!"

The roar of approval echoed through the valley of Ostagar.

"I have heard from your captain of yesterday's brave deeds. You charged with Maric's Shield, under the command of Teyrn Loghain himself! You helped to break the darkspawn horde! Never regret your absence from Highever at this time, for you have saved your country from a threat more evil than death itself. For now there are wounded who need care, plans to be laid, and I must tell my brother that he is now your Teyrn. In the Maker's good time, Howe will be dealt with, and he will bitterly regret the day he thought to



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meddle with the men of Highever!"

Another great shout rent the morning.

She thought, when she told the Captain to dismiss them, that they would go back to their own pursuits and talk amongst themselves. Instead, they pressed forward, wanting to speak to her, wanting to touch her hand, wanting to tell her what they thought of her lighting the beacon.

A trumpet-voiced sergeant bellowed, "Highever Hail to Lady Bronwyn! Hail!"

"Hail!" the soldiers roared.

"Hail!"

"Hail!"

"Hail!"

"Hail!"

"Now that's enough!" the sergeant shouted. "Let the lady get back to slaying her enemies, and you lot get back to *cleaning that armor*. This is an army camp, not a pig-wallow!"



CHAPTER 3

WARLORDS
OF FERELDEN

HAT," ALISTAIR TOLD HER AS THEY LEFT THE HIGHEVER CAMP, "WAS IMPRESSIVE. You're quite the little rabble-rouser, aren't you?"

"I hope so," Bronwyn said, still stirred up. "But I'd do even better with some breakfast."

"Ummm – breakfast..."

And it was ready when they stepped into the tent. Bowls of oat porridge, buttered and salted, and light cider to drink. The tent had been tidied and cleaned, and the chamber pot emptied.

There was fresh water in the bowl for Scout. Highever servants were nothing if not diligent. Bronwyn dug into her porridge, feeling better already.

"This is wonderful," Alistair commented, shoveling it down.

"I suppose we're so hungry because of the battle yesterday."

"Grey Wardens are always hungry. Nature of the beast," Alistair mumbled.

"Really? I suppose so. I remember – " She stopped herself from speaking of Duncan, but Alistair guessed what she

was thinking.

"Since you traveled with Duncan, you must have noticed that he hunted a lot."

"I thought I was already quite the huntress, but I learned heaps from Duncan," Bronwyn told him. "We always had meat roasting on our campfire. Hmmm. So Grey Wardens have hearty appetites. What else can you tell me? I need to know everything you know about being a Grey Warden before our meeting with the Powers That Be."

"Everything? Hmm – well – that might take us – nearly to the end of breakfast. To be honest, I haven't been a Warden that long myself, and there were a lot of secrets that Duncan said usually aren't revealed until after the first full year."

"Oh, that's brilliant. Well, tell me what you do know. Swallow that bit first, please."

"Uhh – right. Nightmares."

"No surprise."

"Already?"

"Afraid so."

"They're not – just – nightmares. We're seeing things that really are. Or we're in the Fade along with darkspawn that are also in the Fade. Some older Wardens say that they can actually understand what the Archdemon is saying."

"That's – interesting, I suppose. It was clear that the Archdemon isn't happy with us! What else?"

"Hmm – we kill darkspawn."

"That part I got."



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"We can sense darkspawn because of the Joining. And they can sense us."

"Evidently."

"Oh." Alistair groaned and nearly stopped eating. "Oh!"

"Yes. That's obviously how they were able to target all the other Wardens. It's how they knew we were going to the Tower of Ishal. Bastards. Let's kill them all."

"Sounds like a plan. Hmm... what else? We're needed to stop the Blight."

"Why, exactly?" Bronwyn pressed.

"Not sure. One of those things that would come later."

"Let's not tell anyone we don't know that. We can look wise and say it's a secret. And it wouldn't be a lie. Duncan told me that the Grey Warden headquarters is in the Anderfels. A place called Weisshaupt. Have you ever been there?"

"No. I've never been out of Ferelden. We have a compound in the palace in Denerim. Duncan dropped a hint once that we have some caches of supplies here and there, but I don't know where they are. When we pack up the belongings here, I guess we'll just send the wagon to the compound."

Bronwyn thought a bit. "What about this 'compound?'" she asked. "Is it just storage in the cellars? Is it —"

"Well, no — there's a suite of apartments in the west wing of the main courtyard. Those are set aside for us. We have a dormitory and a refectory and a training room and some — yes — some storage. We have our own kitchen and laundry and a few servants. It's nice. We have our



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own entrance and everything, because the connection to the rest of the Palace has been sealed."

She narrowed her eyes, thinking. It would be a roof over their heads — and in the Palace, too! — but nothing in Alistair's description sounded like a "private bedchamber for Bronwyn," which was something she was accustomed to and did not want to learn to live without. She would have to look at the rooms herself and see what could be done.

"All right. What else?"

He scraped his bowl, eyeing it wistfully, and then said, with some reluctance. "Don't expect to grow old."

"Why is that?"

"We've got about thirty years from our Joining. The taint makes us hear darkspawn, right? Well, after a while we hear them all the time, and that's known as The Calling. Once Grey Wardens hear The Calling, they go to Orzammar — because there are always darkspawn in the Deep Roads, and they go there to die fighting."

"I see." She pushed her bowl away. "Thirty years isn't so bad. We almost didn't survive yesterday. What else?"

"Not much." He paused, and his ears turned pink.

"Out with it," she insisted. "Is it something scandalous? Do tell!"

"Well — Grey Wardens don't have a lot of children."

This was not funny. Her stomach lurched. She sat very still, and asked, "Are you saying that I'm barren now?"

"No! I mean — I don't know exactly. I haven't met many

female Grey Wardens, and I obviously never discussed — *that* — with them. All I know is that Duncan told me once that it's almost impossible for two Grey Wardens to have children."

"Do Grey Wardens ever marry? I mean — I didn't take any vows of chastity like in the Chantry — at least that I remember..."

"I suppose they could marry. Yes — Duncan told me about that couple in Orlais. Not often, though. It's all duty to the order and kill darkspawn and whatnot. I haven't heard of any Grey Wardens having children."

"Maybe because you don't know many female Grey Wardens. Maybe *male* Grey Wardens have children all over the landscape, begotten on their many adventures!"

"No!" Alistair was indignant and horrified. "I'm sure — not! I mean — I wouldn't — do anything — like that."

"Aren't there any books about being a Grey Warden? We need to know a lot more!"

"Well, there's not a Grey Warden manual that I'm aware of. Maybe when the Wardens from Orlais come, they can help us."

"Teyrn Loghain doesn't want the Orlesians. At the council before the battle, he and the King had an argument about that. I think he's right. Maybe a few Grey Wardens would be useful — to teach us lore and all that — but not the Orlesian royal troops. That's just asking for trouble."

"The war is over. It's been over for years. The Orlesians I've met have been very decent."

"Maybe *Grey Wardens* born in Orlais are all right,"

Bronwyn said grudgingly, her voice dark with suspicion, "but Orlesians are always up to something. My father said so, and Teyrn Loghain clearly agrees. I think he's right to be careful. Meanwhile, we need more Wardens. We should get busy and recruit some. What did Duncan look for when he was out and about? Skill at arms, I suppose, but what else?"

"We can't recruit."

"And why not?"

"I don't know how to do the Joining," he muttered sheepishly.

She slammed down her goblet, cider splashing, and shouted, "What do you mean you don't know? You *must* know!"

"Well, I don't!"

Bronwyn bit her lip in exasperation. "We won't tell anybody that either! We'll conscript them, and they'll have a Joining later. Nobody needs to know when!"

Alistair stared at her in surprise, and then grinned. "You are a devious creature."

"A very good thing, too! Come on, we need to get to the meeting. We get to see the inside of the King's tent, this time. Wipe your face — there — got it!"

"Are the Wardens still here?" asked Wynne of the guard outside the tent. Bronwyn turned to see the Healer enter, looking them over with calm, clear eyes.

"Good morning to you, Wynne," she greeted the older woman. "and many thanks for your help last night. I feel — quite all right, really, all things considered. "

"Perhaps I should have a look?" Wynne suggested mildly. "Well — all right — but I then I must dash off to see the King and Teyrn Loghain!"

Bronwyn nearly danced, saying those words. She, Bronwyn Cousland, Grey Warden of only a day, was called to council with the leaders of Ferelden! She hoped she wouldn't grin like a fool when she faced them.

Scout gave a happy bark and turned in quick circles, knowing they were going somewhere exciting.

Wynne's inspection revealed no lasting hurts, and Bronwyn ran back to her cubicle to take a look at herself in the little mirror she had found in Fergus' chest. She looked pink and breathless, but her face was clean and her hair as smooth as hair like hers could be. Her armor was fastened correctly and shone without a stain. She would have to do.

She ran out, to find Wynne examining Alistair very carefully. It was impossible to wait any longer. Buckling on her weapons, she said, "Take your time. I'm going to go on ahead. Many thanks, Wynne. Do help yourself to the cider in the pitcher. Come on, Scout! We're off to see the King!"

Once outside the tent, she collected herself, and made herself head toward the royal tent with a confident, unhurried stride, head held high. Scout trotted with massive dignity, properly at heel.

The guard, enormously tall like all the king's guards, was not one she had seen before.

"Halt! Who are you and what is your business?"

"I am a Grey Warden, summoned to meet with the King and Teyrn Loghain."

The man's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You're no Grey Warden! You're some sort of — *girl* — Warden!"

Bronwyn's jaw dropped in astonishment, and then she burst out laughing. "*Girl* Warden?"

The men inside the tent had heard the exchange. Cailan sputtered into helpless laughter. Loghain only snorted with amusement.

With a mischievous look at Loghain, Cailan called out imperiously, "Let the Girl Warden pass!"

"As you wish, Your Majesty." In a low voice, the man apologized, "You really are that girl — ? Sorry, my lady — I mean — er — Warden!"

"That's quite all right," the girl said entering, "It's not the first time I've been called a lady — or a girl, either, for that matter. Your Majesty, Teryn Loghain," she said to the two men awaiting her. She gave Scout a glance and a discreet gesture. He took his place in a corner, still as a statue.

"Warden Bronwyn!" Cailan came forward to greet her, very excited. "Well met! We were pleased beyond measure that you and Alistair survived. Is he — is Alistair — all right?"

"Indeed he is, Your Majesty, but the Healer insisted on examining him. He will be here directly."

The King was clearly relieved. Bronwyn noticed the considering frown on Teyrn Loghain's face.

But the King was speaking again. "With so many good friends lost —" His eyes softened. "The burial details have gathered your brothers most reverently. A great pyre is being assembled in the valley below. Everything will be ready for a proper funeral at twilight. That's Grey Warden custom, isn't it?" he asked earnestly. "Twilight — and all the ashes intermingled?"

Bronwyn hadn't a clue whether it was custom or not. Clearly the King knew more about the Grey Wardens than she. Teyrn Loghain had as much as told her outright that the King was daft on the subject. If only she could ask questions! But no — it would destroy her credibility, so she simply said, "It sounds most appropriate, Your Majesty. I thank you for your attention to this, amidst all your other concerns."

"It's nothing! — nothing! If only I could do more! Duncan gave his life to protect me! And you! Without your heroism, who knows what might have happened!"

Bronwyn backed away minutely, and felt herself turning red. "I merely climbed a rope, Your Majesty."

"— and fought an ogre," Loghain remarked, raising his brows.

She glanced at him, and blushed more deeply. "I would have been ashamed for you to see that fight, my lord," she told him. "It consisted mostly of running in circles, trying to get behind the creature and hamstring him." *And screaming my throat raw with blinding, bowel-loosening terror, she thought to herself, but that I'll never tell anyone.* She assumed a slight smile. "I was prepared for a long climb.

The ogre was a surprise."

Loghain shrugged. "What matters is that you survived and the ogre did not. You found a way to light the signal when it was needed. Results are what matter, in the end. I thought getting things done, 'by whatever means necessary,' was the watchword of your order."

She could not stop blushing, blast it. She had heard all her life about Teyrn Loghain's fierce and disturbing ice-blue eyes, but this was only the second time she had experienced them at close quarters. She could, however, speak calmly, in the dulcet tones drilled into her by Mother. "You are well informed, my lord."

"Not so well-informed as to understand why you climb ropes so well."

"Oh!" she smiled, remembering. "My brother and I very often went hunting for bird's nests along the sea cliffs west of Highever."

"The Cliffs of Conobar!" Cailan exclaimed, remembering yet more thrilling legends.

"Yes, Your Majesty. The Cliffs of Conobar. They are very high and nearly completely vertical. The only way to find the nests was to use ropes and hooks — and well — we had other equipment too. I never tried climbing the cliffs in the rain!" She laughed. "My old tutor told me truly that no knowledge was ever wasted." Her smile faded. "I must ask: has there been any word about my brother?"

Loghain shook his head. "None. I sent two more scouting

parties out this morning, but so far there has been no sign of him or his men. It is — possible — that he encountered the main body of the horde as he was going east."

She was prepared for this, but it was still a struggle to keep her face under control. "Then we shall just have to see what the scouts find. Perhaps I could assist them?"

Alistair arrived, a little red in the face himself. He bowed, in the approved Grey Warden style. "Your Majesty. My lord. Sorry I'm late. Healers are determined creatures..."

"Alistair!" The King greeted him very kindly. "I was telling your sister Warden how glad we are that the two of you survived the battle."

Loghain watched, deep in thought, as the King repeated his plans for the grand Grey Warden immolation to his bastard half-brother. That Alistair was Maric's son was a secret known to very few. Cailan himself had not known he had a brother until he was nearly fifteen.

So Maric's sons had both survived the battle. Loghain had not seen much of the bastard before, and had been told he was a nonentity: an unambitious, trifling lad. Yesterday, however, he had been foremost among the party clearing out the Tower of Ishal and had fought very well indeed, from all reports. Perhaps he was not so trifling after all. Problematic as a royal bastard might be, it was curiously comforting to know that something of Maric had lived on.

He wondered if the girl knew who Alistair was. She was watching the two brothers, a minute furrow between

the straight dark brows. No fool she. It would not be long before she saw it for herself. The physical resemblance was strong: both of Maric's sons looked like their father. There was even a certain resemblance in voice, in manner...

"Which of you will speak the funeral address? Alistair?" Cailan asked.

Alistair's eyes glazed, assuming the look of a small animal in a trap. He glanced over to Bronwyn a little desperately. Bronwyn saw it at once.

"I believe I shall, Your Majesty. There is so much I want to say, especially about Duncan."

Loghain's mouth twitched in the faintest of smirks. Yes. The girl. Did she understand the significance of giving the address? Probably. She was already taking charge of the situation. And Alistair gave her another look, relieved and grateful. Perhaps not a trifling fellow, then, but a follower, not a leader. A good sword to have at one's side, but not the sword raised in command.

The girl was a Cousland, after all. Loghain had remembered her name after their brief meeting. Bronwyn Cousland. She might well have been Princess Bronwyn, had her father been elected King five years ago, rather than Cailan. Loghain had supported Cailan's cause, of course, but there was no doubt that in the current crisis, Bryce would have been the better king.

The last time Loghain had seen her — perhaps some four or five years ago — she had been clad in the bright and

costly garments of a nobleman's daughter, her long brown hair whipping about her face as she darted among the booths at a Denerim Fair. She had seen Loghain looking her way and stopped to stare at him with clear grey eyes. A charming child: a bit gawky and coltish, but with the promise of her mother's beauty. The beauty was now in full flower, but the hair was sensibly braided and out of her way, and the armor made her seem older than her years. She had grown tall, too. It had taken him some time to connect her name with the child's face he remembered.

Howe had once referred to her disparagingly as "Bryce Cousland's little spitfire." Some men, when they knew themselves too old to attract the notice of a beautiful young girl, grew spiteful. And yes — Howe had been disappointed in his hopes of arranging a marriage between the girl and his son. Perhaps that might be a factor in Howe's sudden treachery...

But how could Bryce have permitted his daughter to join the Wardens? He and Bryce had not always seen eye to eye, but Bryce had been a sound man, with the right idea about the Orlesians. Loghain would have gutted anyone who tried to take Anora from him like that — somewhere between the words "invoke" and "conscription." Young Bronwyn's life had been effectively ruined now. She should have been the greatest catch in the kingdom, but no nobleman would marry a Warden. She had forfeited not only her right to inherit the teyrnir of Highever, but any possible right of succession to the throne. It might be

convenient for Cailan and Anora and their future children, but it was a sad thing for the girl herself.

But a lucky chance for him: the girl was a vast improvement over Duncan and his intrigues. Orlesian influence was gone for the moment, and the two remaining Grey Wardens in Ferelden were native-born-and-bred. Both were very young and might be amenable to his guidance. The girl, especially, behaved to him with considerable respect. No doubt the Wardens would send some veterans, but for now things were very satisfactory.

"At least the darkspawn horde has been broken!" Cailan declared. "Duncan's death was not in vain."

"Yes," Bronwyn said carefully, "it has been broken for *now*. We should have a breathing space before the next assault."

Cailan blinked. Loghain, roused from his own thoughts, looked at her in surprise and displeasure. He noticed that Alistair did not seem to be disagreeing with her.

"There will naturally be trouble with scattered pockets of darkspawn for some time," Loghain said, "after such a large incursion. Only if this were a true Blight would we anticipate another large horde to form."

Bronwyn looked back at him, surprised in her turn. "But this *is* a Blight. There is an Archdemon behind it."

Cailan and Loghain exchanged quick, concerned glances. Alistair fidgeted, looking uncomfortable.

Cailan burst out, "You really think there is an Archdemon?" He looked — almost radiant. It irritated Bronwyn



beyond words. Loghain, on the other hand, was clearly not happy with her.

"Yes," she answered. It would be wrong and cowardly to lie. "There is an Archdemon. I have seen —"

"Wait!" Alistair interrupted frantically. He hissed at her, "You can't tell them!"

Bronwyn, more and more bewildered, hissed back, "What do mean I can't tell them? You can't withhold tactical information from the army's commander!"

"We can't!" Alistair nearly shouted. "It's one of our secrets!"

Loghain was growing angry and alarmed. It was one thing for Duncan to hint and obfuscate and raise the King's hopes and everyone else's fears in that measured, honeyed voice he had used to impress the lesser forms of life who were not Grey Wardens. It was quite another for this young girl — a decent *Fereldan* girl — to blurt out baldly something about having actually *seen* the Archdemon. The most disquieting aspect of it all, however, was that her fellow Warden was trying to shut her up — not because she was lying, but because she was apparently telling the truth.

She had grown red with anger in her turn, and her palpable fury intimidated Alistair somewhat.

"You just can't!" he repeated, pleadingly.

"Well," she bit off, "it's a *stupid* secret, but if I cannot speak of it openly, I can say this: there *is* an Archdemon marshaling the darkspawn. I know it. How I know I am not permitted to say, but I swear to you that it is not just



because someone else told me about it. It comes from personal knowledge."

Teyrn Loghain was glaring down at her from his greater height. It was daunting, to say the least, but her father had not raised her to back down when she was right.

He asked coldly, "And what else *can* you share with us?"

She swallowed, trying to recall everything from her nightmare. "Obviously, yesterday's assault was intended to crush Ferelden's ability to resist the Blight. It failed in its great objective, but it nearly succeeded in a lesser, but critical goal: to eliminate the Grey Wardens, who can sense darkspawn — and —" she frowned at Alistair — "and other things. With us gone, you might well think the threat eliminated. The Archdemon can afford to be patient and build up its next horde. It cares nothing for its minions, but its pride was dealt a blow. It did not expect to lose yesterday."

She met Loghain's eyes and said quietly, "It really despises us, you know. It regards us as mindless cattle, and that we surprised the darkspawn and defeated them seems to it an outrage against nature."

"How can you know this?" Loghain growled.

"I am forbidden to tell you, but I *do*. I swear on the deaths of my father and my mother and on my honor that I am telling you the truth."

"Well —" Cailan began pacing back and forth, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "A true Blight! An Archdemon!"



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I cannot wait to face it!"

Bronwyn did not want to appear a coward, but she found it difficult to summon up any enthusiasm. She looked at Alistair. He clearly felt the same. How could they possibly defeat the monstrous dragon she had seen in the Fade? She blew out a breath and studied the toes of her boots. She had done her duty, but she wondered if she had done more harm than good.

"— And the Orlesians will help us!" Cailan went on. "You must see now, Loghain, that we will need the chevaliers! "

"I fail to see anything of the sort!" Loghain snarled. "You! Warden!" He turned on Bronwyn, who struggled not to tremble. "Perhaps you've *seen* — " he made the word an insult " — how long we have before they attack next!"

"It will be months, at least, before the darkspawn can amass another horde of similar size. The Archdemon threw nearly everything it had at us." She glanced at Alistair for confirmation, and he granted her a reluctant nod.

Loghain gazed at her bitterly. *Could she be trusted? Was this all imagination and moonshine and a young girl making herself out to be important? She had not struck him as that sort before, but you could never tell...*

And Cailan's bastard brother was backing her. He looked unwilling and unhappy, but not because he was disagreeing with her about the substance of her claims. Could this be another Grey Warden plot? He would have thought the two of them too young and inexperienced to



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devise anything so quickly. The girl had spent quite a bit of time with Duncan, traveling south from Highever...

He looked over at Alistair and stared him down. The boy was fidgeting and red-faced, but this was not the face of an accomplished liar. Perhaps the girl had influenced him into believing her story? She was so much stronger...

"Well, Warden?" Loghain asked Bronwyn, his face only inches from hers. "Are you in agreement that only the *Orlesians* can save us?"

She blinked, and looked up at him. "No, my lord. I don't see horsemen like the chevaliers being much use against the darkspawn at all. Horses can't stand the smell, I'm told. Besides, there are other allies we could call upon who are nearer at hand — "

"Which allies?"

Alistair drew a quick breath of understanding, his face brightening.

Bronwyn told Loghain, "Treaties with the Grey Wardens oblige the Circle of Magi, the dwarven King in Orzammar, and the Dalish clans to support us against the darkspawn. None of them have territorial ambitions in Ferelden, and they are — here. I think we should enforce those treaties before we entangle ourselves with Orlais. I cannot be certain at this point of the exact moment when the darkspawn will attack, and I'm sure no one wants the *Orlesians* here for weeks or months — or longer," she muttered, very uneasy.



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Loghain was silent for two heartbeats, while he took in this news. It caused him to rearrange his ideas about the two young people in front of him immediately. The dwarves! They had been good allies in the past...

"The Dalish Elves!" Cailan was fascinated. "Wouldn't that be extraordinary? Men and Elves marching to war together against an ancient evil. That hasn't happened since the days of Andraste herself!"

Loghain stepped back from the girl, and cocked his head, looking her over. She was — nervous — but not actually afraid of him. Was she spinning another story?

"Do you have proof that these treaties actually exist?"

"Yes, my lord. I have them in my possession. Alistair and I were commanded to retrieve them from an old Grey Warden cache in the Wilds when we scouting before the battle. Duncan had learned of them and was very anxious to get his hands on them."

"But he left them with you."

"I believe he thought I was going to be in a safer place than he, so he told me to read them carefully and to keep them safe."

Loghain walked away from them and stood quietly considering the matter. His glance traveled over to the girl's mabari hound, who was lying at his ease by the king's chair. The wardog panted happily and rolled his eyes up at Loghain. There was a brief, civil wag of his tail, and the dog's attention then returned to his mistress.



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"That's a fine beast you have there," Loghain said, almost to himself. Scout grinned, and "whuffed" in agreement.

Curiously, the dog's presence calmed him somewhat. A well-trained animal, that. It, too, had fought bravely at the Tower of Ishal. The girl and her companions were not frauds, at least in the matter of courage.

"The Circle — " he considered. "The Circle sent us seven mages, and we were told that was all it could spare. The Templars were reluctant to let even that small number go."

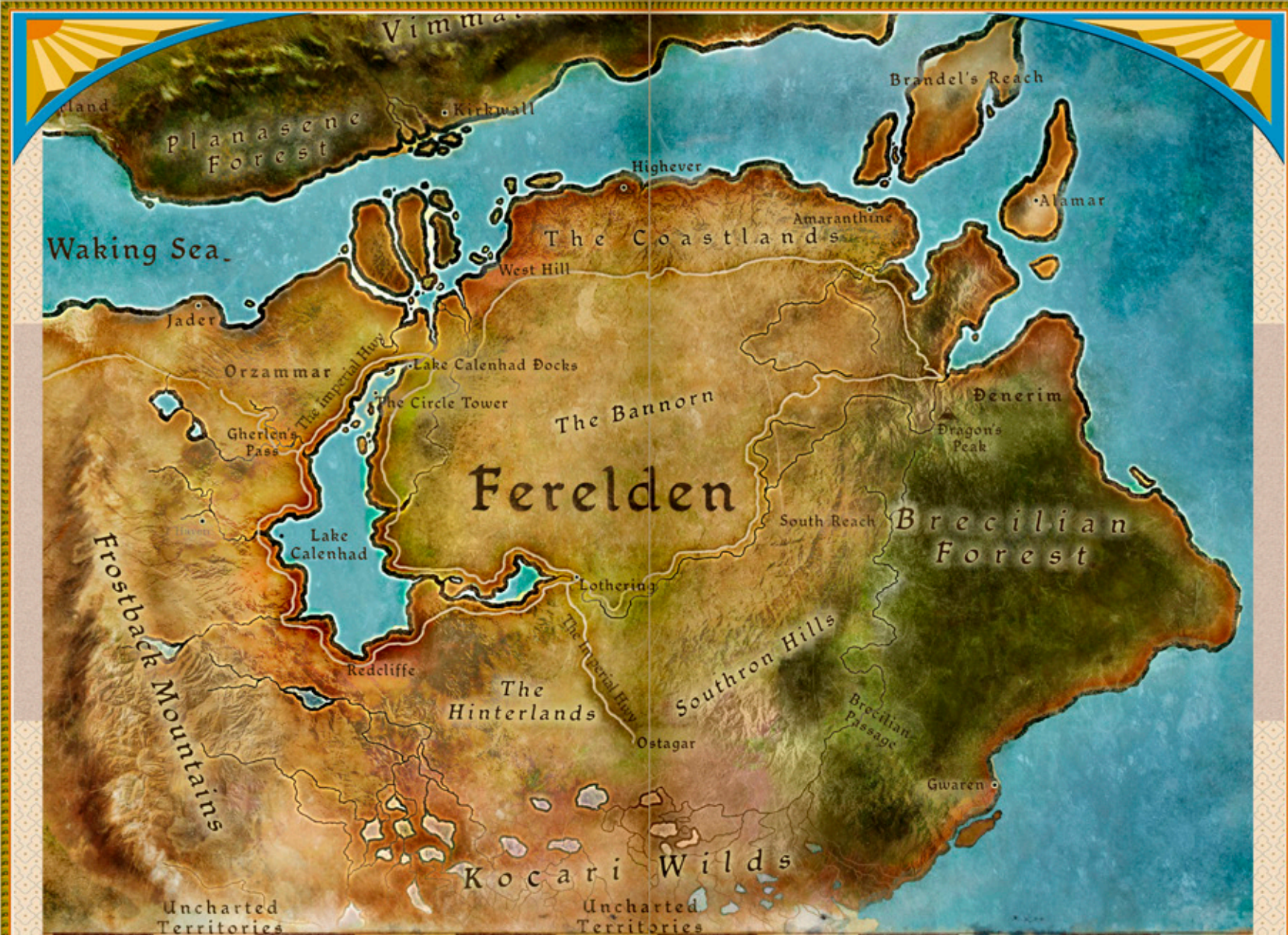
Bronwyn had been thinking about that, too. "That's a ridiculously small number. I know that the Chantry is always worried about maleficars and abominations and all that, but really! I will go to the Circle and enforce the treaty. If there is resistance," she said, her voice hardening, "I will invoke the Right of Conscription as I see fit."

Loghain turned to look at her, almost smiling. That was the kind of talk he liked to hear.

"Rather bold of you. Duncan's approach would have been more conciliatory, I think."

Alistair scowled at what sounded like a reflection on Duncan, but Bronwyn said, "Of course he would have considered the possible repercussions in ordinary times, but this is a *Blight*. The Grey Wardens must do what is necessary in order to fight it. I am certain that Duncan would have supported my plan, given our circumstances."

"All right. The Circle, then. Afterward, the dwarves. What kind of support are they obligated to provide?"



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MAP OF FERELDEN



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She was glad she had read the treaties through, because she could actually give him some hard numbers about this, and the conversation became more specific and detailed. Loghain was looking – not pleased, exactly – but certainly less somber.

Cailan was still thinking of the elves. “The Dalish are not far. The clans travel through the Brecilian Forest this time of year. The Wardens could be there in a week or so.”

Loghain shrugged. He had seen dwarven warriors in action and knew their worth. He knew considerably less about the Dalish, though he had met many in his younger days. Excellent scouts, of course, but in a pitched battle...

“The clans are scattered and have a number of – Keepers – I believe is the correct term. It will take rather longer to gather them and negotiate. The dwarves will obey their King. It seems to me that the best course would be to go north to Kinloch Hold and speak to the First Enchanter, and then continue north to Orzammar. You might even be able to find a boat to take you across Lake Calenhad directly to the docks near Gherlen’s Pass.” He granted a sop to Cailan’s fantasies. “If there is time when you return, you could then see what can be arranged with the Dalish.”

Bronwyn nodded, her knees weak with relief. Teyrn Loghain was no longer angry and disbelieving. She had pleased him with the news of the treaties. He was giving her good advice as to how to go about enforcing them.

“Alistair?” asked Cailan. “Are you in agreement with all of this?”



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“Y – es, Your Majesty,” Alistair answered slowly. “It sounds like a plan to me.” His eyes sought Bronwyn’s, and she nodded again, this time more cheerfully.

Loghain could hardly miss that Alistair was deferring to the girl. So. The defacto Warden Commander in Ferelden was indeed Bryce Cousland’s daughter. She had done well for her first day, he decided.

“We cannot leave the south for some time,” he said, deep in thought. “We will scout for signs of darkspawn and clear out any lairs in the Wilds.”

“And our wounded will be the better for not being moved,” added Cailan.

“True,” Loghain agreed. There was no great hurry. Anora was more than capable of handling things in Denerim. *Let Cailan play at war. In the end, he will no doubt have his fill of it, and more.* “And even when we leave, a strong garrison will remain stationed here.” He thought of something else, and began, “Warden, you should meet the mage Uldred before you leave – ”

The guard peered into the tent.

“Beg pardon, Your Majesty, but a Wilder girl is out here wanting to speak to the Warden.”

“Which Warden?”

“The young lady, Majesty. The Wilder girl says she found something valuable of the Warden’s. Says it’s urgent.”

“May I, Your Majesty?”

“Certainly.”



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Bronwyn stepped out of the tent, with the alert Scout trotting after. She had not far to go, for the men could overhear the ensuing conversation.

"It's Morrigan, isn't it? I was thinking about you and your mother and hoping you were all right."

"Thank you," drawled a feminine voice. "We are quite well. Mother was thinking about you as well, and about our meeting. Your courtesy pleased her, you see, and she found you interesting. We were relieved that you survived your ordeal."

They heard Bronwyn's soft laugh. "It was a relief to me as well!"

Loghain glanced at Alistair, who was grimacing. Apparently Maric's bastard did not approve of this acquaintance. The strange girl did not sound like a Chasind: her speech was old-fashioned but educated, and her voice musical.

"And the battle. Clever of you," she was saying. "At any rate, since Mother liked you, it pleased her to take trouble for you, and thus we found something you had lost."

"I'm not sure I understand —"

"Its name is Fergus. If you do not wish —"

"Fergus!" Bronwyn cried. "You've found Fergus! Is he alive?"

"He is — alive, and Mother is tending his wounds. Perhaps you would care to come and collect him —"

"Morrigan, thank you a thousand times! Fergus! I'll order a wagon for him, and we'll go —"

Loghain frowned. This would prevent the girl from leaving for a few days at the very least. That could be unfortunate, but Fergus Cousland's survival would resolve



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the succession problem at Highever. If the girl had been the only heir, it was possible that Cailan would have wanted to set a bad precedent by letting a Grey Warden hold the teyrnir. And of course the girl was happy at the prospect of seeing her brother. It had been hard for her, losing her parents so violently. He certainly knew that kind of pain...

Cailan was too curious about the visitor to remain in the tent. The other two men followed in the wake of his excitement.

As they stepped out into the sunlight, the young king was startled by the barbaric beauty before him. A tall and exquisitely formed young woman was draped with heavy jewelry and adorned with feathers. Her face was a perfect oval and her skin a perfect cream. Her eyes were — he started — the eyes of a hawk: yellow and piercing.

Bronwyn saw him coming, and introduced them.

"Your Majesty, this is Morrigan. She and her mother were of great assistance to us in the Wilds. My brother is even now being tended —"

"I heard, Warden." He gazed on Morrigan's half-clad beauty. "Our thanks to the preserver of the Teyrn of Highever. You will not find us ungrateful."

"Lord King," replied Morrigan with a nod, evidently unimpressed.

Loghain was amused by the girl's utter lack of swooniness in Cailan's presence. It was too bad that more women did not dismiss him thus. Unfortunately, her cool detachment seemed only to rouse the stupid boy's interest.



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He glanced again at Alistair, who was openly scowling. At least the bastard had the sense to see that this girl was trouble. Attractive trouble, but trouble and no mistake. The sooner she was out of their camp and the King's presence, the better. It was time to cut this encounter short.

"Your Majesty, Warden Bronwyn will want to go to her brother immediately. I shall detail an escort for her protection."

"Of course." Cailan was sorry to lose sight of the gorgeous savage, but surely there would be other opportunities...



CAILAN, KING OF FERELDIN



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CHAPTER 4



THE WARDENS' PYRE

UICKLY – THOUGH NOT AS QUICKLY AS BRONWYN WOULD HAVE LIKED – the retrieval party made its way through the Wilds.

A dozen soldiers from Maric's Shield flanked the wagon on either side as it trundled behind the Wardens. Morrigan took the lead, aloof as always, though she deigned to speak with Bronwyn about the Wilds and the traces of darkspawn she had come across on her way to the camp at Ostagar. She seemed calm and unafraid, leading them with perfect confidence back to the little hut of her mother, the legendary Flemeth.

They were moving east of the battlefield, expecting to come across stragglers from the horde at any moment. A heavy silence hung in the air, as if the violence of yesterday's battle had sapped the life from the natural world itself. The wagon was cajoled through the marshes, mud sucking at the wheels.

Bronwyn was anxious to see Fergus, but ambivalent about returning to the site of her first adventure in the



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south. When she last visited this place, Daveth and Ser Jory were still alive. It chilled her, remembering how Flemeth had dismissed Jory's cleverness as "irrelevant." How much did the old woman know of the future? Or was she simply a remarkably gifted judge of character?

"There it is," Bronwyn said to Sergeant Darrow, pointing ahead to the strange little structure. It seemed to Bronwyn even smaller than the first time she had seen it. The door opened, and Flemeth emerged, coming forward to greet her guests. Bronwyn forced herself to meet her calmly, and not rush to see what kind of hurts Fergus had taken.

The soldiers and the wagon driver watched the proceedings uneasily. Rumors of the Witch of the Wilds abounded. Flemeth's piercing eyes and contemptuous manner did not much allay them.

"Ah, our well-mannered young Warden," said Flemeth. "Come to find the last of her family."

"I am most grateful," Bronwyn replied. "You cannot know what this means to me."

"You'd be surprised," Flemeth said dryly, "But come in and see him for yourself. The dog will wait outside."

Scout growled faintly at that, and Bronwyn frowned, not liking the woman's tone. Still, she was under an obligation...

"Stay with Sergeant Darrow, Scout," she ordered, pointing to the big man. Scout looked at her pitifully, and then slumped away.

Humble as the hut was, there were things of real value



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there, including a tall bookcase filled with impressive looking tomes – and some rare and precious items, she guessed.

The most precious item of all was occupying the bed. Fergus was pale and unconscious, his head bandaged – but he was alive, and Bronwyn's heart swelled at the sight of him. She must take care of him, as she had not taken care of the rest of her family.

"That's your brother?" Alistair asked. "I don't see much resemblance. Maybe it's the beard."

"Very funny."

"His sword and shield and armor," Morrigan drawled, pointing to a corner. "I even cleaned them."

"Thank you," said Bronwyn. "Fergus loves that sword. He would have hated to lose it."

"He will sleep for another day or two," Flemeth told her, studying the young man with detachment. "With rest and proper care, he should live to be wounded in many another battle. You are fond of him, it would seem."

"Yes," Bronwyn answered without heat. "I am fond of him. I love him. He is my brother, but he has always been my best friend and companion as well."

"Interesting. He seems a very ordinary sort of bluff young warrior to me, while you – you are not so ordinary. It matters not. He is of value to you, and I am pleased to return him."

Bronwyn did not bother to reply to this rather insulting remark. They would be leaving, and she would never see



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this unpleasant old woman again. She opened the door and summoned the waiting soldiers.

"Sergeant Darrow, I need a few of your men to fetch the litter from the wagon and come in to carry my brother. He is unconscious with a head wound, and they must be careful not to jar him."

Darrow himself came forward, his face stolid, not wishing to show fear in front of the Wardens. He beckoned forward two of his strongest men. Alistair moved in to lend a hand.

"I'm glad to help," he said. "and I can't wait to be introduced to your brother when he's not out cold anymore."

There were some fearful glances at the objects in the witches' hut. Morrigan lounged against the wall, looking bored. Flemeth's mouth was quirked in a smug, inscrutable smile.

The litter was made for a shorter man, and Fergus' feet dangled off the end. The gate in the back of the wagon was let down, and very cautiously, the unconscious man was eased in. Bronwyn watched anxiously, forcing herself not to wring her hands like a silly girl. She arranged pillows around Fergus to cushion against any jolts, taking special care around his bandaged head. His salvaged belongings were stowed away, and Bronwyn felt she could not be gone from here too soon.

"There. Let us go, Sergeant." She turned to Flemeth with a slight bow. "Madam, I thank you for your rescue of my brother. I should lose no time —"



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"A word or two before you go, Warden," Flemeth interposed. "If I may speak to you privately?"

"As you wish."

They walked away from the others, up a little rise to a broad, flat hill next to the hut. Bronwyn puzzled briefly over why the hut had not been built on it, rather than in the marshy muck below.

Flemeth spoke without preamble. "A Blight is upon us. If not stopped, it will destroy the land. The Archdemon knows its bitterest foes, and wished to eliminate them from the game altogether. It failed with you, and will someday rue it. Your retrieval of the Grey Warden treaties was timely indeed. You are gathering allies against the next attack, I am certain."

"I am. Everyone needs to stand united against the Blight. I shall go to the Circle of Magi, and to the Dalish Elves, and to the Dwarves. Teyrn Loghain and the King know my plans, and support them."

"Ah, yes — Loghain. Such a rude young man. I remember him well. Is he still tall, dark, and lethal?"

Bronwyn flushed. "Loghain Mac Tir may well be the greatest man that Ferelden has ever produced!" she declared, hot with indignation. "I think it quite impertinent that you —"

"My, my!" laughed Flemeth. "Such passion! Save it for your quest, young Warden! You will not always feel as you do now. Life changes, in its inevitable march to death. In a practical sense, you can regard that as good thing. It is

always sad to outgrow love, of course, but very convenient, as I've always said."

"I do not wish to discuss Teyrn Loghain with you. Have you anything else to say?"

"Many dangers lie before you. One does not need magic to predict that. I have saved your brother. In return, I ask a boon."

"Ask. I shall grant it, if I can."

"A simple one. You say wisely that the Blight threatens us all. I wish to help, in my small way. I am old and useless, but my daughter is young and strong, and her magic will serve you well. I ask that you take her with you as a companion in your quest."

"What does Morrigan say to this?"

"Let us ask her."

The young woman was summoned and informed of Flemeth's decision. She was not pleased with it.

"Mother!" Morrigan protested. "Have I no say in this? This is not how I wanted... I'm not even ready!"

"You *must* be ready," Flemeth replied. "These two Wardens must unite Ferelden against the Blight. They need you, Morrigan."

Bronwyn thought it perfectly natural that Morrigan would be reluctant to leave her mother. Why would anyone *want* to leave her mother? Bronwyn would like nothing better right now than to be home and safe with Mother and Father, and for none of this to have happened.

But Flemeth was saying, "Besides, you have been itching

to escape from the Wilds. Here is your opportunity. You will never have a better one, nor such a chance to keep noble company." The old woman laughed harshly.

"I would not force Morrigan to leave you..." Bronwyn said in concern.

"Bah! She needs to see the world. This is my boon, and I will ask no other."

"Then I must grant it. Morrigan, you are most welcome. Gather what you need for a long journey, and return with us to Ostagar." She gave a bow to Flemeth. "Accept my gratitude for what you have done for my brother. Know that your daughter will be valued and honored as my companion."

"I am glad to hear it, young Warden." Flemeth's voice softened. "I entrust you with that which I value above all else."

Bronwyn frowned, and headed back to the wagon. Alistair looked relieved. "We can go now, right? What did she want anyway?"

"She wants Morrigan to travel with us and help us. It's her way of lending aid against the Blight. Morrigan is packing, and we'll be on our way as soon as she's done."

"Wait — you're taking her with us? You're serious?"

"Her mother saved my brother's life, and asked this boon for her reward. How could I refuse her request?"

"And traveling with an apostate doesn't bother you? Not to mention her clothing — "

"It is a matter of my honor," Bronwyn replied, very stiffly.

Alistair put up his hands in defeat. "Right. She comes

with us. I just don't think she can be trusted. Don't say I didn't warn you."

The door opened, and Morrigan emerged, carrying a light pack. Her face was closed down and sullen, and she and Alistair shot each other a hostile glance as she joined the two Wardens by the wagon.

Lovely, thought Bronwyn. My two companions are already at odds. Mother dealt with such situations by offering extra-nice refreshments and talking about something or someone that her inimical guests could agree to mutually attack. Bronwyn had the Blight to offer Alistair and Morrigan. About the refreshments, she was not so sure...

She moved to stand between them, and hoped for the best.

"Sergeant Darrow, we're done here. Let's move out."

"Right you are, my lady – er – Warden."

Bronwyn felt Flemeth's eyes on her back, but did not turn to acknowledge the woman. They needed to get away, and the sooner the better.



The return seemed shorter, somehow. Feeling a little more secure, Bronwyn had the leisure to do some thinking about their situation. After some time silent, she said, "Alistair – I'll need to stay close to my brother until we leave for the Circle. Wouldn't it be easier if you stayed in the Highever tent with us? We have so much to talk over and so much to do, and I can keep an eye on Fergus that way."

"Of course. I'd rather be there than in the Grey Warden

tent alone. I can bring my things and put my cot some place out of the way..."

"This sounds horrible, I know, but could you have two more cots brought over? Fergus will need the only cot in the tent."

"I suppose I could do that," he agreed, with a slight smile. "Wouldn't do to have you sleeping on the ground, while I'm living a life of luxury!"

"Thanks. I need to work on my remarks for the funeral tonight. Once I get Fergus settled, we should walk down to the valley and pay our respects. I want to remember each Warden by name in my speech."

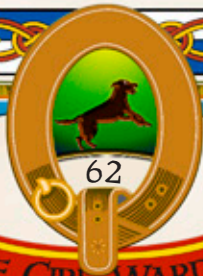
He nodded, looking sad again. "I'm glad you're giving the speech. I don't know if I could manage it without completely – " He stopped, and cleared his throat.

Bronwyn patted his shoulder. "I'm happy to do it, Alistair. Everyone is different. It helps me to talk about it. You'll stand with me and help light the pyre, though, won't you? I think it's important that both of us stand before the King and the army and represent the Wardens."

He set his jaw, and appeared to be trying to pull himself together. "You can count on me," he said. "We'll do Duncan proud."

Morrigan said nothing, fortunately, but only huffed a little. It was not worth taking up. Bronwyn understood that the girl must be very unhappy at leaving her home and her mother, and allowances must be made for such feelings.

They wound up the trail that joined the Imperial Highway. Bronwyn felt gratitude to Teyrn Loghain for



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their escort, for left to themselves she and Alistair would have had an impossible task, getting the cart out of the mud holes in the road and pushing it up onto the Highway proper. Once back on the ancient Tevinter road of finely-fitted stone, the going was smoother. The Tower of Ishal rose up in the distance, beckoning them home.

"Sergeant," Bronwyn ordered, "send a runner ahead to locate Wynne. Ask her to meet us at the tent of the Teyrn of Highever."

Fergus' quiet sleep disturbed Bronwyn. He would need the best possible care. This pale, bandaged man was unlike the healthy, vigorous Fergus she knew. Fergus should be thrashing about or snoring or even mumbling nonsense as he sometimes did – all the things that had infuriated Bronwyn when they camped at night in the course of a hunt or a climbing expedition.

Alistair tried to comfort her, when next she walked over to peer at her brother.

"The old woman may be an apostate, but I'm sure she knows what she's doing. It's a miracle that your brother survived a head wound like that at all."

"I know. I'll just be happier when he's in Wynne's hands. I wish oxen were not so slow!"

Wynne was waiting for them at the Highever tent, her presence already exerting a calming influence. Under Darrow's subdued orders, the Teyrn was lifted out and carefully borne into the tent and the waiting cot.



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"My thanks!" Bronwyn told Darrow and his men, half distracted. "I could not have done it without you." She then turned her attention to her brother, leaving Alistair to escort the soldiers out. Scout sniffed anxiously at Fergus.

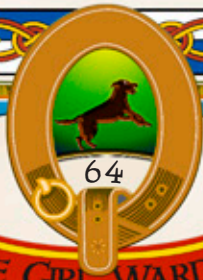
"Oh, dear, dear!" Wynne said, as she unwound the bandage. "A cracked skull! Someone has made a good start here, but your brother will need care and quiet even with the spells I know."

"He shall have it," Bronwyn answered quickly. She had not realized how much Fergus meant to her. "Scout," she said to the mabari hound. "I want you to keep an eye on Fergus. I have to go lots of places today, but you stay here and guard him. Do you understand?"

A low "Whuff" and wag of a stubby tail reassured her. Scout stretched out at the foot of the cot, and watched Wynne's comings and goings. Bronwyn noticed that Morrigan was standing just inside the opening of the partition, not shyly, exactly, but with a kind of proud indifference that Bronwyn recognized as false bravado.

"Oh, Morrigan! Let me introduce you to Wynne, a senior enchanter of the Circle of Magi, and an accomplished healer. Wynne – Morrigan. Morrigan and her mother found Fergus and began the good work you see here. When Alistair and I depart for the Circle, Morrigan will accompany us."

Wynne took in the strange garb, with its cynical indifference to modesty, and then the wooden staff. The



yellow eyes looked into hers, and Wynne remembered some ancient and obscure texts: texts which mentioned the possibility of changing one's shape into that of beasts, but surely that was not –

"Well met, Morrigan," she said smoothly. Oh, yes, indeed. An apostate and possibly a maleficar. Perhaps a shape-changer, too. Into what kind of company had the Wardens fallen? They must be warned.

Morrigan was unimpressed. "How does one address an inmate of the Circle?"

Bronwyn thought it a reasonable question, though phrased rather discourteously. "'Senior Enchanter' would be appropriate, through 'Healer' is also correct."

The elder mage said, "Wynne will do, as it is my name. We need not stand on ceremony."

"No, indeed!" agreed Morrigan. "And to answer the question I can see rising to your lips: no, I am no healer myself, so look elsewhere for assistance with the Warden's brother. I can fetch and carry, if required, but I have never taken an interest in that part of the Craft."

"I see. Your skills are of another sort."

"Just so."

Bronwyn sighed to herself. "Our servants will see that you have all you require, Wynne, and I shall help you myself, in any way that I can. Alistair will be staying here too, and is fetching some cots. Morrigan, I do not wish to be discourteous, but the Wardens are being immolated at twilight, and I have



much to do in preparation for the funeral. Let me introduce you to our servants, who can see to your comfort. As to the rest, you can explore the camp or rest, just as you like. We shall talk more tomorrow of our journey."

"I shall somehow contain my impatience," Morrigan answered carelessly.

Bronwyn felt somewhat relieved, when the introductions were over and Morrigan strolled away to have a look at the quartermaster's wares. She spent some time discussing Fergus' care with Wynne before Alistair returned with a number of elves carrying cots and blankets and bundles.

"What's all this?" Bronwyn wondered.

"Well – I did some thinking. I know that you had to come here without a chance to – I know you couldn't have brought much of anything with you, so I thought I'd better bring some blankets and – well – stuff – " He dropped an armful of belongings on the ground. The servants carrying the cots looked to Bronwyn for direction.

"That was very thoughtful of you, Alistair," Bronwyn said, feeling odd to hear herself sound so much like her own mother. To the servants, she said, "Yes. Put Warden Alistair's cot there, if you please. The other two go in here – " she opened the middle partition and gestured. "Make them up with blankets, and put that – " she pointed to Morrigan's discarded pack – "at the foot of one of them. Please do this all quietly. The Teyrn must not be disturbed."

While this was done, she looked curiously at the other



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things Alistair had brought.

"Is that a Grey Warden helmet? And those tabards? I didn't even know the Grey Wardens had a uniform!"

"Well – Duncan never insisted that we wear them. He thought Wardens fought better when they were comfortable, and he didn't really care for imposing things like uniforms on us. Still, I thought you might like to have it."

"Oh, yes!"

Alistair was pleased at her enthusiasm. "One of the wardens – Belarion – was an Orlesian elf. He was tall for an elf, and so I thought his things might fit you. His Grey Warden tabard was in his traveling chest."

"Thank you! This is just the thing. Do you have one of these?"

Alistair nodded. "I suppose we ought to wear them to the funeral. Maybe these helmets, too."

"I've never seen a Grey Warden helmet before," Bronwyn said, admiring the fine piece of veridium armor. "I agree. We need to show everyone who and what we are. Yes! We'll wear the helmets, certainly, and the tabards over our armor."

She slipped on the smaller of the helmets, and found the mirror. A strange face looked back at her. The wings of the helmet swept high, making her feel more imposing. The nasalpiece extending over her nose made her look rather grim and fierce. The helmet was old-fashioned, but – after all – the Grey Wardens were an ancient order. There had been Grey Wardens long before Ferelden was anything more than a savage land of scattered tribes. Perhaps it



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was time to remind Ferelden of that.

"It's marvelous. I shall treasure this. What was the name of the Warden again?"

"Belarion. He was really good-looking. Well – he was an elf, after all. Somehow he always managed to stay reasonably clean, and since elves have hardly any beard, he always made the rest of us look pretty shaggy and shabby by comparison. Women were crazy about him. He was courteous to everybody, but he always made a point of being very kind to elven servants. He never forgot where he came from, and I gather that the Alienage in Val Royaux is a pretty terrible place."

"That was very decent of him," Bronwyn agreed. Very proper, too. This Belarion must of have been one of what Mother called "nature's nobility." One should always be kind to servants, Mother had taught her. It was a sign of bad breeding to be exacting and rude. And cruelty to a servant was an admission of cowardice, since servants had no recourse. It was good to learn something of the Wardens she would never know.

"Have you ever been to a Grey Warden funeral?" she asked.

"Never," Alistair confessed. "Mostly we don't *have* funerals. When the Warden has the Calling, I heard that they have a farewell ceremony, and then the Warden just leaves for the Deep Roads. I suppose the King knows what he's talking about, though. He has books about the Grey Wardens, and he and Duncan were good friends."

Bronwyn nodded, still admiring herself. She must try on the tabard. It was a sleeveless garment of a heavy grey silk with a sheen to it. On it was the griffon symbol of the Grey Wardens. It would fit to a nicety over her armor. Without the armor, she could wear it belted over her shirt, once she tracked down a pair of breeches. It would be a pleasant change to have something else to wear.



Down in the valley, Bronwyn and Alistair found that a huge pyre had been erected. It was high and broad, measuring roughly twenty feet square. A crowd of men and elves were still sweating over it, arranging the framework at the top that would hold the dead. Barrels of oil had been rolled down from the stores to soak the entire structure, assuring that it could be set alight without embarrassing difficulties.

"That's — impressive," Alistair breathed. He seemed as pleased as possible for one so sad.

It was the largest pyre Bronwyn had ever seen, and she gazed on it in awe.

"See here, my lady," the elven foreman explained, "we have put in some steps so you can walk up to this platform to give the funeral speech and set it alight. We put tinder and fuel just under there, and it should catch very nicely. You can step down perfectly safely then!"

"Good work," Bronwyn praised them. "Do arrange another pile just like it in the opposite corner for Warden

Alistair to light. It seems wise with such a large pyre."

"But my lady!" the elf said, wide-eyed. "It is already done! All four corners will be lit. The King would have it so. He and Teyrn Loghain will be torchbearers as well. Such an honor for the Wardens!"

"Yes — very nice, indeed."

"Amazing," mumbled Alistair, his gaze slipping to the neat lines of linen-shrouded bodies some yards away.

"Warden Bronwyn!" A tall mage, completely bald, addressed her formally, with a little bow. "Teyrn Loghain mentioned that we should have a talk. It occurred to me that I might be of service to you tonight."

"I remember you from the Council," Bronwyn said, bowing in her turn. "Senior Enchanter Uldred, are you not?"

"You are too kind to remember."

Bronwyn was a little put off by his deliberately ingratiating manner. He clearly wanted something from her, but she had no idea what. Before she could ask his business, he began speaking in a low, persuasive voice.

"The Grey Warden funeral tonight will be a most significant and solemn occasion," he began. "I want to contribute to its success in my own small way."

'*Small way.*' Bronwyn considered the man. That smarmy phrase set off all sorts of alarms. Flemeth used those words, too. *Either he is lying, or he is afraid of me, or he is just hopelessly ill-bred. Most likely the last. Arrogance cloaked in false modesty.*

She asked, "And what way is that?"



THE GIRL WARDEN

"You will be speaking to thousands tonight. Everyone will be coming to the funeral. In the out-of-doors, it is sometimes – even for a trained speaker – difficult to make oneself heard. I can – very discreetly – make you audible to the entire army."

She blinked. "It might be alarming if I roared like a dragon!"

"You misunderstand me," he protested. "It would be unnoticeable. You would not be speaking unnaturally loudly. Simply give the address in clear, audible tones, and I can guarantee that it will be heard and understood by all your listeners, no matter how far away."

"That would be – extremely helpful," Bronwyn agreed. There was nothing more annoying than seeing some fool on a dais, mouthing unintelligibly. Even more annoying were all the whispers of "*What did he say?*" "*Did you catch that?*" "*Ssshhh! I'm trying to hear!*"

She considered, and then said, "Please do. There are things I have to say that I wish to be heard."

"Very well," He was very pleased. "And I can also help with the pyre – again discreetly, you understand. Fire spells are very easy."

Alistair winced. Bronwyn spoke up at once. "Yes – I understand you. An all-consuming blaze is always best on such occasions. Your help is much appreciated." Half-burned bodies were very distressing. With such a large number, who knew what might transpire?

"Excellent. Teyrn Loghain thought you would be open to



THE GIRL WARDEN

sensible, pragmatic methods. He is sympathetic to the Circle of Magi. He has told me himself that he thinks us one of Ferelden's best weapons." The mage laughed self-consciously.

"He is right, certainly." Bronwyn was deeply impressed by the good Wynne had done – and would do. "Your gifts are an immense help. I only wish there were more of you!"

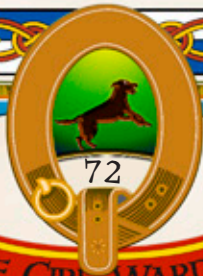
"Your friend Ilon saved my hide when we were clearing out the Tower of Ishal," Alistair agreed. "He'd slow the darkspawn down while Bronwyn's mabari and I dispatched them. We made a pretty good team."

"Yes! Yes!" Uldred said, his voice full of smothered excitement. "That's exactly what I want the First Enchanter and the Knight-Commander to hear! Greagoir was skeptical of our value to the army. There is so much we can do if we have more freedom!"

Alistair's face clouded at that. With a brief glance at him, Bronwyn said, "We shall certainly give a full report of your good service. The Grey Warden treaties give us the power to demand the assistance of the Circle. Quite frankly, we will also be looking for likely recruits to join the Grey Wardens. Before I leave, let us speak again, and perhaps you will have some names for me."

"I will indeed. So the Grey Wardens *do* admit mages? That is – interesting. Until tonight, Wardens."

There was the other thing they must do, when the mage had gone his way. Bronwyn took Alistair's hand in hers, and they went to look upon their dead.



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THE GIRL WARDEN

It was much worse than Bronwyn had anticipated. She had first seen death in battle on the night of the Highever massacre, and she had killed her share of men herself; but she had been so wild with rage and grief that she had scarcely looked at the men she slashed apart. They had been objects – dangers – in her way, and not real men to her. Even the bodies of men she knew had barely registered on her. Oriana and Oren were all she could see, drained and bloodless, their eyes half open.

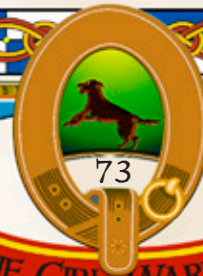
But those had been bodies of the newly dead. There was something even more ugly about these shrouded figures, their blood cold and congealed, their limbs rigid and unnatural. The elves had left their faces exposed, awaiting the visitation of their mourners. At least their eyes were closed, and the funeral wrappings kept their mouths from yawning open.

"The King was here early this morning," the elven foreman told her. "He was very anxious that all the Wardens receive proper respect. Some of the wounds – well – we reassembled the bodies, and wound the linen very tightly, so you can hardly tell if someone was beheaded or not."

Alistair choked at that, and Bronwyn frowned at the elf. "Thank you. We wish to view them in private now."

The elf back away reluctantly. And thus Alistair introduced her to twenty-three brothers she would never know, and one she did.

"– That's Dulin," Alistair said, "he was from Val Tourein. He never lost at cards. And that's Hayward from Igglesbourne



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in the Free Marches. He wasn't much older than us – "

He broke down completely when they came to Duncan.

Bronwyn sat on the ground by him, her hand on his back, listening wearily to his hacking sobs. It was hard to recognize that abused object as Duncan's head. One of the elves began covering the faces of those they had already viewed. Bronwyn made a quick, imperious gesture, and the elf moved to cover Duncan's first.

"Come on," she murmured, when Alistair's tears eased, "Let's see everyone, and then the elves can get them settled up on the pyre. We can't give way now." She had another thought, and summoned the elven foreman with a wave.

"Do you know Captain Fannon? Have someone fetch him for me. I need to speak to him."



The haze of campfire smoke turned the light of the setting sun into menacing streaks of red and violet. The army gathered to see the last rites of the Grey Wardens. Their armor polished, their beards combed, their faces (mostly) washed, the King of Ferelden and his nobles prepared to take the places of honor closest to the pyre.

Loghain felt some interest in tonight's proceedings. Rumor had it that Bronwyn Cousland was a good speaker. With luck, the army would have an entertaining spectacle to alleviate its usual boredom. He was not as annoyed as he might ordinarily have been when Cailan told him that the two of them would stand as torchbearers at the



THE GIRL WARDEN

funeral to help the Wardens light the pyre. After all, he was rather pleased at the prospect of seeing off Duncan and his merry band of Orlesian infiltrators.

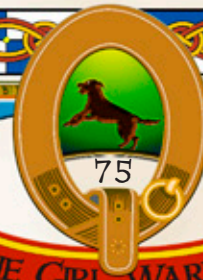
The pyre had taken a lot of men away from other tasks, but it was a notable sight indeed. Uldred had reported that the girl was receptive to a little magical assistance with the fire. That was plain good news. She was sincere, then, in wanting a greater public role for Ferelden's mages. If Loghain could have his way, there would be a mage in every company in the army.

The guards had opened a clear pathway down the middle, and stood rigidly at guard to keep it clear.

The Revered Mother and two priests with censers led the procession, climbing directly up to the platform at one side of the pyre. The King, flanked by Loghain, and followed by the arls and banns, strode down to stand at the front of the army. A deep, roaring cheer rose up from the assembled ranks. A great deal was directed at Loghain. He had never strove for praise or power for himself, but it was *different* when it was his soldiers.

The bodies, shrouded all alike in white linen and soaked in oil, were anonymous cocoons – much like things he had once seen in the Ortan Thaig. He put memories of the Deep Roads and their monstrous spiders aside, as the cheering changed to greet the two remaining Grey Wardens, now marching side by side to the pyre.

What were they wearing? Winged helmets? That was



THE GIRL WARDEN

rather – well – they were picturesque, anyway. And Grey Warden tabards. He had not seen them in years, but it was appropriate, he supposed, for the occasion. The girl was quite tall, even standing by Alistair, who was about his own height. They made an impressive pair. Especially if the girl did the talking, and the lad kept his mouth shut.

The two of them climbed the pyre, and knelt before the Revered Mother in respect. That done, they moved to her side. The lad seemed lost in grief. The girl, however, appeared calm.

More priests and brothers ringed the pyre at a respectful distance, some with torches, some with censers. The reek of perfumed smoke penetrated Loghain's skull like poisoned needles. He would have a monster of a headache in the morning.

The Revered Mother raised her hand to give the blessing. Everyone went down on one knee, head bowed, to receive it.

"BLESSED ARE THEY WHO STAND BEFORE THE CORRUPT AND THE WICKED AND DO NOT FALTER. BLESSED ARE THE PEACEKEEPERS, THE CHAMPIONS OF THE JUST."

Appropriate enough words, but she was not done.

*"THOUGH ALL BEFORE ME IS SHADOW,
YET SHALL THE MAKER BE MY GUIDE.*

*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."*

She called out, "Rise, and hear the Farewell to the Grey Wardens."



THE GREY WARDEN

Armor clanked and knees creaked as the listeners rose once again to their feet. The Revered Mother gave the girl a nod and a slight softening of her hard face, and Warden Bronwyn came forward to speak, assuming a graceful stance Loghain had seen somewhere before: one knee slightly bent. She then removed her helmet, shaking out her long wavy hair. It was a dramatic gesture, and there was a stir of interest as she handed the helmet to Alistair and began her speech.

"YOUR MAJESTY. MY LORDS AND LADIES. REVERED MOTHER. SOLDIERS OF FERELDEN. MY COUNTRYMEN."

She had a very pleasant speaking voice, Loghain granted. Clear and pitched to carry, it filled the valley of Ostagar.

"LONG AGO, BEFORE OUR FATHERS' FATHERS CAME DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAINS, ALL THEDAS STOOD ON THE VERGE OF ANNIHILATION. A HORROR HAD FALLEN UPON OUR WORLD: A HORROR WE NOW KNOW AS THE FIRST BLIGHT. A CORRUPTED OLD GOD HAD RISEN, AND WITH HIM A HORDE OF MONSTERS – THE DARKSPAWN, RAVAGING THE LAND, SLAUGHTERING THE PEOPLE, BENT ON DESTROYING EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE IN THEIR PATH."

"VETERANS OF BATTLES WITH THE DARKSPAWN CAME TOGETHER, AND THE BEST AMONG THEM PLEDGED TO DO WHATEVER WAS NECESSARY TO STEM THE TIDE OF EVIL THAT SWEEPED ACROSS THE LAND. THEY RECRUITED THOSE WHO POSSESSED THE SKILL AND STRENGTH TO RAISE THEIR BANNER FROM ALL OVER THEDAS, MAKING NO DISTINCTION BETWEEN ELVEN SLAVE OR HUMAN NOBLEMAN, BETWEEN SWORDSMAN OR ARCHER OR ACCOMPLISHED MAGE. THUS,



THE GREY WARDEN

THE GREY WARDENS WERE BORN."

Behind Loghain, Arl Bryland whispered, "I can see Bryce in her. Remember how he spoke at the Landsmeet? He taught her well."

Arl Wulffe, to his right, grunted in assent. "That's a pretty girl," he muttered. "Fine head of hair."

Cailan frowned, but did not turn. Loghain wished that the nobility would keep its impertinent opinions to itself. The girl had mentioned mages. And elves. Nice attention to groups that might be very open to bettering themselves by joining the Grey Wardens. Her gestures were few but effective. Bryce certainly had taught her – Loghain recognized his style now. But he must not miss what she was saying –

"TOGETHER THEY POOLED THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF THE ENEMY AND FORMED A UNITED FRONT TO PUT A STOP TO THE ARCHDEMON'S RAMPAGE. WHEN THE GREY WARDENS RAISED THEIR ARMS IN VICTORY, SUDDENLY THERE WAS HOPE WHERE BEFORE NO HOPE REMAINED."

The army was listening with rapt attention, Loghain noted. No jostling and muttering. Cailan would be pleased at their respect for the occasion, at least. More respect than Arl Urien was showing, asking urgent questions about the girl, and if she had any sisters.

"FOR TWELVE AGES OF MEN, THE GREY WARDENS HAVE COME FORWARD WHEN CALLED TO SERVE; AND THEN, THEIR DUTY DONE, HAVE SLIPPED BACK INTO THE SHADOWS. ONCE A BLIGHT IS OVER, WE ARE CALLED IRRELEVANT AND UNNECESSARY: A BURDEN FROM THE DEAD PAST."

Ouch, thought Loghain. "Irrelevant." *My words must*



THE GIRL WARDEN

have stung more than I intended, when first we met before the battle. I take it that this rebuttal is meant for me...

"AND YET, THE PAST IS ALWAYS WITH US. IT LIVES YET BENEATH OUR FEET. IN THE DARK PLACES OF THE EARTH, THERE IS AN ANCIENT MALICE THAT DOES NOT SLEEP. WE FORGET IT AT OUR PERIL, FOR IT HAS NOT FORGOTTEN US."

A low rumble of agreement, mutters of assent from her audience. Loghain approved of the girl's slight, ironic smile. She was putting on a good show.

"AND WHENEVER AND WHEREVER IT BURSTS FORTH UPON THE KINGDOMS UNDER THE SUN, THE GREY WARDENS STAND READY TO DO THEIR DUTY, FOR THE GREY WARDENS' GREAT ALLEGIANCE IS TO LIFE ITSELF; TO PRESERVE ALL THINGS UNTAINTED BY THE DARKNESS. TO THAT END, THESE WORDS ARE CARVED INTO THE SOUL OF EVERY GREY WARDEN:

"IN PEACE, VIGILANCE; IN WAR, VICTORY; IN DEATH, SACRIFICE.' TONIGHT WE, THE LIVING, BEAR WITNESS TO THOSE WHO DIED BY THOSE WORDS."

Now she was listing the names of the dead. She must have been taught those rhetorical tricks drummed into noble children from an early age. Anora herself could have done no better. Of course Alistair was there, ready to prompt the girl if she forgot a name --

"-- THORN OF OSWIN, WHOSE ARROWS NEVER MISSED; GREGOR OF THE ANDERFELS, WHO COULD WIELD A GREATSWORD LIKE A FEATHER AND DRINK ANY TWELVE MEN UNDER THE TABLE; TALLEFER OF AYESLEIGH, SILENT IN SPEECH, BUT BOLD IN BATTLE; BELARION, AN ELF BORN IN THE ALIENAGE OF VAL ROYAUX, FAMED BOTH FOR HIS COURAGE AND HIS COURTESY; STARGEN OF WAKING SEA, WHO



THE GIRL WARDEN

ONCE SLEW A BERESKARN WITH ONLY A DAGGER; THE TWIN BROTHERS HINTOR AND HASTOR, WHO SERVED TWENTY YEARS AS WARDENS AND WHO IN DEATH WERE NOT DIVIDED -- "

She was reaching the end now, her voice moving into the next register. Not too long a speech, thank the Maker. A good length, with all the Wardens acknowledged...

"AND LAST, I CANNOT FORGET THEIR LEADER, DUNCAN, FOR HE PERSONALLY SAVED MY LIFE, JUST AS IN HIS LAST AND GREATEST BATTLE HE SAVED THE LIFE OF OUR KING. MIGHTY WARRIOR THOUGH HE WAS, HE WAS MORE: A WISE COUNSELOR, A LOYAL FRIEND, A MASTER OF LORE, AND A KIND AND CARING MENTOR TO ALL HIS WARDENS. I KNOW THAT THESE WORDS OF THE PROPHET WERE ALWAYS IN HIS HEART:

"LET THE BLADE PASS THROUGH THE FLESH,

LET MY BLOOD TOUCH THE GROUND,

LET MY CRIES TOUCH THEIR HEARTS.

LET MINE BE THE LAST SACRIFICE."

FARE YOU WELL, DUNCAN, WARDEN COMMANDER IN FERELDEN."

One of the priests handed the girl a torch. Loghain grimaced. Oh, Holy Maker. A tear was glittering on Alistair's face. He glanced to his side and saw that Cailan -- oh, of course -- Cailan was in tears, too. There was some choking and coughing going on behind him. He did not want to know who they were. When they came to their senses, they would be horribly embarrassed.

"ALISTAIR AND I ARE PROUD TO HAVE BEEN CALLED TO JOIN THE GREY WARDENS. MY BROTHERS, YOUR SACRIFICE WILL NOT BE FORGOTTEN, AND ONE DAY, WHEN ALISTAIR AND I JOIN YOU, MAY YOU

FIND US WORTHY OF YOUR EXAMPLE."

The girl lifted the torch and cried out,
"DUNCAN – AND THE GREY WARDENS!"

There was a cheer – from the Highever men first, Loghain noticed. One of the sergeants was leading that traditional salute of theirs. The girl must be popular with them. The rest of the army was joining in, the roar echoing back from the stone foundations of the upper citadel.

The priests came forward with torches for King and for Loghain himself. Alistair was given his, and the three men moved to their appointed places. The girl was still holding the torch on high, her eyes shining with the resounding tribute.

Perhaps it was for the best that the girl was now a Warden. In a few years, she would have been a power to be reckoned with in the Landsmeet. It was possible that Bryce would have made her heir to the teyrnir. Anora might have had trouble with her. Loghain remembered his father's old saying about strong women.

*"Two queens in one hive,
 And only one shall thrive."*

The girl gave a nod to the men, and the four of them put their torches to the pyre. The tinder and fuel caught easily, and flames sprouted up, licking at the shrouds. The cheers continued, as the priests and warriors descended from the pyre, and the blaze mounted toward the sky, consuming the Grey Wardens of Ferelden.

Such a pyre would certainly burn all night. The hideous smell of burnt meat filled the valley – a smell familiar to all Fereldans, accustomed as they were to cremation. The priests wafted their censers industriously, but their perfumes could not begin to cover the smell of twenty-four men being reduced to ash and bone. At least the height and large size of the pyre spared the onlookers the usual unsettling sights of hair catching flame, of naked blackened bodies revealed as the shrouds were consumed, of skulls exploding in the intense heat.

Bronwyn blinked a bit of ash from her eyes. She hoped the wind would not change, or they would all have move back quite a way. She was uneasy about her hair being unbound tonight, but had found that the helmet was uncomfortable after a time if her hair was braided up as she usually arranged it. She would have to think of a new style, or cut it short. She sighed. At least the pyre was burning very well and evenly, no doubt helped along by Uldred's discreet spells.

In the Wardens' tent was a large plain cinerarium – hardly more than a box – and the traditional iron trowel. At twilight the following day, the pyre should be safe enough to fill the container from the remains she and Alistair could access. Nobody ever expected to collect everything, and in this case it would be hardly more than a token of remembrance. Alistair obviously wanted something of Duncan, which was why he had had

Duncan's body placed far from the center, and in a place easy to remember.

After her grandmother's funeral, there had been lumps of charred bone on the site for months. It had distressed Bronwyn, even after Mother had gently explained, again and again, that it was natural, and all part of the Maker's plan, for much of one's earthly remains to be returned to the earth.

So they would fill the box and send it to Denerim with the rest of the luggage. Eventually, they would want to commission a better receptacle, though neither Bronwyn nor Alistair were sure where such a cinerarium should be consigned.

"Maybe we're supposed to send the ashes to Weisshaupt," Alistair whispered.

Bronwyn shook her head. There was so much they did not know.

The King and his nobles stood beside them, as a courtesy and a sign of respect. Bronwyn had expected this, and had rounded up what wine she could to serve them in the traditional style. There was a great deal of drinking and a great deal of quiet talk. Bronwyn was tired, but the roar of the flames and the terrible smell kept her alert. Alistair, she saw, was red-eyed and mournful. No one would blame him on this occasion.

"My dear Bronwyn!" Her cousin, Arl Bryland, came forward to take a goblet from her, his face full of compassion. "It is always a joy to see you, though I confess I wish we could have had this reunion under happier circumstances.

So? My cousin's child is a Grey Warden? Duncan obviously thought only the best would do. I wanted to tell you that you spoke extremely well."

"Sent him off in style," agreed Arl Wulffe, rather gruffly. "Hope my boys do as much for me when my time comes. I must say I wouldn't want to engage you in debate at the Landsmeet. You'd lay me low with a well-turned phrase!"

Others came forward, reminiscing about Duncan, praising Bronwyn's rhetorical skills, expressing their gratitude to the Wardens.

Bann Stronar put in, "And of course, we are all so very sorry and horrified at the fate of the Teyrn and Teyrna. An outrage, of course, but a personal tragedy for you. I wish to offer my condolences. I never liked Rendon Howe, myself, but who could have expected such treachery?"

"At least Fergus is alive," Arl Bryland said. "Highever has a teyrn of the right blood, thank the Maker!"

"Your brother is well?" Cailan asked.

"Better than I could have expected. A very skilled mage is tending to him now, and she expects a full recovery."

"Good," Loghain said briefly. "I daresay with this development you will not wish to leave immediately for Kinloch Hold and the Circle."

"No —" she said gravely, "I must know that my brother is out of danger. And then I must tell him the dreadful news. I cannot leave until that is done. On that head, Your Majesty," she said, turning to the King, "I must hold you to your word



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on the matter of Arl Howe. He must be called to account, and sooner rather than later. I claim the Right of Blood, at any rate. When the time comes, I wish to meet him myself."

More murmurs of approval and support.

"Very proper, too," muttered Arl Urien.

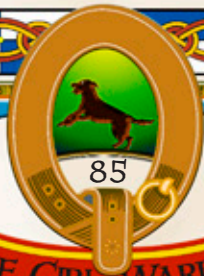
"Your brother may claim that right," Loghain pointed out, not easy with the idea of the girl meeting Howe in a duel. Howe was a tricky bastard, and fast. Loghain had sparred with him in the past, and never had the least difficulty in besting him, but the girl had neither Loghain's size, nor strength, nor experience. He said, hoping she would take the hint, "And if he is not recovered, I am certain you will have no difficulty in finding a proven champion to uphold you."

A few of the nobles exchanged raised brows. An interesting development. Of course, the Cousland girl was very pretty...

"No indeed!" seconded Cailan eagerly. "I would do it myself, were the King permitted."

Bronwyn gave them a tight smile, thinking that the men would not have spoken so without quite so much wine to drink. "Thank you, but there are things one must do for oneself. At any rate, we cannot know how it will fall out. I am concerned for the people in my brother's teyrnir. I do not know what caused Rendon Howe to throw away all our families' years of friendship, but he has done so — and done it so completely that I cannot guess what crime he will commit next. "

Before her imagination, wreathed in the flames of the



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Wardens' pyre, was the picture that never left her: her father propping himself on one hand, the other clutching his wounded side; her mother, fierce and tender, kneeling beside him in a pool of blood. The last, loving, pained look as she was pulled around a corner and they were lost to her forever. She stared into the great blaze before her, her eyes watering. What had Howe done with the bodies of her family? Had he thrown them down a well? Had he given them to the wolves?

The King was speaking, but she did not catch his words.

"The Warden should return to her brother, and perhaps get some rest," Loghain said to Cailan. He touched Bronwyn's arm lightly.

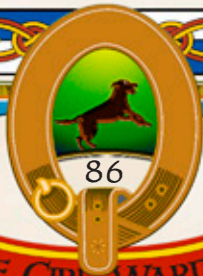
"Good idea!" said Cailan, "Wardens, you are hereby invited to join us for dinner tomorrow! Perhaps my uncles and the knights of Redcliffe will have arrived by then!"

"I believe you are right. Alistair?" Bronwyn asked, over her shoulder. "Are you coming?"

He shook his head. "You go on. I know you need to see to your brother. I'll stay here for awhile. I'm not ready to leave Duncan yet."

She nodded, understanding. "You know yourself best." She bowed to the King, "Your majesty. My lords. Good night to you."

In groups, in quietly talking pairs, and one by one, the nobles drifted away. Alistair stood watching the pyre slowly collapse. Beside him was the King, in silent



sympathy, and Loghain, restless and bored.

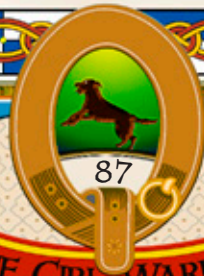
Loghain felt quite enough had been done for the dead Wardens. All very proper, he supposed, and their sacrifice was appreciated, but it was time to get on with the matters at hand. Of course, someone had to watch the pyre. The tradition no doubt was based on the need to make sure the fire did not spread...

He cleared his throat. "We'll be very busy tomorrow, Cailan. You should turn in."

"I'll stay here with Alistair," Cailan told him. "You needn't wait for me. I promise I'll be fit to listen to everything you say."

Loghain snorted, and glanced under his brows at the pyre. *That's the last of you, Duncan. And good riddance.*

He left the two brothers to their vigil.



CHAPTER 5



KING CAILAN
HOLDS HIGH
REVEL

YOU WOULD FIND THE MOSS
UPON A STONE INTERESTING."

"You know what's more interesting than that?" Alistair shot

back at Morrigan. "Apostates. Mages outside the Tower. That's illegal, you know."

"Perhaps I should make more tea," Bronwyn interposed. "Alistair? More tea?"

Distracted, Alistair answered, "Sounds good. Is there some of that honey left? I really like that."

Morrigan smirked at Bronwyn over her buttered bread, knowing what she trying to do.

Bronwyn already knew that Alistair and Morrigan had somehow taken against each other. Breakfast confirmed it. She would have to speak to them – separately and in private – about all those little digs and barbed words. They would poison the atmosphere and make their quest just that much harder to achieve.

And they annoyed her personally. She hated that kind of hostile, nasty wittiness at someone's else's expense.

It all sounded like Father's description of the Orlesian court: so mean-spirited and relentlessly *clever*. Everyone watching everyone else like cats at a mousehole, hoping to gain some advantage. Father had explained to her what a powerful weapon ridicule could be, but this tent was temporarily her home: it was not the court of the Empress of Orlais. They were off on a quest with the highest stakes — not to profit themselves, but to protect the people of Ferelden. They must work together, and to that end they must respect one another.

It did not help that her nightmares last night had been ghastly and nearly continuous. She must find a way to deal with them. Maybe —

"Oh, Wynne! Come join us," Bronwyn called out, when the mage made her appearance. "What do you think of Fergus' condition this morning? His color seemed more normal to me."

And Morrigan and Wynne had taken against each other, too. She saw it in the looks the two women exchanged as Wynne drew her chair up to the big wooden table. That was tiresome, because Wynne was giving Fergus the best care possible. Nothing must interfere with that. Her brother was hovering on the edge of consciousness. Occasionally his eyes would open, but he did not speak or seem to recognize her. The head injury was severe, and without magical intervention, Wynne thought it would have taken him months to recover — if he had recovered at all from it.

At least Wynne had a smile for her. "Much better indeed. I believe he will be able to speak to you by tomorrow." She glanced at Morrigan's usual clothing, and remarked, "So chilly this morning. I think I shall have to put on a heavier robe."

"And I think *I* shall take a walk in the bracing, refreshing air," Morrighan replied haughtily. "'Tis a lovely day." She got up and strolled out of the tent without another word.

"Not that I wish to seem interfering, Wardens," Wynne said quietly, sipping her tea, "but I must urge you to cautious with that young woman. She is an apostate, is she not?"

Bronwyn did not answer immediately, but Alistair had plenty to say. "She and her mother both! Her mother is the Witch of the Wilds! If you ask me, Morrigan is a creepy piece of work."

"I gave my word to take Morrigan as a companion, as a boon to her mother," Bronwyn said, wishing that the two of them would leave her alone. "I will not my break my word."

"You don't have to keep your word to an apostate," Alistair pointed out. "According to the Chant —"

Bronwyn gave him a hard look. "Oh? Is that what they teach you in the Templars? You get to pick and choose? That is not what my parents taught me. A Cousland's word must be kept, whether to king or commoner. I do understand that Morrigan may pose difficulties, but she is nonetheless under my protection."

"We are only warning you for your own good," Wynne said, her voice warm and persuasive.

"I understand that, and I thank you. Alistair, you were



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trained by the Templars, but you are a Grey Warden now, and Duncan said that Grey Wardens accept allies where they can be found, if it will further our mission. I don't say we shouldn't be careful, but I believe Morrigan will be useful in our quest."

"And if she uses blood magic?" asked Wynne.

"Then I shall tell her to stop it," Bronwyn said briefly.

Wynne sighed, with an air of resigned, worldly experience. Alistair snorted. Bronwyn thought she would like a walk, herself.

"I'll be back shortly," she told Alistair. "Then we'll want to get started on the inventory of the Wardens' tent. That done, I can finish our supply list. Come on, Scout. You need the exercise."

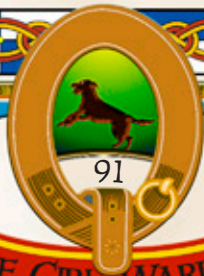
The dog trotted after her, cocking his ears at Alistair in disapproval.

There weren't many places to go in the camp, but there was always the Quartermaster. Bronwyn headed that way, Scout at her heels, when she heard raised voices.

"Think yourself too good for an honest soldier, do you?" A man's voice declared. "I offered her nine silvers — fair and square — going price for a Wilder girl — and she turns up her nose. I ask you? Is that right?"

Another man answered, "Well — maybe she don't like you. Even Wilders can say no, can't they?"

Oh, Andraste's nightgown! Bronwyn thought, glad she was in armor, and even more glad she had put her Warden's tabard over it.



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She picked up the pace, trotting toward the voices. Scout grew alert and started moving slightly ahead of her.

Yes — there was Morrigan, surrounded by a little knot of men, some of whom had either not slept off last night's liquor, or had started drinking early. One big fellow in heavy chainmail was holding forth in high indignation.

"It's a sad day, when some Wilder barbarian won't take the King's silver for a bit of sport. That's all I ask! Don't a soldier have his needs?"

"Morrigan!" Bronwyn called out, in her mother's most commanding tones. "We have a great deal to do! Come along now, if you please!"

The men turned and recognized the tabard first of all, then recognized Bronwyn, saw the black mabari with his head lowered to charge, and instantly backed off.

"What's that Girl Warden want with some Wilder? the big man muttered, very put out. "Ain't proper."

Bronwyn was put out in her turn. How had that stupid nickname spread? The King's guard must have told his friends. Somehow she must put a stop to it. It was demeaning. She scowled fiercely at the loitering men. They gave her scattered nods, bows, and even a salute or two, and bustled away, dragging their muttering friend along.

Morrigan dawdled over to Bronwyn, looking amused.

"I could have dealt with such fools myself," she smirked.

"Of course you could have," Bronwyn replied, trying not to be annoyed, "but then I should have had to pay

blood money for some of them, and Teyrn Loghain would have complained about House Cousland decimating his army. Some of these men have been away from home for months, and you are a very beautiful woman. Some men cannot see a woman's skin without wanting to touch it," she added mildly. She wished that Morrigan would wear mage's robes, or light armor. It would cause less trouble. Or even normal clothing...

"Tis not my fault if men are weak," Morrigan pointed out. "I should not have to change my ways to pander to their lust and vanity."

"Perhaps," Bronwyn agreed, "but some men really are absolute sinks of lust and vanity. And they all believe they are irresistible."

"That is true enough," sniffed Morrigan.

They fell into step together. Bronwyn said, "We are leaving for the Circle in a few days. Have you ever ridden a horse?"

"Ridden a horse?" Morrigan scoffed. "Why would I ever have done such a thing? Why would I want to?"

"Well," Bronwyn said with ever more elaborate patience, "generally I have found I can travel more quickly that way. I would be willing to teach you —"

"I shall travel in my own way just as quickly. Ride your knightly steed if you must. You will find I have no difficult keeping up with you."

"Really?" Bronwyn stopped, wondering what she could mean. "How could you do that?"

"Let us see —" Morrigan stopped as well, pretending to ponder. "A wolf won't do — your mongrel may not like that. A spider might alarm the peasants. A hawk, now — that might be the thing. No one could object to a noble lady with a hawk on her wrist or on her armored shoulder."

Awe and wonder filled Bronwyn. "You can really do that? For a long time? It won't tire you too much?"

Morrigan answered proudly, "I can fly as long as you can ride!"

"We'll see about that!" Bronwyn laughed with delight. "I can ride pretty hard!"

This certainly simplified matters, though she thought she would still beg three horses of the King. It would seem logical — and they would not want to make a spectacle of Morrigan's abilities, if only for her own protection. The third horse would be useful as a pack animal. But Morrigan — what a wonderful talent! She wanted to know more about this...



Loghain was coming back from his inspection of the repairs to the Tower of Ishal, when he saw the Warden, her fine hound with her, deep in conversation with the half-naked Wilder girl. He scowled. From the corner of his eye, he saw Alistair leaving the Highever tent.

"Wait here," he ordered Cauthrien and his escort.

The young bastard saw him coming, saw that he was coming for him, and hurriedly pulled himself together, reddening.

"My lord?"

Loghain spoke quietly. "What is that Wilder girl doing here?"

"Oh, *her*," Alistair replied, suddenly grasping that Loghain might be an ally in his quest to rid the World of Morrigan. "Well, it's like this – Bronwyn went to fetch her brother, and the old woman asked a boon for his care, and the boon was that Morrigan is to travel with us as a *companion*." Seeing the frown on Loghain's face, he added, "I told Bronwyn I didn't think it was a good idea, but she said it was a matter of honor, and she said it in that *way* she has."

"Enough!" Loghain cut him off. "The Warden can choose her company, but if that young woman wishes to remain in this camp, she will put on some clothes. Tell the Warden that," he said coldly, "with my compliments, of course."

It was deeply gratifying, that look of panicked despair on the lad's face. And then Loghain felt a twinge of memory – of another face so like it, and that same expression – one he had never seen Cailan wear...

He scowled and stalked back to his tent.

The knights of Redcliffe arrived that afternoon: too late for battle, but not too late to hear of it and celebrate it. Arl Eamon had been unwell. In fact, he was still unwell, but he had decided to join the army with his knights. His brother and his retainers were concerned for him: he was constantly thirsty, and seemed to tire easily. It was hoped that some rest at the camp at Ostagar would prove beneficial to him.

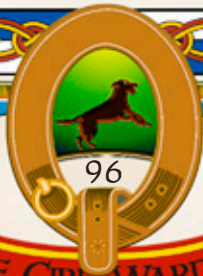
In the Warden's tent, Alistair and Bronwyn heard the commotion of the Arl's arrival, but were hard at work making an inventory of the Grey Wardens' effects. Armor, weapons, clothing, keepsakes, money: much would have to be collected and sent back to Denerim, but not before there was a comprehensive list.

And not before looking through everything to see what could be of use to the two remaining members of the order in Ferelden. Armor and weapons were laid on the cots and on the ground. The chests were lined up and would be gone through methodically.

The small folding table had been cleared, and Bronwyn had set up pen and ink and parchment for her lists. She had two of them: one a tally for coin, the other the inventory proper of the other possessions. Also on the table was the small iron chest containing the Grey Warden funds Duncan had sent to Ostagar. The key had been found on his body. Treasures large and small were arranged in piles. Bottles of wine and fine brandy and more exotic liquors would be packed in a waiting crate.

"Of course we should be using their things, Alistair," Bronwyn insisted. "It's a way to make their memories live on. I shall never forget Belarion's name, now that I wear his tabard and helmet. Would it be better to stow them away in a mouldy cellar, until the owner is utterly forgotten?"

"N-o-o," Alistair admitted with great reluctance, "but some things we shouldn't touch. Like Duncan's things."



"All right," Bronwyn sighed. She really loved Duncan's wonderful dagger. "We can put them on display at the compound. They will have a place of honor there. We can put his armor on a stand and mount the weapons on the wall. Perhaps we can have a plaque inscribed and hung on the wall as well, telling of his life and deeds. Would you like that?"

"Very much. I don't want anybody forgetting Duncan."

"I agree. I think the plaque should have the names of all the Wardens who died here. We won't forget them, Alistair. Duncan's weapons can be displayed as a tribute, but all the rest of this should be put to good use fighting darkspawn. That's what I would want if I died."

He poked about the tent, looking mournful. Beside her on the floor was the traveling chest belonging to a Warden named Ilderic.

"Come and sit here with me." Bronwyn blotted the quill until the ink was just right. "It will go more quickly if you'll take the things out of the chest while I write."

"All right. Ideric. Set of veridium scale here on his cot. A Chantry amulet of silver. A silver ring set with a —"

Bronwyn looked over at it. "— a blue topaz." Her pen started scratching again.

"Right. Two silverite daggers with a nice harness of bronto leather. Eating knife. Longbow — dragonthorn. Silver-mounted quiver from Nevarra. Arrows."

"That's a good bow," Bronwyn muttered. "I may want that one."

"In the chest are one — two — three pair thick woolen



socks. Spare small clothes. Spare shirt of linen. Leather bag with comb and razor. A wet and dirty towel. Pouch with coins totaling — some of these are Orlesian — oh — this is interesting — this is an old square *solidus* from Tevinter. Do you know what that's worth? Because I don't..."

"Alistair, just tell me about the standard coins," Bronwyn said patiently. "Put the *solidus* in the pile with the treasure."

"All right! There's ten-fifteen — twenty — twenty-two silver. A nice gold sovereign from Emperor Florian's time. Two more sovereigns, and —" he counted under his breath — "fifteen coppers."

"Three sovereigns, twenty-two silvers, fifteen coppers," Bronwyn said, adding them to her tally of coin. "Into the money box with them."

There was an impressive clink of precious metal, as Alistair poured the coins from his open hands.

"How much do we have?"

"I'll tell you when we're done."

"And a copy of Cassander's SECRET HISTORY OF THE ORLESIAN EMPRESSES. Hey! I heard that was really lurid."

"Really? All the gory bits?" Bronwyn wondered. "They're certainly a bloodthirsty lot."

"Uh-well, that, too. Also really kind of — well — a *lusty* lot, if you catch my meaning. This book shouldn't even be here. It was banned by the Chantry."

"Oooh! I want to read it. I've never seen an improper book before, but Aldous told me about them. I call dibs!"



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She grabbed it away, and put in on the ground underneath her folding stool.

"I picked it up first!"

"You didn't call dibs. I called dibs. It's rightfully mine. Don't make me fight you for it."

"Hunh!" he grunted, annoyed. "Just as long as I get to read it when you're done."

The work went on: sometimes amusing, sometimes saddening, sometimes simply boring. Bronwyn had already claimed Belarion's nicely carved traveling chest and nearly everything in it — "because I *need* nearly everything," she had declared.

Belarion must have indeed cared about his appearance, for she had been thrilled to find a silver comb, brush, and small hand mirror, all beautifully made, in a pretty case of blue Antivan leather. His shirts and socks and towels were of the best quality, and he had brought some spare clothes that the elves were already altering to fit their new owner: breeches of soft black leather, and a jerkin of the same fine quality, also black, but trimmed with more leather of a silvery grey. His hooded black cloak was something she had desperately needed.

His black thighboots fit Bronwyn quite well, as long as she laced them tightly and wore thick socks. In the chest were some leather hair ties, a small flask of lavender oil, a little box of soap (also scented with lavender), an emerald ring set in fine gold, a small but elegant silver goblet and



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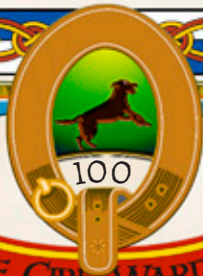
a silver spoon, a compact folding chess set with playing pieces of quartz and malachite, a volume of Orlesian poetry, and a much-loved biography of the Warden Garahel. In a rack of tiny crystal vials, there were a variety of poisons: some of which she knew, and some of which she did not. Belarion had been a person of very refined tastes — more so than most noblemen she knew.

She approved of his taste in weapons, too. She had been proud to bear the ancient family sword of the Couslands, but that was Fergus' by rights, and she gladly laid it aside for the lovely curved blade of silverite that had been the elf's. Belarion was officially her Grey Warden hero now, after Duncan.

That was odd, when she thought about it carefully. Bronwyn was accustomed to thinking of elves as servants, mostly: diligent and skilled like Dariel, or whining and lazy like some of Nan's kitchen help. There were also the elves in Highever's little Alienage, small and shabby beings who were generally described as "layabouts," and "parasites."

She and Fergus had once sneaked into the forbidden Alienage, thinking themselves very daring. It had been — not exactly frightening — but very unpleasant. It was dirty and smelly and sordid. The elves had not known they were the Teyrn's children, but saw that they were rich "shems," and had crowded close, begging for coin. Bronwyn had felt enormously tall and awkward among them, and she and Fergus had hurried away, not telling anyone of their adventure.

Of course, the elves had once had a magnificent civilization:



everyone knew that. They were only a shadow of what they once were. Still, Mother had said everyone was different, and so just as there were noblemen and merchants and peasants among humans, it was reasonable that now and then an outstanding elf would arise. Belarion certainly had been a remarkable person: he had proved worthy in the Joining, just as Bronwyn had. He had fought well and bravely, and the Wardens had accepted him as a brother. It was right to honor his memory, though she wondered if she would have felt uncomfortable around him had he lived. She would think more about that another time.

Alistair moved a different chest up to the table. "So much for Ilderic, poor sod. Here's Tallefer's chest. He was from Ayesleigh — you know — where the last battle of the last Blight was fought. I might keep his sword. The balance is just right, and it's a bit longer than the one I'm using..."

Loud voices came from outside, and the curious sound that must be men slapping each other on the back.

"Teagan! It's been too long!"

Bronwyn recognized the voice of one of Arl Bryland's knights. *Teagan...*

She said quietly. "That's Bann Teagan, the Arl of Redcliffe's brother, isn't it? I can't quite put a face to the name..."

"Yes," Alistair allowed, turning red, which surprised her. "Look. There's something I should tell you —"

"Is it something I'm not going to like?" she asked laughing.

"Maybe."



He was serious, so she became serious as well.

"Well —" he began, and then burst out, "I'm a bastard, all right? I grew up in Redcliffe. Arl Eamon was my guardian."

She saw nothing to get upset about. Sometimes it seemed to her that half the people she knew were bastards.

"Is Arl Eamon your father? There's no reason to be embarrassed. Lots of people are bastards. Some of the nicest people I know are bastards. Except for the ones who are *right* bastards."

He granted her a reluctant chuckle. "I hope you don't think I'm one of those. No — Arl Eamon isn't my father, but he did raise me, and Teagan was around a lot then. I thought I should tell you now, so you aren't taken by surprise by them."

"And then you were educated by the Chantry. I'm surprised the Arl didn't train you as one of his own knights. Who was your father?"

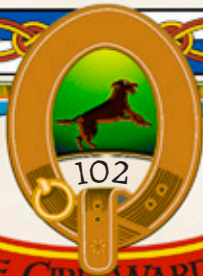
He was so taken aback at the blunt question that he stared at her, jaw dropped.

"Er — uh —"

"Some sort of secret, I take it," she said. "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you." Maybe he was the son of a kinswoman of the Arl's. There must be some sort of scandal involved. Or maybe...

She nearly spoke her thought, and then shut her mouth. Alistair looked like the King. He looked a *lot* like the King. And the King had been worried about him...

Looking at him again, she understood it all, she thought. The old king's bastard, given to a trusted advisor to raise.



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She was only surprised that Teyrn Loghain had not taken charge of him. Hmm. Perhaps that would have been too obvious, if the king wished to keep it quiet. The mother must have been very common indeed for the king to wish to keep it secret so long after the death of Queen Rowan. Or maybe King Maric wanted Cailan to have no rivals.

Of course, by making sure that Cailan had no rivals, he had also deprived him of having a brother...

"And six sovereigns, eighty-one silvers, and twelve coppers," said Alistair, as he poured more coin into their money box. Bronwyn returned to her inventory.



Tables were laid under the sky, arranged in a U-shape. The camp cooks were driven to distraction, wondering how they would put anything decent together, but in the end somehow succeeding.

At the head table were the King, his nobles, and the Wardens. Cailan was faintly disappointed. He would have liked to sit next to the lovely Warden Bronwyn, but he was doomed to have Loghain on one side and Uncle Eamon on the other. It was Loghain, the lucky old war dog, who had the Warden's companionship tonight – not that he would appreciate it. Her cousin Arl Leonas Bryland was on her other side, of course. Arl Urien was on Eamon's other side – really – this army needed more women in its higher ranks!

And he had seen to it that Alistair and Teagan sat together. They knew each other, after all, and it would be nice for them



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to renew their acquaintance. Alistair was a fine fellow, and a Warden. It had been wonderful, having a chance to talk with him, just the two of them alone, last night at the Warden's vigil. He must try to find time to get know his brother better...

Maker! Who was *that*?

In fact, Uncle Eamon was asking him that very question.

The camp seneschal leaned over to assist them. "That young gentlewoman, Your Majesty," he said discreetly, "is the traveling companion of Warden Bronwyn – Lady Bronwyn Cousland, that was. Very proper, for a young noblewoman to have an attendant."

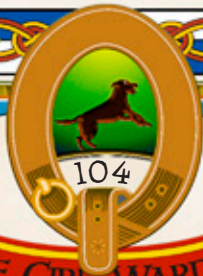
Cailan looked again at the vision in the dark green dress of fine wool. It was that Wilder girl – Morwyn or Morgan – no! Morrigan! What a beauty! She was sitting among the knights of Highever, looking queenly and disdainful. He had promised to reward her for looking after the Teyrn – ah! That must be what Bronwyn was doing! Rescuing this flower from the squalid marshes – giving her an environment worthy of her. How very noble and decent to give her patronage!

What could *he* give her? What did he have with him? Yes! He had been meaning it for the Queen, but Anora would never miss it!

He whispered to the seneschal, who bowed and set off on the errand.



"Do I know you?" asked Bann Teagan, his brow furrowed.



"You do," Alistair assented, "but you'd probably recognize me more easily if I were covered in mud."

"Alistair!" Teagan smiled, pleased to see the lad so well — a Warden, after all — and only one of two who survived the battle. He remembered, and said feelingly, "I was very grieved to hear of the fate of the other Wardens. It would seem that the darkspawn feared them above all else."

"It was — horrible," Alistair agreed. "My friends... I helped gather their ashes at sundown today. Duncan — you must have met him — he was a mentor to me, and the best of men. Bronwyn thinks that's one of the signs that this really is a Blight — only an Archdemon would be cunning enough to pick them off like that."

"Bronwyn is Lady Bronwyn Cousland, the new Warden, I gather. We heard that her brother is here and wounded."

"Recovering, but not conscious yet. Her whole family was massacred by Arl Rendon Howe. Duncan rescued her and she joined the Wardens. She's amazing. Did you hear how she scaled the Tower of Ishal to light the beacon with only a mason's spike for a grappling hook and forty feet of rope...?"



"Well, my lord?" Bronwyn murmured. "Do you deem her sufficiently garbed to remain in camp?"

Loghain flicked the Wilder girl a glance. The knights around her were making complete asses of themselves. "Less likely to start a riot," he agreed briefly. "I notice you are still in armor. Was that the only gown you brought with you?"



Bronwyn almost laughed. "I had no time to pack when I came south. The quartermaster found the gown for her. She looks nice, doesn't she?"

She sipped her wine, slipping him a mischievous smile. The gown and the underdress of delicate white linen, the embroidered sleeve garters, the double belt of dyed and studded leather — all of it had been expensive, but Morrigan had been pleased by the final result. At that, Bronwyn had had to promise that Morrigan could dress as she liked when on their travels.

Loghain was well-disposed towards Bronwyn personally, but did not smile back. Instead, he growled, "What is she after, hanging about here? And who is this mother of hers? Not a Chasind woman, obviously!"

Bronwyn was feeling warm and relaxed with the wine. "She *said* her name was Flemeth," she declared, pleased at the idea of surprising the Teyrn.

Her smile faltered as he caught her wrist in a powerful grip. "Flemeth?" he asked, low and harsh. "As in the Abomination of Legend? The Witch of the Wilds? Is that girl a witch as well?"

Bronwyn felt a shudder of excitement at his touch, but was angry enough at his questions to draw her wrist away. "She may have some magical gifts. I'm not one to tattle to the Templars. She and her mother have been of great help to me, and they saved my brother's life. I am under an obligation to protect Morrigan."



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"Then keep her away from the King," Loghain told her grimly. "He fancies her."

"Really?" Bronwyn asked in concern. "You don't think —" But she followed Loghain's lead, and saw where the King was looking. A great many men were looking in that direction as well. Morrigan really was very beautiful. Bronwyn sighed, feeling ill-groomed, ill-clad, and only half-washed.

"Well might you sigh, if Cailan gets a bastard on her." Loghain shot her a glare. "Keep her away from him," he repeated.

"I shall, of course. Perhaps I should leave for the Circle as soon as Fergus is awake and aware."

"A sound scheme," he grunted.

All they needed was yet another royal bastard. At least Eamon and Teagan seemed to have kept their mouths shut about Alistair. If Cailan got himself killed, of course, it would be another matter.

It was useless to speculate. Arl Bryland claimed the girl's attention, and Loghain concentrated on distracting the King from his newest object of desire.

There was feasting, and drinking, and a great many toasts. Bronwyn was forced to hear of her exploits climbing the Tower of Ishal related by the King himself. She was beginning to hate the whole silly story. She had been terrified the entire time, and all these warriors were treating her like some sort of hero. It was embarrassing, when she was sitting next to a genuine hero, after all.

"— and in recognition of your deeds —"



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Her reward was a dragonbone dagger of dwarven make, glittering with enchantments. It was the finest weapon she had ever possessed, and she longed to play with it and admire it in privacy. It came in a gorgeous sheath of green and purple dragonhide with bronze fittings. Looking at it made her shiver with pleasure.

Nonetheless, she was a Cousland and a warrior herself, and she stood and made the properly modest remarks and was applauded and received another special reward in a gravely approving look from Loghain himself. She sat down, blushing, and feeling a great fool.

"I'll say it again. That's a pretty girl," she overheard Arl Wulffe remark to her cousin Leonas Bryland, "Wonder why we haven't seen her at Court lately?"

She liked her older cousin, but not at the moment, as he had had a bit too much to drink, and whispered back loudly, "Bryce and Eleanor wanted her to get over an inappropriate infatuation —"

Bronwyn burned with embarrassment. She had had no idea that her parents had confided in anyone else. Sickened, she realized that Loghain must have heard. He gave no sign, other than frowning into his wine goblet.

Wulffe was shaking his head. "Shame the Wardens got their hands on her. Just the lass for my eldest. Now, of course —"

Leonas was agreeing. "A scandal, when the Wardens make a teyrn's daughter unmarriageable!"

This was appalling. Bronwyn left off even trying to eat,



and stroked the lovely dagger in her lap.

She felt a light warm breath on her ear as Loghain leaned close to whisper, "If he turns toward Wulffe just a little more, you can stick it right in his kidney."

She bit her lip against the involuntary laugh and nodded, not daring to look at him. "Of course what they are saying about being unmarriageable is perfectly true. Unpleasant, all the same. I really should go see how Fergus is."

He laid his hand over hers. "You cannot rise until the King rises. You know that."

She nodded again, resigned. "I know."

He lifted her silver goblet for a servant to refill, and then handed it her. "At least the King always serves good wine."



Cailan was enjoying himself immensely. A victory — bittersweet, with the loss of the Wardens, of course — but a great victory all the same. He had fought, and fought well. His uncles of Redcliffe were respectful, and all the nobles seemed in harmony tonight.

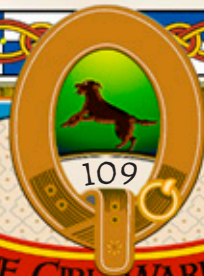
He was about to make some such remark to Loghain, but Loghain was whispering in Warden Bronwyn's ear.

Loghain was whispering in a woman's ear.

Was Loghain *flirting*? The sly old hound!

And whatever he was saying, the girl seemed to like it. She was blushing! And he was passing her a goblet of wine. Their fingers were touching!

Wait until Anora heard about this!



CHAPTER 6



BROTHER
AND SISTER

ARDEN, YOUR BROTHER IS
AWAKE."

Bronwyn emerged from the terrors of the Fade into slanting, early morning light. Wynne was looking down at her, her face serene but pleased. Yes — good news, then. Nearby, Morrigan stirred and murmured in her sleep.

Bronwyn whispered, "I'll dress and come in just a moment."

Fergus was calling, his voice hoarse and weak. Bronwyn slipped uncomfortably into small clothes, shirt, breeches, and boots. She left her hair in its accustomed long sleeping braid, and hurried to the side of her brother's cot.

His eyes wandered the tent in confusion. Seeing her, he smiled, and then frowned, and then asked, "Pup? What are you doing here?"

She did not want to unload all her grief on his poor wounded head. She forced herself to be calm, and to sit on the folding stool by him and take his hand.

"Fergus, you're here in camp at Ostagar. The King has won a great victory. You are safe, and the healer says you will recover completely from your wounds — "



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"Pup!" He shook his head. "Where is Father? Did he bring you along at the last minute?"

"Fergus..." her voice drifted off, and then she pulled herself together. It was useless to lie. If Father had survived, he would have been here beside her. "I am here because terrible things happened at Highever after you left. Rendon Howe has betrayed us. His men were waiting until the castle was defenseless — " she flinched at the growing horror in his eyes. " — and then they attacked."

"Father?" he whispered.

She bit her lip, knowing that tears were coming and would not be denied. "Not just Father. Howe meant to kill us all."

"Oriana?" he grew agitated and tried to sit up. Wynne hurried over to settle him back. He tried to shake her off. "Oren?"

Bronwyn nodded, gripping his hand. "His men went to their chamber first of all. It was quick — it must have been — but Oriana fought them, Fergus! She took one of the bastards with her!"

He was making such awful sounds that her heart bled for him.

"They were killing everyone — even the poor servants — even Nan! The Grey Warden Duncan found me, and Mother and Father had him carry me away, just so someone would live to tell the truth of what Howe had done."

There was a sudden look of hope in his eyes. "But they were alive when you left? Maybe Howe is holding them prisoner?"

She hated to crush him. "Father was badly wounded,



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Fergus. He couldn't have survived much longer. Mother was fighting. I don't believe Howe would have let her live. His whole plan would have depended on no survivors. But I've told the King everything! He has promised us vengeance!"

And then, because he was crying, she slipped from the stool and knelt by his cot and held him. And she cried, too.



Arl Eamon had fallen sick.

Gossip blamed the feast, at which the guests had drunk deep into the night. Too much good wine — the air near the Wilds, with its foggy miasma — the long journey from Redcliffe. Perhaps it had all been too much for him.

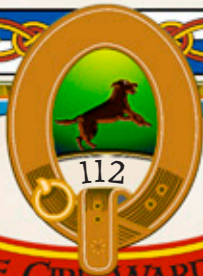
Bann Teagan told Alistair, "This has been coming on him for days. I thought he would delay our departure again, but he was anxious to be here. And then we missed the battle anyway. "

"Does anyone know what the problem is?"

"The healers aren't sure. He's always been so healthy, but it's hard to say..."

Teagan paused, and then made up his mind about something. "Would you mind waiting here a moment? Eamon brought something for you, and you might as well have it now."

Alistair waited, feeling rather miserable. He had looked forward to making things up with the Arl, but they had had little time to speak at the feast. At least Teagan proved himself a true friend, as he always had. It would be horrible, if the Arl were to — well, *die* — and Alistair had



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not thanked him for the things he had done for him.

Teagan emerged from the Redcliffe tent, a small object in his hand. "Eamon kept this for you. He's always meant for you to have it."

"This is — this is my mother's amulet!" Alistair was touched beyond mere words. "I threw it and broke it against the wall the day I left. The Arl must have had it repaired for me. And we parted so badly."

"You always meant more to him than he felt he could show, Alistair," Teagan told him. "We'll pray to the Maker he has an opportunity to tell you himself."

"Let's go to the Wardens' tent," Alistair said thickly. "We can be private there."

They walked through the camp in silence. The uninhabited tent of the Grey Wardens was unnaturally tidy. Bronwyn had finished her meticulous inventory, and what the two of them did not immediately need would be packed on the Wardens' baggage wagon. A convoy would be leaving for Denerim in a few days, and the Wardens' wagon would travel with it, on its way to the Palace. A letter would explain to the servants at the compound what to do with the contents. The big tent would go as well, but Alistair could not bear to have it taken down until after he and Bronwyn were gone.

Teagan looked around briefly, and seated himself on a folding stool. "I suspect Warden Bronwyn has been here. I recall visiting the tent of the Grey Wardens on another



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occasion, and it was — how shall I put it? — not quite so pristine. The Teyrn of Highever is a lucky man, to have a sister's care."

Alistair managed a slight laugh. The Grey Wardens' tent had generally been a mess. Duncan used to get after them about it...

"Well, technically, Grey Wardens aren't supposed to have family ties, but I suppose I can hardly blame her, with the rest of her family being killed so horribly. And I guess it would have been really weird for her, sharing a tent just with me. Not what she's used to."

"There are not many female Grey Wardens, as I understand."

"No, I haven't met many at all. I'm not sure why that is, but it's true. Lucky for us Duncan spotted her. She really did save the day during the battle. We would never have made it up the tower in time, and who knows what might have happened?"

Teagan eyed him seriously. "Teyrn Loghain regards her as the Warden Commander, but she is junior to you."

Alistair fidgeted, poking about the tent. "Are you asking if I prefer to follow rather than to lead? Well, I do. And Bronwyn doesn't seem to have any problem with taking charge. She's used to giving orders, and I'm used to taking them. Not following them, maybe, but basically it's perfect."

"Alistair —"

"If people wanted me to be a leader," Alistair declared, his mouth stubborn, "they shouldn't have drummed into me early on that I was nothing and nobody and mustn't put myself

forward. I've learned that lesson very well, thank you, and I've also learned to live with the consequences. I may not be a leader, but I'm a very *good* follower. I don't want to be Warden Commander – or Emperor of Orlais, either, for that matter.”

Teagan flinched, wondering how it could be possible that Alistair knew of Cailan's secret dealings with the Empire. Surely it was just a figure of speech...

Not that Teagan approved of Cailan's diplomatic courtship of Empress Celene. Cailan was putting himself in a position that might explode in his face. The language that Cailan employed in writing to the Empress was informal, gallant – it could possibly even be construed as the language of courtship. What if the Empress believed Cailan to be offering something warmer than a mere political alliance? Her taste for handsome young men was legend.

It was all hideously complicated by the fact that Eamon had always deplored Cailan's marriage to the child of a jumped-up commoner. He wanted Cailan to end it, and find a new, noble, and presumably more fertile bride. Putting aside Queen Anora – the daughter of the commander of Ferelden's armies! – would be a tricky business. How they planned to deal with Loghain, he had no idea. The dismissal and disgrace of his beloved only child would make of him an implacable, supremely dangerous enemy.

It was technically possible – if scandalous – to obtain an annulment from the Chantry if one's partner was found to be unable to bear children – or father them, if the applicant

was a woman. However, Anora had been crowned Queen Consort of Ferelden. How could one un-crown a Queen? There was no legal precedent for such an action.

And what if the infertile party was not Anora, but Cailan? The Chantry would demand evidence, and it could all become a gigantic embarrassment for everyone concerned.

And who did Eamon think would be suitable to replace her? That was a question indeed! There was something of a shortage of attractive candidates among the nobility. All the really desirable young noblewomen were members of families not allied with Redcliffe: Habren Bryland was a good-looking, rather spirited girl; Bann Alfstanna was a handsome woman, though so close to thirty that her fertility might be called into question; Delilah Howe was said to be pretty and gentle; and after seeing her for himself, he knew that the prize of them all would have been Lady Bronwyn Cousland, the daughter of the only other teyrn in the kingdom.

There had been unpleasant gossip about her absence from Court, but Teagan had already picked up enough of the rumors here at Ostagar to have discovered that the young lady had been in love with someone unsuitable – someone at Court, presumably, since her parents had taken pains to keep her away. A younger son? A mere knight?

Had she fallen in love with Cailan? He was a terrible flirt, and very handsome. Of course her parents would want to protect her from the utter disaster of an affair with

a married king. It was all moot, now, for Lady Bronwyn was now Warden Bronwyn, and the traditions of the Grey Wardens themselves forbade a Grey Warden holding any title – and how much more so that of queen!

However, amongst all of these concerns was the fact that Cailan seemed to love Anora, and she him. Whether it was the romantic love of equal partners, or a carryover from their childhood brother/sister affection, the love was there, and visible. Not that it prevented Cailan straying on his “adventures.” Anora, on the other hand, was admirably faithful to her vows.

But Cailan’s secret correspondence with Orlais, combined with Eamon’s not-so-secret dislike of the Mac Tir marriage, combined with Eamon’s own marriage to an Orlesian – well. Teagan sighed. If anyone looked at all of this together, they might well get the impression that Cailan was planning to marry the Empress himself, and reunite the two countries. There would be war, for most of the people of Ferelden would rather sow the soil with salt than be part of the Empire ever again. And Loghain Mac Tir, Hero of River Dane, would be leading them.

Was this ill-considered campaign part of a secret strategy? Men died in battle all the time. Even a warrior like Loghain could be taken unawares. A battle was an ideal place to stage an assassination that would not appear to be one. Teagan’s soul sickened at the idea. He did not want to imagine that Cailan and Eamon would do such a thing. If

they had, they had not confided in him, thank the Maker!

Is it the Blight itself? he wondered. Is there something in the very air that makes men turn against all they’ve loved? Look at Rendon Howe, who killed his best friend and his entire family. Is the world mad?

“– anyway,” Alistair was saying. “We’ll be heading up to the Circle first. The army only has a grand total of seven mages here at Ostagar, and that’s just ridiculous. Duncan thought so, and Loghain thinks so, and Bronwyn agrees. She’ll use the Right of Conscription if she has to, but she’ll enforce the treaty first. I’ve heard of mages being Grey Wardens. It seems odd to me, of course, but it could be useful.”

Teagan had no trouble catching the thread of the conversation. “So the two of you will rebuild the Wardens.”

“As far as possible. We’ll need some veterans from elsewhere. Wardens who know the lore and history and all that. Since Loghain hates Orlais, perhaps they could be sent from the Free Marches. The Free Marches are so much like Ferelden that nobody would complain. Or from the Anderfels or from – well – anywhere but Orlais.”

“It sounds like you’ve got some good plans,” Teagan approved. “Don’t let Warden Bronwyn make all the decisions, Alistair. At the very least, give her the best advice you possibly can.”

“I suppose I could do that,” Alistair allowed. “Talk is cheap. Which puts it well within my budget.”

The weather had warmed enough that the tent flap was

staked open, letting a light breeze filter through the big front room. Bronwyn was working at the broad trestle table, studying her map and making notes of distances and needed supplies. A flash of green wool made her look up.

It was Morrigan, admiring herself in Teyrn Fergus' small mirror.

"That's lovely," Bronwyn remarked, noticing the heavy gold necklace around Morrigan's throat. "I hadn't seen it before."

"Perhaps because I did not possess it before," Morrigan answered. "'Tis a gift from the King."

"The King!" Bronwyn was concerned. "He sent it to you?"

"'Twas handed to me at dinner by his camp seneschal, in a very pretty little box of amber, with a note of thanks — from the seneschal! — for my 'services to the realm,'" Morrigan answered drolly, with a faint sneer. "It made me sound like a cast-off mistress."

"Be careful of the king," Bronwyn said, her voice low. "He might be the sort of man who thinks that giving you gifts means he has certain rights. Teyrn Loghain told me he admires you."

"I care neither for Loghain's opinion nor for any king," Morrigan declared, "but the necklace is a fine gift, indeed!"

Bronwyn would not treat it as a joke. "Bold words, but do not let him get you alone. I certainly would never want to be alone with him. It's very tricky, defending one's honor from a king. One can't simply punch his head — or turn him into a frog."

Morrigan cocked her head, "Really? I think I could manage it quite easily."

"Just don't," Bronwyn sighed. "It would make my life very difficult."

She unbuckled her weapons from their harness and passed them to the bemused Morrigan. "I have sent word to the King and the Teyrn that my brother is able to speak to them. They will be coming shortly. Would you be so good as to take my sword to the Highever armorer, and ask him to set the edges razor sharp? My spare dagger, too. You cannot miss his tent, as his sharpening wheel is nearby. It should not take long, so perhaps you could wait while he works, and bring them to me afterward? I should count it a kindness on your part."

"And thus the King will be denied the chance to ogle me!" Morrigan shrugged. "Very well, I shall go. He is a fool, anyway, and I do not need any more of Loghain's glares."

"Thank you, Morrigan. I do this for your safety as well as my own honor. I will not let the King think he can do as he likes with my friends."

Morrigan rolled her eyes, and sauntered out of the tent. Bronwyn watched her go, and then noticed that the girl had quickly changed directions. Sure enough, she had just managed to miss the king, who was striding eagerly in the direction of the Teyrn of Highever's tent. Beside him was Teyrn Loghain, looking grave, as usual. Bronwyn felt herself flush and smoothed her hair, knowing she was being silly.



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"Ho there, Bronwyn!"

Cailan saw her sitting at her work. Bronwyn set her father's bronze inkstand over her papers, and rose to greet the men and lead them to Fergus.

"Your Majesty, I have not yet told my brother about joining the Grey Wardens. Perhaps that could be a conversation for another time – "

"Really?" Cailan was astonished. "You've haven't told him about it? Surely you've told him about your part in the victory!"

Loghain was looking at her with interest. Bronwyn blushed furiously, and shook her head.

"No, Your Majesty. I had to tell him about our family, and that was all I thought he could bear at the moment – "

"He should be proud of you!"

Bronwyn wished she could hit the King on the nose. Nothing less seemed likely to make an impression. She could not, so she resorted to a soothing tone.

"I'm sure he shall be, Majesty, but it's too much to take in all at once."

"Hmph!" Cailan scowled, and then stepped through to see the wounded new Teyrn of Highever.

The King, Bronwyn thought, was a little too loud in expressing his sympathy for Fergus' loss. His victory was too great and glorious to allow him to alter his tone appropriately. Teyrn Loghain, by saying less, said it better, and then changed the subject to what Fergus had seen in the Wilds.

" – and darkspawn really do seem to come straight up



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from the earth," Fergus was telling them. "They swarmed over us so fast. Do the Grey Wardens have any explanation for how they do it?"

"Most of the Grey Wardens were killed," Loghain said quietly. "The horde appeared to be targeting them."

"Gallant deaths, each one," Cailan added, his voice thick with emotion. "I know she asked me not to, but I have to tell you that it was such a relief that your sister was spared to us. With her and our friend Alistair, at least there are two Grey Wardens left in Ferelden!"

"My sister?" Fergus asked faintly.

"Yes! And she played a great part in our victory. Scaling the Tower of Ishal when it was overrun with darkspawn – lighting the signal beacon for Loghain's charge – slaying an ogre single-handed – your sister is an inspiration to us all!"

Bronwyn shot Loghain an anguished, beseeching glance. Couldn't *he* shut the King up?

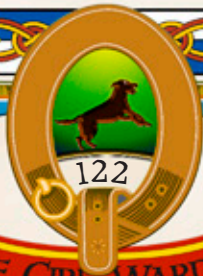
He could not. He frowned, and simply said, "Your sister did her duty and she did it well."

"A Grey Warden?" Fergus was too weak to give full voice to his dismay. His pitying look slid to Bronwyn. "Oh, Pup – "

"I told you Duncan saved me," she told him hurriedly. "His price was to exact a promise from Father that I would join the Wardens."

"Oh, Pup – " he reached out feebly for her hand, and glanced at Loghain. "I know it's not what you wanted..."

Bronwyn was determined not to look at Loghain, or at the



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King, or anywhere else but at her kind and sympathetic brother. Her eyes were burning. "It's all right, really! I'm all right!"

"But Pup – "

"Fergus, it's *done*. It cannot be undone. I am a Warden, and it's hardly an ignoble way to serve Ferelden, after all."

"No, indeed!" agreed Cailan. "I envy her, being a Grey Warden! Glorious!"

Loghain was sorry for the girl. So that bastard Duncan had as good as conscripted Bryce's daughter. No, worse: he had extorted a promise from a dying man as payment for what anyone else would have done as a matter of course. Perhaps it was for the best, though, since the girl was infatuated with the King. She would be leaving soon, and her new duties would keep her away for some time. A pity that such a ridiculous attachment had blighted her marriage prospects and spoiled her life.

Of course Cailan was handsome and charming and all that, and Anora was fond of him. Most women would not care that he was all kinds of fool. But he was a married man, and should not engage in a flirtation or worse with the Cousland girl – or with that witch who had insinuated herself into the girl's company.

If only the girl were not so transparent! She blushed whenever she was in the King's presence, and no doubt he was flattered by that. An innocent still, probably, though that wouldn't last long with the Wardens.

She had looked a bit – angry – at Cailan betraying her



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secret. Possibly spending a few days with the *reality* of Cailan, rather than simply mooning over the *idea* of a young king – yes, that might have gone far to cure her of her infatuation. She was bright enough to see Cailan for what he was, surely.

He watched the rest of the conversation in silence, getting ready to haul the King away when Fergus grew too tired. The King was promising retribution against Howe, of course, though the Maker only knew when they would be able to turn their attention there.

Cailan moved from the treachery of Howe to the current Cousland household, "And where is your charming friend from the Wilds today?"

Bronwyn smiled blandly. "Oh – Morrigan?" she answered in a casual way. "I believe she's out and about, running errands. So kind of her. "

Cailan was briefly dashed, and then looked like he might settle in to wait. Loghain was not about to tolerate that.

"I believe Arl Urien wishes an audience about the decision to raise his troop levy."

"True. You'd think Denerim could send more soldiers than the rest of Ferelden combined! Perhaps we should insist that his son lead the reinforcements. " He was moving at last, with a wish for Fergus' continued recovery, and an "Always a pleasure, Warden," for Bronwyn.

Loghain merely nodded. "Teyrn Fergus. Warden Bronwyn." Bronwyn felt herself blushing again, and hated herself



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for it. She saw the visitors off, and then went back into the tent to face Fergus.



Alistair did quite a bit to save the situation. He was funny and likable, and knew how to talk to an invalid. Maybe it was something they taught in the Chantry.

Now that the truth was out, Bronwyn brought him in, and introduced him, and told Fergus a calm, unvarnished account of the events of the past few weeks. Fergus did not seem pleased with Duncan's insistence that she join the Wardens, but there was no doubt that Duncan had been within his rights. Or that Bronwyn was a proper Grey Warden.

"I told you, didn't I? — that if I were a Grey Warden recruiter, you'd be the one I'd want!"

"Yes, you did. You were right. Don't expect me to say those words ever again."

"Bronwyn's really taken charge of the situation," Alistair told Fergus. "I don't think Teyrn Loghain is the Wardens' greatest admirer, but he was pleased when Bronwyn told him about our treaties. He thought we were going to demand that the Orlesians come in force."

Fergus snorted in disbelief. "The Orlesians! I can just see a Cousland urging that! So tell me more about these treaties."

Bronwyn patted his hand. "We're going to the Circle of Magi, to Orzammar, and eventually to the Dalish elves. The treaties are ancient, older than Ferelden by far. I don't expect any trouble. Well, maybe at the Circle. The



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Templars won't want to let the mages out of their sight, but I'm prepared to be pretty firm with them. Even the seven mages here have made an enormous difference. Wynne is a brilliant healer, and Ilon fought with Alistair at the Tower of Ishal. I've heard that Senior Enchanter Uldred was awesome in the battle."

Fergus frowned. "That's lot of traveling, little sister. What kind of force are you taking with you?"

Alistair looked rueful. Bronwyn managed to smile. "Alistair and I are the last Wardens in Ferelden, Fergus. It's pretty much all down to us. We will be taking Morrigan with us — she is the daughter of the woman who saved you, Fergus." She lowered her voice. "She is a mage, and has some remarkable skills."

"An apostate," Alistair told Fergus. Fergus grimaced, not caring so much about this Morrigan being an apostate, as he did about her being totally a stranger to him.

"I'd like to meet her," he only said. "That's it? The three of you?"

"Well — Scout of course," Bronwyn laughed, pointing to the mabari who stood up at the foot of the cot and grinned at Fergus. "He's our heavy infantry!"

"All right." Fergus managed a slight smile. "The four of you. That's still a pretty small party with the country so unsettled."

"It won't be so small for long," Bronwyn told him cheerfully. "Alistair and I will be recruiting like you never saw. There were twenty-six Wardens in Ferelden only days ago. It will take some time to build back up to that, but we



won't waste any time making a start."

Now that word was out that the Teyrn of Highever was awake and talking, it seemed everyone wanted to talk to him.

He had a meal and a long nap, both of which did him good. Then, with care, he and his cot were moved out to the big front room of the tent, where visitors could pay their respects more comfortably. In between visitors, Alistair kept Fergus supplied with cider and pleasant gossip. Bronwyn gave thanks that her only surviving brother in the Wardens was someone so companionable and well-mannered. Fergus clearly liked him and enjoyed his company. As sad as Fergus was, Alistair had also borne a grievous, recent loss, and the two seemed to understand one another.

"Hmm," she considered, watching the two of them. "Since you, Fergus, are my brother, and you, Alistair, are now my brother according to the Wardens, what does that make the two of you?"

"Brothers-in-law?" Fergus hazarded. "Always wanted one of those."

Alistair flushed red, and then laughed. "Maybe half-brothers. Or lighter-shade-of-Grey-brothers."

"Or step-brothers. I get to be the wicked one, though — like in the story of the Cinderlad."

Bronwyn remembered her mother saying, "*Honestly, it's like dealing with two small boys!*" She turned away and poured herself some cider to hide the sudden tears.



Wynne had gone to the infirmary, but now returned to have another look at her most distinguished patient.

"I believe your healing will progress very quickly now, my lord. You may feel well enough to sit at the table this evening, if your supper is a quiet one. You may even be up to a short walk tomorrow."

"My thanks!" Fergus said, his hand on the older woman's arm. "You've given me a second chance at life, perhaps. I won't waste it, I promise!"

"Then my efforts were not wasted, either," she said with a kind smile.

After she had gone, Fergus said, "You know, the mages I've met here have been very decent people. I know the Chantry is always giving us dire warnings about magic, but times have changed since Andraste's day, surely. That Wynne now — she's a very good person. You can just see it."

"Wait until you meet Morrigan," Alistair snarked. "Then you'll understand all the warnings."

"Warnings about me, Alistair?" Morrigan asked, coming into the tent. "You think me that dangerous? Perhaps you are not entirely without sense."

"Morrigan!" called Bronwyn. "Fergus is much better now. Allow me to present you properly. Teyrn Fergus of Highever," she said, leading Morrigan forward, "this is my friend Morrigan. She and her mother found you in the Wilds and saved your life."

Fergus blinked at the beautiful, finely dressed woman,



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and then said, "My sincere thanks, my lady, both to you and your mother. I confess myself surprised —"

Morrigan's brows lifted suspiciously. "Surprised we would save you?"

"Surprised that a lady like yourself would even be in the Wilds to save a poor soldier," he laughed, a little weakly.

"I have always lived in the Wilds," Morrigan replied, "but I take the compliment in the spirit it was intended. You are — welcome, my lord."

"And I heard you are to be traveling with my sister. Difficult and dangerous work, most likely — and that's just bearing with Bronwyn's company!"

"Oh, yes, thank you so much, Fergus!" Bronwyn smiled, glad that Fergus' spirit was still strong enough to make silly jokes.

Another visitor was coming. "My lord of Highever!" called Cousin Leonas.

Relief over Fergus' recovery, condolences, family chat, war news, praise of Bronwyn. Fergus was told about the Wardens' pyre and Bronwyn's excellent funeral oration. Bronwyn caught Fergus' curious glance her way, and knew she would have to speak to him privately, and soon.

" — and I almost wish Habren were here in the army! I don't know what to do with the girl sometimes. She's up in Denerim now, and spending coin like I owned the King's Mint. Puppies are her latest fancy: she buys a new one every week. No idea what she does with the creatures..."

That earned Bronwyn another of Fergus' quick, shrewd



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looks. He would remember the fight she and Habren had had years ago — the summer Habren had visited Highever — when Bronwyn had found Habren torturing a kitten. Bronwyn looked back at Fergus, and shook her head very slightly. Their cousin would find out the truth of it all eventually, and Bronwyn suspected that it would be thoroughly unpleasant.

Arl Urien arrived, puffing, fresh from his disappointing conference with the King and Teyrn Loghain. After the usual condolences and best wishes, he mentioned his son, Bann Vaughan, left behind in Denerim to rule in his father's absence. Bronwyn could gather from the tone of his voice that Arl Urien was not happy with his only heir. Rumors were rife that the young man was a dreadful bully and was constantly getting into scrapes about the city. Now, news had come from Denerim that he had been wounded in an altercation with an elf girl. The elf had been executed, of course, but it was hinted that Vaughan was at least partly to blame.

"What the boy needs is a lady wife to settle him down," Urien declared, with a quick, almost reproachful glance at Bronwyn.

Leonas pricked up his ears. "I don't know if he has seen much of my daughter Habren, but..."

Bronwyn smiled sweetly, made a pot of honeygrass tea, and shut her ears to the negotiations.

CHAPTER 7

FAREWELL
TO OSTAGAR

FERGUS WAS WELL ENOUGH TO SIT AT THE TABLE AND SUP WITH THEM THAT EVENING. The servants had arranged it for four:

The Teyrn, his sister, Alistair, and Morrigan. Wynne would have a few hours rest, and see that the Teyrn was well before he retired for the night. What Dariel served them showed due concern for the Teyrn's need for wholesome, digestible food, but it was tasty and plentiful for all that.

It was a quiet meal: Bronwyn gave Alistair a hard look when he attempted to bandy words with Morrigan, and a frown for the young witch herself. They subsided, seeing that she was serious. Morrigan still found plenty to say about the stupidity of the world outside their tent. Some of it was funny, and all, alas, was too, too, true. Bronwyn had little to say, herself, for her head was still spinning with the afternoon's conversations.

If only Father were here! He would know how to manage all these people, and he would understand and explain all the little undercurrents in their conversations. She had

learned much from him, but not all she needed.

After Cousin Leonas and Arl Urien, there had been Arl Wulffe, and a host of banns and knights and captains — most especially their own knights and captains of Highever, none of whom Fergus could bear to refuse to see.

There had been others, too. She had now met the brother of Alistair's former guardian.

Bann Teagan seemed a very pleasant and sensible man, and was certainly a handsome one, and he had given her his condolences very kindly. Had he been something other than a younger son, with only a small bannorn of his own, she thought her parents might have considered him as a match for her. But he was a younger son, and no doubt had not been considered exalted enough for the daughter of the premier noble of Ferelden. Ironic, really, for now it was Bronwyn who had been removed from the marriage market as ineligible. Sometimes it was hard not to wish that Thomas Howe were something other than a drunken sot. Perhaps if she had married him, his father would have never betrayed them.

Or maybe Howe would have still betrayed them, and claimed the teyrnir for his son in Bronwyn's name, and she would have been bound, for the rest of her life, to the family of her parents' murderer. That was an idea that she tasted briefly and resolved never to taste again.

Why hadn't Arl Howe made Nathaniel his heir, rather than Thomas? That was a mystery. Father and Mother had been shocked and disappointed. Their families had been so

close, and Amaranthine was next door to Highever. Mother always said there was no point in having grandchildren unless she could see them. But no one had seen Nathaniel in years. The last the Couslands had heard, he was visiting family in the Free Marches. Of course, Nathaniel was too strong and assertive to accept his father's actions without any questions. If Nathaniel had known what his father planned, there would have been trouble, Bronwyn was certain. And that, perhaps, was the answer. Arl Howe must have been deep in his treachery for some time, and had sent Nathaniel away until the deed was done.

Bann Teagan was not there to court her, of course, but to pay his respects to her brother. They chatted, and she could see that Fergus liked him, and that Alistair was very fond of him. Bann Teagan was worried about his own brother, the Arl of Redcliffe. Bronwyn did not know the Arl well, since he and her father had never been political allies and Redcliffe was so far away from Highever. The Arl had joined with Teyrn Loghain in opposing her father's election as King five years ago. Theirs was certainly an alliance of convenience, since Teyrn Loghain could not have approved of Arlessa Isolde, who was an Orlesian, and said to be very haughty and exacting. Nonetheless, the Arl was sick, and little hope was held out for his recovery.

Of course, of greatest interest to her among all the people she had seen today were Teyrn Loghain and King Cailan. Despite the fact that the Teyrn was the King's father-in-law

and the great friend of King Maric, it seemed to Bronwyn that the two men did not actually like one another. She understood enough about families to know that it was not always necessary for family members to like one another: in a crisis they would stand together against the world. Still, she had a constant feeling that there was another conversation going on underneath the one that was spoken aloud – a tacit, ongoing struggle for power and control. Cailan clearly thought himself the equal of his commander in military wisdom. More than equal, in fact: his superior, both in birth and in natural gifts.

As for Loghain: he may have loved King Maric as a brother, but the son was clearly no King Maric. And perhaps that disappointment was at the root of the problem.

Cailan clearly expected to have a special relationship with the Grey Wardens of Ferelden. With Alistair, there were sound reasons, she granted. She granted none for herself. From what Alistair told her, the king had been close to the Wardens: visiting them, drinking with them, sharing stories. She knew she was a poor substitute for someone like Duncan, but she could not bring herself to care. She had never wanted to be a Warden anyway, but she would do her duty.

And her duty was to fight the darkspawn. It was not to play the courtier. With only two Grey Wardens left, there was too much to do. The scouting parties reported seeing only darkspawn stragglers. For the most part

the darkspawn had retreated. But there was a presence, pressing on the edges of her thoughts, walking her dreams, that warned her that this was only a brief respite. She and Alistair need to be on their way, as soon as possible.

And that is what she finally said.

"Fergus – I wish I could stay longer, but I'm going to have to leave. The day after tomorrow, I think."

"So soon?" Fergus was disappointed. "I'd hoped you could stay until I was a bit more myself."

"I wish I could. The darkspawn won't wait, though. I have this terrible feeling that I need to get on with my mission as soon as possible. Alistair – Morrigan – do you think you could be ready by then?"

Morrigan shrugged. "'Tis all one to me."

That was not entirely true. She had liked this glimpse of luxury and privilege. Being a lady was not so insipid a thing as her mother had led her to believe. It was pleasant to have others perform the drudgery, to be served and not to serve, to dress elegantly and to be given fine gifts. A great nobleman treated her as an honored guest. His sister treated her as a friend. People looked at her with respect, and did her bidding without delay. All very agreeable. She would take her green gown with her. One never knew when the opportunity to wear it again might present itself.

"I think you're right, Bronwyn," Alistair considered, spearing another slice of mutton. "I know what you mean about this – forboding – or whatever it is." He grinned

disarmingly at Fergus. "Creepy Grey Warden sort of thing, sensing danger. Bronwyn picked up on it right away – or maybe she's just naturally paranoid. That works, too."

Fergus chuckled. "You'll want some horses. Pick any three you want, and then I'll give you one of those big Nevarran brutes. It will do well for a pack animal, and you'll be able to move faster than with a baggage wagon."

"We really only need three horses in all –" Bronwyn protested.

"Take the Nevarran," Fergus insisted. "I know you'll need it." He pressed a finger to his brow. "Yes – I can see it – you will meet an Orlesian silk merchant on your journey, buy a whole new wardrobe, and only the largest horse in Thedas could bear the weight!"

"Stop! You'll have them thinking I'm as extravagant as Habren Bryland!" She looked at her empty plate with a touch of disappointment. "Of course, one gown might not be a bad idea. What do female Grey Wardens wear when they're not fighting, Alistair?"

"Don't know." Alistair shook his head, palming the last wedge of cheese. "they're always fighting."

Fergus snorted. "Well, if you've a mind to go, you'd better do it. Get your allies sorted out, and then hie yourself back here – or wherever the army is. If we can finish off these darkspawn, we can move on. Maybe go north." He fell silent, and brooded over his wine goblet.

A brief pause. Bronwyn said, "Please don't think me rude, but Fergus and I really must speak privately for a

moment. Could you excuse us?"

Since Fergus was not fit to go much of anywhere, it was obvious that she meant Alistair and Morrigan to leave the tent. Which they did, without comment.

Their absence made the tent larger and curiously empty. Bronwyn waited for Fergus to speak. He did, his voice grim.

"None of us saw any of this coming. How could we have missed it? Father was a clever man."

"Who could predict such malice? Howe dissembled like an Orlesian bard. And ultimately it was stupid," Bronwyn said softly. "He won't get away with it. If he had attacked last summer, when we were all at home, it might have worked. He might have blamed mercenaries, or bandits. Maybe he's gone mad — cunning in the details, but blind to the larger consequences. The last time —" she paused, her eyes widening with realization. "The last time I spoke to Delilah, she said something about her father being different. 'Not himself,' were her words. Maybe it's a kind of Blight sickness. Or madness. But Father didn't see it coming, because it was a self-destructive thing for Howe to do. Howe should have called off the plan when he met Duncan. He was so startled to see a Grey Warden in the castle. He remarked at the time on 'being at a loss.' If he'd been in his right mind, he would have called it all off right then."

"Maybe he couldn't," Fergus considered, grimacing. "Maybe there was no way to contact his men once he was in the castle."

"All the more reason to consider him an idiot." Bronwyn

slapped the table lightly. "Father always said anyone could be assassinated, if the assassin cared nothing for his own life. This is sort of the same thing. Howe's plan was flawed, and he will be destroyed by it in the end. "

"I just wish he had been destroyed by it first." Fergus shook his head. "And he may take what he can of his fortune and flee to the Free Marches. I really, really need to kill him. Then we'll have to consider what to do about the rest of the Howes. We'd be justified in asking for attainder and dispossession for all his heirs. When I think of Oren — and Oriana —"

"I know," Bronwyn agreed quietly. "If Delilah or Thomas knew, nothing would be too bad for them. If they didn't — well — maybe with time — I don't know.."

The silence closed in again.

"I don't either," groaned Fergus, wiping furiously at his eyes with the heel of his hand. "I don't want to be some kind of monster. I don't want to hurt innocent people, but I do want revenge. I want Howe dead. I want him terrified, and remorseful, and then dead."

"We may have to settle for just dead."

"And now you're a Grey Warden." He voice drifted off into weariness. "You made the best of it before the King, but I know that it must be a bitter disappointment. You've been so good and so patient, and for it all to come to nothing must be very hard. I'm sorry, Pup."

"So am I, but who can say what would have happened? Father agreed to open negotiations once I was of age — and if I

still felt the same – but the answer might well have been 'no.'

"Do you still feel the same, seeing him again after so long? He seems to think well of you."

"He thinks well of me as a Grey Warden. And it's pointless to dwell on 'might-have-beens.'"

"He's much too old for you anyway. That's what Mother always said."

"What Mother said," Bronwyn corrected, "was that marriage to Loghain Mac Tir would be 'challenging' in ways I was too young to understand."

"It comes to the same thing. Time is bound to catch up even with him eventually, and then where would you have been?"

"Or I might have been dead in childbirth within the year, like Jennet Kendellss. Or in a hunting accident. Or by falling in the bath. Or he could have been killed in battle. Or we might all be dead in the Blight. You can't live your life waiting for the worst to happen years down the road. But we've had this argument before, and Father gave in, in the end. Much good has it done me. Let's not talk about it anymore. It's time to turn the page."

"I suppose it's better for you to get away for a while. Though – I was wondering about your fellow Warden... Hasn't Alistair been a Grey Warden longer than you? And you gave the funeral address, which makes you appear to be the acting Warden-Commander. Are you just being your usual intolerably bossy self, or are you actually the one in command?"

"Alistair doesn't seem to want to lead. Things need to be done

– now – and I can't wait for other people to pull themselves together. He wanted me to give the address. He spent time in the Chantry – he was trained as a templar, in fact – and you know how peculiar that can make people. He's a bit – I don't know – unwilling to put himself forward. So yes, I am in command, since there isn't anyone else. And there is another thing that I think you need to know." She lowered her voice. "I believe Alistair is King Maric's bastard son."

Fergus stared, and then sputtered out, "You think – well – really? I mean – really? Somebody kept that awfully quiet."

"Yes," she agreed, leaning closer. "He told me he was a bastard, and that the Arl of Redcliffe raised him, but that the Arl was not his father. When I asked who was, he became terribly embarrassed, and wouldn't answer. But look at him and then look at the King, and then look at them when they're together. The King is very interested in Alistair's well-being, and they resemble each other a great deal."

"I'll look. It's not unheard of, after all, but really!" He grinned. "King Maric was an odd sort. Likable, great man and all that, Father always said, but odd. It was as if he didn't really want to be king, and was looking for ways to get out of it. He certainly dumped the worst of the burdens on Loghain. Have you divined who the mother might have been, O Sagacious One?"

"No, but she must not have been very well-born, since he was kept such a secret. One would think King Maric was ashamed of him. But Alistair is a very nice person, and a fine warrior. He's just been taught to be – self-effacing. Yes, that's



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the word exactly. Teyrn Loghain tends to pay him little notice, as if he doesn't approve of him. That was another clue."

"So a highborn lady turned Grey Warden and a clandestine prince join forces to save Ferelden from the darkspawn?" Fergus shook his head, torn between amusement and concern. "It sounds like a very far-fetched Orlesian-style romance. With a beautiful apostate mage for drama and conflict and a loveable mabari hound thrown in for local color!"

"I suppose it does. My experiences as a Grey Warden have not been very romantic so far. I'm glad you're being practical about it. I appreciate the horses, though I ought to pay you for them. The Grey Wardens are not penniless."

"No." Fergus was not smiling. "No. They are my gift to you. And I'm paying for your gear and supplies as well. It's little enough. Do you know what kind of dowry Father would have had to pay out on your marriage? To anybody? What he would have spent on your wedding clothes and jewels — on a proper celebration alone? When you became a Grey Warden, the Couslands got off cheap. And I can't say I'm pleased about it."



And just before dawn of the following day, Arl Eamon of Redcliffe was dead.

Astonishment gave way to mourning. The Arl had been a popular man: much respected by his peers and much revered by his inferiors.



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Alistair was given the news at breakfast and was overcome. He stood up and walked out of the tent with a muttered comment about errands and horses. Bronwyn would have chased him down, had Fergus not caught at her hand and shook his head.

"Give him time, Pup."

"He wanted so much to talk to the Arl, Fergus. I gather that there was some sort of disagreement when Alistair was sent off to the Chantry. Apparently it happened around the time the Arl married that Orlesian woman, and Alistair was very young."

"Maybe the Arlessa thought he was the Arl's. Hard on the boy, nonetheless. Maybe Eamon didn't trust her with the secret. If your theory is correct, who do you suppose knows?"

"Obviously the Arl and his brother Teagan. The King — and Teyrn Loghain, surely. Perhaps no one else knew. No — wait." She considered. "Duncan knew. He must have known. He was friends with both the kings, and he was willing to challenge the Grand Cleric herself for Alistair. Maybe she knew, too."

"Maybe the plan was for Alistair to be a Templar, so he would never have children." Fergus nodded to himself, thinking it over. "So there wouldn't be a illegitimate line of Theirins."

"I daresay. It seems very hard and cruel to me, especially since I gather from the way he talks that Alistair hated the Chantry, and found it — unsuited to his personality."

"Well, then, Duncan rescued him. Good for him. Alistair

seems happy to be a Grey Warden."

Bronwyn grimaced, "That's nice for him."

"Nice for whom?" Morrigan asked, as she emerged from their little sleeping cubicle. As always, she looked very beautiful. "My lord," she said, acknowledging Fergus.

"My lady Morrigan," Fergus answered, his voice softening. "We were speaking of Alistair. His former guardian, the Arl of Redcliffe, died in the night. He is understandably grieved."

Bronwyn said, "I mentioned that Alistair much prefers being a Grey Warden to his life as a Templar."

"And who would not?" Morrigan wondered. "So — no doubt there is to be a notable funeral. If you do not object, I shall gather some herbs this morning. 'Tis unfortunate but certain that we will want healing poultices on our travels."



Cailan could hardly believe that his uncle was gone, and sat by the bier dry-eyed but silent. The pyre was being assembled for the cremation.

"Tragic," summarized Arl Urien. "Simply tragic. Eamon was a fine man."

"Indeed," Loghain agreed. "The King will feel his loss keenly."

"There's a boy, isn't there?" wondered Leonas Bryland. "He's never been brought to a Landsmeet, but I think his name is Connor. He'll have to come now, poor lad, to be confirmed. He's young to come into his title."

"He'll have Teagan to help him," Urien considered. "Good

man, Teagan."

Arl Wulffe muttered, "Wouldn't want to be Teagan when he presents Arlessa Isolde with an urn instead of Eamon. That woman has a tongue!"

Loghain pleaded the excuse of his duties, and walked away, grimacing at the thought of Eamon's Orlesian wife. Despite all the gossip about Isolde and Teagan, he saw no way that they would be able to work together effectively enough to exercise the kind of political influence that Eamon had. Eamon had indulged his wife, but was master in his own house. Teagan would have to resort to cajolery and compromise to manage the Orlesian woman's unreasonable demands — if she permitted him any role at all. Redcliffe would no longer be a center of political dissent, and Eamon would no longer urge Cailan to renounce Anora.

Back in the privacy of his tent, he opened his box of correspondence, considering its secrets. It was only a matter of time, of course, before Connor Guerrin's carefully hidden condition was discovered and he was sent to the Circle of Magi for training. The Landsmeet would hardly accept a mage as an Arl of Ferelden. At that point, Loghain supposed that Teagan would be given Redcliffe, but Teagan was a very different man than his older brother — less traditional, less interfering. Arl Teagan of Redcliffe would not be a problem. A sensible man, and a decent warrior.

The apostate mage Jowan had done his duty, and infiltrating the household as the boy's tutor, had



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administered a subtle poison to Eamon. An ugly, shabby business, but a necessity. Loghain would find some way to reward him, when the fellow turned up. Rather than returning to the Circle, the mage might consider service in the army, elsewhere, under a new name...

Meanwhile there were the Wardens to consider. Or at least the one who mattered. She was brought to mind when his guard poked his head in to say, with an odd smile, "You have a visitor, my lord."

Loghain, mystified, got up from his camp desk and looked out to see the girl's black mabari politely sitting outside his tent, clearly waiting for him.

"Well – good day to you. Scout, I believe?"

A very civil bark.

The guard couldn't hide his grin. "He walked right up, my lord, and sat down there!"

It was fairly amusing. Loghain asked the dog, "Were you patrolling the camp, or was there something you wanted?"

Scout barked, got up to leave, and looked over his shoulder at Loghain.

"You want me to come with you. All right, why not?"

It was not far to the Highever tent. Scout, satisfied that the alpha was not a complete imbecile, panted approvingly, and led the way back to his mistress and her littermate.

Loghain could see the girl at work, and her brother resting on his cot. They looked up as he approached.

"Loghain!" Fergus called out. "A sad business! How is the King?"



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"Still rather in shock. It's a blow to him, naturally. Do you suppose you'll be fit for the funeral tonight?"

"I'll be there," Fergus assured him. "Even if I have to hobble along, leaning on my stalwart sister!"

The girl smiled at her brother and got up to ruffle his hair. An everyday moment of affection, but Loghain was touched by it. The girl, her long hair loose, was looking rather charming, too, dressed in black leather doublet and breeches. Men's clothes, but he supposed that she felt that wearing a woman's gown might undermine her standing as a Grey Warden. Of course, though she might be dressed in men's clothing, the clothing fit her figure well, and no one could mistake her for a man.

The witch and the bastard were nowhere in sight. Loghain allowed the girl to show him to a seat and serve him some sort of Highever-type tea. Warming and quite pleasant, really. The dog lolled at their feet, looking smug.

"What brings you here, my lord?" Bronwyn asked.

"Your dog, actually," Loghain replied, with a half-smile. "Came to my tent, and requested my company!"

"Scout!" the girl laughed, rubbing the hound's ears. "What impertinence!" She flushed becomingly and smiled up at Loghain. "He must have heard me mention you. I said something about needing to speak to you before I left." Her smile faded. "I am sorry to leave Fergus, and I will stay for the funeral tonight, of course, but I've decided that I must be on my way tomorrow."



Fergus pretended to be interested in his tea. "Strange, though. Mabaris may be smart enough, but they usually don't pick up on human names, other than those of their owners' close relations."

Bronwyn tried to look unconcerned. "Well, Scout is smarter than the ordinary hound, and he knows everybody. Don't you, my clever boy?"

The dog barked his agreement. Loghain chuckled. "I had a mabari myself once. Her name was Adalla...well, never mind that. I am here, and what was it you wanted?"

"I thought if you had any letters for the Circle, I could take them, since I'm headed that way. Unless you already sent a courier?"

"I did, but I meant to give you a letter from the King in support of your recruitment efforts. I'll have it drawn up right away. It might help a bit. And since you are leaving so soon, I'll have the clerk copy some maps of mine for you. I've a good one of the Lothing bannorn, where you're headed first."

"Maps!" Bronwyn's eyes lit at the prospect. "How very kind of you! I love maps anyway, and I always feel more confident with one in hand."

"As do I. That reminds me. Bann Ceorlic is in the north right now, but he gave permission to make use of his manor. You can take a letter of introduction from me to the seneschal, and stay there when you pass through."

"Lovely! Thank you, my lord! Much nicer than a tent. Nicer for the horses, too, of course."



"That's all settled, then, I take it?"

Fergus nodded, "I'm giving Bronwyn four horses: one of them is a big Nevarran brute to serve as pack animal. Alistair's off getting all the tack arranged."

Loghain nodded, sipping his tea.

"— and better for her to have them now. Good horses aren't that easy to come by in this country anyway, and they're bloody expensive. I'm thinking about doing some horse breeding up in Highever, when all this is over."

"Not a bad idea. The army could certainly use a more reliable source than thieving Orlesian horse traders."

Bronwyn smirked as the two men shared tales of the depravity of such filthy foreign cheats. All the stories ended in victory for Ferelden, of course. Fergus saw her smirking, and laughed.

"Look at her," he gestured. "She doesn't believe a word we're saying."

It was hard not to laugh out loud. "I do. I really do. At least I'm working very hard at it. Perhaps by tomorrow, I'll be convinced."

They were nice young people, Loghain thought, feeling more relaxed than usual. At least for ambitious, contentious Fereldan nobles.

Fergus would be a good if not brilliant Teyrn, Loghain considered. He would have to marry again, of course, and his choice of bride would be politically significant. His dead wife had been Antivan, and some relation to the



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royal family. A lovely young woman. Well, perhaps Fergus would console himself eventually with a proper Fereldan bride. All the noble girls – and their mothers! – would be after him like a pack of she-wolves.

Then there was the sister: the Girl Warden. She had remarkable potential, he thought. Brave, skilled, and clever. She was just the sort of junior officer that he liked to discover and develop. But no – as the daughter of a teyrn she could never have been a junior officer, and certainly never his junior officer. Had she not been a Grey Warden, she would have begun her military career as an aide to her father or brother. Her birth would have put her in command early on, had she gone for a soldier at all. Bryce had no doubt prepared her for that.

Well, she was in command now – of the only other Grey Warden in Ferelden. He suspected there would be more before long.



Teagan spoke the funeral address for his brother. It was quite a good speech, and more truthful than most of that sort. Loghain listened with approval, agreeing with most of the praise, and pleased to be finally done with this dangerous rival.

A goodly number of mourners were gathered, though nothing like the entire army. Loghain cynically wondered if Cailan had desisted from giving the speech himself for fear of unfavorable comparison with Bronwyn Cousland's barn-burning performance. Teagan, of course, had missed that.

Fergus Cousland, true to his word, was present, looking



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pale but determined. With Alistair on one side and Bronwyn on the other, he bid fair to make it through the evening without falling on his face. The speech was over soon enough, the pyre lit by Teagan and Cailan, and Eamon's earthly remains brightened the valley with a cheerful glow.

"I told you," Cailan hissed to his seneschal, "to bring a folding stool for the Teyrn of Highever, and blast your protocol!"

The stool was hurriedly provided, and Fergus persuaded – and then commanded – to sit.

"No – I won't hear of it!" Cailan insisted. "I'm glad of your company, and I don't want anything to happen to you!"

As exasperating as she sometimes found him, Bronwyn admitted to herself that it was very kindly thought of. The King might be daft on the subject of the Grey Wardens, but his heart was in the right place when consideration and generosity were needed.

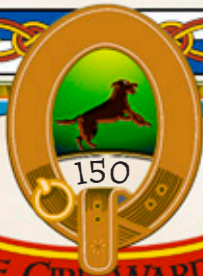
"My lady –"

Bronwyn turned from her brother to see Bann Teagan approaching.

"If it seems to you not too great an imposition," he said, with a gentle smile, "would you consent to be our cup-bearer for the vigil? I fear we are all rather short of female relations to perform the duty."

"I should be honored, Bann Teagan," Bronwyn answered at once.

Again she found herself standing as hostess to a funeral. As she poured wine and handed it to the King and his nobles, it seemed that she was repeating the night of the



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Wardens' vigil. So many words were said again, in the same tones, by the same men. Subtle differences confused her, and she concentrated on the great difference – her brother sitting on a folding camp stool in the midst of it all – to keep her oriented as to time and place.

“ – and it's too bad the tutor up and left, only the day before our departure,” Teagan told an interested Loghain. “Isolde had really come to depend on the fellow, it seems. He claimed some sort of family emergency – but perhaps he was simply tired of the position's demands...”

“ – and Bronwyn's leaving tomorrow,” Fergus sighed to Cousin Leonas. “I'll miss her, but she's really got the bit between her teeth...”

“ – and the Wardens must be rebuilt!” Cailan held forth to a quartet of admiring banns. “We've struck a strong blow, but much remains to be done...”

Alistair was standing silently by. Bronwyn brought him a cup of wine, and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Thanks,” he murmured. “It's odd, isn't it? There's Arl Eamon burning, and everyone is talking about their plans and their future. Are they even thinking about him?”

“It's just life moving on, Alistair. As it should. After all, we'll be moving on tomorrow ourselves, and our lives will never be the same.”

He tasted the wine, and nodded. He took a deeper draught. It was very good wine, after all. “I suppose,” he agreed. He managed a brief smile. “Maybe they'll be better. You never know.”



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She had to leave him then, and Alistair watched her walk away, his smile lingering.

Not far away, Loghain scowled. He had seen the girl put her hand on Alistair's shoulder, and remembered perfectly well what a dangerous journey undertaken by a young man and a young woman might lead to. He noticed that Fergus Cousland also had seen the girl's gesture, and had beckoned the young bastard over. He shifted his position, wanting to hear the exchange.

Alistair leaned over the Teyrn and reddened at the man's next words.

“Touch my sister,” Fergus whispered, smiling kindly, “and you're a dead man!”



Early morning departures sometimes gave Bronwyn that almost-sick feeling. This departure was perhaps the worst of all.

Hungry as Bronwyn was, the odors of campfires and dirty wash water, of latrines and oat porridge and just-about-rancid butter, of unwashed dogs and unwashed people nearly put her off her breakfast. And then there was the very idea of traveling on her own through a country at war, with no Father or Mother or Duncan.

No. The adults she had depended upon were gone. She would have to be the grown-up now, whether she was ready or not.

Alistair was a good friend, but he was no older than she. Or if he was, he was older only in body. He looked to her as their leader. So did Morrigan, for all her independent airs.



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And whining about it wouldn't help anyone, including herself. She made herself eat, and smile, and chat easily about their packs and the temper of the big Nevarran horse Alistair had discovered was named Trampler.

"What have you done with your hair?" Fergus asked, frowning. "It makes you look like Mother."

"It fits under my helmet better this way," Bronwyn told him. "It was this or cut it all off."

"Don't cut it off!" The exclamation was fervent, and simultaneously Fergus' and Alistair's. Alistair blushed. Fergus sat back and eyed Alistair narrowly until the young Warden hurried from the table.

Bronwyn felt her arrangements were as thorough as she could make them. The moneybelt was already wrapped around her waist underneath the chain mail. Eighty-two sovereigns gave her an extra layer of armor. A modest sum was easily accessible in a small leather bag. A cut-purse would not dangerously deplete Grey Wardens funds.

The precious treaties were in a pocket sewn into her shirt. She could not risk losing them by leaving them in a saddlebag. Her maps and other essential papers were close at hand. Stuffed into another bag were the letters she was carrying for the army's mages back to their friends in the Circle. Bronwyn thought that Wynne must have written to every single inhabitant of Kinloch Hold.

Morrigan was looking a little wistful, she thought. They had obtained an extra pack for Morrigan's new finery,



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and it was piled with the rest of the luggage, ready to be tied securely to Trampler's broad back.

"Surely you won't miss camp life!" Bronwyn remarked.

"I shall miss having others do the cooking!" Morrigan shot back, a little tartly. "And having others build the fires, heat the water, and fetch the kindling!"

"Perhaps your destiny is to be a great lady," Fergus suggested. "I don't much like cooking myself."

"Fergus is an appalling cook," Bronwyn told Morrigan. "He can burn water!"

Morrigan gave Fergus a considering look. "I hardly think that that would disqualify him as Teyrn of Highever! He is good at other — more important — things, is he not?"

"I do try," Fergus agreed gravely.

The packs were arranged, the horses saddled, the travelers equipped. Morrigan and Bronwyn had agreed between them that Morrigan would transform in the privacy of the tent, and then be carried out, to avoid too much talk and conjecture.

But there was talk. Fergus raised his brows, when Bronwyn emerged from the tent with the yellow-eyed sparrowhawk on her shoulder.

He came closer, and whispered, "My lady Morrigan?"

The bird cocked its head and preened its feathers dismissively. Bronwyn tried not to burst out laughing.

"That's absolutely the most astonishing thing I've ever seen," Fergus said. "I'm very glad, sister, that you have made such



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a powerful and resourceful friend." He added, "And you, my lady, are just as beautiful a bird as you are a woman!"

Bronwyn had not known it was possible for a hawk to look smug. Others came by to farewell them, and to admire Warden Bronwyn's new pet. Luckily, most of the visitors knew better than to try lay hands on a bird of prey. A few — like Arl Urien — received warning nips from a powerful beak. Scout regarded their strangely altered pack member with mild curiosity, and then diverted some of the public attention to himself. Leonas Bryland gave Bronwyn a silver flask of Tevinter brandy. At the moment, she felt she could happily down the entire contents.

Wynne arrived to say goodbye, and eyed the hawk disapprovingly. Ignoring Morrigan, she put a gentle hand on Bronwyn's. "Be safe, my dear child. Be bold, but not too bold."

"Just as in the old story!" Bronwyn laughed, and leaned in to press a kiss to the mage's cheek. The hawk fluttered her wings in protest.

Fergus wagged his brows dramatically, and growled, "Lest your heart's blood should run cold..."

"I don't know that one," Alistair said, adjusting his stirrups. "I promise to pester you until you tell it to me."

More soldiers were arriving to bid them goodbye.

"That's her! That's the Girl Warden!"

Sergeant Darrow arrived with some of Maric's Shield in tow, and passed her a parcel.

"It's a cake, Warden! Tanna here makes 'em. Figure it'll go



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down well when you're on the road to those foreign places!"

"It's got plums in it, Warden," Tanna said with brusque shyness. "My father taught me how."

"Plumcake?" Bronwyn grinned at the young woman. "If you can make cake in a campfire, I might just have to invoke the Right of Conscription!"

A great commotion bustled their way, and above it all was the familiar, excited voice of the king.

"They've leaving! Look! Loghain! They're leaving!"

Everyone moved aside to make way for King Cailan, who was positively bounding with eagerness. Bronwyn, then Alistair, dropped to one knee in respect. The hawk flapped up lazily to perch on Trampler's back.

"Now there! None of that! Wardens kneel to no one!" Cailan hauled Bronwyn up and squeezed her arm. He shook hands with Alistair very kindly, and slapped a hand on the armored shoulder.

"Maker keep you, brother," he whispered, catching Alistair's eye. He turned to Bronwyn again, speaking for everyone's ears. "You carry our hopes with you, Warden, and I have complete confidence in your success!"

"I thank your Majesty," Bronwyn said, a little dazed at all the ardent good spirits. Her gaze traveled up, irresistably, to the fierce and wintry eyes of Teyrn Loghain, standing silent before her.

She could think of a thousand things she wished to say, none of which were possible.

Loghain said abruptly, "Luck in battle, Warden."

"My lord," she replied. She was in a fire, burning. Somehow she managed to don her helmet and vault into the saddle. Fergus – pale, dear Fergus – reached up for her hand, and she grasped it, sensing him through the thick leather gauntlet. She leaned out of the saddle to kiss him, hearing the murmurs of sentiment and affirmation around her like the surf against the Cliffs of Conobar.

Then she blew out a deep breath, releasing everything that bound her to this place and her old life. She kicked her horse into motion, and the Wardens were on their way. Morrigan rose up in a flutter of white and brown, flying effortlessly in the morning sun.

Loghain watched them go, wishing the girl well. She was young for such a burden, but no younger than he when he and Maric and Rowan set out to defy an empire.

"But – I thought – !" Cailan was looking about in puzzlement. "What about that other girl? I thought she was going with them!"

"Morrigan? She is, Your Majesty," Fergus told him quietly. "She is."

"But – really?" With a sudden realization, Cailan's eyes grew wide, and his smile broadened. "Really? You know, Fergus, real life is often very much like books..."

Loghain rolled his eyes, and with a quick nod to the two young men, strode away to the next unavoidable task.

The crowd dispersed. Already far away, the hoofbeats faded into the ancient stones of the Imperial Highway, echoed by a hawk's plangent cry of farewell.

CHAPTER 8

LOTHERING:
PRETTY AS A
PAINTING

HATEVER ELSE ONE MIGHT THINK OF THE ANCIENT MAGISTERS OF THE TEVINTER EMPIRE, they knew how to build a road. League

after league fell behind, as Bronwyn and her companions cantered north.

The sun shone brightly, the sky blazed blue, and their journey up to that point had been surprisingly uneventful. Smoke rose ominously from distant fires, but the road itself was clear. Bandits undoubtedly did not wish to tangle with the army, and even less with the darkspawn.

What about the darkspawn? Alistair had said that Wardens could sense them. Bronwyn had not noticed anything of the sort herself. They stopped every hour to rest the horses – and Scout – though Bronwyn knew not to wound his feelings by saying so. The air seemed a little too still, the birds a little too quiet, but Alistair had not indicated that he felt anything more unusual than that.

Bronwyn glanced behind her to see how Scout was holding up. He was running along, perfectly happy and



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fit, but something else caught Bronwyn's eye.

"Morrigan! I thought you were going to fly as far as I could ride," she laughed.

The hawk was perched, mightily at her ease, on the broad back of the big pack horse, Trampler. She shrugged her feathers eloquently.

"That's right!" Bronwyn teased. "You said you *could*. You didn't promise you *would*!"

"No surprises there," Alistair muttered.

"We all need a rest," Bronwyn told him. "Up ahead is the Fairebourne. It's no more than a brook here, but it's water. The Teyrn's map shows a feeder spring not far from the highway. We'll make Lothing long before sundown."

Morrigan flew off to reconnoiter. Just before the bridge that spanned the stream, they found a worn track leading down to the water, and to fresh sweet grass for the horses. Bronwyn jumped down from her tall bay gelding, and unwrapped the package of waybread and dried apples. Morrigan changed from feathered predator to leather-clad woman, and joined Bronwyn in the shade of a willow; while Alistair secured the horses before coming for his share of the meal.

It seemed an idyllic place. Water trickled sweetly down the stones of the spring, flowing into the Fairebourne on its journey to the Drakon River. Bronwyn ate hungrily, trying to make the food last as long as possible, savoring the apples' smoky sweetness and the bread's yeasty crunch. Scout lapped at the stream, and then came to sprawl at



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her side, powerful jaws crushing the mealbar she tossed him. The horses cropped the grass, hungry as Wardens.

"It's hard to believe we're at war," Alistair murmured into the pleasant stillness. Morrigan sniffed, picking through her bag of herbs. Bronwyn leaned back against the smooth bark of the willow, shutting her eyes, enjoying the tickling breeze on her face. They were lucky in their weather...

Scout growled low and warningly. Instantly alert, Bronwyn opened her eyes, and was on her feet. Morrigan and Alistair had heard Scout, too, and were getting up, looking about warily.

"What it is, boy?" Bronwyn asked softly. "Wolves?"

He did not respond, and kept up his low rumbling growl. "Bandits? Show me."

The dog was glaring at a clump of bushes on the other side of the stream, his muzzle thrust forward aggressively. Bronwyn eased her sword from its sheath.

"Whoever you are," she called, "Come out now with your hands empty and where I can see them!"

A smothered squeak, and the bushes shook violently. Light footsteps ran away into the undergrowth.

"Scout!" Bronwyn shouted. "Go!"

He burst away, a blur of speed, splashing through the stream and tearing a path through the leaves. Bronwyn followed him, but was only on the far bank of the stream when she heard the thin, high shriek.

"It's a child!" Alistair cried, plunging after her.



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Up the shallow slope, fighting past vicious brambles, they were on Scout and his prey almost too quickly to avoid trampling them. Scout had knocked the child down, and being too well-trained to hurt a small human, was simply holding him? – her? to the ground with his solid mass.

The child kicked out, screaming, "No! No! Mother! No! Help!"

"Let go, Scout," Bronwyn ordered, reaching for a skinny arm. Pulling the child up, she found that Scout had caught a boy of perhaps eight or nine, dressed in the rough clothes of a peasant. He shrank away from the imposing sight of Alistair and his sword and shield, and looked up timidly at Bronwyn, not even trying to free himself.

"You shouldn't sneak up on a warriors' camp, boy," Bronwyn told him quietly. "They're likely to think you're an enemy. What are you doing out here all alone?"

He gaped at her. She gave the thin arm an impatient shake.

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Help," he squeaked, fidgeting desperately. "We need help. Father didn't come home. Mother won't leave without him and something happened over at Old Mackey's holding. I can't find Father."

"They should have gone north weeks ago!" Alistair said, shaking his head.

Bronwyn could only agree. She asked the boy, "How long has your father been gone?"

"Four nights now. Mother doesn't know what to do."

"She needs to go to Lothering," Bronwyn said crisply.



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"How far is your holding?"

"Not far – over that ridge," the boy whimpered. "I thought maybe you'd help us. You didn't look mean, but I was scared to show myself. There are bad men out here sometimes."

"I daresay there are. Come along. We'll go speak to your mother. And you didn't tell me your name."

His name, it transpired, was Conn, and he had never been on the back of a horse before. Morrigan rolled her eyes, but did not even attempt to object to his presence or their detour. She discreetly slipped away to change form. Bronwyn put the boy on the crupper of her horse and told him to hold tight to her.



"But Tarron won't like it if I up and go without telling him! What if he comes back and doesn't know where we are?"

Bronwyn silently thanked her parents for making her come along on those boring visits to their tenants. She knew how to talk to this woman. Mertha, her name was: wife of Tarron Gale.

The house was small and tidy: a kitchen and sitting room combined, a door to a little bedroom, a door to the larder, and a ladder up to a loft where the older children slept. Four children in all. Conn was the eldest, and then there were three girls like stair steps. The smallest could barely walk, and beamed at Scout, putting out chubby arms to him.

Bronwyn said calmly, "You will leave him a note, telling him that you have gone to Lothering. You will pack the

cart, hitch your oxen, and come along *now*."

The pale and pregnant woman looked at her, lip trembling. "Tarron doesn't like it when I do things without telling him. He doesn't like it when I get ideas in my head."

There was no time for this rubbish. "You can tell him you were commanded by the Grey Wardens to evacuate to Lothering. That is perfectly true. And this is Ferelden. A woman and the mother of a family has every right to 'get ideas in her head,' especially when her children's safety is in question!"

"Yes, my lady!"

Bronwyn fixed the woman with her sternest glare. "Alistair and I will hitch the oxen for you. Take all the food in the house."

"Ser — my lady," Mertha hesitated. "Are you *sure* there are darkspawn? Tarron says it's just a story Bann Ceorlic put about to get his hands on the south holdings."

"Pretty sure," Alistair managed.

Morrigan strolled into the little house, looking about in disdain. "Why are we wasting our time here? Let her find out for herself!"

The woman gaped at Morrigan.

Bronwyn hastily told her, "This lady is with us. Yes, there are darkspawn. I fought them only days ago. The King's army just won a great battle against them, but there are always stragglers. You are too close to the remains of the horde, and too isolated for safety. I want to hear no more about it. Dress your children warmly."

There was no parchment in the house for a note. Bronwyn dug some out of a saddlebag, and wrote "GONE TO LOTHERING" in her largest, clearest hand. She felt a bit of satisfaction in nailing it to the table. Tarron might not be as bad a fellow as she imagined, but she had heard much more about him than she cared for.

And the boy and the eldest girl were more useful than their mother, who dithered over her belongings. The girl shooed their chickens into a little cage to be put in the cart, and let the sheep out into the pasture, so they would not starve. The boy was eager to be gone, and showed Bronwyn a column of smoke rising above the trees.

"That's Mackey's place. It's been burning all night."

Morrigan jeered, "Are we going to rescue him, too? Are we going to go from hut to hut to wretched hut, continually saving people who had not the sense to save themselves?"

Imagining the fates of the people in the little valley of the Fairbourne made Bronwyn ill, but she knew that Morrigan was right.

"No," she sighed. "We're not. This is already going to cost us a day. We cannot save them all." She thought Morrigan looked a bit too smug at her answer, and glowered. "But I *shall* save these people."

She was losing time. She was losing time. It gnawed at her, as she packed candles and candlesticks, knowing that her mission should take precedence over one farm family. To walk away, however, was almost certain to sentence them to death.



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Alistair had hitched the oxen to the cart, and was uncomplainingly loading the little vehicle with crates and blankets, with a churn and a featherbed and two smoked hams. Morrigan amused herself by sneering at the children and gathering the dried herbs and flowers hanging from the ceiling.

"Boilwort," she murmured. "I know just what to do with *that!*"

The boy was leading out the family's milk cow, and tying her to the back of the cart. Their speed would be halved, at the best. They would almost certainly have to camp tonight. Bronwyn rubbed the back of her neck irritably, the blood in her veins pounding with frustration. Scout stared out at the forest, ears alert. The wind was in the wrong direction for him to pick up any scents: blowing away from them toward the impenetrable dark green.

The smallest girl was a particularly pretty child. She toddled to Bronwyn, huge blue eyes hopeful.

"Up!"

Mertha, fussing with her pots, called, "Annis, don't bother the Warden!"

"I don't mind," Bronwyn smiled, lifting the little one into her arms. The child nestled there, a warm bundle of life, her white-blonde hair silken and sweet. Bronwyn thought with a pang of Alistair's remarks about the scarcity of Grey Warden children. The idea that she might never have a child of her own made her temples ache with the pressure of *I want* countered by *I cannot*. She had always



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wanted two, herself, and she would name them –

Scout growled.

"Bronwyn."

Alistair was looking at her, tense and wide-eyed.

He was reaching for his sword...

A dark cloud of earth spewed up, just to her right. Before she could turn to see, the genlock was rushing at her, gibbering, needle-like teeth bared in the mad grin of the darkspawn.

Her first impulse was to clutch the child to her, but that was wrong – all wrong – and at once her training came to her. Gritting her teeth, she tossed the wailing little girl aside, heedless of small hands scraping raw on her chainmail, and leaped at the monster, drawing sword and dagger with a smooth metallic whisper. Her blades scissored, nearly severing the genlock's head.

A clang. Alistair, his shield propped against the wagon, had slammed a stewpot instead against the hurlock attacking him, knocking it to the ground. Scout rushed in, and bones snapped as the dog ripped away the creature's face.

Bronwyn could see the pregnant woman framed in the doorway, hands over her mouth in horror, eyes wide and white with fear. The oxen lowed and stamped; the horses whinnied, shying away from the foul stench. Wild, high shrieks filled the air, as the children darted in every direction, distracting the darkspawn from the armed warriors. Trampler squealed in rage, and lashed

out with iron-shod hooves, scattering an attacker's head into scarlet splinters.

A backhand and a squelching stab. Another genlock grimaced in agony and fell back, twitching. An arrow thudded into the wagon, and Bronwyn saw the leering archer, not ten yards away...

"Morrigan!" she shouted.

"I am here!"

A blast of cold frosted the creature, slowing it, and Alistair was hacking at it before it could nock another arrow. Another archer was roaring wordlessly, a little further on. Sparks suddenly leaped around it, stunning it, and Bronwyn was on it, cutting its throat in a veil of blood. But there was another one, half-hidden by the encroaching forest —

A green mist enveloped her, and she nearly vomited. Staggering forward, she glared at the chuckling emissary, its staff raised high for another spell.

"Less fighting, more *dying!*" yelled Alistair. His longsword flashed in a steel arc, and quite suddenly the darkspawn mage was headless, blood pumping from its thick neck. It fell forward, spraying Bronwyn.

"Ugh!" She groaned in disgust, and shook off the last of the spell. Behind her, the mother was screaming, a horrible hoarse sound. Bronwyn wiped foul blood from her eyes. The last of the hurlocks had made a grab for Annis, sitting sobbing in the bloody ground. Morrigan cursed the creature, weakening it. Bronwyn vaulted a low wall

while Scout charged, bowling the darkspawn over. The dog gnawed at the creature's wrist, forcing it to drop its crude axe. Bronwyn stabbed down, nailing the monster to the earth. It thrashed wildly, gobbling and choking. Bronwyn twisted her blade, and the creature jerked and was still.

"Darkspawn!" Conn remarked, unnecessarily, crawling out from under the cart. He poked at a dead hurlock with a bare foot.

"Don't touch it!" Bronwyn ordered. "If you have any blood on you, wash it off immediately! Mertha! Do you hear me? Make sure the children haven't any darkspawn blood on them!"

She crouched down by little Annis, to see if she were badly hurt. The child stared at Bronwyn with her huge blue eyes, and uttered a high, piercing shriek. Her mother rushed up to gather her in her arms, and the other children emerged from their hiding places to huddle all together.

"Come children!" the woman choked, "Let's have a look at you!" She dabbed at them, now and then glancing up at the Wardens a little fearfully.

Morrigan cast a look over the carnage. "Perhaps we ought not to linger?" she suggested.

Alistair came over to admire Bronwyn's handiwork. "I think we work well together," he quipped. He grinned at Bronwyn. "You've done something new with your hair. I like you as a redhead!"

Bronwyn tried to laugh, and failed miserably. "I must look like a monster. Could you finish loading that blasted

cart so we can get out of here?" She stumbled over to the well, and hauled up a bucket. "Here." She shoved the bucket at Morrigan, and leaned over. "Pour it over my head before it congeals."

"Oh, very well. You do look a sight."

It took two buckets before she was clean of the worst of it. "When we get to Lothing," Bronwyn declared, "I swear by the Maker I am washing my hair properly!"

Mertha and the girls were too stunned and terrified to do much more than they were told. Conn was almost too busy – panicky and wild-eyed. No one wanted to stay. The darkspawn lay where they fell, and Mertha only begged to be allowed to lock the door of the house.

Morrigan actually laughed aloud. "She's locking the darkspawn out?"

Bronwyn frowned and hushed her, and then asked softly, "Are you sure you don't want to ride, Morrigan?" It might not be a good idea for Morrigan to shape-change in front of witnesses.

The young witch, however, had already decided what to do. "I shall walk," she declared haughtily. "I enjoy walking."

And so she walked, to the right of Bronwyn's horse, putting the maximum distance between herself and the children and their mother.

The animals were restless and jittery, but calmed down as they put distance between themselves and the farmhold. Bronwyn hoped that no other darkspawn were near. With

the noise the chickens alone made, they were a target for any predator in the neighborhood. The children insisted on riding in the cart, and had to be ordered out when they needed to make the climb up to the Highway.

Once there, however, things improved. The younger children had never seen the great stone wonder, stretching out to the horizon. There was enough novelty here to take their minds from their recent danger.

"That was stupid of me," Bronwyn muttered bitterly.

"What?" protested Alistair. "You did great! We are an awesome, awesome team of mighty darkspawn slayers."

"I was distracted by that child – playing nursemaid when I should have been alert."

"Yes, you were stupid," Morrigan agreed tartly. "Mooning over peasant children! Let it be a lesson to you about the dangers of sentimentality. And yes, Alistair, I agree that we are, in fact, rather awesome."

"Whoa!" Alistair laughed. "We agree about something!"

"Don't expect it to happen again."

Bronwyn was still stirred up. "And that sensing darkspawn thing, Alistair... I thought you meant I would feel something and think, 'Aha! Darkspawn!' I just felt irritable and tense and ready to lash out when they attacked."

"That's it," Alistair informed her. "That's how it feels. Next time you feel that way, you *can* say, 'Aha! Darkspawn!'"

Bronwyn blew out an annoyed breath.

They said little after that, and concentrated on getting



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as far as they could before the sun was low in the sky. The children napped, and then had to be given some bread to eat. And then they needed to stop and go – very cautiously – into the bushes with their tired mother. Bronwyn would have liked to offer to drive the cart for her, but she must stay exactly where she was. They would just have to stop and camp when Mertha was too exhausted to hold the lines anymore. And Bronwyn knew she must not offer to let any of the children ride with her. As the day wore on, Conn got out and walked, and Drisa walked with him a good part of the way. The children might be wary of the human warriors, but gravitated to Scout's vicinity. He was happy enough for the company, and did not object to a small hand scratching his ears now and then.

So they camped early, by a nameless little stream with good water for their animals. They was much work to be done: unsaddling the horses, unloading the packs, watering and feeding the livestock, keeping track of the children. Conn gathered wood for a fire, and Morrigan started it with a casual wave of her staff. She then withdrew to allow Mertha to cook for them.

Bronwyn was passing by the campfire, when Mertha called to her, very low.

"My lady!"

"Yes? What I can do for you?"

"That woman –" Mertha nodded in Morrigan's direction.

"Is she a *mage*?"



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Half-truths and obfuscation would work. "She is indeed. There is nothing for you to fear. There are a number of mages in the King's army – all approved by the Chantry and supervised by the Templars. Alistair himself trained as Templar before he became a Grey Warden. We are very fortunate to have Morrigan with us, don't you think? She did wonders to protect the children."

"I suppose so," the woman answered reluctantly. "But a *mage*... What if she does something to us?"

"She has no reason to do anything except to continue to serve bravely. I give you my word that she is a friend and quite safe."

"If you say so."

The woman went back to her cooking, only half convinced. Bronwyn sighed, and walked away to help Alistair and Conn with the animals. Alistair was currying Trampler.

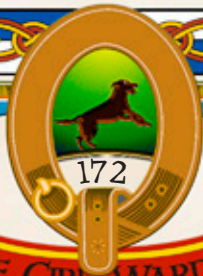
"You're quite good at that," she observed after a moment.

"I should be," he grinned. "Raised in a stable. By dogs mostly, but by horses too."

"What do you mean, 'raised in a stable?' I thought Arl Eamon was your guardian!"

"He was, but I slept in the stable," he answered, as if that were perfectly normal. Seeing Bronwyn's expression, he shrugged, "It wasn't so bad. It was warm there at least, and I had a roof over my head. If guess the Arl thought that if I was pampered, people would think I was his."

Bronwyn tried to temper her outrage, since the man was dead, but she could not help saying, "It is not 'pampering'



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to give a child a proper bed when one has the means to do so! How many beds are there in Castle Redcliffe, anyway?"

"I certainly have no idea," Alistair replied calmly.

Mertha made them a good and plentiful supper — almost plentiful enough for Bronwyn and Alistair. The thick porridge-like stew of barley and carrots and smoked mutton filled all the voids left by the exertions of the day. There was pure spring water to drink and apples to munch afterward. Morrigan decided to take the first watch — Bronwyn suspected to avoid the pandemonium of the children's bedtime. The three oldest children had got over the worst of their fright, and sat close to the Wardens, whispering about darkspawn.

All but Annis. The little girl would not come near Bronwyn. The little girl, in fact, would turn her head away from her, mouth distorting into whimpers of fear. Bronwyn swallowed a lump of misery and dug into her bags for something to lift morale.

"Cake!" she announced. "We'll all feel better for a piece of plumcake."

"Great idea!" Alistair seconded.

The precious cake, which Bronwyn had intended for a later date when luxuries would be harder to come by, was unwrapped and cut into generous wedges. She set one aside for Morrigan, on guard just beyond the trees.

"Oh, my lady!" Mertha reached out uncertainly for the proffered treat. "Thank you kindly! Here, Drisa, give Elwyn this piece."



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"Do you know any stories?" Conn asked.

"A few," Bronwyn admitted.

"What about that *'Be bold, but not too bold story?'*" Alistair suggested.

"Not tonight," Bronwyn said easily. To him, she mouthed the words, *"Too scary."* She considered a moment.

"Long ago," she began, *"before our fathers' fathers came down from the mountains, a war hound was born to the eldest bitch of a tribal chief. They named him Hahaku, and they gave him everything..."*

She told it just as dear old Nan had always told it to her — even on the last day of her life: the great and selfish warhound, puffed up with pride, using its favored position and its strength only to bully others; the chief, at last aware of Hahaku's flaws, rejecting him and matching his son with a more reliable, if weaker dog. The rage of Hahaku, the attack on the chief, and the dog's death by stoning.

"— And what is the moral of this story?" she asked the children.

"Don't bite important people?" Drisa ventured.

Alistair choked on his cake. Bronwyn glared at him.

"Don't be a bully?" This from Conn.

"That's right!" Bronwyn answered, giving the helpless Alistair another look. "You should never abuse your power. The strong must not take advantage of the weak."

"And if the strong are mean, the weak people remember it," Elwyn said solemnly. She elbowed Conn.



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"You are very clever children," Bronwyn told them. "And Drisa, you are right. Biting important people is a very bad idea. I'm sure Scout would agree with that."

Scout gave a considering rumble, cocking his head. Bronwyn laughed. "You certainly wouldn't bite Teyrn Loghain, would you?"

Alistair smirked. "Only if he bit you first."

Scout barked happily, in complete agreement.

"My lady," Mertha asked shyly, "have you seen Teyrn Loghain with your own eyes?"

Bronwyn was glad to answer in the affirmative, wondering why Alistair was making such faces, as Bronwyn confirmed such details as the Teyrn's tall stature and powerful build, his straight and thick black hair falling nearly to his shoulders, his piercing, icy blue eyes, his noble profile, and his shining silverite plate armor.

Mertha told Bronwyn earnestly, "I've raised my children to honor Teyrn Loghain as the hero who freed us from the filthy Orlesians! And to worship the Maker and his Prophet, of course," she added.

The older girl, Drisa, wanted to hear about the King.

"He's young and handsome," Bronwyn told her, smiling. "He has golden hair and wears golden armor, and he's very brave and kind."

"Did you see the Queen, too?" asked Drisa.

Bronwyn shook her head, "The Queen is at the palace in Denerim right now. I haven't seen her in years. Alistair,



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you must have seen her more recently than I."

Alistair gave a nod, stretching his back a bit. "The Queen. Well – Queen Anora is very pretty. She's tall and blonde and looks like a Queen ought to look."

"Is she nice?" wondered Elwyn.

Bronwyn considered. "She has good manners, and is very clever," she allowed.

"Such a lot of places the two of you must have seen!" Mertha marveled. "You've both been to Denerim? Really?" At their amused nods, she asked, "Is that where you're from? I heard it's bigger than Lothering. There are hundreds of houses and thousands of people there! It's hard to believe."

"It's true that there are thousands of people in Denerim," Bronwyn assured her, "but Alistair is originally from Redcliffe, and I am from Highever."

"Highever!" Mertha gasped, as astonished as she would have been by the name of some fabled city – Minrathous or ancient Arlathan. "That's all the way to The Waking Sea!"

"Have you seen the sea, then?" Conn wanted to know.

With a rush, Bronwyn pictured a summer's day on the Cliffs of Conobar, the grey vastness of The Waking Sea glittering below, the stiff salt breeze, the scent of fish and the cries of the seabirds, the sun hot on her face, the prickleweed and madcap trailing over the stony verge, the feeling that she and Fergus stood alone at the edge of the world...

"Yes." She summoned a smile. "I have seen the sea. But enough talk! I think it's time for little Wardens to get some sleep!"



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The children laughed. All but Annis, who still would not look at her.



It took forever to get started in the morning. In the end, an irritated Morrigan deposited the two younger children into the wagon half-dressed, while Mertha obsessively scrubbed at her pans and spoons. At least they had had a good breakfast: a fry-up of eggs and potatoes and wild greens. Mertha was a fine cook, if a slow one. The Gale family seemed better for a night's sleep.

"Let's wear our Warden gear into the town," Bronwyn said to Alistair. "We might get a bit more cooperation that way."

"Fine with me." Alistair liked wearing his Warden tabard. And the children seemed impressed by the helmet. The wings really were — *neat*.

"We're going to Lothing!" Drisa cried to her sisters. "We're going to see the town!"

The children besieged their mother with questions. They had never seen such a thing as a town, but their mother had visited Lothing not once but three times, and felt herself wise enough in city ways to prepare them for their adventure.

Their party grew as they met other wayfarers along the road. The first additions were a pair of frightened Chantry brothers, hoping to be invisible in their hooded cloaks, clinging to the low stone walls along the road for cover, greeting the Wardens on horseback like heroes of legend.



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A family of city elves was swept up in their wake: husband, wife, and pretty little daughter, carrying their worldly goods on their backs. Mertha and her children gaped at them, and Drisa ran up to touch the little elven girl. Then she ran back to the shelter of the creaking wagon, pleased at her own daring.

"My lady," the elven father asked Bronwyn, civil and humble. "Would you permit us to travel under your protection? We will give you no trouble."

"Of course you may." Bronwyn wondered how Alienage elves had wandered so far south. Perhaps they had been working for the army at Ostagar. It was a serious undertaking, to bring a little child to an army camp — especially an elven child...

Perhaps that's why they're not there anymore.

She caught the relieved look the parents shared. They each gave a hand to their little girl, and followed at the back of the party.

Behind her, Mertha hissed at Conn. "Keep an eye on those knife-ears. They're like to steal the cow when we're not looking!"

An elderly couple with a handcart was overtaken, not two miles from the town ahead, as the road began its slow descent into the valley of the Drakon River.

"There are bandits on the road, ser," the old man warned Alistair. "Neighbor of mine was robbed by 'em on his way to town! And beaten, too!"



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"But you're on the road to Lothering," Alistair pointed out mildly.

"No help for it, ser! No help for it. We can't stay, and that's the Maker's truth! We've got a bit put by, and we thought it might be enough for 'em to let us through. But with you and your noble lady..."

"Right. Two more for Lothering!"

"Where did your neighbor encounter the bandits?" asked Bronwyn.

"Not a mile from the town, on this side of the river. Reckon we'll see 'em soon enough, if they haven't left for greener pastures."

Another good thing about horses. One could see farther. Bronwyn and Alistair scanned the road ahead for possible threats. It was not long before they spotted one.

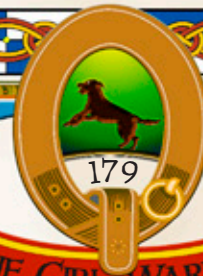
"There they are," Alistair pointed.

Bronwyn saw the men lounging in the distance. Four — no — five fit and well-armed men, who by rights should be in the army. They had blockaded the road with overturned wagons and scattered crates and barrels.

"Stay together and keep up," she told their charges. "These men are nothing to be feared."

"They are fools to get in our way," Morrigan agreed.

Considering that there were four horses and fifteen people, she half expected the waiting men to melt into the trees and wait for weaker prey. But past success must have given them confidence. Their leader looked up at



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their approach, and came forward, a handsome young man with a cocky grin.

"Wake up, gentlemen!" he called, "More travelers approaching! And I'd say the pretty one is the leader!"

The leader's biggest stooge gaped at the approaching party, and rumbled, "Uh, dey don't look like dose odders. And dey've got a big dog. And *horses*."

"Right, *horses*." Alistair smiled. "You should have seen what Trampler there did to a hurlock's skull yesterday." He mimed an explosion. "Boosh! What a mess."

The bandits edged away nervously.

Bronwyn said. "Lucky for us you're here. This road is a disgrace. It's a wonder anyone can get through to Lothering."

"Well, we let a few through, now and then," the leader smirked. "If the price is right."

"Oh? And what are you? Road guards?"

"Yes!" The leader grinned in delight, white teeth flashing. "That's it exactly! We're road guards! We tax the odd passing traveler to cover our expenses."

"Well, we're Grey Wardens, and we don't pay *taxes*."

"Grey Warden?" The stooge blurted out, "Dat's her! Dat's da Girl Warden! She's da one dat killed an ogre! Dey was talkin' about her at da tavern!"

The bandits backed away a little further. The leader's smile grew forced. Bronwyn's smile was forced, too. That bloody awful nickname had preceded her. Some idiot courier had blabbed it out, and even these scum had



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heard it. The leader was looking at her with wary respect.

"The Girl Warden, eh? The Hero of Ostagar, I hear. Well, let's forget about the tax. We'll stand aside and let you get on with your darkpaw-fighting and ogre-killing ways."

"As soon as you clear the road," Bronwyn told him, perfectly seriously. Using the stupid nickname called for some degree of punishment.

"Ah — that's not really how it works..."

"Yes. That's exactly how it works. I am *shocked* at the condition of the road you've been guarding. How are the army couriers to get through? How is the King to get through? Whoever made this mess must be a traitor to Ferelden. I think it would be an act of patriotism to clean it all up." She drew her dagger and tested its edge. "I'm waiting."

It was astonishing how fast the rubbish went over the sides of the road. The bandits all but polished the stones. Their leader grinned gamely, making her a sweeping bow. Bronwyn waved the rest of the party on and stayed to speak to the man.

"You know," she said, her voice light and conversational, "I've met many old soldiers. I've met many *rich* old soldiers. I've even met a number of rich old mercenaries." She leaned down and smiled grimly. "But I've never met an old bandit. *Ever*. I suggest you rethink your career plans. There are opportunities in the south for able men. If I were to find you collecting taxes here again, I might misunderstand the situation and — lose my temper."



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"Right," the man said slowly. "No old bandits."

"Not even middle-aged. Think on it." She turned her horse's head and kicked it into a gallop.

The stooge called out after her. "Did you really kill dat ogre? Dat's pretty neat!"



"There it is. Lothering: pretty as a painting," said Alistair, with a wave at the sight unfolding.

Bronwyn agreed that it was quite a pretty place indeed. Close to the ramp leading off the Imperial Highway was a green meadow, where a few tents were pitched. Beyond was a Chantry of very respectable size, a little stone bridge over a stream that flowed into the Drakon further down, some wattle-and daub houses, and all the usual appurtenances of a country village. Further out, a mill loomed high above the rest on a rocky hill. And further yet, up a gentle rise, was a largish wood and stone edifice, surrounded by outbuildings, that must be Bann Ceorlic's manor.

She turned in the saddle to their new acquaintances. "You all should be safe enough now. Maker watch over you."

But she and Alistair could not just ride away. Everyone came to thank the Wardens, and Conn wanted to shake their hands, and the two older girls wanted to hug Scout and kiss their protectors — Bronwyn and Alistair, at least, as Morrigan refused in disgust — and the elves bowed nearly to the ground. The old couple waved their farewell cheerily, and the brothers quoted a blessing, then hurried



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off to the secure stone bulk of the Chantry.

"You could have been one of them," Bronwyn pointed out primly to Alistair. "Don't you feel you've made a terrible mistake?"

"I do not," he answered with careless swagger. "I get to wear a helmet with wings and ride a horse. And besides, I never would have been a brother. They would have trained me as a Templar, and I would have had the spiffiest armor in Ferelden. No dull robes for me, thank you!"

"No," drawled Morrigan. "'Tis only your wits that are dull!"

"Oh, yes. Thank you so much for that insight, Morrigan."

There was a defensive wall, Bronwyn noted, but it was really no more than a fence. There were a pair of wooden watchtowers, currently unoccupied. She frowned, as they guided their horses down the ramp. There were no guards, and the flimsy gate was open.

The number of campers in the commons and the number of wagons must be unusual. People came to see the warriors and their horses, a fairly notable sight in these parts. There was gossip, and pointing fingers, and to Bronwyn's furious annoyance, a very distinct call of —

"That's the Girl Warden. You can tell by the wings."

Alistair burst out laughing. "I'd be more impressed if *you* had wings."

"Funny. It might be convenient, though. We could all fly along with Morrigan. Let's find the tavern and hear the news before we go on up to the manor."



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Almost immediately, it became clear that at Dane's Refuge, they would never have to pay for their own drinks. Even after the welcomes and the cheers, and even after Bronwyn's polite greeting, people kept staring and smiling at them in a very unsettling way, apparently expecting them to do something prodigiously heroic at any moment.

"You know," Alistair considered. "If we drink everything that people want to buy for us, we probably won't be able to get back on our horses ever again."

"Probably not, so don't," Bronwyn agreed. The ale at Dane's Refuge was very good, all the same. Music thrummed pleasantly from the minstrel's gallery above.

Morrigan raised her brows with haughty languor, and sipped daintily at a cup of pear wine from a goggling admirer.

Even Scout was growing tired of the adulation, and hid under their table.

"Get off my foot, filthy mongrel!" Morrigan scolded.

Only Danal the barkeep appeared to be sane. He kept pouring drinks, muttering to the other patrons to leave the little party at the back table alone.

Out of the blue, Alistair remarked, "Duncan could hold his liquor — he really could — but a lot the other Wardens were pretty much drunk a *lot* of the time."

Morrigan sneered. Another cup of pear wine appeared before her.

"It's a hard life," Bronwyn replied, more to her own thoughts than anything else. "Excuse me," she said, and



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walked over to the bar.

"I was hoping to hear the news," she said to Danal. "Have you heard any rumors?"

"Let's see..." The barkeep considered. "Do you want to hear the rumors about the Girl Warden who won the Battle of Ostagar single-handed?" He gave her a wink.

"I – don't think so."

"How about the rumors that she and Teyrn Loghain are going to beat back the darkspawn before Satinalia? Hand in glove, they are."

"Hmmm." She smiled in spite of herself, but shook her head.

The barkeep pursed his mouth, and continued, more seriously. "Well, I heard that Arlessa Isolde, the young Orlesian wife of Arl Eamon, was cheating on her husband with his brother Bann Teagan, and that she poisoned the Arl so that she and the brother could marry each other!"

Bronwyn was sober quite suddenly. "You don't say?"

Of course, that could be just as ridiculous as the rumors about me.

"And folks up north say that Rendon Howe, the Arl of Amaranthine, has gone clean mad. Murdered the Teyrn of Highever and his wife! Hard to believe."

"Believe it," Bronwyn said shortly.

"And there's always the nasty rumor that the Queen is barren. It's the Maker's Curse, they say, for putting a commoner on the throne."

"That's very unkind," Bronwyn replied at once. "And I'm



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sure it's not true."

"And then what about people just vanishing from their farmholds?" Danal offered. "Just up and disappearing, no one knows where!"

I know where.

"Thank you for the drinks, but we must be going!" Bronwyn turned and saw a pretty young Chantry sister headed her way. From her earnest, hopeful expression, Bronwyn could tell she wanted something.

"We must be *going!*" Bronwyn repeated, more loudly for Alistair's benefit. Scout was instantly at her heels. Morrigan quickly downed her wine and rose lithely from the little table. Alistair gave her a wry grin, but moved to the door nearly as fast.

"You know," he muttered as they mounted their horses. "I smelled mutton roasting. If we'd stayed, we probably could have had a free meal!"

"And so we shall – at the manor," Bronwyn said. "Perhaps people there won't gawk at us so!"





THE VILLAGE OF LOTHERING



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CHAPTER 9

TO THE
MANOR BORN

ANN CEORLIC'S MANOR LOOKED LIKE MANY ANOTHER OF THOSE BELONGING TO FERELDEN'S LESSER NOBILITY. A good looking house,

with well-kept-up outbuildings. Not a castle, certainly, but a typical fortified manor house.

Not as fortified as most, however. What had once been a deep defensive ditch backed by a low stone palisade had been softened by time and flowering vines. The "fortifications" would now serve to keep the sheep out of the front garden, but were now otherwise simply decorative landscaping. Bronwyn was somewhat scandalized that the bann had not spent the sums necessary to maintain his defenses. Of course, this was south-central Ferelden, and far from any of the usual foreign threats...

She dismounted in the handsome stone courtyard, and a stable boy came out to see to the horses. Emerging from the carved front doors was a portly man who was obviously Ceorlic's seneschal.

"I am the Grey Warden Bronwyn Cousland," Bronwyn

introduced herself crisply to the man. Grey Wardens were supposed to have no family names, but Bronwyn's was too powerful a tool to cast aside. "I have here a letter of introduction from Teyrn Loghain, permitting me the use of this manor. This is Warden Alistair, and this is Lady Morrigan. We shall only be troubling you for a day or two before we travel north."

The seneschal goggled. "A Cousland! What an honor, my lady! I am Rurik – Seneschal of Lothing Manor. We haven't had a *Cousland* visit us in – well, years! Teyrn Bryce is your father, then?"

"My father died recently. My brother, Fergus, is now teyrn." Well, it was not official until he was confirmed at the next Landsmeet, but there was no use in puzzling the man with legalities.

"I am sorry to hear of your loss, my lady. Your father was a great man, and once did me the honor to shake my hand."

"I thank you for your courtesy." It never hurt to be polite to staff. This man's goodwill might make the difference between mediocre food and service, and a pleasant stay indeed. "Our horses have had a hard journey."

"They shall have the best of care, my lady," the seneschal replied, with a stern nod to the boy, and another man standing in the stable door. "We have accommodations for your fine hound in our kennels –"

Scout's growl was barely audible.

"I would prefer to keep my mabari with me," Bronwyn said pleasantly.



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"As you wish, my lady." The seneschal was unsurprised. Many nobles did, though Lady Rosalyn was not fond of animals in the house. She was not here, however, and this was a *Cousland*. "If it please you, come to the Hall, and I shall show you to your rooms and have a dinner served to you directly." He leaned closer and whispered discreetly, as they walked up a flagged path lined with flowering shrubs. "Do your companions require separate rooms?"

Bronwyn nearly laughed aloud at the thought of Morrigan and Alistair being taken for a married couple. "Yes, separate, if you please, Rurik. And we would be so very grateful if baths could be arranged tonight."

"Of course! Our bathing facilities are of the most modern contriving. Bann Ceorlic is a stickler for cleanliness and proper comfort!"

"I am glad to hear it."

She only needed to step inside the Great Hall of the manor to see where Bann Ceorlic had spent the money that should have gone to his defenses. Lothing Manor was a little jewelbox – every wooden pillar was elaborately carved with dogs and deer, with garlands of flowers twisting up their length, and riots of oak leaves at the top. The table was polished like armor, and even the benches were padded. There were fine tapestries on the walls, and silken banners hanging from the ceiling. A large portrait of the bann himself, full length and clad in the height of fashion, dominated the wall opposite his high seat at the



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end of the Hall nearest the fire.

Scout, unimpressed by the grandeur, sat down to scratch his ear while the humans gazed about them.

They were led upstairs – the stairs also polished and with carved banisters. The seneschal opened a door with a flourish and there was a pause, as three jaws dropped. Bronwyn's and Morrigan's hastily snapped theirs shut, out of pride, but Alistair's remaining hanging.

"Maker's *Breath!*" he gasped.

"This is your room, Warden Alistair," the seneschal smugly declared. He did so like it when visitors admired his master's domain. Bann Ceorlic's taste was unequalled, even by those of greater wealth and station. "The bathing room is that door down the hall."

After her initial shock, Bronwyn carefully schooled her face to show polite appreciation. This guest room was nicer than her own bedchamber at home! Far nicer, and far more luxurious. Morrigan's room was equally handsome, and she wondered how many gorgeous bedchambers the manor boasted. Morrigan's face was absolutely blank as she walked into the room assigned and shut the door behind her.

"And this is yours, my lady. I hope it meets with your approval."

"Very nice indeed. A paradise of comfort after the camp at Ostagar, I assure you."

"I shall have the servants retrieve your luggage and lay out your gown for dinner."

"Actually, I'm traveling light at the moment, and shall

simply wear the breeches and jerkin I brought."

"If you prefer, my lady, Lady Rosalyn left behind a number of her gowns on her departure for the townhouse in Denerim. They are last year's fashion, but perhaps something would suit."

Well, why not?

"What a pleasant idea. Do so, by all means. My thanks."

"There is a small parlor across the hall. My lord prefers it for its privacy. You may find it a comfortable place to sit with your friends. I shall have a fire lit for you, my lady."

He left, and Bronwyn could explore her new chamber without let or hindrance. *Andraste's Nightgown!* Mother would have been appalled by the extravagance displayed. Of course, not all of it was new: the current bann's father had been a notorious Orlesian collaborator, and had clearly done well by it. King Maric had shown the son great mercy in allowing him to inherit the bannorn.

The room was fully paneled with varnished walnut, rich and dark. The bed was wide, long, and high, and the carved posts were thick as tree trunks. The bedcovers and window hangings were of mossy green velvet, and the coverlet and pillows stuffed with down. The little table by the bed was carved in the form of a flower, and supported a silver double candlestick and wax candles — not tallow tapers. There was a corner fireplace with a cushioned chair and footstool set demurely before it.

She was provided with a polished vanity and bench,

and the mirror of the vanity was Tevinter silver-backed glass, and not polished metal. The armoire was a splendid piece of Nevarran silkwood, fragrant and capacious. There was a little traveling desk on the vanity, filled with parchment and ink and quills and sealing wax, and every possible little luxury. The mullioned windows opened out over the garden, and a rich scent of musk roses and gillyflowers rose up to greet her. Scout trotted over to pick up the smells, whuffed dismissively, and then found a comfortable corner for sprawling.

Bronwyn was filthy from travel, and decided to find the bathroom at once, if only to clean her hands and face before dinner.

"Stay here, Scout. I'll be back in a minute."

Not a sound emerged from her companion's rooms, as Bronwyn sought the designated door. She opened it, and her jaw dropped once more. Gingerly, she reached out to touch items that her father had told her of when he returned from Orlais: a wash basin of painted porcelain, with taps that would allow water — either cold or hot — to pour in with a mere touch. There was a commode, also of porcelain, of the design that allowed one to pull a chain to dispose of the waste down a copper pipe. The bath was a lovely thing of tin, extravagantly enameled in malachite green and deep lapis blue, also with taps for hot and cold water. There were soft and thick towels on a shelf, and all manner of soaps and oils in easy reach. There was a



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sheepskin rug on the floor, warm and soft.

She had never seen such a bathroom, herself, and was shocked to imagine what it had cost to buy the items and install the pipes and boiler to run it. That did not prevent her from washing her face and hands with a lavish amount of the scented soap provided. There was a little mirror above the basin, and after getting a look at herself she washed her face again, rather embarrassed at the amount of grime that was flowing down the drain. Another scrub, and she got at the bit of dried blood that was crusted in her ear. Why had Morrigan not told her she was walking about with darkspawn blood on her?

There was noise through the wall, and when Bronwyn stepped out, she saw servants busily at work in the room next to the bath, feeding a fire under a huge water boiler. As Bronwyn had guessed, the water for the boiler was piped from above — probably a cistern on the roof to catch the rain. The servants bowed to her, and one assured her that “there will be plenty of hot water by this evening, my lady!”

She could not resist having a look into Bann Ceorlic's private parlor, and it was even more than she expected. The floor was not stone, but polished, inlaid wood, covered with silken rugs. It was stuffed to excess with upholstered, cushioned furniture in the Orlesian style. It was quite impossible to conceive of sitting on any of it in her dirty chainmail. She stepped hastily away, and found that other servants were arriving with their gear. One carried



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a large cushion and a folded sheepskin.

“For your hound, my lady,” the servant explained. Bronwyn bit back an incredulous laugh. Scout had a blanket of his own at home, but a *cushion*?

Taking a moment to direct them to the right rooms, she knocked at Morrigan's door, and almost jumped when Morrigan opened it instantly. The young witch was attempting to be inscrutable, but failing. The silken beauty of her surroundings had clearly made an impression. A servant brought in her packs, bowed, and left.

Bronwyn smiled. “You must see the bathroom. It's all fitted up in the latest Orlesian fashion, and it's amazing. The seneschal is sending up a servant with some of Lady Rosalyn's gowns. I'm to pick one to wear to dinner. Why don't you join me? It would keep your own gown clean for a later occasion.”

Morrigan was silent a moment more, and then shrugged. “Amusing, I suppose. Let us see this 'bathroom,' first, then.”



Dinner was sumptuous, and the three of them, splendid in borrowed and somewhat ill-fitting finery, sat long over it. Scout played with a meaty bone in front of the fire: he had already raided the larder, Bronwyn was told. The seneschal apologized for the simplicity of the meal: the bann's Orlesian head cook had traveled north with his master. Only a small staff was left at the manor to maintain it against the bann's return, and to serve the guests who came their way.



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After they retired to the privacy of the little parlor, Alistair remarked, "A man who knows what he likes."

Morrigan smoothed the red velvet of her gown, studying the play of light on the folds of the skirt. "And who has the coin required. 'Tis all the better for us, at any rate."

"You would hardly know we're at war," Bronwyn agreed. "There are almost no guards here: only servants. Rurik told me that the bann and his lady took a strong party of his men to Denerim with them. The rest were sent south to the army with a captain. His sons are in the Free Marches —" she smirked at her companions — "for their *education*. The usual excuse when someone wants either to hide their children's disgrace or protect them from danger. Not particularly admirable."

"You can't say he's not contributing the war effort!" Alistair grinned. "He's providing us with previously unknown luxury. Unknown to me, at least! I imagine Highever Castle is much grander."

"Ha!" Bronwyn shook her head. "My father had expenses other than his own pleasures. We'd have to drill tunnels through stone walls ten feet thick to put in water pipes like Bann Ceorlic's. Let's enjoy it while we can. I, for one, can't wait to wash my hair!"

A soapy scrub for a bemused Scout, leaving him smelling like a field of meadowsweet. Then for her a hot bath; essence of apple-blossom in her freshly washed hair; a dressing gown of silk brocade; a servant girl to comb out



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the tangles in front of a crackling fire; her ragged nails trimmed; a clean nightgown of the finest linen laid out on the bed for her: Bronwyn had never felt so pampered, even when she was a child. It was pleasant, but it also made her feel a little guilty. How could she be enjoying herself, when the soldiers at Ostagar were living on porridge and stale bread? When Duncan was dead and ashes? When her parents were gone and their murderer unpunished?

She sighed, and dismissed the servant. Sitting at the vanity, she took out some parchment from the lap desk, and began a letter to Fergus.

"My lord brother — or silly old Fergus, as you prefer —"

She had decided that he would know everything: so she filled the letter with the events of the past two days. The letter would not be sent until she left the Circle, and had real news, but it would calm her own mind to think through her adventures on a daily basis.

"I can see why Father used to roll his eyes at the mention of Bann Ceorlic. Such a sybarite the man is! My bedchamber boasts lavish and entirely undeserved comfort, but it all pales in comparison to the bathroom —"

Detailing its wonders kept her up until her hair was nearly dry, and she could braid it neatly for the night. It was dark: even the moon had set, and the flickering light of the candles swam before her tired eyes. Scout was already curled up and dreaming on his ridiculous cushion. Slipping into the wide bed, she found it just as



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soft as she had hoped...



This is the Fade. She has been here before, and will no doubt be here again.

Darkspawn grunt and squeal and shit, crouching by huge fires. Bronwyn is dressed in her delicate white nightgown, walking barefoot amongst them, but they take no notice. She is one of them, and they are one with her. The foul reek permeates into her very flesh and flows through her veins. At a crude forge, a bent figure is hammering out blades. It is a human — or was: his eyes dull, his face blotched with taint, his craftsmanship listless and slovenly. He is becoming useless for work, and will soon be good only for meat. He will not care. The caring bit left his mind long ago.

Heads on poles line the tunnel — heads of humans and heads of dwarves. They are half-flayed and eyeless. Bronwyn is deep in the Dead Trenches. The words mean nothing and everything to her. She has never heard of them before and she has always known them. This is home: this is her destiny.

Far away sounds a voice of infinite beauty: a wise voice and a terrible. It is the Old God Urthemiel, now perverted and incarnate as the Archdemon. The God of Beauty is their God now: its voice sweeter than any before it, fairer even the mighty First, the God Dumat. Their God will lead them up into the sunlit lands, to kill and eat, to take what is theirs back into the dark places. The exquisite voice sings out its commands, and far away a woman's voice screams in counterpoint. They are doing what must be



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done, what they have always done, and it is good...

The Dead Trenches recede, and Bronwyn is in a room she knows well. This is a real dream, a recurring dream, and not a bloodtaint vision, then. Her body relaxes, sinking into the familiar.

She is sitting on an embroidered footstool by the fire, brushing out her hair, waiting for him. Rain is falling, water sheeting the mullioned windows. A sweet sound: a sound that the warmth of the fire transforms into the music of safety and comfort.

He enters, fierce and shining as a falling star. His eyes seek out Bronwyn, sitting by the fire, and she waits for his gaze to soften, as it does only for her.

Instead, he strides forward and grasps her wrist, caring nothing for her pain. He drags her to the wide writing table, and he slaps down the papers in front of her. His eyes are icy shards of anger and suspicion. His mouth is moving, calling her spy and traitor...

And the hurlock gibbers, its face inches from hers...



"Ugh!" Bronwyn woke, staring up at the dim velvet canopy above. "Dream," she mumbled, and turned over, instantly forgetting it all. "Bad dream..."

When her eyes opened again, the canopy was green as young leaves. She winced at the brightness and lay back on the down pillows.

She was in a real bed, in a real bedchamber, and pale yellow sunshine was streaming through real windows. In fact, she was in a fabulous bed, in a gorgeous bedchamber.



There was no reason for her to rise early, and no one was currently threatening to kill her. She could laze here, and if she were very, very bad, she could summon a servant and have her breakfast brought to her on a tray, like horrible old Aunt Luvinia.

"I'm not that far gone," she groaned.

Scout whined and came over to press his nose against her arm.

Time for you to get up and for me to go out.

"Yes, I know. I'm up. See me getting up." They would move on today, but there was no reason to leave until they were well rested. A good breakfast for humans and beasts, and then back to the Imperial Highway.

A soft knock at the door.

"Who is it?" she called blearily.

"It's Kara, my lady. The seneschal sent me to tell you breakfast would be ready soon, and to help you dress."

"Come in, then."

It was the same servant who had seen to her last night. Nice little thing. At Highever, Bronwyn was expected to be able to dress herself. Kara came in, a bundle of linen in her arm. Scout dodged past her, paws pattering down the stairs, eager to mark out the garden as his own.

"I have your laundry done, my lady."

"Oh. Good." That was right. The girl had taken her shirts and small clothes with her last night. She must have washed them and let them dry overnight. A hint of lavender drifted through the room.



And then she rose early to iron it all. I must thank her with silver before I go.

She stumbled to the bathroom, and returned to find Kara ready with her best shirt and her Warden's tabard.

"What's that noise below?" she asked. "Is it Market Day here?"

"No, my lady," the girl told her, wide-eyed. "Some freeholders have come to seek audience with you. The seneschal bade them wait until you had your breakfast."

"Very well," Bronwyn sighed. It was now most unlikely she would be leaving Lothering that day. She had better have something to eat, because dealing with the freeholders might take some time.

Alistair, she discovered, was already downstairs and eating his way through the feast provided. Morrigan had breakfasted early, and was reading in the library. Bronwyn decided that she wanted to make a good impression, and put on her armor and her tabard over it. Then she went down for a quick meal. Her hair, wavy from last night's braiding, she would wear down, for there was no time to arrange it.

"Your adoring public awaits," Alistair smirked at her, filling the last empty places with a snack of dried cherries. "They began arriving just after dawn, I'm told."

"Get your armor on," she warned him. "We need to make a decent appearance."

A bowl of porridge later, she told the seneschal to move the table and benches out of the way, and show their visitors in. Scout loped back to her, all the better for a



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visit outside. Morrigan, grand once again in red velvet (Bronwyn suspected she would wear it until they were actually leaving), strolled in to see the show.

"Both of you should enter with me, and stand by the High Seat," Bronwyn said to her companions. An audience was nothing new. Father had made her sit by him on his regular First Day and Twelfth Day appearances since she was old enough to understand what was going on. He was Lord of High, Middle, and Low Justice in Highever, and hearing lawsuits and criminal cases had taken much of his time. When he was away, Mother had undertaken the duty, and it had been interesting to see how differently she judged. Lothering was an unknown place, of course, and no doubt would have its share of surprises.

The four of them waited at the top of the stairs, until the Seneschal's voice rang out.

"People of Lothering: Lady Bronwyn Cousland, Grey Warden of Ferelden!"

Alistair snorted a laugh at the pomp of it all, and Bronwyn elbowed him.

"Do try to make a stab at dignity, Alistair," Morrigan said, her voice acid with reproof. "No matter how it pains you."

Bronwyn thought that their entrance was effective. The Hall was filled to bursting with farm folk, with villagers, with a pair of well-dressed surface dwarves who must surely be traders, with some ragged refugees. The Chantry was represented as well, with three Templars and a clutch of



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priests, including the young redheaded sister from the tavern.

Bronwyn was ready with some words of thanks for their kind welcome, but never said them, for even before she could take the High Seat, pandemonium broke out.

"— Are the darkspawn coming?"

"— Is it true all the other Wardens were killed?"

"— Are the Orlesians invading?"

"— What about my crops, then?"

"— You're the Girl Warden, aren't you?"

Father would never have permitted an audience to get so out of control. Bronwyn raised her hand and shouted, "Silence!" Alistair unslung his shield, and banged the hilt of his sword against it until the noise subsided.

"Now," Bronwyn said calmly into the uneasy quiet. "I am here, and I will answer your questions as best I may. Yes, I am indeed the Grey Warden Bronwyn. I was at Ostagar for the battle, as was Warden Alistair here. By the Maker's favor, by the valor of our King Cailan, and by the wisdom of Teyrn Loghain it was a great victory for Ferelden. Sadly, yes — the other Wardens were killed. Our victory has stemmed the darkspawn movement north, but we must all be vigilant."

An anxious man — a farmer from the dirt on his boots — called out, "I heard the King sent for the Orlesians. Are they coming back to take over?"

The noise in the hall threatened to burst forth again. Bronwyn raised her voice.

"The Orlesians are not coming in force. Some Orlesian



Grey Wardens may eventually join in our struggle against the Blight, but that is because Grey Wardens fight darkspawn wherever they are. The Empress has indeed offered the services of her chevaliers, but Teyrn Loghain does not deem that necessary or advisable at this time."

"I'll just wager he don't!" one village woman shouted, and laughter rippled through the room.

Bronwyn raised her hand again, and smiled tolerantly.

"What about the bandits, now?" another man complained. "Why don't the Templars do something about them – and the wolves and spiders, too?"

A tall, dark-skinned Templar looked harassed. "Hunting beasts and bandits is not the mission of the Chantry –"

"Why not?" shrilled a woman. "You've got swords and that fancy armor! Seems like you do nought but stand around all day, safe in the Chantry! I heard that Girl Warden there –" she pointed at Bronwyn in a very impertinent way – "wasn't here an hour before *she* chased a gang of the rascals away. Why can't the Templars do the like?"

The Chantry contingent bristled, and Bronwyn asked, "Do you not have a village militia to deal with these things? Who is your mayor?"

The seneschal intervened, somewhat embarrassed. "There is no mayor of Lothering. Bann Ceorlic prefers to manage these affairs directly."

"Well," Bronwyn asked, "who was delegated to lead in his absence?"



That raised more noise. The upshot was that the bann had departed, leaving no instructions for the defense of his bannorn whatever, other than guards to protect his personal manor. Bronwyn fought to keep her face impassive, but was shocked at such indifference to the safety of his own people. If her cousin Arl Bryland were told of this, he might be able to sway a number of the freeholders to his own vassalage. She knew that South Reach was not so carelessly looked after.

She silenced the noise once more. "It's clear that you must have a militia, and that you need someone to lead it –"

"Could you not stay, my lady?" an old man pleaded. "I'm sure we'd all be honored to have you lead us."

Another outburst of anxious, eager voices.

"I cannot." Bronwyn shook her head. "I am on my way north on a vital mission. However –" she shouted, to quell the disappointment. "I can stay long enough to help you organize yourselves for your own defense. We are Fereldans!" she urged, seeing the doubting faces about her. "We're not cowed Orlesian serfs, waiting for our masters to decide what's best for us. Teyrn Loghain didn't chase the chevaliers out of our country by staying on his farm, waiting for someone else to do the job! He saw what needed to be done, and he did it!"

"Well –" muttered one man. "he is a Hero, after all."

Bronwyn interrupted him ruthlessly. " – And he didn't do it alone! He had people just like you and me who stood

with him. And we won. Now I want to see every fit man and woman at noon in the field across from the Chantry. That means everyone who isn't pregnant or doesn't have children who can't be looked after by someone else for a few hours a day. We'll muster for a weapon-showing and you can choose a leader: a strong and fair man or woman you trust. It doesn't have to be the best warrior, but he or she should have good sense. And some of you older folk might have served in the last war. We could use your advice. You're more than welcome to join us."

"My lady —" a dark-haired young woman asked, biting her lip. "Some of us aren't trained to arms like you. What can we do?"

"Can you ring a bell?" Bronwyn asked her.

"I — I — well —"

"If you can ring a bell, you can take a turn at watch in one of the towers or up in the mill. You should have people there all the time, and then your militia can deal with trouble before it's on you. The river is a natural barrier and that should protect you as far as the bridge —"

"There's spiders down by the river," a man objected. "Spiders and bears and more of them bandits."

"And wolves!" added another voice from the back.

"What a pack of children!" sneered Morrigan, softly in Bronwyn's ear. "Explain to me why you are trying so desperately to pretend they are not?"

"Children grow up," Bronwyn whispered back. "And these

had better grow up soon, or they'll die." Aloud she shouted, "Very well! I and my companions will have a look at these spiders and bears and — *whatever*. And we'll kill them, and at noon I want to see all of you so I can tell you about it!"

"What if we don't have a weapon?" whined another man. He was one of those idiots Bronwyn had seen gossiping outside the tavern.

"I see a thumping great knife right there on your belt! If you have a knife, you have a pike. You must have a carpenter in this town. I want him to bring some poles to the muster, and someone else should bring rope or leather cording. They'll be paid, never fear. Now I'm off to do battle. Someone point us at these blasted bandits, for Maker's sake!"

They could not leave instantly. Morrigan had to change from red velvet to black leather, Alistair fetched their helmets and bows, and Bronwyn remained to talk with the persistent questioners. Scout, of course, was perfect just as he was.

The dark-skinned Templar introduced himself as Ser Bryant, Knight-Commander of the Lothing Chantry. He seemed a pleasant and cooperative enough man, and he hoped that Bronwyn would be paying a visit to the Revered Mother before her departure.

"Of course I shall, Ser Bryant. I should be most grateful for her blessing on our enterprise. I hope to be there before the weapon-showing, or certainly after. Do you have any information about these local nuisances before I go out in pursuit?"

Not really, it appeared. Privately, Bronwyn sympathized with the villagers. The Templars were one of the best-armed forces in all Ferelden, and they had done exactly nothing to assist their country in its time of greatest danger. No: that was not true – they had sent two Templars to stand guard over seven mages at Ostagar, but she had not heard that they engaged in the battle personally. Their task, she gathered, was to kill those mages if they showed any signs of demonic possession or blood magic.

It was all very well to fight mages-turned-abominations, but those cases were few and far between, and Bronwyn was not convinced that all mages that refused to be caged in the Circle were mortal dangers. Their numbers were too small, and they did not rampage about the country, *eating* people. Morrigan had proved herself a friend, and even Flemeth was not dangerous in the way a single hurlock could be.

However, there was nothing to be gained by antagonizing this man, who seemed well-disposed enough toward her.

She headed to the door, trying to get past all the well-wishers, when she found the red-headed sister standing in front of her, blue eyes wide, words tumbling from her in a torrent.

"I was so glad when I heard the Grey Wardens were here in Lothing! You are sworn to fight the darkspawn, yes? I know that after what happened at Ostagar you'll need all the help you can get! That's why I'm coming along."

"Ah." Bronwyn raised her brows, and noticed a pair of older sisters rolling their eyes at each other. Was there

something wrong with this young woman? Other than her speech, which was odd...

She asked, "Why are you so eager to come with me?"

Quite seriously, the sister answered, "The Maker told me to."

One of the older sisters broke in, and tried to pull the young woman away. "Come, Sister Leliana. Excuse her, Warden, she is a little..." there was a quick, explicit gesture to her head.

Sister Leliana jerked her arm free, and pleaded with Bronwyn. "I know that sounds insane, but what you do – what you are *meant* to do, is the Maker's work. Let me help."

Bronwyn shot the smirking older women a cool look. This girl was the first person she had met since she left Ostagar who had actually offered to help, rather than demand something for herself. She did not deserve mockery.

"I very much appreciate your offer. Never doubt that. I hope that you will remember me in your prayers. There is so much you can do for the people here. I can only offer you danger and hardship, and in fact I must be off now to fight."

Alistair arrived, and they slapped on their helmets and took bows with them as well as their swords. Alistair had confessed that he was no sort of archer at all – "not something we're trained for in the Templars" – but Bronwyn had insisted he take the crossbow that had belonged to Hayward of Ayesleigh, in order to have a ranged weapon. Morrigan stalked proudly down the stairs in her revealing Wilder garments, ignoring the whispers of admiration or disapproval.

Bronwyn nodded to her companions. "Let's go," and glanced at the red-headed girl, who was arguing with her fellow sisters in angry whispers.

As Bronwyn stepped outside, the girl broke away, trying to follow, calling out, "But I can fight! I can do more than fight! I put all that behind me when I came here, but if it is the Maker's will, I will take it up again, gladly. Let me help you!"

The girl's speech...the accent... Bronwyn scowled. An Orlesian! Here in Lothering!

"It cannot be," Bronwyn said firmly. "I will say no more."

It seemed half the village was following them – not to help, of course, but to gawk. Well, if they wanted a show, they'd get one. They had been eager enough to give directions to the camp of the local bandits.

It was all too scandalously easy. The bandits were few, and no match for heavily armed warriors accompanied by a mage and a mabari. Morrigan froze them, Alistair smashed them down with his shield, Bronwyn slashed their throats, and Scout shredded them. A few more appeared out of the trees, and two of those ran away, escaping north on the Highway. The others foolishly tried to support their fellows. One had a huge maul that would have flattened Bronwyn, had she obligingly stood still.

She did not. She danced in, too close for the maul to be of use, and the man slumped backwards, spurting blood. His friend rushed forward to avenge him, and Bronwyn thrust low, arm extended, and ran him through. He must

be the last, for from the safety of the mill, there were shouts and applause, celebrating the Wardens' victory. Alistair grimaced at her.

"They could have done this for themselves, you know."

"Oooh!" cried Morrigan in mock horror. "But that would have been *dangerous!*"

The only person within fifty yards was the crazy Orlesian Chantry sister, who was marching in their direction, pretty face set in determined lines. She was wearing a big dagger in a harness over her right shoulder. It looked very odd, contrasting with the soft colors of her demure long robes.

"Stop!" Bronwyn called to her. "You'll get hurt!"

Morrigan shrugged. "What harm can she do? Perhaps she will be useful as bait for the bears."

"Now that's just mean," Alistair said.

They set off along the river, looking for the lair they had been told of. Behind them, Sister Leliana was rummaging through the corpses of the bandits, apparently with some success. She now had a longbow and a quiver added to her weaponry. Bronwyn shook her head, and decided to let the poor girl be.

Bows were a good starting point with the bears. Bronwyn wished she had a boar spear with her, but with Morrigan's help they were dispatched fairly quickly. A few arrows that were not their own found the bears' vulnerable spots. Bronwyn looked behind and gave the Chantry sister a nod. Sister Leliana was a good shot.

"Now the spiders," Bronwyn said grimly. "They're south of here. A hole in one of those hills, they said."

"Isn't it lunchtime yet?" Alistair complained. "Haven't we already slain our share this morning? Don't we get a break for tea?"

"Very funny. Spiders first. Then tea."

"How many do you suppose there are — oh — that's wonderful!"

"Those are — really big spiders," Bronwyn agreed.

They might have had some trouble without Morrigan's ability to slow the creatures. They were each as long as Bronwyn was tall, and they were aggressive and vicious. Sister Leliana kept up a steady rain of arrows from her position behind them. Bronwyn pulled her sword from one of the distended abdomens, and was suddenly knocked down from behind.

She kicked out, scrambling around onto her back, dodging the pincers. Her sword was too long, but she stabbed upward with her dagger, wincing at the shrill, alien shriek. It was hairy and heavy and it stank, and she could hear Alistair shouting as he tried to hack it apart without killing Bronwyn in the process.

Another shriek, and the spider shivered violently and was still.

"Get this bastard off me, Alistair," Bronwyn snarled. The filthy creature was pushed away, and she looked up to see Leliana standing nearby, wiping her blade.

"I can fight," she repeated simply.

"So it would seem," Bronwyn agreed. "Where does a

sister learn to fight that like that?"

A dimpling smile. "I wasn't born in the Chantry, you know."

Bronwyn studied her a moment, then asked abruptly. "When did you come from Orlais?"

"Oh!" Leliana looked at her uneasily. "I am a native of Ferelden. At least my mother was. I wanted to return to my homeland, and I have been at Lothing Chantry for the past two years."

"Two years?" Bronwyn would check that out. It seemed very odd — very *peculiar* — that the first person to offer to help them was so obviously Orlesian.

The girl pleaded, "I loved my quiet life in the Chantry, but what you are doing is so much more important. So — will you let me help you?"

Morrigan, busily at work removing the spiders' poison sacs with a sharp knife, looked at Bronwyn and shrugged.

Kindhearted Alistair put in a word. "She does have skill, even if she seems a little — strange. I vote to let her come along."

"Alistair," Bronwyn whispered in his ear. "She's one Archdemon short of a Blight."

"Yes," he agreed, "But she's more 'Ooh! Pretty colors!' than 'Muahaha! I am Princess Stabby-Stab. Kill! Kill!'"

Bronwyn stared at him. "Ye-es," she said. "I suppose you have a point. Well — Sister Leliana —"

"Just Leliana — I have not taken my vows. I am only Affirmed as a lay sister."

"All right, then. Leliana. Welcome to our company. Tell

me, are you asking to become a Grey Warden, or are you just asking to help us?"

"Oh!" The pretty face puzzled over that. "I think just to help you. But if I need to be a Grey Warden to do that, I would not refuse."

"You don't – yet. I was just wondering. And another thing: you can't go about with us in your Chantry robes, you know."

"Oh, I have some – things – I have kept from my life before the Chantry. When we get back to the village I will get them from my chest and put them on again. It has been a long time, but I am ready."



SISTER LELIANA OF LOTHERING CHANTRY

CHAPTER 10



THE MUSTER
OF LOTHERING

ES, THERE WAS A WOLF PACK. No, it was no trouble at all. It was too early to tell how Sister Le – no, *Leliana* – would fit into their little company. Mediating the personality clash between Morrigan and Alistair was already stressful. But Leliana was an excellent archer, and capable with a blade. That would have to do, for now. Bronwyn thrust down into the heart of a snapping grey wolf, and the beast went limp.

Scout trotted up, licking his chops, ready to be praised and petted.

Some of the gawkers were already coming closer to shout their praise and thanks. Bronwyn kept a polite smile on her face for them, trying not to despise them too much. Much of their passive uselessness might be Bann Ceorlic's fault. He had obviously meant to suppress independence and initiative in his little realm, and had succeeded all too well.

There was a gibbet cage hanging outside the low stone wall that she had not noticed before, and it was occupied.

She looked again, and then walked toward it, full of curiosity. That surely could not be – but it was!

"A Qunari!" she breathed. She had never seen one of the huge, fierce warriors from the tropical lands to the north. This man could be nothing else. Over seven feet tall, he could barely stand upright in the big iron cage. He was dark-skinned, with crystal-white hair in cornrow braids. Coming closer, she could hear him calmly praying in his outlandish tongue. The Qunari were named for their strange heathen religion – the "Qun" or something such which they spread with their conquests, and inspired them to feats of great courage in battle.

Morrigan had recognized him for what he was, and pointed at him, full of indignation.

"This is a proud and powerful creature, trapped as prey for cowards and vermin. If you cannot find a use for him, I suggest releasing him for mercy's sake alone –"

"Mercy?" Alistair scoffed. "That doesn't sound much like you, Morrigan."

The witch continued, without missing a beat, " – and I would also suggest that Alistair be put in his place."

"Right," he drawled. "Now *that* sounds more like you."

The Qunari opened his eyes, and Bronwyn blinked. Pale lavender, almost glowing like jewels. Quite fascinating, really. Bronwyn had always longed to travel and see the world like Father. Her one visit to the court of their cousin the Lord of Ostwick in the Free Marches was too sheltered

and too much like home to be called *traveling*.

Today, however, the outside world had paid a visit and was staring back at her.

"You are not one of my captors," the Qunari rumbled. "I will not amuse you any more than I have the others. Leave me in peace."

"You're a captive?" Bronwyn wondered. Then she almost blushed. Of course he was.

With sarcastic patience, the Qunari answered. "I'm in a *cage*, am I not?" With dignity, he introduced himself. "I am Sten of the Beresaad – the vanguard – of the Qunari people."

With reflexive courtesy, Bronwyn replied, "I am Bronwyn of the Grey Wardens. Pleased to meet you."

"You mock me," the Qunari said, frowning slightly. "Or – you show manners I have not come to expect in your land. Though it matters little. I will die soon enough."

Leliana came forward to explain. "The Revered Mother ordered this punishment. He murdered the people of a farmhold."

"It is as she says," the Qunari confessed. "Eight humans, in addition to the children."

A pause. Bronwyn ventured, "It must have been difficult capturing you."

"There is no difficulty in capturing prey that surrenders. I waited for several days until the knights arrived. Death will be my atonement."

Morrigan nudged her, and dipped her head at the huge warrior. "A penitent man left to die a slow death. A fine

example of the Chantry's mercy, is it not?"

Bronwyn bit her lip. It did seem like a gift of the Maker, but...

She made her decision, and hoped it was the right one.

"There are other ways to redeem yourself."

The Qunari studied her impassively with his disconcerting lavender eyes. "Perhaps. What does your wisdom say is equal to my crime?"

"You could help me defend the land against the Blight."

"The Blight – " Sten considered. "You are a Grey Warden, truly? Strange... My people have heard legends of the Grey Wardens' strength and skill, though I suppose not every legend is true."

Bronwyn refused to take offense. The Qunari was no doubt baiting her.

Alistair muffled a snort. "You really want to do this?"

"Yes." Bronwyn cocked her head and nodded. "I think I do." She asked the Qunari, "Can you ride a horse?"

He grunted. "I can. But not the dogs you people call horses. Only a *Fereldan*," he said scornfully, "would ride a dog to war."

Scout growled his indignation. Bronwyn rubbed his ears, pleased at her new plans.

"Well, Sten of the Beresaad," she said, "I think I have a horse for you." More briskly, she told him. "The Revered Mother will doubtless release you into my custody. I shall be back in an hour or two, or perhaps sooner."

"I have little choice but to await your return."

The people of Lothering were out in force, already

eavesdropping breathlessly on her conversations. Bronwyn smiled tightly as they divided to let her pass.

"Lunch," Alistair muttered.

"Right," she agreed.

Dane's Refuge was only steps away. The heroes (now including Leliana) were loudly welcomed, shown to "their" table, and foaming mugs of ale were placed before each of them in a trice. Except for Morrigan, who was given yet another goblet of pear wine.

"Your usual, my lady," simpered the waitress.

Bronwyn caught Morrigan's eye. The witch sneered, but drank the wine readily enough. Bronwyn was glad of her own tankard. Killing bandits-bears-spiders-wolves was thirsty work.

Without even having to ask for it, a hearty meal was brought to their table, bowls of a meaty lamb stew and plenty of bread. Scout had a bowl of his own, for this was Ferelden, after all.

The stew had mushrooms in it. That was reason enough to celebrate. The Wardens ate heartily, making no bones about asking for more. Their two companions were daintier, but in the end both Leliana and Morrigan surrendered to the custard-and-honey tarts the cook brought to the table.

Bronwyn insisted on leaving a gold sovereign to buy good will and drinks for the house. Then it was noon, and time to face anyone in the village of Lothering who was not already crowding into the tavern to stare at her.

Outside were a pair of Templars, who bowed respectfully.

"Grey Wardens, the Revered Mother wishes to bless the

muster of Lothing.

"Splendid idea," agreed Bronwyn, feeling better for the food and drink. She followed the Templars all the way to the Chantry, where the Revered Mother and her priests awaited them on the porch.

Obviously, the Revered Mother understood the value of a good show, too. Bronwyn led her party to the steps and she dropped to one knee with conscious grace, while the villagers watched in awe. The blessing itself was the usual formula, but Bronwyn kept her head bowed respectfully. They rose to listen to the Revered Mother's next remarks.

"— And I wish to add my personal thanks to these brave people. Sister Leliana, I see you among our defenders. Do you wish to leave us then, and serve the Grey Wardens?"

"I do, Your Reverence. I will never forget how happy I have been here, but I must do what I can to defend this country."

There was a murmur of satisfaction at Leliana's kind words, and much appreciation of her sentiments, though no one else seemed inclined to risk his or her life unnecessarily.

The Revered Mother smiled benignly on Bronwyn. "And what can the Lothing Chantry do to help you in your struggle against the common enemies of mankind?"

What an opportunity! Bronwyn smiled back. "I wish to take with me the Qunari you imprisoned."

Her Reverence was somewhat taken aback at actually being asked for something. "If I release him, then his next victims might count you and me among their murderers."

"I understand your concerns." Bronwyn raised her voice to be perfectly understood. "Therefore, I invoke the Right of Conscription. Sten of the Beresaad will serve as a Grey Warden. By slaying darkspawn, he will atone for his crimes."

A rumble of excitement at the drama unfolding. The villagers watched the dialogue like children at a puppet show, forgetting that they themselves had the power to shape events.

Another blessing, more gracious words. Leliana was sent off to collect her belongings and to dress more appropriately. Bronwyn was given the key to Sten's cage. The crowd moved into the field, and the muster of Lothing began in earnest.

A decent number of decent bowmen. Some big farmers with big axes. A smith with a maul. An old man who knew how to use a pike, and could teach others. And Elder Miriam's sensible son, Tobery, who, had he been born in a different place to a different set of parents, would have had the makings of quite the swordsman.

Bronwyn wondered why he hadn't gone for a soldier, but then saw the pretty wife and the mob of children. Tobery had never felt the lure of adventure. He had everything he ever wanted, right here in Lothing. Bronwyn hoped those things would give him the incentive to do what he must to protect them. The consensus of the villagers supported him as leader. She would make it official.

"Hear me, people of Lothing," she declared. "I appoint this man Captain of the Lothing Militia for the duration

of the Blight. Obey him as you would me.”

There were others present: people willing to take a turn at watch, people who lurked on the fringes, unsure of themselves, but almost ready to become a part of something important.

Leliana returned, clad in boots and studded leathers, carrying her bow and armed with a pair of daggers. She took some of the more lightly armed people aside and showed them some basic knife moves. When working like this, she did not drift into religious musings, and looked pleasantly serious and not at all crazy. She was good with those daggers, too, and everyone seemed to appreciate her efforts.

Tobery was listening to Bronwyn, trying to remember all she had to say. His friend Sam, shorter and broader, was standing behind him, his lips moving as he followed Bronwyn's words.

“You need to make the archers practice nearly every day. Find every bow you can. The older boys and girls should be learning.”

“Bann Ceorlic doesn't care for archery, my lady,” Tobery told her. “If he sees a man with a bow on his back, he's like to have him brought before him as a poacher. Bann Ceorlic hates poachers, he does.”

“Well, of course he does,” Bronwyn said soothingly, consciously keeping her speech from being too flowery. “But these are strange times. The darkspawn are down south, only two days journey away. People are worried,

and there are more bandits on the roads than usual. And Bann Ceorlic is up in Denerim and not likely to come back until the darkspawn are gone for good. That might not be for some time. You'll want your families here in Lothering to be safe. It's up to you, it seems. If you keep someone on watch, you should be able to call out the militia before any danger reaches the gates of the town. If you have a good lot of archers, you can deal with the danger before it's close enough to do you harm.”

She pointed out the access points to him. “You really need to keep an eye on the ramps to the Imperial Highway: there — and there. Also — make sure that nothing swims across the river or sneaks across the Highway. You might consider extending the palisade and building a barred gate at the mill end of the village. Use some of the stone blocks fallen from the highway to patch weak spots in your walls, and pile them into fighting steps so your archers can see to shoot over them. You could cut some trees and build a palisade there — and across there. You'd be a lot safer, certainly.”

“The bann's manor is outside the village gates, my lady,” Sam blurted out.

“Yes,” Bronwyn agreed. “Yes, it is. I presume that was the bann's own decision. Well, the manor has its own defenses and its own guards. If the bann wants more, he can see to it. I think you'll have plenty to do protecting the village proper.”

“My sister Kara is a maid at the manor,” Sam told her, looking unhappy.



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"Yes — Kara. I've met her, and a very good girl she is. If things get bad she can always come back to the village, can't she? All the more reason to do the best job you can."

Alistair smiled over at her from the mustering field. He was showing four men and a woman how to use a shield. A good shield was a weapon in itself, and Alistair was very skilled. The one woman in the group obviously found the handsome young Warden worth watching. Bronwyn smiled and waved back, hiding her annoyance.

Much remained to be done. A young girl was sent to the manor to apprise the seneschal that there would be two more guests — "Grey Warden recruits," Bronwyn specified, to get her people the best and most respectful treatment possible. Any possible Joining was too far in the indefinite future to plan for, but calling her people 'recruits' seemed reasonable to her. It would at least give them the protection of the Grey Warden name.

More questioning revealed that the local smith was in possession of Sten's armor and other equipment. No one else could possibly wear the huge man's armor, but the smith had planned to refashion it into new pieces. After some haggling, he agreed to fetch it forth and sell it back for a reasonable profit.

Morrigan, bored with watching the villagers and being watched in her turn, sauntered over to hear the end of the bargaining. As soon as the smith departed, she turned an amused look on Bronwyn.



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"'Tis well you are supplied with gold, or our tall acquaintance would be wearing what scraps the Chantry girl scavenged from the dead."

"Or I'd have to have something made for him, and that would take forever," Bronwyn agreed. "It's a fair deal. The smith would have had to spend a great deal of time turning the armor into something anyone else could use."

"I find myself weary of all this incompetent sword-waving and bad archery. Have I not shown the flag, as it were, sufficiently? As there is nothing I can teach that these yokels could learn, I should like to return to the manor's library."

"Before you go, come with me to release Sten. We'll escort him up to the manor, and the seneschal will be easier if one of us is there to keep an eye on him. I'll have to return to finish here, of course."

"As you wish."

The smith returned soon, his arms and his sons' arms full of armor and accessories. Bronwyn called Scout away from his terrorizing of the village dogs, and together they found Sten, still standing with stoic patience in his cage. Some villagers came along to witness the event, and they shoved and murmured as Bronwyn turned the lock and freed the prisoner.

"So it begins," the Qunari declared. "I shall follow you, and in so doing shall find my redemption."

He was somewhat surprised to have his armor returned to him, though his eyes wandered over the belongings,

seeming to search for something that was not there.

"No weapons?" Bronwyn asked the smith.

"All I had was the armor," the smith answered. "That's what was there when he was taken." The men were paid, and returned to the muster, where the smith had promised to show some other men some tricks to using a maul.

Bronwyn gave the Qunari a slight smile. He was handling his armor with reverence and relief, donning first the padded gambeson, and then the plate over it, like one who had lost and reclaimed his very skin.

"Well, Sten, you need something to fight with other than your mailed fists. What is your preferred weapon?"

He was very glum about it, obviously having lost a weapon dear to him, and Bronwyn sympathized. Finally he said, "A two-handed sword would be best, if one of suitable size can be had."

"One of the bandits we killed had a steel greatsword. If the villagers haven't already spirited it away, it might do. Let's go."

They walked back to the site of their recent victory, the Qunari moving carefully. Bronwyn could see that he needed food and rest and reasonable exercise. A good thing they had horses.

As they approached the bodies, two figures suddenly rose up out of the grass: the two bandits who had run a few hours before. One held a sack of loot, and looked back and forth between the approaching threat and the safety of the Highway, undecided. The other dropped his

burdens and took to his heels.

"Scout! Get him!" Bronwyn ordered, drawing her sword and dagger, and darting in at the irresolute man before her.

"You really shouldn't have come back," Bronwyn told him, just as her sword slashed his chest open.

Morrigan and Scout had between them brought down the other bandit. Sten stood over the bodies, looking thoughtful. Scout sat up and panted smugly at the Qunari.

"You are a true warrior," Sten admitted, "and worthy of respect."

Scout barked an agreement. Bronwyn laughed to herself. Better that the Qunari understood that from the first.

The Qunari found the sword in question and pronounced it "adequate." Morrigan was picking through the bandit's sack, apparently finding the contents of interest. Bronwyn fought to control her disapproval. Father had explained to her that common soldiers always fought in part for loot. One must not despise them for it. Not everyone was a teyrn's daughter.

"Something nice?" she asked Morrigan.

"Oh!" The witch was uneasy. Then composing herself, she said, "Perhaps." She opened the bag and let Bronwyn have a look.

The bandits had done well for themselves. This sack must represent the best of their loot: six sovereigns, a bracelet of heavy gold, a pair of gold earrings, chains of gold and silver, a few rings. Some of the rings were gold and set with gems. It was easy now to understand why the bandits had come back for this treasure.

"That's a nice ruby," Bronwyn said, touching the bright

stone with a curious forefinger. "Pretty."

Morrigan clutched at the bag, clearly wanting it for herself. "What do you intend to do with it?"

"It's not mine," Bronwyn answered easily. "It's yours. You found it. I suppose we'll all have to sit down tonight and decide on a fair policy in regard to loot, but that bag is yours. You get the jewelry and Sten gets the sword."

"And what do you get?" Morrigan asked warily.

"Powerful allies, I hope."



"Just how long were you in that cage?" Alistair asked Sten over dinner. His jaw dropped at the answer.

It was astonishing that Sten had survived all those days without food and water. It was even more astonishing that after a hasty lunch, a bath, a nap, and a good dinner he seemed fairly fit and ready to travel. No wonder the Qunari were such a menace.

More talk with local merchants had pried loose the equipment Bronwyn's new companions would need: packs and bedrolls and tents, canteens and mess kits, cloaks and socks – some socks even big enough for Sten's gigantic feet.

Leliana had few personal possessions, other than the armor and weapons she had brought with her to Ferelden. A mysterious case was revealed to contain an Orlesian triple-necked lute. It was a difficult instrument to play well – or even to play at all, as Bronwyn well remembered from years of painful music lessons.

"Are you any good?" she asked Leliana.

A sad and secret smile. "I can play a bit."

Bronwyn hoped she could. It would be very entertaining and good for morale. More specifically, it would be good for Bronwyn's morale. She liked music, though she was useless with any instrument other than a simple straight flute. If Leliana could play at all, then Bronwyn would think she had done well bringing her along with them.

She wondered what had happened to her flute. She wondered what had happened to all of her things in her room. Was some lackey of Howe's living there, sleeping in her bed, fingering her possessions, throwing away her keepsakes? Had Howe destroyed the castle? Were the people of Highever in revolt, even now, struggling against his tyranny?

She scowled. It was useless to agonize over things she could not yet control. She would not lie awake tonight worrying about that, or about her journey to the Circle, and what she might say to insult the mages, and everything that might go wrong on the way. At least she hoped she would not.

"So I am to be a Grey Warden?" The Qunari thought that over, frowning. "Or am I considered a Grey Warden already?"

"You are a Grey Warden *recruit*," Bronwyn clarified. "I won your freedom by invoking the Grey Warden Right of Conscription, which is absolute in Thedas. To actually become a Grey Warden requires additional steps, which will take place at a future date in our headquarters. For now, you will be a recruit and follow our ways."

"And those are?" asked the Qunari.

"To kill darkspawn," Alistair informed him, munching. "We kill darkspawn whenever and wherever we find them. We do whatever it takes to kill them. That's our purpose."

"Our current mission," Bronwyn added, "is to enforce the treaties that support the Grey Wardens. We are going first to enlist the aid of the Circle of Mages at Kinloch Hold." The Qunari frowned, not knowing the name. Bronwyn explained, "It is on an island just off the eastern shore of Lake Calenhad."

Sten's brow cleared. "I remember Lake Calenhad," he muttered.

"Well, that is where we are going first. Then we must try to cross the Lake or travel north around it to the dwarven city of Orzammar. Teyrn Loghain believes they will be strong allies during the Blight. They certainly have experience fighting darkspawn."

He nodded. "And then?"

"At that point we'll have to see if the darkspawn horde has regrouped or not. We may go to Denerim if the king is there or south to Ostagar if we need to. Ultimately, we want to search the Brecilian Forest for the Dalish clans. The Grey Wardens have a treaty with the Dalish too, but they are scattered and shy of strangers."

Sten asked, "The Brecilian Forest is closer than Lake Calenhad, is it not?"

"It is, but we might waste considerable time finding even one clan. We know exactly where the Circle is, and where Orzammar is. It will be easy to find those places, though

we might face some resistance along the way."

"A Grey Warden..." Sten considered. "I have never heard of one of my people being a Grey Warden. It is a new thing for us."

"Then you will be the first," Bronwyn told him. "We are a very ancient order of warriors. Ancient and honorable. We have protected Thedas for twelve hundred years: before the time of Andraste and the Chantry, before there was a Ferelden or even an Orlais." She gave the Qunari a slight smile. "Whether any other Qunari becomes a Grey Warden might very well lie with you."

"Am I a Grey Warden recruit, too?" Leliana wondered, blue eyes wide.

"Only if you want to be, at this point," said Bronwyn. "I did not have to conscript you, so there is no obligation involved. When the day comes, though, you will have to make a decision to join or not."

"You can call me a recruit, if you like," Leliana decided. "It is such an honor, after all..." She rose gracefully, and said. "I think I shall have a nice hot bath, with rose petals sprinkled on the water..." She drifted out of the hall and up the stairs. Morrigan rolled her eyes. Bronwyn smiled in spite of herself.

"Come on, Sten," she said, getting up from the table. "I want to show you your horse."

"I'll be with you in a minute," Alistair promised.

The stables were very well kept, and their own animals had been looked after properly. Scout nosed around,

enjoying the smells. Bronwyn presumed that what animals Bann Ceorlic had not taken with him to Denerim had been sent to the army.

There was her own bay Posy – a nice animal. In the stall next to it was Trampler.

"That is indeed a horse," Sten agreed, his hand running over the big animal's withers approvingly. "It should serve well."

Bronwyn was not surprised he had approved. She would add this to her letter to Fergus, and let him feel clever for giving her such a useful animal. Sten, however, was not quite the Orlesian silk-merchant Fergus had predicted.

Alistair called out, in the stable doorway. "Bronwyn? You in here?"

"Alistair," Bronwyn called back. "Come join us. Sten is making Trampler's acquaintance."

The stall next to Trampler was also occupied. Bronwyn looked, and looked again. This was not one of her horses. This was a lovely mare: a well-bred Antivan barb. Quickly she stalked through the rows of stalls, Scout at her heels. Four more horses were here: all high-quality mounts. One was a fairly big warhorse that might be a mixed Orlesian Destrier/Frostback Traveler.

We need these, she decided.

They needed more horses. They needed them for pack animals, and they needed them as spares in case of trouble. No one in Lothering seemed to have any for sale. No one else in Lothering seemed to have any at all.

In the back of the stable were three mules and a very charming little grey pony.

"We'll also take one of the mules," she said aloud.

"We'll also – ?" Alistair prompted. He laughed. "Are you proposing that we *steal* Bann Ceorlic's horses? I didn't know you had it in you. You do know that stealing horses is a hanging offense in Ferelden? Well – it's a hanging offense anywhere I've ever heard of..."

"We're not *stealing* them," she answered, frowning in thought. "We're *requisitioning* them for use in a vital mission for the war. I shall leave a promissory note for Bann Ceorlic, and he will be paid for the animals out of Grey Warden funds in due course."

"He won't like it."

"He's not here," Bronwyn rapped out, "and I don't care if he likes it or not. We need those horses."

Sten nodded, apparently in approval. Alistair was still uncertain about the whole idea.

"We're supposed to try to get along with the local rulers, you know. Between organizing a militia and taking his horses, you could really stir things up."

"Alistair," she said patiently. "Bann Ceorlic is not *here*. If he needed those horses, he would have taken them with him. If the darkspawn reform and attack, the poor beasts will just be eaten. We are taking the horses and we will pay a fair price for them. Not out of the funds we are carrying, of course. That would deplete our gold, and we'll need it.



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Bann Ceorlic is not even thinking about those horses. If I don't take them, I know we'll regret it."

Seneschal Rurik was also rather taken aback when she told him she was taking the horses. She sat him down in the library, and with him and Alistair to witness she wrote out a formal promissory note, signed *Bronwyn Cousland, Grey Warden*. The price was a good one, and was to be paid no later than next spring's Landsmeet. Bronwyn thought it a very business-like transaction.

"I'm not taking everything," Bronwyn consoled the man. "You'll have the mules for any farm work about the manor, and I can't bear to take that nice little pony into danger."

"Thank you," the man practically blubbered. "That's Lady Ethelswyth's pony. She's only eight, and losing it would break her heart."

"Of course the little girl can keep her pony," Bronwyn assured him, trying not to lose patience with the man. "However, we must take the five horses and their tack with us. The biggest mule will carry our cooking gear and some of the tents. Please see to the arrangements, and have the farrier make certain that the horses won't be throwing shoes anytime soon. We need to leave early tomorrow."

Before the village of Lothering can find more work for me, she refrained from saying.



They left just after dawn: a rather impressive party, heavily armed and well mounted. Bronwyn distributed silver to all



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the servants who had looked after them, the maids and the cooks and the men who stoked the boiler. Morrigan insisted on walking down from the manor and through the village, rather than riding the lovely mare offered her.

"You can't walk the entire way," Bronwyn protested.

"I can walk through the village," Morrigan insisted. "And then I shall change into something more comfortable, so to speak. That is why I wear these robes that everyone so dislikes."

"I don't dislike your robes," Bronwyn told her. "They're just unlike any mage's robes I ever seen."

"That is because they are created and enchanted for my peculiar talents. I would have to remove those robes your tame mages wear lest I be tangled in yards of wool if I changed form in them. This garment, however," she stroked the feathers at her shoulder, "changes with me. I alter it as I learn a new shape. It mirrors my talents, and molds itself to whichever body I take."

"It's a mighty power," Bronwyn said, rather wistfully. "And very useful."

Pleased, Morrigan preened a little. "I am glad that *you*, at least, see the value of this ancient magic. The Chantry calls it evil, and claims it is only practiced by maleficarum, but *I* hold that some things are worth preserving. The only 'evil' in shape-changing is that it makes it harder for the Chantry to control me!"

"Just be careful, that's all I ask."

Bronwyn looked about the village, pleased at the changes



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she had wrought. Lookouts manned the watchtowers. Two more waved at the Wardens' party from the uppermost floor of the mill. Lumber was piled up where the carpenters were building a strong gate to protect that side of the village. If the place could be just a little more secure than it was when she arrived, Bronwyn would consider her two days well spent.

Early as it was, people were there to see them off. A group of children sat on the stone walls, kicking their heels against the mossy stones. The two oldest Gale children darted out to greet them.

"See!" Drisa shouted at some village girls. "We do so know them! Please, Warden! Wave at those girls and tell them you know me!"

"Me! Me, too, Wardens!" Conn called.

"Good day to you, Drisa and Conn!" Bronwyn called back obligingly. "Give my respects to your mother and to all the Gale family!"

There were "Oooohs" of awe, and a number of children jumped down and began tagging along.

Conn ran up alongside Alistair's horse. "When I'm a man, I'm going to be a Grey Warden!"

"Good for you!" Alistair grinned at the boy.

"Me too!" Drisa seconded.

"That's silly," Conn objected. "You're never going to be a man!"

"Then I'll be a Girl Warden like Bronwyn," his sister told him airily. "I'll be the Girl Warden Drisa, and all will fear me!"

"I'd rather be a mage," one daring young towhead dec-



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lared. "I like her black leather."

Bronwyn smirked at a fuming Morrigan, who was on the point of chasing away some bold young admirers. She raised her hand to halt her party, and told the children. "That's far enough! Thank you for your courtesy. I hope you older children will practice your archery under your Captain's supervision. Until then, mind your elders, and keep safe!"

"I have some flowers for you," Drisa said, offering Bronwyn a handful of limp daisies.

"I thank you, Girl Warden Drisa. Until we meet again!" She whispered to Morrigan, "We really must get out of here before the whole village arrives. Please get on the horse!"

Morrigan hesitated, tempted to show these peasants something extraordinary.

Bronwyn hissed, "*Please* just get on the bloody horse!" She untied the mares' lead, knotted it around the pommel, and then held the reins out commandingly.

"I hate this!" Morrigan snarled. She made a face at the Antivan mare, who gazed back with mild brown eyes. The young witch was lithe enough to mount easily, and took up the reins just as she had seen Bronwyn do.

Bronwyn leaned over and smirked at her. "Hold tight with your legs and move with the horse," she said in a low voice. Then, straightening in the saddle, she called out, "Let's go!" and kicked her horse into a canter. Scout barked his excitement. The Wardens clattered up the stone ramp of the Imperial Highway, and galloped off together,

heading west. Behind them, the children cheered shrilly.

Morrigan was surprised at the smoothness of the horse's motion: an easy rocking, and not the jerking and shaking she had expected. She saw that Bronwyn's arms were stretched out in front of her, allowing the horse's neck and head full freedom of movement. Imitating this caused the horse's gait to smooth out even more. It was not an unpleasant sensation.

Bronwyn grinned at her, shouting, "You can't say this isn't fun!"

Morrigan shouted back, "'Tis a poor substitute for flying!"

"Just a little farther. You can change once we're out of sight of the watchtowers!"

They traveled a mile, and then another, moving at an easy pace. Morrigan began to feel that there was nothing at all to riding a horse, until Bronwyn raised a hand, and the party slowed. Instantly the rocking motion became choppy, and Morrigan bounced very uncomfortably in the saddle.

"There's a trick to sitting a trot, which I'll teach you at a later date," Bronwyn said. "That's enough riding for one day. Now you can change, as you say, 'into something more comfortable.'" She told the rest of the company, "We'll reach a fork in the road in a few miles. We'll bear to our right: that road will take us along the north shore of Lake Belennas. If we keep up a good pace we should be able to camp by Lake Calenhad tonight."

Morrigan wondered if she should dismount, and then decided against it. Her legs might be — untrustworthy —

after this experience, and she did not want to reveal any weaknesses that might be used against her later.

She lifted her hand and suddenly distorted in a shocking, unworldly way, like one image superimposed on an entirely different one. She shrank, feathers sprouted, legs shortened, and with a high *Creee!* of triumph, a hawk soared up and settled on a the branch of an overhanging birch tree.

"Show off," Alistair muttered.

Sten scowled in profound surprise and disapproval. Leliana was astonished, too, but also very impressed.

"Such a beautiful bird," she declared. "So proud and independent! The feathers are so pretty! The last winter I was in Orlais, feathers were very much in fashion!"



CHAPTER II

SPOILED PRINCESSES



UCH A STRONG, WELL-ARMED, WELL-MOUNTED PARTY WAS HARDLY A TARGET. Bronwyn and her companions rode through the

Hinterlands and skirted the shore of Lake Belennas seeing few signs of life, and meeting no opposition at all.

The handful of people on the road tended to melt away into the surrounding woods at the sound of their approaching hooves. Wolves howled in the distance, but Scout seemed to sense no real threat.

They reached the branch in the road, and Alistair slowed his pace, looking wistfully to the left. That road itself branched a little farther on: the Imperial Highway ran south, back to Ostagar, but also west, around the southern tip of Lake Calenhad. The road sign made it official that that was the way to Redcliffe.

"Do you miss it?" Bronwyn asked. "Redcliffe, I mean?"

"I haven't been there in years," Alistair told her. "I don't know. With Arl Eamon gone, it wouldn't be the same. Maybe I miss my childhood, such as it was. Maybe I wish things

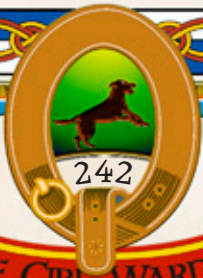
could have been different. Anyway, it's gone, and so is he." They cantered past, and Alistair was quiet for some miles.

This portion of the West Road was not as splendid as the Imperial Highway, but they still made good time, stopping to rest the horses and eat some bread and fruit when the sun was high overhead. Bronwyn had seen enough to be satisfied with her companions' horsemanship. Leliana had an upright, elegant seat on her mount, and the Qunari knew what he was about. Morrigan flew and rested by turns, and the horses did not seem to mind the hawk perched on their backs. It was amusing to Bronwyn that Morrigan seemed to prefer to rest on the back of "her" horse – the Antivan mare. It really would be a good idea for her to learn to ride properly.

As the afternoon shadows lengthened, they came upon a small abandoned house by the side of the road – an inn or tavern of some sort from the darkened, illegible sign swinging above the open door.

"We can camp here tonight," Bronwyn decided. "There must be a well."

There was, and with good water, too. Leliana volunteered to cook the dinner, and all of them were busy for some time, unloading the gear, caring for the horses, scrubbing a table clean for their use, making a fire for Leliana to cook over. They were well-supplied, and there was no reason to stint themselves. Before preparing the food, Leliana searched the house methodically for anything of



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use or value. Bronwyn was a bit shocked.

"What if the owners return?"

"Why did they leave the door open?" Leliana shrugged. "This place looks deserted to me. These foodstuffs —" she pointed at the dusty shelves in the larder "— won't last forever. We should use what we can't take with us, and take with us what we can."

There were all sorts of oddments, though not much of any one thing: a few bottles of cheap Ferelden wine, and a small untapped keg of indifferent ale. It would be good enough to drink tonight. There was a small crate of salt fish that the vermin had not yet breached, and some onions and carrots hanging from the ceiling.

The big stewpot was filled with an amazing variety of ingredients, and soon a very savory herbal scent filled the air. They still had plenty of bread, and some cheese that could be rationed out — actually, that *must* be rationed out, or Alistair might eat the lot of it that very night.

Food was not the only thing that Leliana found in the house. Bronwyn was uncomfortable with it. The former occupants were not rich banns, but poor people. She decided that to salve her conscience she would leave some silver behind the bar the next morning. The owners might never return, but Bronwyn would be able to tell herself that she was not a scavenger.

The fish stew Leliana concocted met with general approval, and the comfort of the food made conversation easier among them.



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Alistair finished inhaling his second bowl of stew, and then said to Bronwyn, "You know, you promised to tell me that story — the 'Be Bold But Not Too Bold' thing."

"I did not," Bronwyn replied saucily. "You promised to pester me until I told it."

"Oh, I love stories!" Leliana urged. "I don't know that one. Please tell it."

"Well —" Bronwyn considered. "If I tell this story, each of you must tell a story — not tonight, of course — but sometime in the future. That way we'll be sure of diversion when we need it."

Morrigan regarded her skeptically. "You want *me* to tell a story? Are you *sure*?"

"Yes," Bronwyn affirmed. "I am. Stories will help me understand my companions better, and there is nothing wrong with that."

Sten frowned, and then nodded. "Yes. Interesting. You wish to have more insight into the characters of those you command. An unusual method, but not unsound. I agree to participate."

"Excellent!" Bronwyn smirked at Alistair. "Well, Alistair? Are you in?"

"Sure. It sounds like fun. You go first, though."

"All right." Bronwyn rose and stood in front of the fire. "I shall tell you one of my favorite stories, and I shall tell it exactly as I heard it from my dear nursemaid Nan: The Story of Ser Murtherous and the Bloody Chamber."

"Oh," muttered Alistair, "That sounds — gruesome."

"Ssshhh," Leliana hushed him. "I want to hear this."





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BRONWYN'S STORY OF SER MURTHERUS:

Lady Dara was young, and Lady Dara was fair. She had two brothers, and more suitors than she could count. But of them all, the bravest and most gallant was Ser Murtherus, whom she met at a tournament in Denerim. No one knew who Ser Murtherus was, or where he came from; but he was certainly brave, and clearly rich, and of all her suitors, Lady Dara cared for him alone. He asked for her hand and was accepted. He described his keep, and where it was, but did not arrange for her to come with her brothers to see it.

Lady Dara was full of curiosity about her new home, so one day when her father and brothers were hunting, and Ser Murtherus had gone away to tend to some business — as he said — she mounted her horse and set out to find his castle.

At last, after a long ride, she came to a solitary wood, and a fine strong keep she saw, with high walls and a deep moat. When she came up to the gateway, she saw a sign written on it:

BE BOLD, BE BOLD.

The gate was closed, and no one answered. The little postern gate to the side was open, though, with room enough for her to slip through. Lady Dara had a cold feeling, like something terrible would happen. She tied her horse in the woods, well out of sight, and she entered the courtyard, all empty and silent as it was, and went to the door, and over it was a sign:

BE BOLD, BE BOLD, BUT NOT TOO BOLD.

Still she went on, until she came into the hall. It was fine and



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broad and high, but empty like all the rest of the castle. She found some wide stairs and went up them, until she came to a door at the end of the gallery, over which was written:

BE BOLD, BE BOLD, BUT NOT TOO BOLD,
LEST THAT YOUR HEART'S BLOOD SHOULD RUN COLD.

But Lady Dara was a brave one, she was, and she opened the door, and what do you think she saw? A pile of bodies of other young ladies, dead and rotten, the remains of their rich clothing stained with blood. So Lady Dara thought it high time to leave that place, and she closed the door, and she ran back along the gallery and down the stairs.

But just as she reached the door of the hall, she heard loud voices, and the sound of armored feet. She rushed to a corner, and hid herself behind some barrels, and Ser Murtherus came in with his henchmen, dragging a young lady through the door. They laughed and joked, and paid no attention to the young lady's shrieks and lamentations. They forced her to drink three glasses of wine: white, yellow, and red as blood. They stabbed her, every one of them, and then she lay dead. Ser Murtherus saw a ruby ring on the lady's hand, and tried to pull it from her finger. But it was too tight, and he cursed and swore and he drew his sword, and cut the young lady's hand right off.

The hand flew into the air and fell, of all places, into Lady Dara's lap. The men roared with laughter, as they dragged the dead young lady up to the Bloody Chamber. Ser Murtherus wanted to search for the ring, but his captain stopped him and said, "Wait until tomorrow morning. That hand won't run away!"



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No sooner were they out of sight than Lady Dara jumped up from behind the barrels, made a dash for the door, and was outside and through the postern gate, and on her horse, and riding for home as fast as ever she could.

Now it happened that Lady Dara and Ser Murtherus were to be married the very next day. All her father's vassals came, and her brothers and all her kin, and there was a great wedding breakfast set out. Ser Murtherus came with his henchmen and was seated across from Lady Dara, and he said,

"How pale you are this morning, my dear."

"Yes," said she, "I had no rest last night, for I was plagued by a terrible dream."

He was very gallant, and said, "Dreams go by contraries. Tell me your dream, and your sweet voice will make the time pass till the happy hour comes."

"I dreamed," said Lady Dara, "that I went yesterday to your castle, and I found it at last in a solitary wood. It had high walls, and a deep moat, and over the gateway was written:

Be bold, be bold.

Ser Murtherus looked at her strangely, and he said, "But it is not so, nor was it so."

Lady Dara said, "I went to the door, and over it was written:

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold.

He said, "It is not so, nor was it so."

"And then I went up the stairs," she said, "and came to a gallery, at the end of which was a door, and over it was written:

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold,



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Lest that your heart's blood should run cold.

"It is not so, nor was it so," said Ser Murtherus.

"And then," she said, "I opened the door, and inside the room were piled the bodies of dead young ladies, their rich clothes stained with blood."

"It is not so, nor was it so," said Ser Murtherus. "And Maker forbid that it should be so."

"Then I dreamed that I rushed down the gallery, and down the stairs, and just as my hand was on the door, I heard you, Ser Murtherus, and your men coming up to the hall, dragging with you a young lady, rich and beautiful."

"It is not so, nor was it so," said Ser Murtherus, "And Maker forbid that it should be so."

"I dreamed that I hid myself behind some barrels while you and your men forced the young lady to drink your wine: white, yellow, and red as blood. And then you stabbed her, every one of you, and she lay dead. You tried to get her ruby ring from her finger, but it was too tight, and you drew your sword and hacked off her poor hand."

"It is not so, nor was it so. And Maker forbid that it should be so," said Ser Murtherus. He was rising from his seat, getting ready to say something else, when Lady Dara cried out:

"But it *is* so, and it *was* so. Here's hand and ring I have to show!" and she pulled out the lady's hand from her dress, and pointed it straight at Ser Murtherus.

And at once, her father and her brothers and all her kin drew their swords, and they cut Ser Murtherus and his evil henchmen into a thousand pieces.



The story finished, Bronwyn bowed gracefully, just like the traveling minstrels she had seen.

"That," said Alistair, "is just about the goriest thing I ever heard. I can't believe your nursemaid told you that. They never told us things like that in the Chantry!"

Morrigan laughed at him. "No doubt! *I* found it very diverting. An evil man's plans foiled by a woman's wit and courage!" To Bronwyn, she said, "The story you told those tiresome children back at Lothing had a moral. What is the moral here, I wonder?"

"That the ones you love aren't always the people you think they are," Leliana whispered, almost to herself.

Sten remarked, "I approve that the men executed the criminals, as is proper. The young woman also showed good sense in retaining credible evidence against them."

Bronwyn laughed lightly, "I always find it amusing that it was an arranged marriage, with the full consent of her father. Perhaps the moral is that sometimes parents choose no better for their children than the children would for themselves!"

Morrigan smirked. "You are subversive! And a teyrn's daughter, too!"

"I dislike others choosing for me," Bronwyn shrugged. "If that is subversive, so be it."

Darkness crept into the little room, making the fire on the hearth glow brighter by contrast. The companions



slowly settled down for the night, each finding a place to sleep that suited them. Bronwyn sat up for a little while at the table, working on her lengthening letter to Fergus.

Leliana offered to take the first watch, and stepped outside to find a dark corner to lurk in. Morrigan seemed to like to keep her distance from the others, and claimed a room upstairs for herself. The rest of them spread their blankets out in the little common room. Once finished with her writing, Bronwyn chose to sleep sheltered behind the bar, and Scout stretched out beside her. Their situation lacked something of Lothing Manor's comfort, certainly, but at least they had not had to pitch tents.

She found it very hard to fall asleep in such a strange place. Sten snored, very quiet and very low: the sound so much like his speaking voice that it almost made Bronwyn laugh. Alistair only snored when his sleep was disturbed by nightmares, which was unfortunately often.

Finally, she drifted off, kept from true rest by gibbering monsters walking her dreamscape. It was almost a relief when Leliana gently shook her arm. She sat up slowly, and gave Leliana a nod of thanks. Scout's eyes were already open and alert, reflecting glints of firelight in their black depths. He padded silently out just in front of her, and she shut the door.

How many nights will be like this? she wondered.

The distant lake shimmered silver under the moonlight. Deep in the sighing trees, a few nightbirds called. Bronwyn looked up at the glittering stars, searching for her favorite



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constellations. So strange. A month ago she could not have pictured herself standing watch near Lake Belennas, far from everyone she had ever loved, on a mission to save Ferelden from monsters.

What would Mother say, if she could see her now? That last day, Mother had worried about Bronwyn and her lack of "softer skills;" she had worried about finding her a husband. Mother had never reconciled herself to Bronwyn's arrangement with Father. When she could be brought to talk about it at all, she made plain she thought it a bad idea: bad for the Couslands in general, and very bad for Bronwyn in particular. What she wanted for Bronwyn was very different than what Bronwyn wanted for herself. Mother wanted Bronwyn to relive her own wonderful life: a lovely young nobleman with a lovely home, who with Bronwyn would make lovely children. Mother always wanted lots of grandchildren.

No. I don't want to think about Oren.

She was usually such a light sleeper. Why on that night of all nights, had she slept so obliviously while enemies crept through their halls, while they made their way into her brother's bedchamber?

"Holy Andraste!" she hissed out loud, and then bit her lip, angry that she had given away her position. She moved silently to another dark place, and fixed her attention on her surroundings. Still the thoughts plagued her. Howe's men must have had the keys. Who gave them the keys?



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Did they kill the seneschal first? Or did they have a good picklock with them? Bronwyn was rather good at picking locks herself, having had practice whenever she had been locked in her room as a punishment.

If only she had heard the bastards creeping around! If only she had awakened when Scout first gave the alarm. Her imagination pictured her waking, alert and ready, arming herself quickly, surprising the intruders, saving Oriana and Oren, gathering them and Mother for an escape...

She would have sent them to the larder immediately, and looked for Father on her own. But then, reality intruded. It was more likely that Mother would have ordered her to take Oriana and Oren under her protection, and then Mother would have gone with the servants to look for Father. And she likely would have died.

She died anyway, Bronwyn thought bitterly. At least I might have rescued Fergus' wife and child. And I might not now be a Grey Warden. We could have gone west, to Bann Alfstanna's manor. She has always been a good friend of the Couslands...

But if Bronwyn were not a Grey Warden, what would have happened at Ostagar? What would have happened had she not been there to give the signal? What if Teyrn Loghain had not charged? What if he found that the King's position was already hopelessly overrun?

Bronwyn shivered, imagining the consequences: the king dead; half the army dead; the teyrn forced to choose between deserting the king and possibly destroying the

entire army of Ferelden; darkspawn roaming unchecked, swarming up the Imperial Highway, their foulness surging over Lothering like an evil tide. What if Loghain had charged late, even knowing he was doomed, and died there on the field with the king? Ferelden would have been unarmed and unprotected, in chaos. Three of the country's five arls might have perished as well, and with the death of Arl Eamon, Rendon Howe would become the premier noble in Ferelden. Bronwyn thought of Fergus, wounded, dying all alone in the Wilds; of Queen Anora, far away in Denerim, hearing shreds of ghastly rumors, trying to assemble some sort of force with no one to help her...

It didn't happen. Bronwyn clamped down firmly on such frightening, disturbing images. *I didn't let it happen. I was there. I couldn't be everywhere, but I was there.*

Scout snuffled around the outside of the little house, nosing into nooks and crannies. Bronwyn made herself focus on watching and listening, while the stars in their courses wheeled overhead.

Much later, the door opened, and a tall figure emerged, stooping under the lintel.

"I have come to relieve you," Sten told her.

"Thanks. Scout and I have heard and seen nothing of concern. I can't even say it's too quiet, the way it was in the Wilds."

He nodded, and remained looking at her, frowning in the dim light. Bronwyn wondered what was on his mind, when he suddenly declared:

"You look like a woman."

Surprised, offended, amused, she paused, trying to think what to say, and finally replied, "I *am* a woman."

The frown deepened. "Women are priests, artisans, farmers, or shopkeepers. They don't fight."

Bronwyn smiled, remembering other debates with other people on this very point. "That must be the tradition in your country. A custom of your people, not a universal truth. Some women fight. Some women have to."

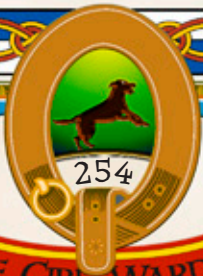
"It is the duty of warriors to fight. Not women."

"You know, Sten, my brother's wife often told me that. She was a good person and a wonderful mother. I loved her dearly. She wanted me to be like the women in Antiva, her homeland, where the women are refined and educated and never fight – except with words and poison." Bronwyn leaned against the wall, looking briefly out to the silent road, and added, "You will notice that she is not *here*, and I am. She was killed when enemies attacked our home. Because she did not know how to fight, it was easy for those men to kill her and her child. The women of Ferelden learned long ago that the menfolk can't always be there to protect the womenfolk."

She looked up at him with a hint of challenge. "So, yes, Sten. I am a woman, and I am a soldier. I am a Grey Warden, and I am at war against the Blight. You look like a soldier yourself."

"I am."

"Have you ever fought in a war before?"



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"I have always fought in war."

"Good. Then you must know you way around a battlefield."

"Some of them. They aren't all alike."

"Well said. I'll leave you to your watch."



Their journey continued with little incident and few difficulties. The second day, true, a large wolf pack followed at their heels for some miles, hoping for signs of weakness. Even the mule, however, could put up a fierce fight with teeth and hooves, and the wolves gradually dropped behind, their yips of disappointment fading into the other sounds of the forest.

They pressed on, and the road turned north as the vast grey expanse of Lake Calenhad emerged. The West Road became the Lake Road. They eventually stopped at a farmhold, where Bronwyn dismounted and approached the house, hands empty and out.

"We are Grey Wardens, on our way to the Lake Calenhad docks. May we use your well, and camp tonight in your meadow?"

The freeholder peered out into the twilight, alarmed, crossbow in hand. His wife whispered excitedly behind the door. Permission was granted, and a little later, a young boy came out to bring them a plate of cookies.

"You're the Girl Warden, aren't you? We could tell by the helmet."

Alistair smirked at her. Bronwyn sighed, and thanked the boy for the treats.

"What are these?" asked Sten. "Some sort of local waybread?"



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"Cookies, Sten," Alistair told him, grinning. "They're cookies. Try them."

The Qunari did, and said nothing, but thought long on the matter.

The farmer's boy seemed inclined to linger, and Alistair answered his questions in his genial, unassuming manner. Bronwyn knew it was silly to sulk about a name, but it was so *annoying*. She pitched her tent and disappeared into it as soon as possible, hoping for rest.

The farmer's wife insisted on making them breakfast the following morning, which saved them time and effort. They were invited into the little house and served at the family's table. Bronwyn made herself rise to the occasion, and expressed her appreciation for the hospitality in her grandest style. Before long, they were on the road once more.

There was time for talk. Hesitantly at first, Leliana spoke of how pleasant and quiet she had found life in the Chantry... but that it was... not entirely perfect. Growing more confident, she told Bronwyn more: there were judgmental people there, people intolerant of the views of others, people with whom she was never quite in tune. She called herself a native of Ferelden, but that was an exaggeration. She was the bastard child of a Fereldan woman who had been a servant to an Orlesian lady. When the Orlesians were driven from Ferelden in the wake of King Maric's successful rebellion, Lady Cecille had allowed her servant to travel to Orlais with her. Leliana had been born there, and her mother had died when Leliana was very young.



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"But Lady Cecille was so kind and so gracious. She could have thrown me into the street. Instead, she kept me with her, and paid for my music and dance lessons. But she, too, died, and I was alone."

Her whole story raised more questions than it answered. Bronwyn considered her companion as they rode together. How had Leliana earned her bread, after the lady of the house had died? Had she been married? Had she been in the Chantry in Orlais? She spoke of music lessons: was she a minstrel? More to the point – was she a bard?

The reputation of Orlesian bards as spies and assassins as well as entertainers was not mere invention. Father himself knew a number of bards and had had some – close calls – in the course of his embassy to the Empress. They were beautiful, clever, deceitful, skilled, enthralling and deadly – both the men and the women.

If Leliana was a minstrel, that was well enough: she would have musical skill and might be able to tell stories. Minstrels had a shady reputation of their own, of course, as female minstrels often supplemented their earnings from public performances with coin earned in more private and intimate circumstances. Perhaps Leliana was repenting such sins in the Chantry.

If she were actually a bard, instead – and the skills of minstrels and bards overlapped a great deal – there might be very sinister reasons for her presence in Ferelden. Father had explained that the intelligence network of



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the Empress spread all over Thedas: her agents were everywhere. Some of them worked openly, living at the Orlesian embassy and gathering information from the foolish or inebriated at receptions and feasts.

There were others, though: the ones Father called "sleeper" agents. What if Leliana had been sent to Lotharing to insinuate herself into the village, to listen for interesting rumors, to step forward when opportunity knocked? Things could get very, very bad, if a bard were to find out the truth of Alistair's paternity. The Empress would pay a fortune for that kind of information. Leliana would certainly not discover it from any carelessness of Bronwyn's. Perhaps she should talk about the issue discreetly with Alistair...

They met the bereskarn on the third day: the horses screaming and striking out; Morrigan darting down from the sky to pick at the creature's eyes; Leliana galloping past in a blur of speed, twisting in the saddle to shoot with deadly accuracy; Scout snarling, leaping to rip at the mighty throat. Swords slashed, as they surrounded the beast, and it went down at length, roaring in protest, stretched out on the dusty earth.

There were other hazards, other threats. A pair of incompetent horsethieves attempted to cut the horses' hobbles and make off with them, only to meet with the twin misfortunes of Scout and Trampler before the other companions even reached the spot. At an isolated house,



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the inhabitants tried to lure them in and poison them, but found themselves outmatched.

Only once did they see darkspawn, and it was a small group – perhaps a scouting party. Sten showed no fear of the monsters, and to her surprise, neither did Leliana, who was an aggressive fighter, and curiously bloodthirsty for someone so sweet-spoken.

Bronwyn was expecting Morrigan to freeze the darkspawn spellcaster in place, when Alistair suddenly put up his hand, and the creature's spells dried up to a pathetic trickle. He was down and dead in short order. Bronwyn stared at her companion.

"What did you *do* to that darkspawn mage?"

"Templar trick," Alistair grinned. "Sucks the magic right out of them for a minute or two."

"Impressive."

So there was danger and hardship, of course, and quite a bit of blood spilled and splashed, but they were still making good time, and on the afternoon of the fourth day a ghostly tower appeared, as if suspended in the air over the lake.

"Kinloch Hold," Bronwyn told her party. "Home of the Circle of Magi."



As they rode north, the tower grew larger and less ethereal. Eventually the bottom made contact with the island below it. Everyone had remarks to make about the imposing structure.



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"Is that the prison for your mages?" Sten asked. "Ours are not so grand."

Morrigan chuckled at that, remarking, "A grand prison indeed. How appropriate that they built it in the middle of a lake and made it look like a giant phallus."

Sten snorted. "Humans, over-compensating as usual."

"Not very practical," Alistair said to Bronwyn.

Leliana gazed at in in wonder. "Well, *I* think the view from the top must be spectacular!"

Bronwyn scowled. Was she the only one here who knew any history? "The tower was not built either for or by the mages. The ancient Avvars built it over fifteen hundred years ago, with the help of the dwarves. That's probably why it's still intact. The Tevinters took it over when they conquered these lands, and after their withdrawal it lay empty for centuries until the mages moved in during the Towers Age. That's only six hundred years ago. It's true that it's prison-like, in that the causeway was deliberately destroyed, making it accessible only by boat. And yes, Leliana, I imagine the view *is* spectacular. It's nearly as tall as the tower of Fort Drakon in Denerim."

"A gilded prison," Morrigan considered, "but still a prison. How can you call it impractical, Alistair, when it serves its function to isolate and incarcerate Ferelden's mages so very well?"

Bits of Tevinter ruins became frequent as they approached the docks and the associated village marked

on Bronwyn's excellent map. By the time they reached the slope leading down to the water's edge, the road was framed by ancient colonnades. Below them lay the docks, and what must surely be an inn.

No boats were tied up at the moment. Bronwyn bit her lip. That was awkward. She had hoped for a good-sized boat to take them across the lake. Without it, they would have the long ride around the north end of the lake before them. Well, her business at the Circle would take time. When it was complete, perhaps there would be something.

Wait — there were no boats *at all* at the docks.

"Well," she told her party, "it appears I won't be going to the Circle today. The Tower ferry must have left with someone else."

Alistair was philosophical about it. "We can go in the morning. We'll be rested and cleaned up by then. Maybe it's all for the best, if we want to make a good impression."

"Perhaps so. The inn looks tidy and well-kept, at least." They dismounted, and a boy came out to take the horses. After giving him instructions and dire warnings, they walked up to the inn itself and made out the sign. "The Spoiled Princess?" Bronwyn laughed. "I've never heard of such a name!"

"Sounds right up your alley," Alistair teased.

"Ha! No princess here! Are you implying I'm spoiled?"

"Are you saying you're not, my lady?" His smile grew softer. "And you're as close to a princess as no matter. If your father had been elected King, you *would* have been a princess!"

"Yes, well —" Bronwyn shrugged, uncomfortable with the great interest that Alistair's revelation had generated in the rest of their companions. "If the ancient Tevinter mages hadn't been idiots, there wouldn't have been darkspawn, either!"

The inn was small but clean. The innkeeper was a pleasant man who welcomed them warmly, poured them some good ale, and was happy to tell them the history of the inn's name — an ironic tale of sibling rivalry and the innkeeper's pampered sister's sticky end. Bronwyn asked about lodging, and he offered them the rooms available.

Which were two in number. "Another party's got the third."

"Well, that's easy," Bronwyn said, with sardonic nonchalance. "Gentlemen to the right and ladies to the left."

"I hope the bed is *really* big," Alistair muttered.

Bronwyn blew out a breath. "So do I." She had not had to share a bed in years, but she would be hanged before she would give up her share and sleep on the floor.

The room was — well — *not* very big. Bronwyn, Morrigan, and Leliana nearly tripped over each other, trying to stow their packs and wash. The bed itself would just accommodate three slender women — if they didn't move much.

"It's still better than the floor," Bronwyn told herself.

"*Someone* is going to have to sleep in the *middle*," Morrigan said darkly. Clearly, it would not be her.

"I don't mind!" Leliana volunteered, very cheerfully.

"And the dog stays in the common room tonight," Morrigan

demanded. "I'm not catching fleas from your filthy mongrel!"

"All right," Bronwyn agreed grudgingly. Scout would probably be trampled if he slept in here.

They sent for more wash water, and Bronwyn eased gratefully out of her filthy armor. Cleaning it would occupy her most of the evening. At least she had other clothes to wear. Leliana had only her chantry robe, and Bronwyn watched the girl slip into it, determined that they would find her something else. A Grey Warden recruit in a chantry robe sent a message that Bronwyn thought was not at all appropriate. The Grey Wardens were *not* an arm of the Chantry.

"We'll have to find something new for you," she told Leliana casually. "I know how tiring it is to wear armor all the time."

Morrigan caught her eye and smirked, understanding her perfectly. She was still in her robes, not thinking a wayside inn grand enough for her green gown.

Leliana turned big, worried eyes on Bronwyn. "Should I not have put this on?"

"It's all right for tonight, but you really need something else. We'll see if we can find something here or on the road later."

"I haven't any money," Leliana told her sadly.

"We'll buy it out of Warden funds."

"Oh!" Leliana's face lit up. "How kind of you! Can it be blue? I love blue!"

By the time they returned to the common room, Alistair and Sten were already there, talking with a middle-aged man who must be the other guest of the inn. His commonplace traveling clothes told little about him, but his bearing revealed he was clearly no warrior.

"Brother Genetivi," he introduced himself, standing courteously as the women approached. "An honor to meet you, Wardens."

"I am not a Warden," Morrigan replied ungraciously, seating herself as far as possible from the man.

"Brother Genetivi?" Bronwyn thought for a moment. She smiled. "I believe I read a book of yours! You wrote that biography of the Rebel Queen. I enjoyed it so much."

The pleasant smile broadened. "My thanks! It was a labor of love, writing on such a very worthy subject." With a certain diffidence, he said, "I believe we have a mutual acquaintance, Warden Bronwyn. Your tutor Aldous was a good mentor to me, long ago. We often corresponded, and he had much to say about the wonderful children he was privileged to teach."

She was unprepared for the sudden pang of loss, but pushed it aside, and made herself smile a little. "We were such a trial to him! He was a good man, and a very good teacher. I am sorry to tell you," she added, "that he is dead. He was killed, along with so many others, when Arl Rendon Howe attacked Highever."

"Yes," he said, very gently. "The news of the arl's crime is all over Ferelden. The Queen herself is horrified, and is

working to bring Howe to justice."

"I am glad to hear it," she managed, "but I really do not wish to speak of it now. I had rather hear," she told him, "how a distinguished scholar such as yourself happens to be traveling in such troubled times."

The serving woman brought them their suppers, and they fell to, glad of a meal they did not have to cook themselves. Over the stew and bread, Genetivi told them of himself.

"I suppose I was restless. I suppose I was tired of writing about other peoples' adventures, and wanted to have a grand adventure of my own while I still could."

Alistair pointed out, "We have a Blight on our hands, you know. Maybe it would have been a good idea to wait?"

"Warden," Genetivi laughed ruefully, "Some Blights have lasted over a hundred years. I don't have that kind of time. There comes a moment in a man's life when he asks, 'If not now, then when?' So here I am, on the trail of the Urn of the Sacred Ashes."

Leliana stared at him in wonder. Bronwyn and Alistair looked at each other, a bit incredulous. Sten and Morrigan continued eating, quite unconcerned.

"Yes," said Brother Genetivi, "I do mean the urn that contains the remains of the Prophet Andraste herself. The remains are said to have remarkable curative powers. My research indicates that the urn still exists, and is in Ferelden."

"That is amazing!" Leliana cried, "Oh, how I wish I could go with you. I would, too, if I did not have to kill darkspawn. Where do you think it is?"

He did not seem to mind telling his story, and brought out a map, showing them the location – in the Frostback Mountains – of a remote village called Haven. "That is my destination. I believe the people there can direct me further. There is a funerary temple somewhere in the mountains nearby."

"Haven?" Bronwyn frowned, trying to place the name. "I've never heard of such a place." She got up and came back with her own map of Ferelden. Spreading it out to compare it with Genetivi's, she said, "Not here. Are you sure there's such a village?"

"I have very good information about it. I'm as sure as a cautious old scholar can be."

"Do you mind if I mark it on my own map?" Bronwyn asked.

Genetivi's map displayed other details in the west of Ferelden, beyond Lake Calenhad, that were unknown to her. Leliana ran to fetch pen and ink, and Bronwyn carefully placed a dot on the map and labeled it "Haven." There was another place, south of Redcliffe, that was called "Honnleath." She added that to her map as well. There were some interesting rivers and roads that she drew in. Smiling, she wondered what Teyrn Loghain would say when she told him she knew things about Ferelden that he did not.

"I can't believe you're going alone," Alistair said, rather concerned. "Couldn't the Chantry spare some Templars to send with you?"

Genetivi shrugged. "They're not very impressed with my

research," he admitted. "They think I'm chasing rainbows. And besides, hunting apostates is easier than traveling hundreds of miles into danger. No, the Grand Cleric gave me permission to go myself, but offered me no assistance. I suppose I shouldn't have written that controversial study of the early days of the Chantry. The fact is that I'm not in favor at the moment."

Morrigan considered that, and deigned to look at Genetivi a little less despidngly.

Bronwyn said feelingly, "I certainly wish you well, Brother, and I look forward to reading an amazing book someday!"

"You are very kind," he smiled, folding up his map. "It was an honor to have met you. But now I'm afraid I must turn in. I'm not as young as I was."

When he was gone, it was time to make their plans, speaking quietly at their corner table.

"I think," Bronwyn said to her companions, "that it would be best if we did not all go to the Mage's Tower. Someone must be here to keep an eye on the horses, at the very least. Our mission would be compromised without them. And Morrigan, I do not think it a good idea to take you there. Having set eyes on you, they might want to keep you, and then there would be tiresome arguments before we left, and that too, would compromise the mission."

"I certainly have no desire to see how captive mages live," Morrigan agreed.

"Very well. I want you and Sten to stay here. I want Scout to stay with you."

A pitiful whine from below the table.

"Yes, I want you to stay, too, Scout. You won't like the Tower. It's hard stone and endless steps and no rabbits, and it's more important that you help guard the horses."

The whining stopped. Scout could see the sense in that.

"So — watch the horses and get plenty of rest. Morrigan, be very careful about your magic use. This area is crawling with Templars. If you get in a tangle with them, I'll either have to conscript you or you'll have to leave the party altogether — at least until we can get far enough away. Even then, they would know about you and watch for you. So be *very careful*."

Morrigan rolled her eyes. "Yes, Mother."

Sten bowed his head. "I shall make good use of the time."

Bronwyn went on. "Alistair, Leliana, and I will go to the Tower. Alistair's templar training and Leliana's association with the Lothing Chantry will be of use. Don't be surprised if I call you 'Sister,'" she said to Leliana. "I'll have to toady to the Templars a little, because in the end the Knight-Commander is going to be the real obstacle to getting more mages for the army. I'm going to have to be tactful for that. For the Grey Wardens, I can just use conscription."

Leliana said, "We must do the Maker's work however we can. I am sure He wants more mages in the army to help against the darkspawn."

"I am sure you're right," Bronwyn agreed, ignoring Morrigan's expression. "And we cannot let old prejudices stand in our way. Teyrn Loghain is depending on us."

"And the King," Alistair added, with the slightest edge to his voice.

"Of course – 'and the King.'" she agreed, wondering why Alistair always got that look on his face whenever she mentioned Teyrn Loghain. "We must get those mages for the army. And we should keep our eyes open for Grey Warden prospects, too."

"If you are looking for *tame* mages," Morrigan sneered, "perhaps a healer might be useful. I have no interest in that School of Magic."

"An excellent suggestion." Bronwyn liked the idea, no matter how it was presented. "But however *tame* these mages might be, I suspect there are at least a few who long to be free. Those are the ones we want. Keep your eyes open," she repeated.



Three women in their smallclothes in one bed was not an experience Bronwyn wished to repeat anytime soon. If she moved in the slightest, she touched Leliana, and that was so unusual and startling that she woke at once. It did not seem to bother Leliana, who actually started *cuddling* at one point, pushing Bronwyn to the edge of the bed and over.

She thumped to the floor, half asleep and cursing.

"Whatever you are doing," came Morrigan's voice from

the darkness. "Stop it at *once!*"

A little later, Bronwyn cried out as the darkspawn sliced a man open, waking her two companions. They all looked around blearily for danger, before subsiding back into the lumpy mattress.

"It's all right," Leliana cooed, stroking her arm.

Later, she sat up and talked back to the Archdemon. This was also not well-received.

"If you don't lie still, I will stick a knife in you," Morrigan snarled. "This, I *swear!*"



MORRIGAN, DAUGHTER OF FLEMETH



KINLOCH HOLD: THE CIRCLE OF MAGI



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CHAPTER 12

CIRCLES
WITHIN
CIRCLES

THE LITTLE COCKLESHELL OF A BOAT SWAYED UNDER THEM. Kester, the boatman, talked on and on, full of gossip about the important figures at the Circle of Magi.

"That Irving – he's First Enchanter – seems a decent sort. I know what the Chantry says, but the Maker made mages for a purpose, I reckon, and they have as much right to live as anybody."

Bronwyn wondered what Morrigan would say to that. Silly as Kester sounded, he was far more generous in his opinions than many people. There was widespread support for the view that mages had no right to live at all, and should be wiped out, root and branch.

Kester kept up his stream of chatter, "Now Greagoir, the Knight-Commander – he's the big man there. Very decent and affable, he is. Always asks me how my family's doing. A man to be respected, I always say."

Well, that was something. Greagoir was polite to humble boatmen. Many wouldn't be. Perhaps he would not be like so

many templars – filled to bursting with his own importance. She studied the tower, now looming before them, so tall that she had to crane her neck back to see the top. If put to it, she could swim from the island to shore fairly easily – as long as there were no storms – and even more easily to the remains of the causeway. There was a gap of only forty yards or so between the ancient spans. The mages, however, were not taught to swim, most likely.

Bronwyn wondered if they were even allowed out of the tower to get a bit of air and sun. From the deserted look of the landscape outside, she would guess not. The Tower truly was a prison. It was a claustrophobic place: a place that looked inward to its secrets, not outward to the world. It must be very unhealthy for the children. She remembered that butcher's boy in Highever town who was discovered to be a mage. He couldn't have been more than eight. How frightened he was of those faceless Templars when they came to take him away...

"And there's been a fair-to-do in these parts," Kester nattered on. "Comings and goings like you never saw. O'course it's not everyday the King goes to war. Strange goings-on in the South, but you know all about that, Wardens."

Oh, yes. Kester certainly knew who they were. Alistair was quite right about the need to make a good impression. The two of them were kitted up in full fig: polished armor with their Grey Warden tabards, winged helmets on display. Leliana had no such accoutrements yet, of course,



but looked neat and respectable in her light armor.

Bronwyn had wondered if they should go armed and helmeted, since she was not exactly going to the Circle to fight – except with words and cunning – but decided that they must go as warriors to speak to the Knight Commander. No one ever saw the Templars without their armor, and generally they also wore those unnerving helmets that covered their heads entirely, leaving only the narrow slit for their eyes. It wouldn't do to look weak before them. Therefore, they would match them armor for armor, sword for sword, and helmet for helmet. The Grey Wardens predated the Templars anyway, and were far more important. Bronwyn was not going to them as a suppliant, but as an ambassador, claiming support to which she had an ancient, irrevocable right.

The great doors opened to them, and Bronwyn could not complain of her welcome. Clearly someone in the Tower had seen them coming.

A soldierly man in Templar armor, no longer young but still fit, gave them a slight bow. "I am Greagoir, Knight Commander of the Templars of Kinloch Hold."

"And I am Irving, First Enchanter of the Circle of Magi," said an elderly man with a flowing grey beard and deepset eyes filled with kindness and secrets. "You are very welcome here, Grey Wardens."

"I am Warden Bronwyn and this is Warden Alistair," Bronwyn said, with a polite bow of her own. "And this is Warden Recruit



Leliana, formerly lay sister of Lothing Chantry."

They were led upstairs to the First Enchanter's study, moving past the crowded apprentice dormitories: depressing and windowless rooms filled with bunk beds and reeking of ancient toilet facilities too close for comfort. Templar guards stood at intervals along the walls, reminders to the inmates of their fate should they prove a threat.

Pale and scrawny children watched them pass, whispering to each other. They moved through the libraries – no doubt full of astonishing lore – further on past the quarters of mages who must have moved beyond the apprentice stage.

A few came out to watch them. One young woman – fragile, blonde, and sickly-pale as the rest – called out, "Is there any word of Uldred?" before a Templar turned his impassive metal gaze on her, and her friends hushed her and pulled her into the shadows.

Leliana whispered in Bronwyn's ear, so softly she could barely be heard. "I don't care what the Chantry says. No one should have to live like this – especially the children."

Bronwyn did not remember the mages she had seen at Ostagar looking like this. Admittedly most of them had been in the army for a month or two before her own arrival. Perhaps in that time they had acclimated and become stronger. None of them had seemed particularly fit – other than Wynne, who, though old, had a certain wiry vitality. She hoped she could find some mages who were *healthy* enough to conscript.



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They followed the two older men upstairs to chairs, glasses of good wine, and a closed door.

"Word has already reached us, Warden," Irving said, "of your deeds in the south. I confess myself surprised to receive so distinguished a visitor."

Greagoir was more frank. "No doubt the Grey Wardens wish to make further demands upon the Circle."

Alistair shifted beside her. Bronwyn sensed that he was already put out. She felt rather put out herself.

"If you have heard anything of the Battle of Ostagar, then you have heard that Grey Wardens were nearly annihilated defending this country and its king. You see before you the remains of our order. That alone should make clear to you the nature of the threat we are facing." She took a sip of her wine, her eyes not leaving Greagoir.

"Together we beat back the first assault," Bronwyn went on, not mincing words. "The next will be greater. The larger the forces we can muster now, the better chance we have of ending this Blight before all Ferelden falls." She narrowed her eyes at her hosts. "Do not mistake me, gentlemen. Fall it will if we are not united. You may think yourself safe on your island, but you may find that its comparative safety means only that you will be the last to die."

Alistair gave her the letter bag. Bronwyn said to the two men, "I have here a letter for the two of you from Teyrn Loghain on behalf of the King, supporting my efforts. The seven mages the Circle provided have proved of immense



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assistance, but against thousands of darkspawn, greater numbers are needed."

Irving took the letter, scanned its contents, and then passed it to Greagoir, who read it with a frown of concentration.

"So, aside from being a letter-bearer," Bronwyn went on, "my mission here is two-fold. The King's army needs more mages. Badly. Their value has been established time and again, in combat and in the tents of the Healers. My own brother, the Teyrn of Highever, no doubt owes his life to Senior Enchanter Wynne. But there is only one Wynne, and her abilities and strength are being stretched to the utmost. Uldred proved a mighty force on the battlefield, but one mage can be easily overwhelmed by a thousand darkspawn."

"And Ilon — " Alistair put in. "He was great. There's no doubt in my mind that he saved my life when we were fighting at the Tower of Ishal."

Bronwyn smiled at Alistair, and continued, "In addition to the army's need for mages, the Grey Wardens also require new recruits," she said. "While I am here, I hope to replenish our numbers. Mages have served as Grey Wardens since the founding of the order, and I believe that Uldred has some interesting remarks about that service in his letter to you, First Enchanter. He told me when he gave me this letter of them. Perhaps his findings might be of interest — and provide some reassurance — to the Knight Commander."

Irving instantly broke the seal of Uldred's letter and looked through it. He read aloud a paragraph near the

end of the first page:

"...in all my research, I can find no case in which a Grey Warden mage ever became an abomination or was even possessed. Something about their initiation seems to prevent it: either because the unworthy mages perish in the course of joining the Grey Wardens, or because something in the ritual itself protects them. Service among the Grey Wardens might prove a humane alternative to the Rite of Tranquility or to execution in a failed Harrowing. Such talents as they possess might there be of use..."

"Can this be true?" Greagoir wondered, taking the letter to read it for himself. He appeared skeptical, but a bit hopeful as well. Bronwyn was pleased to see that he was not one of those Templars who appeared to live only for the opportunity to put mages to death.

"Uldred is a respected scholar," Irving replied, himself rather pleased with the letter. "What sort of mages are you looking to recruit?"

"Obviously, a Healer would be our first choice, and a valuable addition to our ranks, such as they are, but any magical talent is useful. The darkspawn have mages of their own, you know."

Greagoir looked faintly ill. "So I had heard."

"Not really powerful mages," Alistair added, "but they're troublesome, and they can really make you sick."

The two men looked at each other. Not enemies, then. Mutual respect was there, at least, complicated with the

Templars naked power over the mages, and the eternal fear of magic gone wrong. Still, the men were able to work together. That might or might not prove to Bronwyn's advantage.

Irving spoke, almost to himself. "Petra is Wynne's prize pupil, and is a responsible young woman. We'd be sorry to lose her as a teacher, of course, but in these times... There's Kinnon, too. Gwyneth, perhaps — " he looked at Greagoir in a quick, questioning way. " — and possibly Eochaid."

Greagoir nodded. "Yes, those four seems likely prospects. I suppose they can be spared..."

"Four?" Alistair burst out. "You can only spare *four* mages? There are thousands of darkspawn and you offer us four mages? Duncan is dead! The Grey Wardens died to protect you! Don't you people understand what we're facing?"

"I'm sure," Leliana said softly, "that is a very good start. These are strange times, after all."

Bronwyn was rather pleased at Alistair's indignation. It saved her the trouble of being indignant herself, and let her play the role of reasonable negotiator.

"As Leliana says, four mages is a start." She smiled. "With your permission, gentlemen, I would like to address the mages. You may not know which of them harbors the desire to defend Ferelden."

"You want to address the mages?" Irving was rather surprised at the request. "All of them?"

"Yes — all. Even the apprentices. They have a right, surely, to know what is happening in the world — especially since

it's a matter of their own survival."

"Is it really that serious?" Greagoir asked heavily. "Are you wardens certain that this a Blight?"

"Absolutely certain," Bronwyn assured him. "As you know, Blights have sometimes raged for decades. We are hoping to contain and crush this before it can spread. To do that, we must have greater numbers. It is the only way, and our only hope."



Within the hour, the mages and their Templars were gathered in the Great Hall, up yet another winding staircase.

From the benches, pale faces gazed up at Bronwyn: curious faces, suspicious faces, anxious faces — even eager faces. She took note of those, because they gave her confidence.

"Good morning to you all," Irving welcomed them. "An unusual gathering in these unusual times. I have called you all to meet our distinguished visitors: the Grey Wardens of Ferelden."

A rush of whispered excitement filled the room. To her distinct displeasure, Bronwyn heard the dreaded words "*Girl Warden.*" Alistair nudged her, looking like he wanted to laugh. She nudged him back, forcing her face to express nothing but the seriousness of the moment.

She stepped forward. "Well met, Mages of the Circle! It is a privilege to come to this ancient place, even in these troubled times. Among other things, we come bearing letters from your friends who are serving so bravely and effectively in the king's army. Before we leave, our latest recruit, Leliana —"

Leliana gave the assembled mages a charming smile and wave —

"— will distribute the letters. From the weight of the bag, it seems like Senior Enchanter Wynne wrote to half the people here!"

Some slight smiles. Bronwyn realized that these people did not trust her. They had no reason to trust anyone.

"Many of you have heard of the great victory at Ostagar. Every man and woman there played a part in the defeat of the darkspawn horde, but I come today to tell you about the brave deeds of your own, and to urge you to seize an opportunity the like of which you have not seen in hundreds of years.

"No one — *no one* — who has been healed by Wynne, or stood by Uldred in battle will ever look or think about mages in the same way. Those seven mages of the Circle have cast a shadow beyond their small number. They are not faceless threats in a distant Tower. They are comrades — brothers and sisters in arms against the common enemy of mankind."

She had stolen the phrase from the Revered Mother in Lothering. It was a useful image, as the response of her audience proved. They were listening attentively, apparently pleased to be praised for once, rather than being told that they were at fault for every misfortune since the time of Andraste.

"*'Magic exists to serve man.'* No doubt all of you have heard that phrase scores of times. But what nobler way to serve

than to take part in the great struggle of our times – to serve by saving your country? Teyrn Loghain himself has spoken with the greatest respect and admiration of mages. He calls you 'Ferelden's best weapon.' He would like at least one mage in every unit of the army. Any mage volunteering for service will be welcomed as a valuable warrior against the Blight. The more of you who serve, the greater share of honor to the Circle when final victory is ours."

She smiled at the smallest apprentices, sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the benches. One of them, a pretty little girl who must have been part Rivainni from her dark skin, grinned back at her and made a ridiculous face.

"We *can* all work together. I have seen it," Bronwyn assured them. "I have *seen* Templar skills drain a dark-spawn emissary of mana, and the creature finished off by a cold spell from one of our own Ferelden mages. That kind of cooperation is a thing of beauty. Warriors and mages together, we shall defeat the Blight."

Her listeners did not need to know that she was speaking of Alistair, who had never taken Templar vows, and of Morrigan, an apostate who had never set foot in the Circle. It hardly mattered. Ferelden would be better off without all this fear and enmity between mages and the Chantry.

"We shall be here for some hours. I have been graciously invited to join you for your midday meal by the First Enchanter. Afterward, I will remain here in the Great Hall, ready to accept the enlistment of the mages of the Circle.

Think carefully before you reject this great opportunity. This is your chance: this is the most important decision you will ever make. Choose wisely, mages of Ferelden. History awaits your decision."

She bowed respectfully. There was a smattering of applause, which grew rapidly in volume. The little apprentices cheered and the older mages chattered among themselves.

"Leliana!" Bronwyn called. "Please distribute the letters."

The little redhead read out: "To Torrin from Wynne!"

A dark-skinned mage came forward and hastily took his letter.

"To Gwyneth from Uldred!"

The fragile blonde hurried up and snatched at the letter, breaking the seal before she returned to her seat.

"To Niall from Wynne!"

This took some time. The mages seemed pleased with their letters. *Of course, everyone likes to get letters*, Bronwyn acknowledged. Apparently what was said was generating considerable excitement.

A pair of little apprentices approached Bronwyn, evidently on a dare, shoving and giggling.

"Please, my lady," the little girl asked, "are you the Girl Warden?"

Bronwyn smiled down at them. "I'm called that. It's just a nickname. I'm a Grey Warden, really, just like Alistair there."

"Can mages be Grey Wardens?"

Bronwyn saw others listening to the questions they dared not ask themselves. "Yes," she told the children.



"Mages have always served in the Wardens. Alistair and I are looking for some especially brave mages to join us."

The boy whispered something in the girl's ear. Clearly, she was the spokesperson.

"And you wouldn't be scared of them or make them live here in the Circle Tower?"

"Certainly not. They would live with us."

"Forever and ever?"

Bronwyn nodded gravely. "As long as we live."

The girl announced. "Then I guess we'll be Wardens someday."

Alistair came over, grinning. "We'll be glad to have you. Study really hard and learn all the magic you can! We want really smart mages."

The meal was served shortly afterward. Not bad food, though it was apparent that what the Wardens were eating at the head table was not what the balance of the mages were given. Bronwyn ate slowly, watching the whispered debate rage through the Hall, as mages exchanged letters, and gesticulated fiercely to each other.

"Uldred has stirred up his friends in the Libertarians," Irving told her, dryly amused.

"Libertarians?" Bronwyn asked, puzzled.

"Within the Circle are various factions: 'fraternities' we call ourselves. Each has a different philosophy about our role in the world, or what our role would be if we could choose for ourselves. The Libertarians believe that mages



should be completely free..."

On her other side, she heard Greagoir snort in disgust.

Irving went on – "There are also the Lucrosians, who believe we should be using our gifts to amass wealth; and the Aquitarians, who believe in maintaining the status quo. They are the largest group. Another fraternity is that of the Isolationists. They would prefer that mages withdraw entirely from the rest of the world and live apart, where their magic can harm and frighten no one."

"I daresay we won't be getting any Isolationist recruits, then."

"You'd be surprised," Irving said thoughtfully. "I have always believed the Isolationist viewpoint to be one of despair. If offered other options, some might change their tune. Young Niall, for example, over there – " he indicated a clean-shaven mage with a nod of his head " – appears to be rather excited about the things he's reading. The walls of our Tower can seem very confining, especially when one is young," he added, his voice rising, perhaps for Greagoir's benefit. "It is not so extraordinary, surely, for young people to wish to see a little of the world."

Clearly, Irving was right. As soon as the dishes were cleared away, and Bronwyn arranged herself with parchment and ink, mages were coming forward to offer their services to the army.

A young woman hurried forward, and signed her name "Petra." Bronwyn remember that she was one of the candidates that Irving had predicted. Her boldness

encouraged others. Soon a line formed, though now and then the mages themselves pulled someone away, notably some very young apprentices.

"But we can help!" piped a little boy. "Enchanter Lora said my healing spell was very advanced for my age!"

"No more nonsense!"

Greagoir sat there too, watching the candidates come forward with narrowed eyes, occasionally frowning at some of them, more unconcerned about others.

"But I must go!" a young girl was crying. "How else can I expiate this dreadful curse?"

"Keili," Petra quietly explained to Bronwyn. "She's a Healer apprentice – not even Harrowed yet. She's really bought in to the Chantry view that magic is evil. She's in the chapel constantly, praying for forgiveness."

"Is she any good as a Healer?" Bronwyn asked flatly.

"Oh – yes, yes. Quite talented. But a little – off."

"I don't care about that," Bronwyn said. "If she knows what's she doing, she can help. In fact, I can think of nowhere better for a Healer apprentice to train than in a camp of sick and injured soldiers."

Even Greagoir saw the sense in that. After a whispered conference with Irving, it was agreed that the Healing apprentices could go, as long as they were at least sixteen years old.

"I shall also send notice to the mages living outside the Tower, informing them that they may be called for service in the war." Irving told her. "There are a number of them,

serving with Chantry permission in noble houses. It will take time to recall them, of course."

It must seem like a Satinalia to the mages: the regular schedule forgotten, the little apprentices running wild, playing some sort of game, touching the bases of the statues in the Great Hall.

Bronwyn was feeling quite pleased, looking down at the growing list of names. Wynne's letter had encouraged Senior Enchanter Torrin to come forward, and he had agreed to lead the party to Ostagar. Greagoir's expression showed that he respected the man – or at least did not think he would turn into an abomination anytime in the immediate future.

"Do you hear that?" Alistair asked, his head up, listening.

"That rumbling sound?" Bronwyn asked, "Perhaps the wind is up and we're hearing the waves against the stones of the island."

"Maybe." He went back to talking with another knot of young male mages, telling them the story of how he and Ilon fought their way up the Tower of Ishal together. The mages were asking technical questions about Ilon's spells that Alistair could not quite follow, but they seemed to understand what they needed to know from his descriptions of the effects.

More names: the young Isolationist Niall, willing to give the rest of the world one last chance; Petra's friend Kinnon, talking about new "Area of Effect" spells he had learned;



Gwyneth, who said little to Bronwyn, but whispered to her friends about "freedom at last!"

As more signed up for service, those who had had doubts took courage and joined the end of the line. Bronwyn knew she would have done the same in their place. She would have done anything to escape this sunless world, where faceless armed men stood guard to kill them at a moment's notice.

"Thirty-five mages!" Alistair read over her shoulder. "The King will think Satinalia has come early!"

"He'll be very proud of Ferelden's Circle," Bronwyn said for the listening ears surrounding them. "This will make a tremendous difference."

Irving and Greagoir were debating how soon the mages would leave, but agreed that it would be at least four days before the wagons, oxen, drivers, and supplies could be gathered. The mages would also need Templars to guard them, and that number was also a matter for discussion.

"I have some letters of my own that I would like to send back to Ostagar with your mages," Bronwyn told them. "I'll also compose a message to the King and to Teyrn Loghain before I leave."

Her letters to Fergus and to Wynne were nearly ready. She had begun an official report to Teyrn Loghain that she would also complete here. She had debated whether or not she should send a short letter to His Majesty, as well, wondering if that would be considered presumptuous. In the end, she had decided that the King would like to



receive a letter from the Grey Wardens. In fact, perhaps he would be hurt if he did not...

"I knew I heard something!" Alistair shouted. Faint screams echoed down the hall, coming closer.

Bronwyn was up from the chair in an instant, knocking it over, Alistair and Leliana were with her as she raced toward the screams. At the door to the staircase, mages were bubbling up from the floor below.

"— Demon!"

"— We can't hold it!"

The mages leaving the assembly seemed to have opened the door to the Fade, and a demon had emerged to greet them.

Huge, flaming, twisting, roaring: its multiple limbs blurred, its face melted from one appearance into another. Someone threw a cold spell at it, but that only served to slow the demon slightly.

"Out of the way!" Bronwyn commanded, drawing sword and dagger. "Alistair! Come on!"

It was unnatural, but corporeal enough to feel her blades. It fought back, one misshapen arm holding an enormous sword on high. Bronwyn dodged to the right, and stabbed deep into the creature's pulsing side. Alistair bashed it with his shield. Leliana threw aside her bow and rushed in with her daggers, an Orlesian war cry echoing off the wall.

The mages were trying to help, but there were too many of them — and too many children in the way. Bronwyn bit off a scream as a tongue of blue lightning missed the

demon and crackled through her instead.

Leliana was caught by one of the flailing arms and tossed aside. She was up and at the creature almost instantly, her pretty face intent and joyous. Alistair kept slamming at it with shield and sword pommel, while Bronwyn edged behind the creature and drove both blades into the shifting back.

There was a low bellow and suddenly a silence, and Bronwyn felt herself going up and up, the very air pressing on her until she felt she could never again draw breath. An explosion rocked the Tower, and she fell to the stones, slamming against the floor.

After a moment, she could hear again.

"We won? Yay," said Alistair, sitting on the floor beside her. "I think that was a demon. I'm pretty sure, anyway –"

"Alistair," Bronwyn groaned. "You're babbling."

No one was dead, luckily, and there were only a few injuries. Bronwyn was still so dazed that she hardly felt the First Enchanter's careful hands on her face, or the tickling of the healing spell.

"I didn't expect quite so much excitement on my first visit to the Circle," she confessed.

"A puppet show would have been fine," Alistair agreed. "No need to go all out."

"The ancient spirit Shah Wyrđ," Irving murmured. "Wardens, you have done us great service by defending us from this creature. It was thought destroyed for centuries,

and all this time it has been lurking in the shadows. Clearly, something summoned it."

Petra bent down, and pulled out a blade of gleaming silverite from the putrefying remains.

Niall, who loved history, came forward to look at it. "I think – look at the runes!" He told Irving, "I believe this is the sword Yusaris – or a very good copy, anyway."

"Yusaris..." Irving took it in his hands, struggling with the weight of the enormous two-handed greatsword. "The Dragonslayer. A storied weapon. How did it come into the possession of an ancient demon? No matter. It is your prize, Wardens. Take it with you with our thanks."

The Templars, who had spent quite a bit of time running and hiding from the demon, told Greagoir and Irving that it had burst out of the cellars below ground level.

"Perhaps we should look into the matter," Irving said. "Wardens, would you care to join us?"

"I didn't *summon* the demon!" the bearded, filthy, naked young man in the dungeon cell protested. Despite his bruises, Bronwyn could not help noticing that he was far more muscled and fit than any other mage she had seen. "It came out of the cellars lower down, and I was doing my best not to be noticed and killed – no thanks to you lot locking me in and forgetting about me!"

Irving shook his head. "I am not convinced that Anders here is the culprit. Summoning a demon would require a

ritual, and he clearly has nothing that could be used."

"Except his *blood*," sneered a faceless Templar.

"What is this mage imprisoned for?" Bronwyn asked.

"He is a flight risk, Warden." Greagoir told her. "Six times he has escaped the Tower. He was sentenced to a year of solitary confinement, in some hopes of teaching him wisdom. Our hopes were vain, it seemed."

"I am not a blood mage!" Anders shouted back. "If Biff here hadn't taken it upon himself to rough me up, you'd see I didn't have any cuts or wounds a blood mage could use!"

"Let me examine him, Greagoir," Irving urged. "It may well be that he is telling the truth. Reckless and disobedient as Anders is, no one has ever suspected him of blood magic."

Irving took the young mage's face in his hands, and tutted over the split lip.

Meanwhile Greagoir considered it all. "If it's not this one, then it could only be — yes! She's more likely anyway. Consorting with a blood mage... She very well might be the guilty party!"

Through another set of doors they descended to another level and came to yet another cell. This one appeared empty, until a pale face turned toward them, and they saw that a young elf girl was lying on the stone floor. She too was naked: covered in scratches and cuts, her eye swollen and her wrists and thighs bruised.

"Tara Surana," Greagoir said grimly, "We want to know

what you did, and we want the truth."

"They just wanted to be *free*!" the young elf cried, struggling to sit up. "They just wanted to get out of this awful place and get married and live like real people! Lily didn't want to be a priest. Her aunt and uncle traded her off to the Chantry like an animal!"

"What is she talking about?" Alistair asked Irving, uncomfortable with the girl's nakedness and concerned about her injuries.

Irving murmured, "She and a chantry initiate helped a blood mage escape the Tower."

The girl clutched her head in despair. "I didn't *know* Jowan was a blood mage. He told me he *wasn't*!"

"That's enough of that!" Greagoir said sternly. "We are not here about your past crimes. A demon was summoned today and set on the Circle. As it issued from the dungeons, you are the probable culprit. We suspect blood magic to have been used, and your visible wounds are proof of it."

"Of course I'm bloody, you fool!" screamed the elf. "Your oh-so-pure Templars come down here for a bit a sport now and then when they're bored! You must know that! *They* did this to me, and now your saying I'm a blood mage because I've been attacked?"

"Child, child," Irving said sadly, "raising demons to defend yourself is not the answer..."

Bronwyn thought it sounded like a perfectly reasonable answer to her. If armed men came to rape her, she would



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do anything to fight back.

She spoke up. "What happened to the other girl – the initiate? Is she here, also?"

Greagoir shook his head. "No. She was taken north to the Aeonar Prison shortly after the escape of the blood mage Jowan. As she was a member of the Chantry, sole authority was mine. This mage – " he pointed with disdain at the young elf girl, " – Irving thought might be salvageable, and she was sentenced to three years imprisonment. Now she makes wild accusations against my men. Clearly, Irving's mercy was wasted on her."

"What mercy?" the elf screamed. "What mercy? You people wouldn't know mercy if Archon Hessarian stood beside you and shouted in your ears! I don't care anymore! Do whatever you like. You will anyway."

"A great pity," Irving sighed. "Such remarkable talent."

"Talented, is she?" Bronwyn asked, keeping her face expressionless.

"Oh, my word, yes. Powerful, too. One of our best students. I had such hopes of her, just as Wynne did of Anders."

Alistair winced, and then blew out a breath. This dungeon was a horrible place, and there wasn't a shred of real evidence against either of the battered prisoners.

"Couldn't the demon have been summoned some other way?" he asked.

"Possibly," Irving granted, ignoring Greagoir's glares. "but we have no other suspects. The demon emerged from



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the cellars, and only Anders and Tara were down here.'

"But – " Alistair pointed out, remembering his training, " – mages don't have to be physically close to demons to summon them. Somebody else could have done this from the top of the Tower, for all we know."

"These are the likely suspects," Greagoir ground out.

"I don't see why," Alistair muttered. Bronwyn put a hand on his arm.

"As you seem to have no further use for these mages, First Enchanter," she said in a gentle, reasonable voice, "Perhaps the best thing would be for me to conscript them into the Grey Wardens. If they are as powerful as you say, they could of great service to us."

"A blood mage?" Greagoir was incredulous. "Better to kill her at once." The Templars beside him moved to unlock the elf's cell. The girl tensed, clenching her fists. Bronwyn thought she resembled a kicked dog, turning on its tormentors.

Bronwyn moved in between the cell and the Templars, raising her voice. "I do invoke the Right of Conscriptio on this mage – Tara – and on the mage Anders. They are henceforth Grey Warden recruits."

Irving tried to mediate. "Warden, we have many better and more reliable mages in the Tower."

Bronwyn shook her head. "This girl is wounded, and yet she is still full of fight, ready to defend her life against armored men with swords. Anders has escaped you six times.



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That shows remarkable resourcefulness. I'll take them with me when I leave today, and they shall trouble you no more."

"No one contests your right, Warden," grumbled Greagoir. "Merely your good sense!"

Inwardly seething, Bronwyn gave Greagoir a self-deprecating smile. "I appreciate your concern, Knight-Commander. I shall consider your words and take very great care. Is it possible for them to be clothed and healed before we leave?"

"I shall see to it personally, Warden," Irving assured her. Bronwyn thought she detected a note of relief in his voice.

She trusted the First Enchanter, but she did not quite trust the Templars. The Wardens waited with their new recruits while they were healed; while smallclothes and boots and robes were brought. Irving also provided them both with staffs of their own.

"Grey Warden, eh?" Anders considered. "That works, I suppose."

"We're not coming back to the Circle?" Tara asked, her eyes flat and hostile as she watched Irving heal her arms.

"Not unless you want to, or our duties call us here in the course of recruiting," Bronwyn said. She felt full to bursting about things she would like to say about the Circle, not one of which she could allow past her lips. It was so important to maintain friendly relations with the First Enchanter. Those thirty-five mages were not yet on their way to the army.

Greagoir had already left – to "more pressing duties" as



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he said. Bronwyn led her party up the stairs and toward the entry hall, only asking Irving if there were some place she could speak privately to the new recruits.

"Of course," He led them to a door, and said to Bronwyn, "Do join me in my study when you are finished."

Once inside the little room – hardly more than a closet – Bronwyn spoke quickly.

"Welcome to you both. Anders: consider this your seventh, final, and completely successful escape from the Circle."

"What if I want to escape from the Grey Wardens?"

"Hey!" Alistair objected. "You can't leave the Grey Wardens! We're in the middle of a Blight!"

Leliana said softly, "Being a Grey Warden is a great honor. And it's nice. We travel and meet all sorts of people and kill monsters."

"I hope," Bronwyn said earnestly to both of her new recruits, "that you won't consider joining the Wardens either a prison or a punishment. In fact, it's the one way you're safe from the Chantry forever. If you're a warden, you can promenade up and down the street in front of a Chantry, waving your staff, and no one can do a thing to you."

"Sounds like fun," Anders allowed. "When do we get out of here?"

"I've just recruited more mages for the army in Ostagar –"

The elf nodded grudgingly, but Anders looked completely blank.

Alistair filled him in. "We've got a Blight. Darkspawn

are attacking in the south. The King led a big army down there and we've won the battles so far, but the army needs mages really badly."

"Teyrn Loghain thinks highly of the value of mages," Bronwyn added, "and there are only seven with the army now. The Grey Wardens have a treaty with the Circle and I was able to enlist thirty-five more to go to the army, but we also were looking for possible Grey Wardens. We heard you were both talented, and I thought you would be glad to get out of here."

"Mere words cannot express it," Anders agreed. "I may have to kiss all three of you passionately."

Alistair backed away in alarm, but Leliana laughed.

Bronwyn turned to the elf, Tara. "I know you were hurt badly," she said in a softer tone. "Do you feel able to travel? We have rooms at the inn across the lake, and you can rest there."

"Not very *big* rooms," Alistair muttered.

"I can pitch a tent outside," Bronwyn waved that away. "Or sleep on the floor. Tara can have the bed."

Finally the elf spoke. "I can do whatever it takes to get out of here."

"That's the spirit!" Anders approved.

"All right then," Bronwyn said. "Here is what we're going to do: Alistair – Leliana – I want you to take our new recruits to the quartermaster." She passed them a money pouch. "Get them what you can – canteens, plain cloaks, backpacks if they can be had. If they don't have what we

need here, we can get it at the village up the hill from the inn. I'll go finish my letters and say our farewells. With luck, we can be out of here within the hour."

It was not that simple, of course.

The First Enchanter very kindly allowed her the use of his desk, and Bronwyn finished her letters to Fergus and to Wynne. Then she wrote with quick but careful elegance to the King. Even more carefully, she finished her longer and more specific message to Teyrn Loghain, feeling very proud of her work today. Eventually more mages would have to be called to serve, but this was a good start.

As she signed her letter to Loghain, the Knight-Commander returned to the study, and not alone. With him was a tall and handsome young Templar.

"I have another recruit for you, Warden," Greagoir said.



CHAPTER 13

THE WATER
OF LIFE

LISTAIR," BRONWYN SAID.
"MAY I SPEAK TO YOU FOR A
MOMENT?"

Her party was dickering with the quartermaster, the two mages rather lively and spirited as the reality of escaping from the Tower became more solid with every purchase. She paused in the doorway, watching them. Alistair looked up, smiling broadly, and excused himself.

"What is it? Are you all right?" he asked, his handsome face concerned.

"Come in here." She led the way into the little room they had used shortly before, and she shut the door.

"What's the matter?" he asked again. "You're upset."

"I'm very upset. I've had to do something I don't like, and I wanted to tell you first."

"Go on."

She took a deep, furious breath. "Knight-Commander Greagoir obviously thinks I need his help. He's forced a recruit on us, and in a way I couldn't refuse. He made it clear that if I tried, the departure of those thirty-five

mages would be unavoidably delayed."

"Blackmail? Is he out of his mind? This is no time to play power games!"

She ran a hand over her face, and impatiently pushed some stray curls aside. "You know that and I know that, but Greagoir thinks our new recruits are too dangerous to leave without a keeper. He's given us one of his Templars. Released him from his vows and all that, but he's to come with us. That was his price. I couldn't say no."

"Ri-right." Alistair leaned against the wall, thinking. "There's something I should tell you about the Templars. The Chantry keeps a pretty tight rein on them. Ever wonder how all those lady-like priests control the big scary armed men?"

"Now that you put it that way, I do."

"Well –" he grimaced, and then went on. "Yeah – well – why not give away the store? It's not like they've ever done anything for me. Not to put too fine a point on it, Templars are all given lyrium to enhance their mage-fighting abilities. They end up addicted. The Chantry controls the lyrium trade. And there you are."

"Are you saying that the Chantry deliberately addicts their Templars to lyrium? That's obscene! I can't believe it!"

"Well, they do, and it is, and you should, because it's all true," he said bluntly. "Another reason I'll always be grateful to Duncan for saving me. They start the dosing just after the Templar takes his vows, so I just missed it. Thank the Maker."

"So you're saying that we're saddled with a lyrium-

addicted slave of the Chantry?"

"That's – pretty much exactly it."

"I imagine he has orders to spy on us."

Alistair laughed. "At least."

"And after what that poor girl has gone through, the last thing she'll want to see is a Templar."

"So where is our new brother?" Alistair asked.

"Waiting back by the apprentice dormitories. We've got to take him, Alistair. Those mages need to be on their way to the army as soon as possible."

"All right. Fair enough. We have to take him. I wonder if Greagoir knows he could die in the Joining."

"Any of them could die in the Joining, but I hope they won't." She bit her thumb, thinking. "And what are we going to do about the lyrium addiction?"

He shook his head. "I don't think there's much we can do at the moment. I don't even know if it can be cured. We'll probably have to give him a potion or two every day."

Thinking it over, she felt her resolve hardening. "We can do that. I wonder if he already has a stash of lyrium on him, with promises of more in exchange for information. I'll have a word with him as soon as we're across the lake. Meanwhile, we've got to get him kitted out, and get rid of the Templar gear. I hope the quartermaster has something he can wear, because otherwise he's going in his smallclothes!"

She was disappointed but not surprised when the excited looks on her new recruits' faces evaporated, and their

expressions became guarded and then fairly horrified when Bronwyn and Alistair returned with the newest addition to the party. Cullen, however, was a recruit, too, and Bronwyn could not see any point in publicly insulting him.

"The Knight-Commander has released Cullen from his vows. He wants to join us, so we'll need something suitably raffish and untemplar for him," she said lightly.

Cullen put in, a bit shyly. "I wanted to go with you – to fight. I heard your speech, and I thought I might be of use."

"Wonderful," Anders muttered. "Our very own stalker." He glanced anxiously at Tara, and whispered a question in her ear.

She would not look at Cullen, but shook her head and whispered back at Anders. The tall young mage looked relieved, but still suspicious.

" – I'm pretty sure, anyway," Tara added in a low voice. "They always kept their helmets on."

"Oh, that is a picture I *did* not need in my head," Alistair said to Bronwyn.

The quartermaster had some armor that would fit Cullen: a very nice set of silverite scale that was far better than Bronwyn's own chainmail. Gritting her teeth, she reached into her money belt for the gold, since she had not really been serious about taking a recruit along in only his smallclothes. The Knight-Commander had done well for him otherwise, at least. Cullen had been given time to neatly pack his belongings, and had a tent and a bedroll



of his own. Other than the expensive armor, he would not be a great drain on Warden funds.

"Go and change," Bronwyn told Cullen, nodding toward the small room off the entry hall. "Bring whatever else you want, but leave your life as a Templar behind."

She filled up the time by making some small purchases, and by chatting with her other recruits about their backgrounds.

Tara did not remember life before the Circle. She was obviously an Alienage elf, but as she had been brought here when she was four years old, she had forgotten her family, and in fact did not know which Alienage she had come from. She said very little to Bronwyn directly, and appeared to be in awe of her.

Anders' story was very different.

"My mother helped me keep my magic hidden until I was fifteen. Then she died, and I was sent off to live with her brother and his wife." He smiled grimly. "May they die in a fire. They turned me into the Chantry so fast that my head is still spinning. They took all my mother's money, and her house, and all her things, too. Very pleased with themselves, they were. Righteous and richer all at once, you see."

"I think the Chantry *means* well –" Leliana said to herself.

Alistair hardly knew what to say at all. His Chantry conditioning made it difficult not to regard magic as dangerous, and those afflicted with it in need of people to protect them for their own good, but he knew what it was to be locked away against his will. Would he have run away?



Probably not. They would have filled him full of lyrium, and he would have danced to their tune until his brain rotted like every other Templar's did in the course of time.

Cullen was back, looking very tentative and uncomfortable – and younger and smaller too, without the massive plate armor. He had a big two-handed sword sheathed at his back, and Bronwyn hoped he knew how to use it.

"Nice armor," Alistair commented. He hefted Yusaris, newly cleaned and in a new scabbard, and Bronwyn and Leliana shifted some of the other purchases to waiting arms. Cullen gave them a hesitant smile.

"Take this, please," Bronwyn said to Cullen, passing him a parcel of potions ingredients. "Yes, very nice armor indeed. Let's get moving. You need to meet the rest of our companions."

Complicated as Bronwyn's life had just become, there was more in store, as they walked through the wide doors of the Circle Tower.

The young elf stepped out into the sunlight and staggered, green eyes bulging, looking up wildly at the blue dome of the sky over the vastness of Lake Calenhad.

"Too big," she gasped, and promptly vomited into the straggling weeds by the doorway. Moaning, she covered her eyes and retched again.

Anders put an arm out to steady her, but she was already collapsing to her knees, curling up in a tight ball of fear and misery.

"Too big," she moaned. "Too big." She began trembling, her breath coming in short, sharp pants.

Bronwyn looked at Alistair, who looked back at her, blank and helpless.

"Poor thing!" cried Leliana. "She must be very sick."

"She *told* you she doesn't remember anything before the Tower, and since she doesn't, she won't remember what it's like to be outside," Anders told them, smoothing the girl's hair back. "Come on, Tara. You'll get used to it. Keep your eyes shut and we'll get you out of here."

Cullen had come up on the girl's other side, his face anxious, his hands reaching out hesitantly. He stepped back a little at Anders' fierce glare.

"Get away from her!"

"I want to help..."

Bronwyn pushed the former Templar aside, and knelt beside her new recruits. "Tara, we need to get you to the boat. Can you walk if Anders and I help you?" The girl nodded quickly, and then clapped her hand over her mouth, gagging. Her eyes were shut tightly, her other hand groping out for them.

Bronwyn thought about telling Anders to carry the girl, but that would not be the most impressive way for the girl to begin her career in the Grey Wardens. Instead, with Anders on one side and Bronwyn on the other, they led the girl to the boat and helped her in.

She jerked her head at Cullen. "You can help by carrying their things."

He instantly swept everything up, trying not drop the

odd bags.

He seems biddable enough, Bronwyn sighed to herself. *But he's going to be a very tough sell to a lot of my party.* Morrigan already had problems with Alistair, who had been trained by the Templars. What would she make of Cullen, who had actually been one?

The old boatman had been napping as he waited at the dock. Now he snorted awake and frowned, trying to figure out the group. He clearly recognized Cullen, which seemed to give him some reassurance.

"Little elf girl's come over queer, has she? I seen that before. Not used to the big sky over the lake. A fine sight. Never get tired of it myself."

"I'm sure she'll be better once she's had a chance to wash and rest," Bronwyn said, trying to hearten her new recruit. "Maybe this would help," she said, offering her silver flask of Tevinter brandy.

Anders took a sniff, "Ah, *aqua vitae*, the drink of the Old Gods themselves! Come on, elfkins, drink up! It'll put hair in your ears!"

The elf, eyes still screwed shut, took a sip and coughed. "Anders, you ass!"

At least she laughed, and the rest of the them did too, more or less.

Bronwyn managed a weak smile. She felt like a fool. Recruiting the elf because she was sorry for her had been a stupid thing to do, but she knew she could not have left

the girl to her fate. Somehow, she would have to find a way to make this work.

Seven people in Kester's small boat left it low in the water. Bronwyn removed her gauntlet and let her hand idly trail in the chilly lake. Tara rested against Anders' broad shoulder, shading her eyes, trying to slow her breathing. Bronwyn hoped she wouldn't have to deal with a full-blown panic attack in the cramped confines of a boat in deep water.

There was a period of silence, broken only the sound of Tara's gasps and the gurgle of the oars slipping in and out of the water, when Cullen spoke up.

"Are we going to Ostagar?"

Bronwyn shook her head slightly. "We'll talk when we're all together at the inn. We have a different mission. How are you on horseback?"

"Pretty good." He seemed interested. "You have horses?"

"Enough."

"Oh, wonderful," Anders groaned. "Horses."

"Not a fan, I take it?" Alistair asked.

"I've never ridden a horse," Anders declared, "but I've been kicked by one."

"Well," Alistair explained, with an air of great wisdom. "Riding and being kicked are two entirely different skill sets. We'd like you to focus on the riding bit for now."

Bronwyn said, "We're waiting for a boat to take us across the lake to Gherlen's Pass, so we'll have time for

some riding lessons before we go."

Kester's attention was drawn by that. "Waiting for the LADY OF THE LAKE, are you? That's the biggest in these waters. Put in here a month ago – no, I tell a lie – it was two months ago and the skipper said she needed looking to. Might be awhile before she puts in."

"Really?" Bronwyn was displeased. "How long?"

"Can't say. Might be a month, might be tomorrow."

"Lovely," she sighed.

"There's the inn," Leliana said. "We're almost there – Tara, isn't it? – We're almost there. It's very comfortable. I'll order baths for us, and you will feel much better."

"Thanks," Tara managed, gritting her teeth against the skull-burning terror of all this *space*.

"A bath would be nice," Bronwyn agreed. "And tonight we should have some entertainment. A story, I think – and Alistair –"

"Oh, Maker save me," he muttered.

"Yes, Alistair, I think tonight's the night for you."

"Oh, what fun!" Leliana enthused. "I look forward to it so much."

"And you, Leliana," Bronwyn said. "If it wouldn't be an imposition – would you consider playing your lute for us?"

Leliana smiled, brilliantly. "I shall consider it, yes!"

The boat knocked against the pier and was made fast. Tara was helped out and gently urged toward the inn.

Their approach had been noted. Sten and Scout were waiting for them by the shore.

"I must speak to you, Warden," Sten said grimly, in contrast to Scout's happy tail-wagging and frolicking.

"Go on, take Tara in and get settled," Bronwyn said, waving on the rest of the party. She gave Scout a reassuring pat. "Yes, Sten? Is everything all right?"

"The horses are safe and I have seen no enemies approaching. All is well. There is something else I wish to discuss."

"Of course."

"You may have wondered what a Sten of the Beresaad was doing in a human village in the middle of Ferelden."

"I wondered, yes, but I thought it best to let you speak of it in your own time."

"That is well. I came with my fellows on a mission from the Arishok to answer a question."

She waited, only raising her brows.

"The Arishok — the military leader of my people — wished to know *'What is the Blight?'* By these shores — I think south of here — we were surprised by a large party of darkspawn. I alone survived. At length I was found by humans. How I came to be in the village is a story for another time."

"Your — Arishok — must be expecting your report at some point, I take it?"

"Indeed. But I cannot return. I have lost my sword, and my people would call me soulless, and slay me."

"Your sword?" Bronwyn tried to understand the story. The Qunari were just so different — so incomprehensible. "You might have dropped it where you fought. You must

have your sword in order to return to your people?"

"It is so."

"Well, we'll have to find it —"

"I have word of it." Seeing her waiting patiently, he continued. "There is a scavenger — a looter of lost things — whom I came upon. He came to sell some of his findings to the innkeeper here. He was one of those who robbed the bodies of my brothers. He says the sword was taken by a trader, by name Faryn, who was on his way to Orzammar."

Pleased that it fell in with her plans, Bronwyn said, "Well, we are going to Orzammar, so we will look for this Faryn. There is a big trading post outside the gates of Orzammar, I'm told. They have a fair that lasts until the dead of winter. We'll find this fellow Faryn, I'm sure. Oh —" she said, reaching down to scratch Scout's ears. "I don't pretend to fully understand how important your sword is to you, but I do sympathize. While we are looking for it, perhaps you would consider making use of a fine weapon we were given at the Circle..." She led the way back to the inn and a much-desired tankard of ale.

"So here it is —" said Alistair, gathering the new recruits at a table at the Spoiled Princess. Bronwyn was speaking outside with Sten, and he had a few minutes to talk before she returned. The innkeeper brought them a round of drinks, which were seized on eagerly by everyone.

Alistair told the innkeeper, "It's awhile until supper I

imagine, so if you could bring us some snacks – just some bread and cheese – that sort of thing, you know – ”

“ – And we’ll want baths as soon as we can have them!” Leliana added.

The innkeeper nodded and bustled off to the kitchen. Alistair took a long swallow of ale before going on.

“I don’t know how much any of you know about the Battle of Ostagar – ”

Cullen was nodding, but Tara and Anders looked fairly blank. The elf’s color and condition had much improved, once within four walls and covered by a roof. She could even enjoy looking out the narrow little windows at the Circle Tower, now safely in the distance and separated from them by a fair stretch of lake.

She said, “I heard about the darkspawn invasion, and that the King had taken the army south. That’s just before I got locked up.”

“You know more than I do, elfkins,” Anders said.

“Right.” Alistair took a deep breath. “The darkspawn invaded, the King went south, and there was a huge battle. This is the bad part, now: all the Grey Wardens but Bronwyn and yours truly were killed. We were sent to light a signal beacon at the top of this huge old Tevinter tower – the Tower of Ishal. We got there, found it was already taken by the darkspawn, and Bronwyn did this big heroic thing of climbing the tower with a rope and fighting an ogre single-handed at the top and lighting the

beacon. It was a tremendous victory from the King’s point of view, but we still lost most of the Grey Wardens. That’s why we’re recruiting pretty aggressively.”

“Lucky for us!” Anders remarked. “Except for the whole ‘killed in battle’ thing.”

“Anyway,” Alistair continued, an edge in his voice, “my *point* is that Bronwyn is the real deal – she really is brave and smart and heroic – and she deserves your respect. She’s in charge, and I’m here to back her up, and that’s the size of it.”

“Is the Qunari a recruit, too?” Tara asked.

“Yeah. We picked him up in Lothering, along with Leliana here.”

“Bronwyn is a very nice person,” Leliana agreed. “And her swordsmanship is admirable. I like the way she does her hair. Well, I do!” she said to Cullen, seeing his strange expression.

“The way she talks – ” Tara muttered into her tankard. “ – it’s kind of fancy. She sounds like the First Enchanter.”

Alistair shrugged. “Well, her brother is the Teyrn of Highever, and she’s a highly educated lady.”

“I should have known,” Anders sighed. “A *noble*.”

Cullen was very impressed. “The sister of a teyrn? Shouldn’t we be addressing her as Lady Bronwyn, then?”

“Hey! We’re all equal in the Wardens,” Alistair declared. “We don’t use titles. And since I’ve got you all together, let’s go over the rest of the basics...” He broke off. “Oh, good! Cheese!”

Bronwyn came in to find Alistair taking care of the recruits’ orientation. He was doing perfectly well at it, so she took the tankard the innkeeper offered, and devoted

herself to drinking for a moment. Sten joined the others, pleased to see that the tray of snacks the landlord set on the table included cookies.

"But if Ostagar was this big victory," Anders was saying, "Why is there a problem? The darkspawn were defeated, right?"

She didn't want to hear the bad news repeated, even though it stalked her dreams. Instead, she nodded to Morrigan, coming in through the door from the upstairs.

"The Chantry scholar has departed," Morrigan told her, "so I secured his room in addition to the others. 'Tis a great deal larger, in fact, and should — are those people with us?"

"Three new recruits." Bronwyn gestured to her and they stepped back into the hallway. "Two mages and a former Templar," she whispered. "Don't look at me like that. The Templar was a concession to the Knight-Commander, so he would permit the departure of a mob of mages we recruited for the army. I'm more concerned with *our* new mages at this point. I know you despise the Circle and its inhabitants, but go easy on them — especially the girl. She helped a friend escape and was caught. She was in the dungeon when we found her, and in a very bad way. It's quite impossible that you would hate the Circle more than she does. She had problems leaving the Tower, since she could not remember ever having been out-of-doors. The man is reportedly an outstanding Healer, but was also in the dungeons — for a year in solitary confinement — because he made repeated escape attempts. I think he's the pick of the bunch."

Rather acidly, Morrigan replied, "Then I shall handle them with velvet gloves. I *had* hoped to have a room to myself, if only to escape your nightly adventures in the Fade."

"Maybe Leliana can bear with me. If you don't object, I'd like you to share a room with Tara, and I'll share with Leliana. If the other room is larger, we'll put the men in there, and ask the landlord to lay some featherbeds on the floor. I expect to be here a least for a few days. No one knows when the boat I want is coming. I'll be giving the mages some riding lessons anyway, and I hope you will join us. And now, come with me, and I'll make the introductions."

As Bronwyn could have predicted, they did not go very smoothly. She caught the men's looks of admiration at the sight of Morrigan in her revealing robes: Anders very open about it, and Cullen very guilty. Tara looked at her with admiration too.

"You're a mage?" she asked in wonder. "A mage who has never lived in the Circle?"

"That I am," Morrigan declared proudly. "Templars came and went, but my mother and I were never caught. Never even in the least danger of it, in fact."

"An apostate!" Cullen stared in horror. Bronwyn did not like the curious blue glow gathering around him.

"Uh — Cullen," Alistair nudged him. "Don't do that. She counts as a Grey Warden ally. Remember what I told you?"

"But —"

"I'd like to speak to Cullen for a moment," Bronwyn



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said pleasantly. "Why don't you all get situated and washed upstairs? Tara, you will be sharing a room with Morrigan, and I'm sorry, Leliana, but it looks like you will have put up with me. Alistair – " she said quickly, cutting off whatever remark Anders was about to make. "Alistair, Morrigan took Brother Genetivi's room for us, and since it's much bigger, I think all the men can go there. Ask the the innkeeper for more bedding."

"I cannot wait to have a shave," Anders said dreamily, following after Sten and Alistair. "Ale, cheese, and a shave. I call that the good life. All I need now is permission to shoot lightning at fools and a harem of pretty girls – oh, wait, we've got that..."

Bronwyn smiled at the sound of his voice, fading as he went upstairs with the rest. She remained smiling as she sat down at the table and faced Cullen. She gave a nod to the innkeeper, and he hastily departed in the direction of the kitchen.

"Cullen." She sat back and regarded him, keeping her face pleasant. "Please listen very carefully to me. I don't know what the Knight-Commander had in mind, or what orders he gave you. They don't matter. He is no longer your Knight-Commander. I command the Grey Wardens in Ferelden, and you are *my* recruit. I'm sure Alistair told you of our mission."

"He said we were to go to Orzammar to enforce the treaties against the darkspawn," Cullen ventured. He added, uncertain as to her title " – Commander."



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"Call me Bronwyn. We are not formal in the Grey Wardens. We are going to enforce the treaties, yes, but that is because our ultimate mission is to kill darkspawn, by whatever means necessary. Did Alistair say those words to you?"

"I don't recall – "

"Then I shall repeat them. *'By whatever means necessary.'* Our late commander, Duncan, emphasized those words to me. Grey Wardens have always taken allies where they could find them, because the darkspawn are the supreme danger to the safety of the people of Thedas. Understand that as a Grey Warden you will not be fighting unarmed, frightened eight-year-old boys, or exhausted, escaping lone mages. Darkspawn are strong and savage and they hunt in packs and they *eat* people!"

Her voice had risen involuntarily. She took another sip of ale, thinking the man was looking sufficiently cowed. Of course, as a former Templar, he was accustomed to women telling him what to do.

More quietly, she continued. "We are not the Chantry Wardens, Cullen. We are certainly not the Shining White Wardens. If an apostate wants to stand with us and fight darkspawn, then she is our ally. In fact, I don't *ever* want to see you using Templar skills on any of our mages. Save them for the darkspawn."

The words, once spoken, disturbed her. She remembered the night before Ostagar: the council of war under the ruined arches of the ancient fortress, and Uldred offering

a magical alternative to the signal beacon. The Revered Mother had rudely cut him off, telling him to save his spells "for the darkspawn."

"I think there is so much you can do to help us save this country, Cullen," she told him kindly. "We need brave hearts and generous souls so very badly. But we must keep on mission, Cullen. The *darkspawn* are our enemy, and anything that prevents us fighting them. The *darkspawn*, Cullen. Do not let yourself be distracted by anything else. Have you ever seen darkspawn yourself?"

"Never," he said softly.

"Well, you'll be seeing them if you stay with us. Keep your sword sharp. And remember that the Grey Wardens are brothers and sisters to one another. Alistair is your brother, and Anders is your brother, and so is Sten. Tara and Leliana are your sisters. We are your new family, whether we are warriors or mages or human or Qunari or elf."

"And you."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're my sister, too."

"Exactly right," she approved. Then she gave him her most winning smile. "Just remember though, that I'm your *older* sister, and I get to tell you what to do."

"Yes, Comman – I mean – Bronwyn."

"And furthermore," she added gently. "When you need lyrium, just tell us, and we'll see to it."



"You never lived in the Circle," Tara repeated. The room was gorgeous, and she would be sharing it with only one other person. There was a big bed, and a writing table and a chair, and their own fireplace with a fire in it, and chests for storing things, and well – everything. And the servant had come in with a big pitcher of hot water, and Tara could have a bath, standing in the wide basin in the corner. Irving had healed her, but she was still filthy from imprisonment and too many faceless men.

"No, I never have," Morrigan answered carelessly. "My mother taught me my magic, and taught me well."

"You are so lucky," Tara told her. "You must not even have a phylactery!"

Morrigan frowned at the unfamiliar word. "A phylactery? Why would I have such a thing?"

"When we come to the Circle, the Templars take some of our blood and put it in a phylactery vial, and that's how they track us," Tara told her. "When I helped Jowan escape, we went to the storage cellars off the dungeons to destroy his." She added glumly. "Mine had already been sent to Denerim."

"The Templars track you using your *blood*?" Morrigan asked with incredulous amusement. "Such breathtaking hypocrisy astonishes even me. You are saying that the Chantry, that bastion against the evil maleficarum, uses Blood Magic itself? And regularly, too?"

"Yes," Tara ventured uncertainly, "I suppose you could say –" She stopped, enraged and betrayed and murderous.



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"Yes, they do! Those bastards!"

She caught Morrigan's eye, and shook her head, laughing and crying at once. "Those *utter* bastards!"

"This is wonderful," Anders proclaimed, digging into his shepherd's pie. "I haven't had much but gruel for months."

"It is good, isn't it?" Tara agreed. It was such a pleasant, strange way to eat. It was like a family, almost, or at least the way she had imagined a family. There was the mother at the head of the table, and the father at the foot – or was it the other way round? Well, Bronwyn was in charge, so where she sat must be the head. There was plenty of food and drink and people were talking nicely to each other, and no one was standing guard. She was a little afraid of the big dog sitting on the floor by Bronwyn, but she was told that Scout was a friend, so she managed a frightened smile and put a piece of meat from her pie on the floor by him to buy his favor. She had never seen a dog before, and had not imagined them being so *big*.

Scout regarded the meat with a certain disdain. He had been informed that the small creature was pack, but it was clear that she was a low-ranking member, and she smelled of fear. However, meat was meat, after all...

"I cannot believe how much you two look like each other!" Leliana cried for the tenth time, smiling at Alistair and Anders. "You really could be brothers!" She turned to Sten. "Don't you think they look alike?"



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"All humans look alike," he rumbled, carefully leaving room for cookies.

"You do," Cullen put in hesitantly. "There really is a resemblance, now that Anders is shaved."

"I do not look like him!" Alistair insisted. "He's all pasty – and – and – magicky!"

"Woooooo!" Anders threatened, waving his hands in weird patterns. "Magicky! I like that! I suppose nothing is impossible. I'm a bastard, after all. We could have had a mutual sperm donor – not to insult your no doubt worthy father."

Bronwyn stopped eating, and set down her fork. Alistair turned red and looked at her from the other end of the table. She smiled lightly and said, "Where are you from, Anders? You mentioned your mother and how you avoided the Circle until you were fifteen."

"From Gwaren. I'm told my father was a soldier, but Mother wouldn't say much. She was always putting me off 'until the time was right' as she said, and then she was killed in a fall. so now I'll never know. I don't worry about it much. If my father had been worth two coppers, he wouldn't have left her in the first place."

"Maybe you're right," Alistair muttered. "I think I'm done," he said, pushing away his plate.

"Not until we have our story!" Leliana told the others, "We have made a pact. Everyone has to tell a story. It's Alistair's turn tonight!"

"Oh, very well," he groaned. "I might as well get it over

with. I heard this from a minstrel at Redcliffe a long time ago and I liked it. I'll try to get it right...

ALISTAIR'S STORY OF THE WATER OF LIFE:

There was once a king who had three sons. The king was proud of his two eldest, but the youngest son he thought a fool, and he was called Witling, instead of having a proper name.

The King fell sick, and everyone thought he was going to die. The King told his courtiers, "In a far country is the Well of the Water of Life. Unless someone can bring me a draught of that, I shall surely perish."

The eldest prince said, "I shall soon find it." He was given a white horse and a scarlet cloak and a famous sword, and trumpets rang as he rode from the castle. He rode until he came to a deep valley, surrounding by high rocks. On one of the rocks was perched an old man with a staff and a bright red cap, who called out, "Whither so fast, my prince?"

"What's it to you?" sneered the prince.

The old man was a mage, and he was furious at the prince's rudeness. Suddenly the prince and his horse stopped, spellbound and asleep. The rocks and trees and vines surrounded the prince and hid him from the world.

After a time no one had heard from him, so the second prince said, "Sire, I shall find the Water of Life." To himself he said, "My brother is surely dead, and now the kingdom will fall to me."

So the king gave him a white horse and scarlet cloak and a famous sword, and trumpets rang out as he rode from the castle. He rode

until he came to the deep valley, and the mage was there, and called, "My prince, whither so fast?"

"Mind your own business, you old busybody," sneered the prince, and instantly he was struck by the spell and vanished from the world, sound asleep.

When he did not return, the youngest brother went to his father and asked for leave to find The Water of Life.

"How could you, a worthless witling, hope to do what you brothers could not?" said the king, but nonetheless he was afraid of dying and gave his leave.

Prince Witling was given an old nag, and a rough sheepskin to keep him warm, and a rusty sword from the armory. No trumpets rang for him, but he rode out with high hopes all the same.

He came to the deep valley where the mage was waiting. The mage called out, "Prince, whither so fast?"

And the prince said, "I am going to search for the Water of Life, because my father is dying. Have you ever heard of it? If you can give me any help, I would *really* appreciate it."

"Well!" said the mage, "since you ask so nicely, I will help you. The well of the Water of Life lies to the north and the well is hidden in an enchanted castle. Follow the Dragon Star and you will find it. Here is an iron wand. Strike it three times against the gate of the castle and it will open for you. Here are two loaves of bread. There are two bears standing guard just inside the gate. Throw one of these loaves to each of the bears and they will let you alone. Walk through the castle until you come to the inner courtyard, where lies the well of the Water of Life. There is something else there too, but I believe in pleasant surprises."

So everything happened as the mage foretold. Prince Witling struck the door three times and it flew open. There was a bear to the right, and a bear to the left. The prince threw a loaf to each and they were satisfied. He walked through the great castle, and stepped outside to a broad courtyard.

The courtyard was full of flowers of all colors, and in the middle was the well, but the prince saw something even more amazing. Standing beside the well was a beautiful queen. She welcomed him joyfully and told him she was under an enchantment; but if he could come back here after a year and day had passed, she would be free of the spell, and she and this castle and her whole kingdom would be his.

To seal their betrothal, she gave him a sword and helmet of dragonbone. The sword could cut through any armor, and the helmet rendered the wearer invincible.

"Take these, think of me, and be ever victorious," said the beautiful queen.

Rejoicing in his good fortune, he filled his flask with the Water of Life and bade the beautiful queen farewell, promising that he would return without fail.

He rode home and on the way he met the mage in the red cap who had helped him, and thanked him for all he had done. The mage smiled when he saw the sword and the helmet. "You have won noble prizes in your travels, my prince," he said, "but I think that the best of all is what is yet to come."

The prince agreed with that, of course, and then asked the mage if he knew anything about his brothers.

"I have punished them for their pride and arrogance," the mage said, "and they are bespelled with sleep."

The prince was sorry for his brothers, and begged so hard that they be released that the mage agreed, but he warned Prince Witling: "Take care. They have bad hearts."

But the prince was happy to see his brothers again, and told them he had found the Water of Life, and showed them the flask. He also told them of the beautiful queen and his promise to return and lift the enchantment after a year and a day. The older princes smirked at each other, and while their younger brother slept, they took the Water of Life from him and put it in another flask. Prince Witling's flask they filled with scummy pond water.

When they reached their home, Prince Witling brought his flask to his father. The king drank the dirty water, and spat it out, furious. The other sons pretended to be horrified, and said, "Father, if we had known that this fool meant to poison you, we would never have allowed him to return!"

The king did not think Witling clever enough to poison him, but he thought him an embarrassment. He ordered the youngest prince banished and told him that if he ever returned to the kingdom his life would be forfeit. The older sons watched him off and then hurried to take their father the Water of Life, each wanting to get the credit for saving their father's life, each hoping to be made the heir of the kingdom.

Meanwhile, Witling sadly rode away. He spent many months traveling, and everywhere he found battles and bloodshed. He used his sword and helmet in countless fights, and saved whole kingdoms of innocent people.

The queen in her castle far to the north waited for him, and while she waited she caused her servants to build a road of shining gold from the forest to the gate of her castle. She said, "Only he who rides

down the middle of it is my true prince: let no one else pass the gate."

At the end of the year, the eldest prince decided to ride north and gain himself a queen and a kingdom. When he saw the golden road he thought it a thousand pities to ride upon it, and so he turned his horse to the left and rode up on the dirt beside it to the castle. When he came to the gate, the guards told him he was not the true prince, and to go about his business. And so there was nothing for it but to just go home.

Then the second prince saw his chance, and rode north hoping to gain a queen and a kingdom. When he saw the golden road he too thought it a thousand pities to dirty it with horse's hooves, so he turned to the right, and rode up alongside it to the castle. But he fared no better than his brother: the guards told him he was not the true prince, and to go away. And so he had to go on home, too.

The king their father was amazed when many embassies came to him with presents, praising his son Prince Witling for saving them. He wondered, "Could I have been wrong about him?" And he searched for his son, but he never found him, for the prince was wandering the world until the time came to claim his queen. And the other brothers never told him about the castle and the queen, because they were too embarrassed.

When the year was quite gone, the prince rode north to the Castle of the Water of Life. As he rode along, all he thought about was his beautiful queen and how much he wanted to be with her. He never even saw the golden road. He cantered down the very middle of it, and the guards opened the gates to him at once. The queen kissed him, and told him that he would be her king and lord of all she possessed. So they were married amid feasting and celebration,

and they lived happily ever after.

"Happily ever after!" Morrigan scoffed.

"Yes," Alistair maintained loftily. "They lived happily ever after to the end of their days. Deliriously happy, in fact. Couldn't have been happier."

"And the old king never knew what happened to his son?" Cullen said, almost to himself.

"No, never!" Anders interrupted. "Why should he? He was quick enough to throw him away when he didn't think him of any use. Serves him right, I say."

Sten frowned. "Did the prince continue to fight? Or did he fall into sloth and gluttony, fawning over the woman like a fool?"

"Hey!" Alistair objected. "He fought! Lots! People were always coming to him to help them out, and he did, but when he wasn't doing that, he was having a very nice life with his queen."

"It's a beautiful story, Alistair," Bronwyn said, liking the golden road bits especially. "Thank you. Don't be too scornful, Morrigan. Your turn is coming soon!"

"Well, I can assure you that any story I tell will not end with the words 'happily ever after!'"

"There are many different kinds of stories," Leliana granted. "All of them have their merits. Variety is very important."

"So—" Bronwyn sat by Leliana, looking at her expectantly, "are you going to play for us tonight, or not?"

Leliana smiled, and gave a slow nod. "Yes. I am ready to play again at last."

CHAPTER 14

PARTING
GLASS

STAGAR WAS BEGINNING TO HAVE THE LOOK OF A SMALL TOWN, OR AT LEAST A PERMANENT OUTPOST OF THE KINGDOM. Wooden

huts and barracks were in the process of being constructed. The quartermaster's stores were now under permanent cover. If they stayed through the winter, the King and his nobles would have to take up residence in the Tower of Ishal, which was being readied for that contingency.

The darkspawn had been thwarted at every turn, but they had not been eradicated. Soldiers did not wander off alone from the camp, for darkspawn appeared in small packs at frequent, random intervals: pressing, probing, always challenging the defenses of the army at Ostagar.

The threat was not so great as to spread the rot of fear through the army, fortunately: morale was fairly high. So Loghain thought, leaving the King's tent for his own. Higher than ever, of course, since Bronwyn Cousland had sent them her extravagant gift.

The arrival of thirty-five mages in their six wagons had

astonished the entire army, from King down to foot soldier. Some soldiers had been intimidated. Most however, were glad – especially at the arrival of so many Healers to work in the infirmary. And the mages certainly seemed enthusiastic. Without exception they were genuinely glad to be here.

Thirty-five mages! That was an amazing contribution. If the young Warden accomplished nothing else, that alone was worthy of commendation. He had imagined she might double their number, or perhaps, if she were particularly persuasive, send them ten more from the Circle.

The First Enchanter and the Knight-Commander had not responded so generously to the King's call for assistance. Idly, Loghain wondered exactly how the girl had wheedled the mages away from those two stubborn old men. Had she scolded them, charmed them, counseled them, mocked them? Perhaps all of the above, sweetened with that smile of hers. It was amusing to imagine.

He hoped that the bastard was proving of some use to her. The boy had followed her like a puppy, those days between the battle and their departure. He smiled to himself. It reminded him a little of Anora and Cailan, at least in childhood, when the palace was their world of adventure.

A burst of laughter from the tent beyond distracted him from his thoughts. Fergus Cousland seemed in good spirits. "Ha! I can't *believe* it! She took his horses, too!"

Another man laughed, saying something unintelligible, but Loghain recognized the voice as Leonas Bryland's.

Who could "she" be, if it was a matter of interest to Cousland, and who could "she" be, if it involved horses? They must be speaking of his sister. Curious, Loghain walked around his tent to hear the news.

Fergus Cousland, his tent open to the air, was lounging about reading, red-faced with mirth. Bryland was laughing too, putting his head in his hands in mock despair. The men looked up to see Loghain staring at them.

"Oh! Sorry, Loghain. Ha!" Fergus tried to compose himself. "I'm reading through Bronwyn's enormous letter to me! Practically a novel, this, telling me all about her adventures."

Loghain paused. His paperwork could wait, surely.

"Come in and sit down," Fergus was saying, still grinning. "No doubt she was on her best behavior in her letter to you. Have a drink! Dariel!"

Bronwyn had written to him, indeed: a very proper, very clear report of her activities and her progress with her mission. Once again, he regretted that she would never be his officer. She was of course, under his general command, and there was satisfaction in that. In combat, he felt that she could be trusted to do as she was told, and improvise when needed without compromising his own strategy.

Yes, an excellent report: respectful without subservience; witty without flippancy. He could almost hear her speaking the words.

The tent still bore a certain air of her having been there, or perhaps it was simply the well-trained Highever

servants. He accepted the cider, and sat down in a folding chair by Fergus, wanting to hear about the letter. It was certainly thick enough.

Loghain remarked, "She told me that she had seen only scattered patrols of darkspawn: one a day south of Lothering, and then some up around Lake Calenhad."

"Right — Lake Calenhad. I've only scanned the letter. It looks like I've got entertainment for a night or two here," he laughed. "Bronwyn's practically sent me a diary of her adventures!" He bowed to his cousin, "She began with sending her best love to all her relatives, of course."

Bryland bowed back, "Of course!"

Loghain snorted into his cup. Cousland and Bryland had certainly begun their drinking early today. Or perhaps it was simply the letter.

"She must have left the humorous bits out of the report she sent me," Loghain said dryly.

Fergus wiped his eyes. "Not so much humorous as outrageous. Our Bronwyn has been a very high-handed girl. I'll probably have to settle things with Bann Ceorlic eventually, but I can't blame her for taking all the horses he left at the manor."

Loghain looked up in surprise. "She did *what*?"

"She *requisitioned* them — gave the seneschal a promissory note and all, but clearly she saw nothing wrong in it. Come to think of it, I think I'll let her do the talking when Ceorlic comes calling. She can be all doe-eyed and

sweet and earnest, and I'll just stand behind her nodding solemnly. She'll probably get away with it."

"Did she say why?"

"Why she took the horses? She says that she recruited two Wardens in Lothing and foresaw that she'd need more mounts. She picked up another three at the Circle: two mages and a Templar who's been released from his vows. She says that – Ahem!" Fergus' voice grew higher and lighter and considerably more polished as he read. "*It would seem that my words struck home with a great many of our mages.*" That means, I take it, that the First Enchanter and the Knight-Commander were so ill-advised as to let Bronwyn address the troops, as it were, and she laid on the charm as only she can. Hence the five wagons and the thirty-five mages. Bronwyn's awfully good at getting her way. Mother was about the only one who could resist the big grey eyes and that little throaty tremor in her voice – but of course that's because Bronwyn learned how to do all that at Mother's knee. Surpassed her, though – and early."

Bryland laughed, with a touch of melancholy. "Your father could never say no to her, certainly."

Fergus' smile became rueful. "I don't know. He managed to put her off from time to time. A flat 'no?' Well, perhaps not."

Loghain saw no reason to complain of her behavior, since she had sent him thirty-five mages. Ceorlic might never realize the horses were gone, or if he did, it might not be until next year. That sniveling coward should have

given the horses to the army, anyway.

"Oh!" Fergus went back to his letter. "And she organized a militia in Lothing while she was there. Ceorlic may not like that, either. She was quite scandalized that no provisions at all had been made for the town's defense. She's got them keeping lookouts in the watchtowers and building a gate of the far side of town. She also cleared out some bandits while she was there."

"Oh, well done," Bryland saluted her with his goblet.

" – and some wolves, bears, and spiders. Spiders? She says there was a nest of unpleasantly large spiders in a hill south of town. Big as mabaris, she says."

"She's having you on," Bryland decided. "Never heard of a spider that big or even near it."

"I have," Loghain stated flatly. At that very *Loghainish* tone of voice, Bryland was silent. Loghain scowled, thinking it over. "Until her report, I had no idea they were breeding on the surface. That could be serious in itself. There must be details there she might not have thought to tell me."

"Well – " Fergus said, scanning the pages of the letter, "from what I can see, she was running into all sorts of unpleasantness. If she'd told you about every time she was attacked, her letter to you would be as long as this!"

"No matter," Loghain said, pouring himself more cider. "What exactly does she say? I need to know everything."

Bryland raised his brows and shot Fergus a knowing look. Fergus grimaced, and paged through the letter.

"All right. There was the little boy she ran into half a day from camp, whose family lived along the Fairbourne. She got the mother and children out, but the father was not to be found, and the darkspawn attacked just as they were loading the wagon. Killed them all, but the children took no hurt beyond a bad fright. Said there were others who hadn't evacuated when they were told, and were probably dead. She picked up some more refugees on the road, and then chased off some bandits south of Lothering."

"Chased off?" Bryland asked. "What does she mean?"

Fergus read a paragraph, and grinned again. "She told them that she had never met an old bandit, and that she would be vexed with them if she met them 'collecting taxes' again. They agreed with her, and cleared their rubbish off the road."

He took a sip from his goblet, and read down the page. "Lothering – everyone happy to see them, bought them drinks, and so forth. Some strange rumors passed on to her from the barman." He frowned, and passed over them without reading them aloud.

Could Arl Eamon have been poisoned? It seemed unlikely to Fergus. The man had been right here in camp when he died. Still, there *were* slow-acting poisons. Father had told him about the Crows and their tricks. It seemed impossible that a decent fellow like Teagan would be involved in something like that. He couldn't fake that kind of concern for his brother. On the other hand, Mother had always disliked Arlessa Isolde, and thought she was – what? 'A

pious fraud.' There was endless gossip about Teagan being unmarried and some whispers about how possessive the Arlessa seemed toward her brother-in-law...

Loghain was looking at him, waiting for the rumors. Fergus, feeling himself flush, said, "There was some talk about Bronwyn herself that she thought silly. She hates that nickname – '*Girl Warden.*' She was more concerned about reports of people vanishing from their farmholds. It's probably what she saw at that place where she rescued the family. The darkspawn burst out of the ground and snatch up the odd captive. Very unsettling."

Loghain snorted, and agreed, with heavy sarcasm. "*Very.*"

Fergus went back to the letter, "And then up to the manor, and everything very nice, and Ceorlic really is quite the sybarite, and oh – " he laughed again, glancing through the next few pages. " – This is all about Bann Ceorlic's bathroom, and isn't it a scandalous expenditure, but she really liked it, all the same." He rubbed his jaw, trying not to laugh at her. "Bronwyn's a sensible girl, but she's still a girl, and thus had to describe to me how very much she enjoyed washing her hair properly. I think we can pass over that bit."

He moved to the next page. "And she thought she'd get an early start, but she woke to half the freeholders in the bannorn pounding at the gate the next morning, wanting to talk to anybody who might know something, so she had to address their concerns and calm them down, and then

she agreed to organize their muster, but first deal with the present threats."

He huffed, in sympathetic indignation. "She's quite starchy about the helplessness of the village, standing there watching while someone else dealt with their problems. A young lay sister of the local Chantry eventually showed up with a bow, and made herself useful, but she was the only one to actually do anything to help. She volunteered to go with Bronwyn," he burst out laughing, "— saying that the Maker told her to. Bronwyn thinks this Sister Leliana is a bit bonkers, but very well-meaning, and a splendid archer. She's been recruited into the Wardens."

Fergus stared at the rest of the page. What was this? Lines of strange symbols and markings? Then he remembered.

Loghain saw his confusion, and asked, "What is it?"

"I'm not sure. I'll have to puzzle this bit out. Bronwyn's written it in our old secret code."

"What?" Bryland laughed. Then he said, "I should have known!"

"No, really —" Fergus, explained, smiling. "— when we were children we made up a secret code so we could exchange messages that no one else could decipher. I'll have to sit down and do some scribbling, but it will come back to me, I'm sure. We got the idea from some story about the old Tevinters that Aldous made her read. It was a pretty good cipher, too: not just a mere substitution. She must have something to say that she didn't want any of the mages carrying the letter to see." He glanced through the pages.

"She uses it again in her bit about the Circle of Magi — at length, too. It may be important. Anyway — to get back to her story, she killed the men and monsters, and then the muster was blessed publicly by the Revered Mother in a very theatrical display on the Chantry porch. She appointed a captain — Captain Tobery, son of a village elder — whom she considers a sound fellow and a good swordsman — and laid out a plan to stiffen the village defenses a bit. Oh — and she also wrung the release of a prisoner from the Revered Mother — a Qunari, whom she also conscripted. She thanks me for the Nevarran horse, which was big enough for him, since the Qunari said that 'only a Ferelden would ride a dog to war.'"

"I've seen mabarais that were big enough," Bryland mused to himself. "They could certainly carry elves. Don't know how they'd take to saddles, though..."

Loghain glanced at the arl and rolled his eyes. "A rogue Qunari and a Chantry sister? That doesn't sound particularly promising."

"I don't know," Fergus shrugged. "She seems pleased with them. The Qunari puzzled over Bronwyn's being a woman for a bit, but she set him straight about Ferelden. Let's see: more abandoned houses, horse thieves, some wolves...the darkspawn patrol by Lake Calenhad... Alistair's Templar skills proved useful..."

Loghain muttered, "I'm glad he's useful for *something*."

Fergus wondered why Loghain was so down on the lad.

"She doesn't say that much about him, but he seems to be doing well, other than being a deplorable cook. As bad as I am, she says, which means really bad. He made some sort of quip about the name of the inn at Calenhad Docks where they're staying – Ha! *The Spoiled Princess!*"

"Really?" Bryland wondered. "I wouldn't call Bronwyn spoiled, exactly. Certainly she's used to getting her way, but she's really a very nice child. Not always demanding things, like... well... she's a very nice child. Woman, I suppose, now. *Spirited*, perhaps..."

Fergus read a little further, and looked amused. "At the inn, she met a scholar who wrote a book she liked about the Rebel Queen. Brother Genetivi is the name. It seems he knew our old tutor. The worthy brother is off on a mission of his own to find – get this – the Urn of the Sacred Ashes."

Bryland gaped. "You're joking! Or he is."

Fergus shook his head. "No. The man really and truly thinks he's found a lead. Here –" he turned the page. "She sent me a little map here of the land between Redcliffe and the Frostbacks." Seeing Loghain lean forward in interest, Fergus read aloud:

"I shall take great satisfaction in lording my superior knowledge over Teyrn Loghain, as his map does not include two villages that Brother Genetivi swears are within Ferelden territory. His present goal is the town called Haven, about which he knows little, other than that it is the human settlement closest to the alleged funerary temple of Andraste. I wondered

that he would be traveling alone in such unsettled times, but he pointed out, justly, that Blights have sometimes lasted for decades, and he said something that struck me deeply: 'If not now, then when?' which is something I think we should all say to ourselves from time to time. So to this Haven – which I marked on my own map – Brother Genetivi is to go. About the other village, Honnleath, he knows nothing at all, other than the bare fact of its existence. Whether these places are the stuff of fantasy and daydream, I know not. I certainly haven't the time to investigate. I wished the good brother all success – and survival – but he is in the hands of the Maker now."

"The Urn of the Sacred Ashes!" Bryland repeated, in awe. "Wouldn't that be extraordinary, if it were true?"

"I am glad," Loghain said stiffly, "that your sister is too sensible to chase after myths and legends. May I see the map?"

Fergus passed the page to him, and went on glancing through the letter, while Loghain frowned over Bronwyn's hasty scribbles.

"All right then," Fergus said, "she made it to the Circle... some observations... lots in code... she was writing this just as she was about to leave... Right, she spoke to the assembled mages and then probably fluttered her lashes at them soulfully until they caved and enlisted. A demon!" He set down his goblet and stood up, pacing a little. "Listen to this! While she was there, a demon was loosed from the dungeons. What sort of place is the Circle? And... code, code, code... I think she's saying something about the Templars..."



anyway, she and Alistair rushed down and slew the demon while pretty much everyone else ran away. I can tell when she's unimpressed with people. Oh, and the demon was carrying a very nice greatsword called Yusaris, and I'm to find out what I can about it, because the First Enchanter gave it to her, but it's much too heavy and awkward for her, so she'll probably let the Qunari use it."

Loghain was still scowling at the little map. "Have you some parchment I can use?" he asked Fergus, a bit abruptly.

Fergus gestured at the writing table, and Loghain sat down to make a copy of the copy.

Bryland suppressed a grin, and said loudly, "So Bronwyn slew a *demon*! Isn't that extraordinary, Loghain?"

With a hint of a sneer, Loghain looked up from his work and said, "Believe it or not, I did hear that, Bryland. Bronwyn slew a demon and won a greatsword she cannot use, named Yusaris. All hail the Girl Warden! What about those recruits of hers?"

"Nothing gets past that man," Bryland muttered to Fergus, looking disgusted. "Yes, what about her recruits?"

Fergus sat down again, and found his place in the letter. "As I said, two mages and a Templar – that last is scrawled at the very end. It looks like the Knight-Commander surprised her. Most of this is code, and she underlined some of the bits. I wonder if she was angry... She says briefly that one of the mages is an outstanding Healer and just what she needed, and he looked more fit and healthy



than anyone else she saw at the tower. The other mage is a young elf woman who Irving said was remarkably powerful. Code, code, code... She says she'll try to write again when she can, but she's waiting for the big lake ferry, and has no idea when it will arrive. Her alternative plan is to ride around the north end of the lake... She's very happy that she was able to send us thirty-five mages, and we're to use them well. Love to all. She must run now."

Loghain finished his cider and stood up. "When you decipher the rest," he said to Fergus, "inform me. I should have given her a cipher for correspondence before she left. What you have will have to do."

Fergus grimaced, rather annoyed that Loghain should feel entitled to know the details of his sister's private letter. He supposed the man might be right about some of it being of military importance, though she had not indicated she wanted it all shared. If she said anything that might cause herself embarrassment, he would simply not communicate it to Loghain. He needed to work on remembering the cipher...

"Loghain!"

The King was striding toward them, Bann Teagan in tow, their handsome faces uncommonly serious. Another man was trying to keep up with the taller men, a young fellow in common dress.

"No, don't get up," Cailan said. "You stay too, Bryland. I'll want advice about this, if I'm to leave the camp and go to



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Redcliffe."

"Go to Redcliffe?" Loghain growled, a trickle of suspicion chilling his spine. "Why would you do that?"

"I've had some bad news," Teagan told him. "Something's wrong there, and I need to find out what has happened. The King feels he should go as well."

"Well – Connor is my cousin," Cailan declared. "My *only* cousin – or first cousin, at least. If he's in danger, I must do something!"

"What sort of danger?" Loghain asked harshly.

"Perhaps, Your Majesty," Teagan suggested, "It's best that Tomas tell everyone what he knows." He explained, gesturing the young man forward. "Tomas here is from Redcliffe, and a reliable young man. He came to me this morning with an alarming tale. Tell us your story, Tomas, and try to remember every detail."

The young man – really more a boy – was blushing like a maiden and stammering with nerves. "I'll – d-do my best, my lords – Your Majesty. I left Redcliffe three nights ago –"

"Did the Arlessa send you?" Fergus wanted to know. Loghain simply glared at the boy, wondering the same.

The boy gaped, thrown off his stride by the question. "The Arlessa?" he said confused. "No! I don't know if the Arlessa is alive or dead!"

The reaction to this caused Teagan to call out, "If you please – let the lad tell the story in his own way."

"Very well." Loghain sat back down, feeling very uneasy.



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Could this have anything to do with that other matter?

The boy swallowed, looking at the august personages waiting on him, wishing to hide or sink into the ground. Gathering his courage, he started, haltingly, at first.

"We were that sorry when the Arl's ashes were sent to us. Nobody expected it! Ser Perth and those others came back with the urn, and told the Revered Mother, and she led the prayers for his lordship. There was talk that the Arlessa took it hard – really hard: screaming and shrieking all over the castle. The mayor and some of the folk called at the castle, to pay their respects, and ask when there would be a day of mourning declared for the Arl, but *she* – I mean –" the boy blushed again, remembering his manners, " – I mean the Arlessa – wouldn't talk to them. Took to her bed, we were told. Had the urn with her, and was carrying on day and night. We asked after the little boy – I mean the new Arl, and he was shut away with her. The chamberlain told us to come back in a day or two, when her ladyship was feeling herself, and not to come in a crowd, like we'd done, because it made her ladyship's head ache to hear us all."

"Go on, Tomas," Teagan urged kindly. "They need to hear everything."

"Well," the lad went on, "I'm afraid your lordships won't believe me, but something is not right at the castle. Murdock the mayor and two others went back to the castle as they'd been told, and they never returned to the village!"



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We waited, and then we wondered if they'd been needed for something. A few of us went up to the castle and the portcullis was down, and no one was in the courtyard, and we shouted awhile. After a bit the Chamberlain comes out, looking all calm-like, and asks, "What do you want, fellows?" in his high-and-mighty way. No disrespect, but there's no call to speak to free men the way he was, but he was sort of – off. We asked about Murdock and about the Arlessa. He told us that he knew nothing of any fellow named Murdock, and that the Arlessa was too busy to mind a pack of peasants."

The boy licked his lips. "We weren't having that, so we – sort of pounded on the gate a bit, and after a little more, who comes out but the Arlessa herself, all smiling. And she doesn't know anything about Murdock either, but when we asks her about a day of mourning for the Arl, she laughs in this fancy sort of way, and says there's no cause for mourning at all. The Arl's come back and he's fine, and they'll are very happy, thank you very much. She could see that we didn't – well – we didn't believe her, so she said to the chamberlain to raise the gate and let us in, and she'd show us that everything was all right now."

His listeners were utterly silent now, enthralled by the story. Tomas continued his account. "So the Chamberlain comes out and the gate goes up and he smiles and tells us to come in. And my uncle – he says to me, he says, 'Tomas, my lad, we'll go in and see what's what, but I want you



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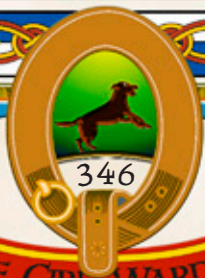
to hide yourself in the corner there and wait. If we're not back in an hour or two, you run on home and tell the Revered Mother."

"And they did not come out, I take it," Loghain ventured. This was all wrong, horribly all *wrong*.

The boy shook his head. "Not then, they didn't," he muttered. "And when they did they weren't themselves, either." He cast frightened eyes at Teagan. "I told you how it was, my lord, how after nightfall a lot of those creatures came down the hill into the village. We all thought it was the darkspawn, but they weren't that at all. Like corpses, they were, with no weapons, but rending anything that moved with their bare hands. Folk ran home and barred their doors, and most of them were all right, but those caught out in the open were killed. I was in the Chantry, and we heard the growling and grunting and screaming. I peered through the windows – even though they're thick, and I thought that some of the creatures looked like people I knew," his voice shook. "I thought I recognized my uncle and – and Murdock and them all. They were dead, but they were *walking*."

"Do you have any idea what happened to the Arlessa and her son?" Cailan asked, horrified. "It didn't look to you like – I mean – the Arlessa didn't look *dead*, did she?"

"No, Your Majesty! Not dead, but not all right, either. Too smiling and pleased with herself by half! When daybreak came, we gathered the dead, and the Revered Mother said to burn them fast, because if the dead were walking, we



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needed to see that these couldn't."

"Sensible woman!" commented Fergus. Loghain nodded, still trying to imagine what had gone wrong. Had the mage...? *Surely not.*

The boy said, "Some of the Templars were in the Chantry, and they gave me a horse and told me to ride fast for Ostagar and help. Lothering was closer, but they didn't see as anyone there could do any good. They said they'd see that folk were kept safe, as far as they could. But if the dead came back, and me three nights gone, I can't answer for anyone still being alive there. All I can do is beg your lordships to come to our aid, or everyone in the village will be dead – or worse."



"I would think, Loghain," Cailan shouted, "that you'd let me go off on my own for once! It's just a village, when all's said and done!"

"Just a village under attack by the *walking dead!*" Loghain shouted back.

The other nobles fidgeted, embarrassed. Fergus hated the very idea of getting in the middle of this, but he owed it to everyone to mediate.

"We really haven't had much activity here in the past week," he said mildly. "And Redcliffe is not really all that far. Perhaps a strong company could investigate matters at Redcliffe –"

"Well said," Loghain snapped. "It will investigate them under my command." If the worst had happened, and the mage had



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unleashed some sort of curse, Loghain felt he must be there to contain the damage and salvage whatever he could.

"Loghain –" complained the King.

"Your Majesty," Teagan pleaded, "Loghain is right. You are too important to risk yourself unnecessarily. I should be glad for you to come, but well supported. Perhaps it would be best if Loghain led the vanguard to explore the castle, and you could command the reserve. You would be on hand to reassure my nephew, but not in the forefront of danger."

"But who would command here?" Cailan protested.

"Teyrn Cousland is the ranking peer," Loghain said shortly, "and I believe he can be trusted. Arl Bryland and Arl Wulffe will support him. We will leave at dawn, taking two companies of Maric's Shield –"

"– and the knights of Redcliffe!" Teagan added.

Loghain grudgingly consented. "– and the knights of Redcliffe. We will also take some mages, as this is clearly a situation calling for their expertise. Senior Enchanters Uldred and Wynne, and perhaps some of their younger colleagues. With a forced march, and using the hill paths, we should be in Redcliffe within three days. And then we'll see what we're facing."



The camp was in an uproar as the expedition prepared to depart in less than twelve hours. Fergus alternated between anxiety and glee. To have command of the King's Army, even if only for a few days! He had been lucky in



healing as soon as he had. And then there was a brief thrill of anguish. Father would have been so proud... but had Father been here, it was he who would have been in command, and everyone would have been confident in his leadership. Fergus admitted to himself that he hoped that nothing serious happened while Loghain and the King were away. Or if it did, he prayed he would have the wisdom to deal with it.

And he wished he could not hear the voices in Loghain's tent quite so clearly.

"But she didn't send me any Wardens!" Cailan was complaining.

"She sent you thirty-five mages, which is twenty-five more than I dared hope for. Very likely she needs all the Wardens with her," Loghain answered impatiently. "You should get some rest, Cailan. We'll be leaving before dawn."

"At least she wrote to me," Cailan was going on, a smirk in his voice. "Though I noticed her letter to *you* was longer."

"And her letter to her brother was longer still. I must speak to the captains, Cailan. Maker's Breath, get some sleep!"

The elves were packing with furious efficiency. Dariel and the others were nearly noiseless, as they helped Loghain's servants load a baggage wagon with a smaller, different tent, with supplies and arms, with parchment and maps and books. Loghain traveled light – for a great nobleman – but there were things he would not want to be without.

Fergus himself had been to see his own Highever men,



and then to arrange details with Bryland and Wulffe. He had managed to puzzle out the rest of Bronwyn's letter – just in time.

"Well, Cousland?" Loghain was standing in front of him, glowering.

"Loghain?"

"What did your sister have to say that she wanted to keep from strangers' eyes?"

Fergus looked about him uneasily.

Loghain waved him along. "Walk with me. We'll go down to the valley and talk to the captains of Maric's Shield."

It seemed that now that everyone could see them, no one would think of trying to eavesdrop.

Fergus still kept his voice low. "Most of the things about the Circle were her indignation at conditions there. She thinks it's a shame and an outrage that there are Fereldan children who have never seen the sun. They were all pale and sickly-looking, she thought; all under guard like criminals. She doesn't see why they can't be allowed outside to play now and then. She used words like "cruel" and "inhuman," and I'm sure the Chantry would not be pleased with her. The mages she conscripted were prisoners – both involved in escape attempts. Bronwyn said it appeared that the Templars seemed to care nothing for their vows of celibacy when a young woman was helpless and in their power. She didn't need much experience to tell her what the girl's injuries signified. I

suppose that's why she conscripted her: she couldn't bear to leave her behind."

Loghain grimaced. "She'll get herself in trouble if she uses Conscription to right what she perceives are wrongs."

"I think she knows that, too, but that's the way she is." Fergus cleared his throat. "— and then there was the other bit. That alarms me more."

"What?"

Soldiers were greeting Loghain, and he was speaking to the older ones: the ones he knew. They moved beyond a row of tents.

"It's about the recruit she picked up in Lothering."

"The Qunari?"

"No. The Chantry sister. Bronwyn found it odd that the one person in Lothering who volunteered to help her had a pronounced Orlesian accent."

Loghain stopped dead, and fixed Fergus with a fierce glare. "A spy?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Sister Leliana had been at the Chantry for the past two years. Bronwyn checked her out. She's not a fool. If the woman's a spy, she was not sent there for Bronwyn, but is merely an opportunist. Nonetheless, it's a bit worrying, and Bronwyn told me that she would take great care not to let slip anything about her fellow Warden's —" Fergus made a face, and then decided to come out with it plainly. "— Her fellow Warden's paternity."

A silence, and Loghain examined Fergus narrowly. "Has

Alistair confided something significant to her?"

"He didn't need to. She's not a fool, I tell you. She also understands that in the current climate, Alistair's situation is not something the Orlesians need to know. She'll keep it secret."

"Will Alistair? Is this Orlesian woman pretty?" Loghain could well imagine the lad falling prey to a spy's cheap allure, just as Maric had. One would think that the company of a beautiful girl like Bronwyn would be enough for him, but Rowan had not been enough for Maric. Nor was Anora enough for Cailan, either. Much as he had loved Maric, there was something rotten in the Theirin blood.

Fergus had considered his question carefully, and shrugged. "Bronwyn didn't say. What matters to her is that the woman can fight and that she's either a bit mad or a spy. Either way, let's hope Bronwyn's cautious around her."

They returned to their tents to find that King Cailan had certainly not taken Loghain's advice. He was drinking with Bryland and Wulffe and Teagan, and banns and lesser nobles spilled out of the brightly-lit tent. Fergus and Loghain could hear the party before they entered the Royal Enclave. Fergus considered disappearing discreetly, but they were spotted before he had a chance.

"A parting glass!" Cailan called, flushed and joyous, his hair a golden nimbus in the lamplight. "Don't look so sour, Loghain! Come join us! We're drinking the ladies' health!"

Fergus smiled, thinking of Oriana. Loghain saw the exact

moment that the young man recollected that his wife was dead.

Nonetheless, there was nothing for it but to take the offered wine. That was the worst of life in camp – the boredom that led to the drinking. At least Cailan was drinking to Anora.

"The Queen! Maker bless her!"

"With *children*," Bann Loren muttered to Bann Stronar. Loghain scowled, wishing a lethal hangover on his son-in-law.

"And Fergus!" Cailan called eagerly. "Let's drink to your sister next! The highest-born maiden in the land, and a Grey Warden, too!"

Fergus managed a pleasant smile. "To Bronwyn, high-born and high-handed as she is!"

Laughter and lifted goblets. More ladies' names were called out. Bryland grabbed Fergus and pulled him aside. He might have thought he was being subtle, but he was a half-dozen drinks beyond that. "Well? What did he say?"

"Say?" Fergus frowned, stepping back. "Who?"

"Loghain! I saw the two of you taking counsel together." He tapped the side of his nose, winking. "No point keeping the poor girl waiting any longer! It hardly matters now if she's of age or not!"

Too many people were listening. Fergus smiled tightly. "I assure you, we were speaking about the army."

"And you were also talking about Bronwyn! Don't even try to deny it!"

"She's a Grey Warden, Cousin. I didn't even raise the issue. There's no point now."

Fergus extricated himself and stonily placed himself by Cailan's side. Bryland saw Loghain, and shrugged expressively. "Well, I think it's a shame. Bronwyn's a wonderful girl."

Loghain scowled at him, trying to understand him through the noise and the clinking of goblets. Bryland was so drunk it was a wonder he was still on his feet. "No one says she isn't."

"Eleanor and Bryce thought she'd get over it, but she didn't. It's a shame." He refilled his goblet.

"Perhaps we should not be speaking of her in front of everyone," Loghain growled, steering Bryland out into the cool air, far from the noble crowd. "I know about her 'inappropriate infatuation.' Are you saying she still feels the same way?"

"Of course!" Bryland regarded him owlshly, and quaffed down his wine. "Steady sort of girl. Gorgeous, too. Man would be lucky to have her!"

"Yes, of course," Loghain sneered. "Unless, of course, he was already married. That might *not* be so *lucky* for her!"

"But he's not!" Bryland objected, puzzled. "I mean – you're not. Are you?"

Loghain opened his mouth, and then shut it. Then he said, "She was not in love with the King?"

Bryland burst out laughing, and then put his hand over his mouth. Loghain backed away, expecting Bryland's wine to make a reappearance. With swaying dignity, the arl declared, "Not that His Majesty isn't a splendid fellow. No. Poor Bronwyn's heart has belonged to another since



she was — what? — sixteen. Every year at her birthday, Bryce would ask her if she'd changed her mind, and every year she said 'no.' *That's* why they didn't want her at Court. Bronwyn's good at getting her way, and I daresay she would have found a way to force the issue, even with you."

"With me?" He had made a ridiculous mistake. No, a perfectly reasonable mistake. It made him feel just the least bit — giddy. Perhaps it was the wine.

"You. Lucky bastard. Imagine being married to *Bronwyn!*"

Loghain did: in an instant he could picture that young, fresh face smiling at him under a wreath of Andraste's grace, a trailing laugh, long legs wrapped around him, and *rapture*.

Slurring his words a little, Bryland told him the rest. "Bryce promised her that if she still felt the same when she came of age, he'd open negosh-neg-he'd talk to you. We all thought that would be the first thing he'd bring up once he came to Osta-osta-osgar...m tired..." Bryland sagged against a ruined pillar, slid down slowly, and passed out with a bewildered grunt.

Loghain considered the man and his revelation. With any luck, Bryland would remember nothing of this. Blowing out a breath, he decided to go back to his own tent and try to sleep. He would think on the matter tomorrow with a clear head.

If Cailan and Teagan and their walking dead will let me.



CHAPTER 15



NIGHTS OF
REDCLIFFE

HE HINTERLANDS MADE WAY BEFORE THE POWER OF MARIC'S SHIELD. The overgrown hill paths were trampled flat by booted feet and the iron-shod hooves of warhorses. Sharp and green, the scent of bruised foliage followed them from the Wilds to the shores of Lake Calenhad.

Loghain, on the long road to Redcliffe, found himself brooding about Bryland's drunken revelation. It was nonsense, of course. He had not thought Bryland such a fool.

Still, it shed a different light on things he had understood in a different way. That the girl was not enamored of the King was plain good news. Cailan would have been easy prey for a beautiful Grey Warden. And if the beautiful Grey Warden was the daughter of the Teyrn of Highever, it could cause endless political trouble, most especially were the girl to produce a child...

But the blushes had not been for Cailan: they had been for him. Loghain fought back the smile that came to his lips at the idea of that lovely young girl wanting *him*.

And Bryce had consented? That seemed incredible to him, but after several years, perhaps she really had worn him down. He could not have been their choice for their daughter, but somehow he was the girl's.

To marry a Cousland! Aside from Bronwyn's own considerable charms, marriage to that ancient and prestigious family would have given him even more power over the fractious, imbecilic Landsmeet. With a Cousland bride, very little in Ferelden would be beyond his reach.

If Cailan were to die, leaving no heir...

Loghain tried not to think about that, but it was true that with a Cousland at his side, even the crown would be a possibility. The Couslands were the heirs presumptive, anyway, but he did not see Fergus engaging in a fight for the crown. Even the family allies would be more likely to throw their support behind the more forceful Bronwyn.

She was young, yes, and perhaps he should stand aside for a better and younger man, but who else was there, really?

He had no great respect for the nobles of Ferelden. Howe's sons were out of the question now, of course. Wulffe had mentioned her for his eldest, but she was simply too good for that fellow. There was Teagan, he supposed, and Teagan might well be an arl in short order, but why should he give away such a prize to *Teagan*?

He had given away just such a prize, indeed, long ago, but that was for the good of the kingdom. His sacrifice had caused him years of grief, and certainly hadn't made

Rowan happy. Her brief years with Maric had been years of duty without much reward, with the exception of Cailan. And if Rowan could see how Cailan had grown up...

He nearly sighed, but scowled instead. Ferelden had a strong queen: his daughter Anora. There was no need for Bronwyn to marry contrary to her own wishes.

She was a Grey Warden, of course, which complicated matters. By that order's ancient custom, she ought not to hold a title, but there was nothing in Ferelden law that set that in stone. And if she were his wife, she would not be holding the title of Teyrn of Gwaren. The title was his, and the wife of a teyrn was a teyrna, not because she held the teyrnir, but as a courtesy title. That legal nicety would pacify the Landsmeet.

If they succeeded; if Bronwyn rounded up their allies, if he threw back the darkspawn; if the Blight ended...

These were all in the future, but presuming they won, the Grey Wardens would once again slip into obscurity for the next few hundred years. Why should the girl devote her life to them, when she would already done her duty? She could retire from active service, marry, and do something productive with her life.

With very little training, he suspected that she would be a splendid administrator for the teyrnir, thus freeing him of those concerns. A suitable occupation for her talents, and she would have the sort of life her parents would have wanted... that she had been brought up to expect...

And what a companion she would be...

He tried to put that particular consideration aside for the moment, but it was difficult. He felt the familiar rush, that ache, the longing for that kind of closeness. She was no insipid, whining, hot-house flower, but a strong and beautiful young woman. She might well become a friend as well as wife and lover. Having her in his life would be a pleasure in so many ways...

Cailan had been silent himself, which was unusual, but now he spoke up.

"I haven't visited Redcliffe in over two years, I think. I can hardly believe it. I'm always busy, of course, but I should have taken more notice of Connor. He's my only cousin, after all..."

"He's certainly old enough now to appear at the Landsmeet," Loghain said noncommittally. "He'll have to, in fact. And I recall that you found Redcliffe rather dull."

Cailan looked rather abashed. "True. It's not the liveliest place in Ferelden. The Arlessa is so very pious! She had us going to services in the chapel twice a day. It was more fun visiting Teagan at Rainesfere."

Loghain had not often visited Redcliffe, and had never liked it when he had. It was Rowan's childhood home, of course; but her family were already dispossessed long before he had met her. He had once mocked the proud daughter of the Arl of Redcliffe as an indigent beggar, living off the charity of those who in better days she

would have scorned.

Unfair and untrue, of course. He had said that to taunt her, to catch her attention, to make her feel not quite so far above him. Loghain had already had an uncomfortable relationship to the nobility, much of which had been shaped in his youth when his father had been forced to swear fealty to an Orlesian lord: the same lord who raised their taxes to drive them from the land; the same lord who had sent the men who raped and killed his mother. Nobles, at the best, had their own agenda, and were not to be trusted. Occasionally, he forgot that he was one of them, and had been since the end of the rebellion.

After the Orlesians were driven out, and Rowan became Maric's queen, she rarely visited Redcliffe. Perhaps it no longer seemed like home. Eamon returned from the Free Marches and was confirmed in the arling. Teagan, so much younger, looked upon her as a distinguished stranger. Loghain could detect nothing of Rowan in Redcliffe.

It was not much of a village, to be the seat of an arling, to be sure. Redcliffe was even more a backwater than his own teyrnir of Gwaren. That town at least had the fishing and lumber trade, far bigger docks, and the unfailing indicator of a prosperous town: a decent brothel.

By mid-afternoon, they were well within the borders of the arling. As they moved deeper, they found empty houses and deserted farmholds. This land had never been very populous to begin with. Now it seemed abandoned. When



REDCLIFFE VILLAGE



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they reached the top of a grassy ridge, they saw that a haze of smoke clung to the hills surrounding Redcliffe. Teagan spurred his horse forward, his face strained and anxious.

"I think I should ride ahead," he said quietly to Loghain, after a moment's thought. "Let me take a small band of horsemen, and assess the village's situation. It's between us and the Castle, anyway."

Loghain scowled. At this rate, they would be reaching the village just before sunset. Based on the boy Tomas' account, the monsters were quiescent until then. He could order everyone to camp and enter the village in the morning.

But that did not sit well with him. He gave Teagan a nod. "Take Merrilys and Parton with you. They're fast riders on good horses. If you need us, don't hesitate to send them."

And then Cailan understood what Teagan was planning and wanted to go too. Loghain nearly threw up his hands at that point, but arguing with the King would cost more precious time. There was no way he was going to let Cailan go wandering off into a village of walking dead, so he would just have to go as well.

"Cauthrien!" he called, and was pleased that she was there, alert as ever when he said the word. Quickly, he explained the plan.

"I am riding ahead with the King and Bann Teagan. We need to know what's happening while the sun is still up. Have the men pick up the pace, and keep that boy with you. Once you arrive, assemble the men in the village

square in front of the Chantry. We will need to make our arrangements quickly once we meet in Redcliffe."

He cast a cool look at Cailan. "Well? If you want to go, let's go." And he spurred off, over the old path, up a green hill, to find out what had been unleashed in Redcliffe. The expected hoof beats followed him, just a few seconds later.

Cailan was very pleased. Once again he had succeeded in getting his way. True, Loghain was coming along, behaving as if he did not trust Cailan with command, but at least they were in the vanguard, and not waiting for the unbearably slow foot soldiers.

Redcliffe stank of burned bodies and rotting flesh. The breeze carried the reek to them lightly at first. Up on the heights above the village the smell was bearable. As they descended, it became overpowering. The makeshift pyre was in the village square, right in front of the Chantry. Nothing else could have indicated the dire situation quite so clearly.

"My lord!"

A Templar emerged from the Chantry, helmet off, eyes wide. Slowly, his face changed from worry to a relieved smile. "Teyrn Loghain! You've come! Thank the Maker!" He saw who else was riding along and his smile broadened.

"Bann Teagan. Well met, my lord! And –" he gasped and then fell to one knee. "Your Majesty! To be rescued against all hope!"

More people were pushing out of the Chantry now. There were anxious cries and questions and then little squeals from the women.

Teagan remembered the Templar. "Ser Henric, is it?"

"Yes, my lord. I cannot tell you what it means to see you! Tomas got through, after all. We feared..." He glanced at the dozen-odd horsemen a little nervously. "Are there more with you?"

Loghain told the man, "Two companies should be here within half an hour. Right now we need to know your situation. Have you had word from the castle?"

"None!" Ser Henric burst out. "We have not dared approach it for the past two days. The portcullis is closed and the dead walk the grounds. It is all we can do to gather and burn our own dead, here in the village!"

Under Loghain's stern glare, the man pulled himself together, and made way for the Revered Mother, who had joined the rest of the survivors on the porch of the Chantry.

"Bless you!" she greeted them warmly. "The Maker smiles upon us this day!"

Loghain gave her a grim nod, wanting a proper report. He had little patience with blessings, and the sun was low in the sky.

Teagan said, "There's that barn back of the Chantry for the horses."

"Good," Loghain said shortly. "See to it." He and the rest dismounted. Horses were of almost no value in this hilly terrain. The two grooms who had ridden with them took charge of the mounts, and Teagan directed them to the proper place, while the King and his nobles talked over the situation.

The reeking pyre was heaped with charred bodies. Remains had been piled there over and over again, for

days. Half-burned legs and arms hung obscenely from the edges of the pile. There were too many dead to give them even the pretense of dignity.

A few more survivors crept out of the Chantry: old women, children, a pretty young girl who looked up at the armed men as if they were her last hope.

She cried out, "Please, please, find my little brother! He ran away and he's all alone! Please my lords, he's all I have..."

Loghain grimaced, and left Teagan and Cailan to the task of comforting the frightened people. He had work to do.

He beckoned Ser Henric over and leaned down to ask, "Are there any other warriors left in the village?"

"I'm the last of the Templars, my lord," Ser Henric told him, his eyes haunted. "There were some knights up at the castle, but they're not..." He looked away. "I saw Tristan last night, but he wasn't one of us anymore." A raw and anguished gaze turned to Loghain. "This was the last night, my lord. I had the last of the people I could find gathered, and we planned to bar the door of the Chantry and keep them out as best we could. Once they were in, it would be over."

"Where do they come from?" Loghain asked crisply.

Henric waved up at the heights above the village, where a battered mill still turned. "Some came across the ridge from the front gate of the castle. There was a natural bottleneck there, and we could hold them all right. We thought we were doing well, until one of the village men came up screaming that the things had somehow come across the

lake and were swarming up from the docks. The militia was surrounded and slaughtered, and then the things hit us from two sides. They haven't any weapons, you see, but they're strong. You can put a sword through them and they just keep fighting. You have to practically hack them apart to put them down. So we ran for the Chantry."

He looked away for a moment, in shame. "I was the only to make it. I climbed onto the roof and waited for dawn, while the creatures shrieked and milled about. Now and then one of ours would rise and join them, stumbling and jerking. They wandered away at sunrise, but they've become bolder and bolder about the light. Up at the castle, they don't mind the sun anymore at all."

Loghain studied the terrain, making his plans. Archers with fire arrows and a shield wall would do wonders against these creatures, whatever they were. He would secure the village tonight, and tomorrow, with the dawn, they would have a look at Redcliffe Castle.

"That's the inn up the hill, isn't it?" he asked Henric. "Anyone holding out there?"

Ser Henic lowered his voice, glancing at the crying girl on the Chantry porch. "As far as I know, everyone still alive was gathered into the Chantry. Twenty-two were inside last night."

Loghain grimaced. A score of people left out of hundreds. There might be others, of course: hidden in attics and cellars.

A sudden scream made him look up.

A woman wailed, "It's the monsters! They're coming!"

Children shrilled in terror, running aimlessly like startled chicks. Shouts, prayers, curses swelled up: a confusion of voices.

Loghain shouted above them all. "Silence! It's Maric's Shield. You – catch hold of that child, right now! If you're not here to fight, get back in the Chantry!"

The Revered Mother, frowning, shepherded the non-combatants back through the doors, hushing their questions.

Cailan grinned briefly at Loghain, amused at his father-in-law's grim expression. No doubt he had enjoyed reassuring the young woman.

"Well, Loghain? Will we be moving on to the castle?"

Is he insane? Loghain hoped that his expression did not reveal his opinion.

"No, Cailan. It's already too close to sunset, and we really have little idea what we will be facing. It seems to me that the King's place is here in the heart of the town, in front of the Chantry. The majority of those we can save are here. If anything unfortunate happens elsewhere, you can lend us your support."

Cailan nodded. It was the central position: the most visible position for the people to see their King defending them. He hoped that wherever Loghain was, it was elsewhere, not watching him like a hawk.

The column marched down the steep slope to the center of village, raising a dust. To Loghain's relief, the mages,

Uldred and Wynne had not stayed with the ox cart, but had marched along with the soldiers, accompanied by a pair of youngsters, whose names he did not know.

And there at the head of them all was Cauthrien. She met him, a line between her dark brows, relief far back behind her eyes. King, nobles, and officers met to confer. Loghain gave his orders quickly.

"We have until sunset to make our preparations," he told them. "I want five squads to search the houses thoroughly for survivors. If they find corpses, they need to bring them out. We need to get them burned before dark. Cauthrien, I want you and Bear Company up at the mill, archers at the ready. There's a bottleneck there that attackers from the castle would have to funnel through. These creatures take a lot of putting down. Get a fire going up there and burn the bodies immediately. The mage Uldred will be up there, too, since he excels at fire spells.

"I will command Eagle Company on the docks, The creatures found a way to get over the water, so we must be alert for boats of any kind. I want Wolf company here in the village behind a shield wall in front of the Chantry. The King will be here, protecting the villagers. Bann Teagan and his knights will stand with him. The mage Wynne should be there to heal the wounded."

The mages joined them and were informed of their assignments. The young girl with them seemed upset, and whispered to Wynne, obviously begging for a change.

Wynne spoke up. "If I may, Teyrn Loghain, perhaps it would be wise to have a mage stationed with your men on the docks. Keili here is becoming an excellent Healer, and sometimes moments can make the difference between life and death."

The apprentice was staring at him in mute appeal. She seemed young to Loghain, but Healers were valuable.

"She'll have to look after herself," he said.

Taking that as permission, the girl fell to her knees in gratitude.

"Thank you, my lord, thank you!" she sobbed. "You won't regret it! I'll be the best Healer you ever saw! I –"

Wynne tugged at her, scandalized. "Get up this minute, Keili! There's no need to make a spectacle of yourself."

Cailan was very amused, and there were smirks all around. Loghain rolled his eyes at the girl's antics.

"Get moving," Sergeant Darrow ordered the search parties. "We've only got until sundown to get through the town. You all know what you have to do. Remember that children can hide in places smaller than you could ever imagine."

They spread out over the village, looking for trapdoors and hidden rooms; opening cupboards and chests and looking under beds and behind piles of blankets.

The dead outnumbered the living. One search party went to the smithy, and found a dead man, ripped nearly apart, reeking of spirits and bile. There was a concealed entrance to a cellar, and some arms stockpiled there, but no people. The



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dead smith was hauled out, and thrown on the common pyre.

The tavern on the hill was a plum assignment. The door was splintered, and leaves were scattered on the floor, mostly clinging to a sticky patch just inside. A dark trail led to another smashed door and a cellar, where there was quite a bit of damage. A sack of coin had been torn open, and the bright metal gleamed in the half-light. Darrow picked up a piece of silver, and regarded it curiously. The blood on it had clotted some time ago.

"Reckon there was a fight here, Sergeant," one soldier remarked.

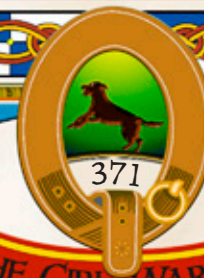
"Reckon so." He crouched down by a dark patch at the bottom of the stairs. "Somebody lost. Bloodstains on the steps looks like they were dragged away. Maybe killed at the doorway from all the blood there. Maybe he was found and burned later."

"Or maybe not," another soldier grunted. "Maybe we should search the kegs and barrels, eh, Sergeant?"

"Not tonight. We'll want clear heads. We can always come back at first light. And leave the coin. We don't know that everybody who belongs here is dead. Maybe the women went to the Chantry. Tanna and Bass: you go upstairs and search the rooms. I'll go with Gleary to the kitchen."

They even looked in the lean-to behind the kitchen and behind the bar. There was a ring of keys there. Darrow left it alone. The tankards and cups were stacked neatly. Walking dead didn't have much of a thirst, it seemed.

In the end, they rounded up a dwarf and two rowdies



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who seemed to be his hirelings. They were ordered out of the house by the docks. The dwarf complained bitterly, right up until he saw the King in his golden armor standing in the middle of the village square. Sullenly, he agreed to make a stand with the soldiers at the docks, if only to keep the stupid humans from burning his house down.

And Wynne had found a survivor too, a small boy whom she ordered out of a cupboard. The soldiers with her were impressed by her command style. There was a lot to be said for having mages in the army...



A sickly green light was Cauthrien's first warning. A shout rose from the men, and fingers pointed at the phenomenon, rushing their way. Uldred stood beside her, and considered the long narrow path leading down toward them.

"When enough of the creatures are there," he told her, "I can create an inferno that will rage for some time. It should at least damage them."

Cauthrien nodded. Magic was all very well, but she had other methods to rely on, as well.

"Archers!" she shouted. "Make ready!"

The things were quicker than she would have imagined. Pinned with cloth-yard arrows, engulfed in flame, they stumbled on down the hill, seemingly insensible to pain and fear. Some fell, and the flames took them. Some surged on, and crashed against the shields of Bear Company. As long as the shield wall held firm, no undead hands could tear at them...

Loghain waited on the docks, eyes peering into the mist on the lake. How did such creatures use an oar? Magic, he supposed. A reason that was no reason at all. Well, they were ready for them...

He heard the shouts on the heights above the village and saw green light reflected in the thick cloud cover. They were there, all right. Now, where were the rest?

The soldiers muttered and were silenced by their officers in hushed voices.

Something bumped against the piers of the dock, under their feet. Loghain scowled, leaning forward to catch the first glimpse of their foe.

And then the wet hand reached up out of the water and grasped his ankle. The soldiers beside him cried out in alarm, as the walking dead clambered onto the docks, grabbing at the living, throwing them in the water, smashing at them with dead hands.

Holy Maker! Loghain kicked away the groping monster. *The things walked across the lake bottom! Why not? It's not like they can drown!*

"They're under the docks!" he shouted. "Hack them apart as they climb up! Archers, get to the roofs and shoot down!"

There was a scramble, and there were splashes and screams. A dead face stared into his own, the hands clawing at him, the filthy teeth bared to bite. Loghain smashed it down with his shield and beheaded it. It was still kicking

feebly, and another soldier hacked a hand away.

Blood trickled down under his armor. The thing had nipped him along his throat. Instantly there was a glow and the wound closed over. Loghain glanced over to see the girl mage-Keili was her name?-cringing back as if she had committed a crime. He gave the girl a nod, and she gazed at him wordlessly, and then set about looking for more wounds to heal.

"Four men!" Loghain shouted. "Grab any dead you can and carry them to the pyre! Burn these bastards!"

Grunts of approval as swords swung and axes split skulls. Some of Wolf Company trotted up to support them, catching any dead slipping through the maze of the docks, sending them reeling through a gauntlet of steel.

The attack eased off, and Loghain drew a deep breath. Was that it? Was that all?

In a moment, another wave of the things was climbing up onto the docks. There were four waves in all.

And then, it was over.

No more dead shambled down the hill or rose up from the water. The bodies were tossed on the ungainly pile of burning corpses, now burning from their own fuel. The soldiers detailed to attend to the pyre were soot-faced and sickened. Cailan promised himself that they would receive some sort of reward — a gold sovereign apiece, perhaps. It was a filthy, depressing job, but necessary. He



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almost never carried any money himself, though. Maybe Loghain had some on him...

Cauthrien sent a runner down to Loghain to report that the attacks had stopped. It was long after midnight, and the clouds were beginning to blow away, leaving only wisps to veil the patient stars. She posted a guard, and let two thirds of the men sleep. She slept herself, pushing aside the memories of dry flesh cracking away under her sword...

Loghain posted his own guards and pulled most of the platoon away to allow them to find what lodgings they could in the empty houses. The docks were a shambles, but that was hardly the worst of the damage to Redcliffe. The little mage girl was following him around, staring, looking like she would like to cast yet another healing spell on him. Hero-worship made him tired, but he could not find it in him to shout at her. Perhaps he was getting soft...

Cailan was fast asleep in his neatly-arranged cot in the chapel off the transept of the Chantry. His guards kept away the curious and the well-wishers and the star-struck priests...

Teagan slept fitfully nearby, waking throughout the night from dreams of grotesque bodies and mindless faces. What had happened to Connor? Would they march on the castle tomorrow, and find the boy turned into a soulless monster? What of Isolde? He sickened at the memory of the female creatures, lost to dignity, their ragged clothes torn and disregarded. Isolde had always taken such pride in looking perfect...



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Sergeant Darrow was roused from sleep by a hissed warning from Tanna.

"One of the locals coming!"

After the battle, the Teyrn had ordered him and his men to guard the tavern. Some fools were bound to get a notion to break in and drink themselves sick. A few had come nosing around, but had been set straight.

Darrow struggled to his feet, favoring the arm where the creature had clawed at him. It didn't hurt, which surprised him. Should have been torn to ribbons, by rights, but that little mage had fixed him up a treat. He rubbed his eyes, and then rubbed them again.

Striding boldly up the hill was a handsome piece with hair like fire. She gave Darrow a saucy smile as she drew closer.

"Minding the ale, are you?" she asked.

Tanna challenged her, "Any of your business?"

"I live here. Reckon that makes it my business."

Darrow and Tanna exchanged a weary look. He held out a hand to slow the girl's progress.

"Er – well – before you go in there, you should know it needs – cleaning. Looks like the monsters broke in. Did you have – family – staying there?"

She had seen the broken door by now, and the long-lashed eyes were wide.

"Lloyd was there. He wouldn't leave, not for anything."

"Was he – your husband?"

The girl laughed. "No need to pity me, my bold soldier!"



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No, not my husband. He was a rotten bastard and treated me like a slave. Would have run off, if there were anywhere to run. Is he in there?"

He shook his head. "A lot of blood though. Looks like he was in the cellar —" she nodded, expecting that. He went on. "They got at him there and dragged him upstairs."

Not too upset at the news, the girl considered the matter, and said, "I reckon I'll need to open up then, since he won't be doing it. The name's Bella, by the way. I'm very grateful to you soldiers for coming all this way to save us. The King and the Hero of River Dane, too. That's something to tell travelers for years to come."

Tanna grinned at him as he followed the girl into the tavern. "Maybe you need some help..."

She did, moving bits of door out of the way. She went straight to the bar, reaching for the keys that were there, and seemed to be looking for something else.

Darrow cleared his throat. "There's some coin on the cellar floor. The purse was torn open. We left it there."

She smiled at him, radiantly. "You're a true gentleman." In a flash she was down the steep steps and scrabbling in the dirt. Darrow found a candle, lit it, and brought it down to light her way.

"That way I see it," said Bella, dropping coins into her pocket, "this tavern is mine now. Lloyd was good for something, after all. I've got plans for this place. I'm going to brew ale the right way from now on, and not water it



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down til it's no better than dog-piss..."

There was more money there than he had thought: quite a bit of silver and some gold, too. Bella searched under the kegs, straining to reach every last bit she could.

She pushed herself up at length, with another smile. "That last was worth it. A sovereign! Foul bloody mess on it, too, but nothing a good soak and a scrub won't cure. Fancy a pint?"

"I wouldn't say no."



By the time Loghain walked up to the mill, that wretched Orlesian woman was already running away. He briefly considered telling the archers to shoot her down. A pleasant thought, but impractical.

Cauthrien had sent for him, but the damage was done. Teagan was determined to go into the castle alone.

"What can I do?" he protested. "This is my family. Connor is my nephew!"

"You're going to get yourself killed," Loghain snarled. "There are traps, and then there are traps, and I have never seen anything before that had 'trap' written on it quite so plainly."

The younger man ran a hand through his hair in exasperation. "I do have a plan: that's why I sent Isolde away. I'll go and distract whatever it is that's up there. While I'm doing that, a small force can infiltrate the castle using a passage under the lake."

Loghain stared at him. "A passage under the lake? Does

the Arlessa know about it?"

Teagan smiled grimly. "I am quite sure she does not. The passage runs from there –" he pointed to the mill, "and comes up through the dungeons. The dungeons Isolde certainly knows about, but not about the passage. Eamon pledged long ago never to tell her." He pulled a heavy gold ring from his hand and passed it to Loghain. "This ring opens the lock of the concealed door that leads down to the passage. It's old – dwarven work from the look of it – and quite sound. Your people can come up from the dungeons and make their way downstairs – or down again to the cellars, which have door to the courtyard. From there you can open the portcullis, and enter the castle. I'll sketch you a diagram."

And he did, quickly, while Cailan joined them, looking disgustingly bright-eyed.

He was not happy to see his uncle go, but was very optimistic about the scheme, and pleased that he would be in command of the main body at the castle gate.

For Loghain had decided to lead the scouting party himself.

There were many reasons for his decision. It was essential that it be done well, quietly, and thoroughly, of course, but more importantly, if anything personally incriminating was in evidence, he wanted to see it for himself and first. Teagan had said that the mage had left the Castle, but had he left anything that would tie him to Loghain?

And he felt guilty, truth be told. Whatever happened here was at least in part his doing. Arl Eamon had been

a thorn in his side, but the villagers had never done him harm, and did not deserve a ghastly death at the hands of undead monsters. He owed it to them to risk himself.

"Fine," he shrugged, sneering a little at Teagan. "If you're determined to get killed, then go right ahead."

Cailan smiled, and clapped Teagan on the shoulder. "Do try not to die," he said. "It's not as if I'm particularly rich in uncles!"



Loghain chose his companions carefully. Cauthrien, because she was looking wrathful at the very idea of the scouting expedition, and she would feel better at his side. And he would feel better with that sword of hers along. He considered. Yes, Uldred. There was magic involved, and they would need expertise.

And then he decided to bring Wynne as well. The older woman was extraordinarily calm under stress, and there was just the chance that the King's cousin would be in some sort of dire state...

The signet key worked, and soon they were moving along the narrow stone passageway. It was sound, indeed: not particularly damp, and high enough for him walk comfortably. No one had much to say, fortunately, because every noise they made was magnified by the stone about them. There was a door at the end, which slid out of the way. And then they were in the dungeons beneath Castle Redcliffe.

The cells were empty. It puzzled Loghain a bit, since he could not imagine a castle ruled by a woman as volatile as

Isolde not having prisoners in the dungeons. Perhaps there had been prisoners, and they had been removed. And a little further on they came across two more of the walking dead.

Two were no challenge at all. Uldred froze them solid, and one shattered as Cauthrien brought the Summer Sword down on it. It shattered so completely and dramatically, in face, that she backed away, startled and repulsed. Loghain found he had lost his rhythm as well. Fighting alongside mages took some adapting. An opponent shattering like an icicle simply seemed *wrong*.

But it was certainly convenient.

Cauthrien gave him a look from the corner of her eye. She was thinking what he was thinking, as she so often did. A few more of the dead emerged from the cells, stumbling toward them, moaning and roaring like nothing that had ever been human. Yet they clearly had. One had been a woman, once.

Wynne knew some handy spells, herself. She was doing something that knocked the creatures down, flat on their backs, sometimes stunning them. It was impressive, and after a moment, one learned to take the advantage and cut the thing apart as it lay helpless.

They found the staircase to the castle proper and began wandering the halls, meeting groups of the dead – now one or two, now a half-dozen. There were demons in the chapel. Loghain had come across demons very rarely and Cauthrien had never seen one. The sight made him think of Bronwyn and her Demon in the Circle Tower. Doing something that

she had done recently made her more real to him, somehow. She, too, was fighting side by side with mages.

They paused to catch their breath after the chapel.

"Aside from the demons, we've come across twenty-three walking dead since we entered the dungeons," Cauthrien said. "I wonder how many people were here in the castle to begin with?"

In another hall, they found the body of a young girl, recently and horribly dead. Wynne gazed on her in pity.

"The poor child. She must have tried to escape. How frightened she must have been." She drew closer. "Wait, my lord! I think she may be alive. Perhaps I can –"

The girl sat up, eyes blank, and uttered an awful groan. With unnatural speed, she was on her feet and lurching toward them.

Uldred froze her. "Not exactly alive, my dear Wynne."

Loghain tried bashing her with his shield. She exploded into red ice crystals.

"Not alive at all," Cauthrien remarked. "I hope."

Loghain had no time for witticisms at the expense of the dead. "Let's move on."

He hated killing the mabaris they found, but they were mad and ensorcelled, and Uldred was clearly not interested in doing anything to them but destroying them. Mages seemed not to have much feeling for animals, but that was no doubt due to their separation from the natural world. He thought of Bronwyn's letter to her brother, and how she

fumed at the treatment of the little apprentices, forbidden even to play out of doors. There might be something in what she said. The treatment of the mages in the Tower did not seem calculated to develop well-balanced individuals.

Wynne sighed, after they cleared out the path to the kitchen. "I'm afraid that it's growing more and more unlikely that we will find that poor child alive."

Loghain grimaced. The idea that he had killed a child with his meddling – no, probably more than one – caused him some distress. The arling of Redcliffe was going to need years to recover from this disaster, and it would be his duty to support Cailan in any measures the Crown took to help the victims. The Royal Treasury was not in the best shape at the moment, due to the war with the darkspawn. He should have hired the Crows to kill Eamon.

His gauntleted hands were bloody, and left smears on Teagan's little floorplans. Loghain cursed. A big metal-shod door led to a corridor by the Great Hall, but it was locked, and too massive to blow apart without attracting every monster in the Castle. There was an alternate route...

Yes. It was better, anyway. There was the kitchen, and there were the stairs down to the cellar. There was a little door from the cellar to the courtyard. They moved through the passages. Cauthrien gave them her most recent body count.

"We're up to forty-one. How many more can there be? We must have slaughtered the bulk of them last night!"

Loghain shrugged, shoving open the cellar door, and

blinking at the sudden assault of daylight. The courtyard seemed deserted. It was just possible that Cauthrien was right. Maybe they had already eliminated the worst of the threat. Cautiously, he stepped out into the open. Fifty yards away was the portcullis and its lever. They only had to –

The world slid sideways. Loghain was on his back, crashing along the stony ground with no control over his own body. He jolted to a stop, disoriented, his ears ringing. Uldred was shouting something, and Cauthrien shrieked out a battle cry. They were coming...

Everything was very slow. The air was thick and pressed him to the ground. Gritting his teeth, he squinted up at the creature looming over him. It was in armor, and it was not human. Its sword was coming down –

He rolled to the side, hacking at the creature's ankles. It stumbled, but made no sound, as if pain were a thing unknown to it. It flared blue, as Uldred struck it with a spell to slow it. Cauthrien swung at it, grunting with effort. The thing turned to her, its blade arcing at her with incredible force and speed. There was a clang, a spurt of blood, and Cauthrien screamed.

Loghain balanced himself up on one knee, and drove his sword straight into the creature's groin. Such a move would have severed any normal creature's femoral artery and killed it in seconds, but this thing was still striking out, wordless and remorseless. Wynne cast a blue healing glow over Cauthrien and the spurt of blood slowed to a trickle.

The thing was still slashing at them, and caught Loghain along the side: a glancing blow that pit metal against metal in screeching protest. It was like being hit with a sledgehammer. Loghain used the force of the blow to add to his own strength as he hacked down on the creature's armored arm. It broke. In complete silence, the creature took up its sword with the other, undamaged arm.

More spells, more slowing, more hacking and slashing, more healing, and Cauthrien was again able to wield her blade, bringing it down in a way that would have cleft anything else from chin to breastbone. The thing staggered, and Loghain whirled, cutting into the massive neck. Its resistance to magic was nearly gone. Uldred's last spell drained it of life, and Loghain needed to do no more than buffet it with his shield to bring it to its knees and then lay it out, dead at last.

They stood there, panting. Uldred was strangely pasty under his olive skin. He reached into a pouch for a small flask and downed the contents, his hand shaking.

"A good idea," Wynne sighed, drinking from her own flask. Whatever they were taking, it had an odd, unfamiliar smell. Cauthrien mouthed the word "lyrium?" at him, and he nodded. It must be.

"What in the Maker's name was that thing?" he asked.

Uldred blew out a breath. "A Revenant. A powerful undead being. I've never come across one before." He seemed genuinely impressed.

"Nor have I," Wynne admitted. "That was terrifying. Perhaps there's nothing worse here."

"You mean, maybe we're done? I mean – surely that was the heart of the evil," Cauthrien said. "Maker, I hope so. What could be worse than that bastard?"

"I'd rather not know," Loghain said. "Let's go let the King in. Perhaps now we can go to the Castle without being attacked every two minutes."

Cailan had seen part of the battle, and had been very impressed. He hurried to the remains of the Revenant, poking at it gingerly with the toe of his armored boot. "What a monstrous creature! Look here, Loghain, I wish you wouldn't hoard all the glory. Do give some of the rest of us a chance at slaying inhuman fiends! Ser Cauthrien," he said expansively. "You were splendid."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," she answered blandly. "I was nearly killed. I would have been, but for the mages."

"Yes!" Cailan enthused. "Wonderful, really wonderful, the way you all fought together. That just the sort of thing the army needs!"

Loghain gestured to him, and they went up the steps together. There were no guards, and the great doors were unbarred, giving way at a touch.

Uldred caught his breath, and suddenly gestured at Loghain, frowning deeply.

"I take it," Loghain growled, "that we are not *quite* done."

"There's something else here," Uldred muttered. "Something *big*."



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At a glare from Loghain, the King's Guard closed ranks around them. The Great Hall was to the left...

And in it was the Guerrin family. All of the Guerrin family.

The boy was laughing and clapping, pleased and excited. Arlessa Isolde stood next to him, very still. A noble fire lit the scene in flickers of sickly yellow and blood red.

There was Teagan, putting a show of some sort. Probably not exactly what he had in mind when he said he would create a diversion. The man was leaping, cutting capers, bouncing like an Orlesian minstrel, while the child urged him on.

And watching it all was Eamon Guerrin.

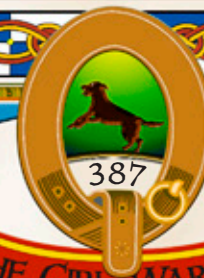
Cailan gasped, and said something under his breath. Everyone paused for a moment, to stare at the thing sitting in the arl's High Seat.

It was both like and unlike the Eamon that Loghain had known. It looked — bigger, certainly — and the features were smoother and not entirely finished. A haze clung to the edges of the creature, as if the boundaries were yet to be determined. It stared back at them, expressionless.

Loghain whispered to Uldred, "Is that an illusion?"

"Not exactly," the mage answered, not taking his eyes from the sight before them. "It is material, but bound together by magic. It is a kind of golem, but not the sort made by dwarves. I suspect the arl's ashes were used."

"It is nothing but a vile puppet, and an insult to the man's memory," Wynne muttered fiercely, clutching her



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staff a little tighter.

The child noticed them, and called out. His unnatural voice sent a chill through Loghain.

"Who is that man in the golden armor, Mother? I can't see him well enough."

"It is the King, Connor: your cousin." Arlessa Isolde barely looked at them, terrified and ashamed.

"King! There is no King here but me! Isn't that so, Uncle!"

"Marmalade!" shouted Teagan, with a bow and a manic grin.

Furious, Cailan tried to push past his guard. "What did you do to him?"

The demon in child form sneered. "I like him better this way. He amuses me. I warned him what would happen if he kept shouting. Nobody tells me what to do!"

Teagan nodded eagerly. "Nobody tells him what to do! No-bo-dy!"

Isolde sobbed out, "I beg you, Your Majesty! Please don't hurt my son! He only wanted his father back!"

Uldred and Wynne looked at each other, astonished. "He is a mage!" Uldred exclaimed. "Did no one know of this?"

There was an uneasy stir in the soldier's ranks. Keili whispered a prayer. "Oh come, Swift Sword of Mercy..."

Loghain was silent. Cailan looked winded. "I had no idea. Is this why you wouldn't bring him to Denerim, Isolde?"

"He was being taught to control himself!" the woman cried. "I hired an apostate to tutor him. I thought if he knew just enough he could hide his powers, no one need ever know.

The mage betrayed us, and ran away. This is all his doing!"

"Lady Isolde," Wynne reproved her. "This child has become an abomination. You concealed his magic, and only harm has come of it."

"Oh, Isolde!" Cailan mourned. "Why?"

"They would have taken him away!" Isolde clutched at the demon, who shrugged off her hands.

"Fool woman!" it growled. "You are beginning to bore me!"

"Uldred —" Loghain began. "Is there any way..."

Uldred shook his head slowly, raising his staff. Cailan was near tears. Cauthrien reached for her weapon.

"Father!" screamed Connor. "Protect me!" He ran behind his mother, cowering.

The thing in the High Seat rose, growing every moment. It glowed with magic and menace, and drew an enormous sword. If the Revenant had been alarming, this was ten times worse.

Uldred flashed out a wave of ice, slowing the Eamon-thing. Teagan, his eyes unfocused, rushed forward. Loghain swung him around, and the bann's jaw connected with Cailan's fist.

"Sorry, Uncle," Cailan muttered. "You men!" he shouted at three men to his left. "Take him! Hold him down! Get him out of here and don't hurt him!"

Teagan was dragged away, unconscious, and the real fight began.

They ringed the creature, which lashed out with sword and magic. Arrows struck and were shrugged off. Swords cut through glowing flesh and wounds closed as they

were made. Uldred caught it in a glowing shaft of light, immobilizing it briefly. They hacked at it, uselessly. It had never been alive, and could not die.

Cailan swung his greatsword, and should have sheared off the thing's hand; but the blade passed through without injury to the creature at all. One of the knights, knocked flying, crashed into Loghain.

"Holy Maker!" Cauthrien shrieked in Loghain's ear. "The boy is stabbing his mother!"

Loghain looked. Isolde was on her knees, eyes glazing. Blood was pouring from her arms and sides, trickling from her mouth.

"Blood magic!" cried Wynne. "Stop him!"

Uldred downed another stinking potion. "I'll try to hold the creature still," he shouted to Loghain. "Kill the boy! Kill the boy!" Seeing Loghain hesitate, he said, "Kill the boy, and the creature will be destroyed. It is the only way!"

The thing swung its sword, and a knight screamed as the blade clove through his armor and nearly cut him in two. Blood gushed from the groaning mouth, and the man sprawled gruesomely on the stone floor.

"Maker!" Cailan roared. "Out of my way, Loghain! I'll do it!" He stumbled away from the melee and took the steps up to the dais in two bounds. Isolde clutched at him, dying, the words bubbling from her mouth.

"Don't-hurt-him." She fell, face down, and the demon behind her looked up, small face pale, eyes wide, clutching

a red-stained dagger.

"No! No! You wouldn't hurt a little boy! You *couldn't!* You —"

Cailan snarled, and plunged his sword through the child's body. Connor wriggled and shrieked, and was still. Cailan stared at his little cousin, panting, and then vomited violently, falling to his knees.

The Eamon-thing faded, shrank; and as the soldiers backed away, it slowly crumbled to dust. The sword and armor crashed to the floor, empty.

Keili was still praying, her face streaked with tears. Wynne pulled her up from her knees, and set her to work, healing.

"You can pray *after* you've done your work, my girl!"

The dead and wounded were gathered. Cauthrien gave orders, but Loghain was deaf to them. He had killed Eamon, and now it was clear that he had got away with it. He felt soiled, and not elated. It had been perhaps the worst mistake of his life. He blew out a long breath, and walked over to Cailan.

His son-in-law was pale and sweating, on his knees still, wiping his mouth. Loghain stood over him, and then hunkered down to speak in the young man's ear.

"Cailan —"

"I killed a child. I killed my own flesh and blood."

"The child was long gone. You killed an abomination. You did your duty, and you saved a lot of lives."

"I feel horrible." Cailan glanced over at the small body. "He looks so helpless."

"He wasn't helpless, and you know it. If you feel horrible, that's normal. If you didn't, you'd be the monster."

"If only —"

"Don't start with that. Regrets are useless. None of us could have predicted this. If anyone's to blame, it's the mother, hiding his magic, keeping what was happening a secret. She could have warned the village, but she didn't. She deliberately led Teagan into a trap that would have cost him his life in the end."

Cailan shook his head, miserable and guilty.

Loghain scowled at him. "You always said you wanted to be like your father: a hero. Well, Cailan, I can tell you that you father felt just as you are feeling now most of the time he was king. It's the way you feel when you make the hard choices. You did the right thing today, and your father would have been proud."

Hesitantly, he put out his hand, and gave the boy a pat on the shoulder. Creaking to his feet, he said brusquely. "That's just about enough self-reproach for one day. We have work to do. Your uncle should be himself when he wakes, and he'll need your help. He'll be Arl of Redcliffe now, of course. It's not going to be easy for him. Come on."

The mage girl wanted to cast another healing spell his way. Loghain grunted his thanks, and pointed at the King.

If Loghain felt any pain, he knew he deserved it. Regrets were useless, but he had them, all the same.

CHAPTER 16

INTERLUDE BY THE SHORES OF LAKE CALENHAD

DAYS PASSED, AND THE BOAT DID NOT COME. Rain beat down for nearly the whole of a day,

a mist of silver on the lake, and turned the earth to a morass. Bronwyn and her companions waited, and while they waited, their time was filled with food and talk, with the little tasks of daily life, and the great tasks of understanding one another and preparing for the journey ahead.

The mages learned to ride, after a fashion, falling now and then into the mud. Morrigan was the best and quickest at it, as she absolutely refused to dirty her robes. Anders just mastered the basics, and Tara, the Circle mage, was still afraid of her horse. Morrigan, however, was becoming quite a good rider in quite a short time.

"It's not so surprising, really," Alistair considered. "She understands animals. Really understands them. Maybe she's using some of that shape-shifting talent to understand that horse of hers."

Bronwyn laughed. "Nerissa certainly seems taken with

her mistress, from the way she follows her around!"

They studied the maps, and sketched out their alternate route to Orzammar. If the ground dried out before the boat came, Bronwyn had decided they would have to move on, and head north around Lake Calenhad as soon as possible. It was interesting to discover which of her companions wanted to be included in the planning, and which were content simply to be led.

In the first group were Alistair and Cullen, because they clearly thought it was their duty. Anders joined them because he thought it was great fun.

"I love maps. Always have," he grinned. "Time was when I planned to run away to Tevinter and be properly appreciated for my magical genius and manly beauty. Being a Grey Warden works, too, though. I love traveling, especially as you, Fearless Leader, have promised that my journey will not take me back to the Circle. May I say that you're all right?"

"You may."

"You're all right."

There were many purchases to make – though not so many that they would unduly burden them. With one thing and another, it seems only decent that each of the companions should have something to wear other than armor or robes. There was a general store at the village above the lake bluffs, and there they found something for Tara: originally a dress belonging to a merchant's young daughter. The only shoes that fit her were, once again, a human child's, and they were a glorious



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bright red. Leliana, wishing the ensemble to look properly put together, searched until she spotted a flash of crimson silk piled among the merchant's wares: it proved to be one of the wide, corset-like belts that had lately come into fashion. Tara was perfectly happy, and admired the only clothes she could remember owning that were not mage's robes.

They also found other castoffs from the wealthy and the aristocratic. What they could not find at the store, they found in the cart of a dwarven peddler. Anders, Alistair and Cullen were nearly of a size, and laughed at the prospect of trading various items. Sten already possessed a fairly decent set of clothing from his days in Lothering – something that never failed to puzzle Bronwyn, until it was explained that he was dressed in these by the farmers who had cared for him when he was injured. Evidently the farmer's wife – whom Sten had later murdered – had actually tailored those clothes for him. The knowledge made Bronwyn feel very sad for the poor, well-meaning woman, whose charity had been repaid so brutally.

Leliana had found her blue dress. It did not fit her at all, but Leliana knew how to sew. A rather ordinary light wool dress in a rather ordinary shade of greyish-blue was turned into something quite striking by her clever fingers.

Bronwyn herself bought nothing. She had her breeches and her leather jerkin and her Grey Warden tabard, and she could not justify adding weight to her pack. Leliana mourned over a long-sleeved gown in dark red that she



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thought would have suited Bronwyn perfectly, but she was doomed to disappointment.

Bronwyn smiled and shook her head. "You and Tara and Morrigan will have to be the grand ladies of our company."

"Well," said Leliana, "If I slip into a town for reconnaissance, I can blend in better now."

That made Alistair laugh out loud. "Blending in?" He shook his head. "That's a noblewoman's gown."

Leliana frowned. "Really? It seems *very* plain to me. but it would be silly for me to try to pass myself off as a peasant. I still have this accent I cannot get rid of, and men sometimes feel free to trouble a poor girl. Better and safer to be in the middle ranks of society. Such a gown, in Orlais, would be worn by a merchant, or a rich farmer's wife..."

Bronwyn grimaced at the reference to Orlais, and decided she had talked all she cared to about their fashions. She gave them a brief smile, and went off with Scout to find Cullen and make sure he had taken his lyrium for the day.

Cullen was very good about exercising and caring for the horses, and spent quite a bit of time in the stables. He was there now, currying his own destrier, Dax: talking to it in a calm and quiet voice.

"You're fond of horses, aren't you?" Bronwyn asked, leaning against the doorframe. The air was musty with damp hay and ordure. Little specks of dust floated in the breeze from outside. Scout nosed about, distantly friendly



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with the former Templar.

Cullen nodded to Bronwyn, his eyes on his mount. "Horses are good people. Not very clever, I suppose, but then, neither am I. I've always liked them. Taking care of them always makes me feel better."

"Then we're lucky to have you. How is your lyrium supply holding out?"

He understood what she meant. If they had to take the land route, the journey would be much longer. He set his jaw. "I'll make it last. I'm trying to take a little bit less every day."

"Are you going to be all right?" she asked, very seriously.

"I don't know," he confessed. "I don't know what's going to happen. I thought I knew what my life was going to be like, but then everything changed."

"For what it's worth," Bronwyn said, "I'm sorry you were forced into this. It can't have been what you wanted."

"It's hard to say. I've never really been in a position to do what I wanted. I am a Child of the Chantry, you know."

"No, I didn't." A foundling, left on the Chantry doorstep, then. Probably his mother was a mage, or unmarried and poor, or he had two parents who could not afford another child. She smiled ruefully. "You fit right in, then. Most of us are orphans, it seems. All the more reason to hold fast to each other."

The local laundress they had engaged arrived, and there was a great to-do as everyone's clothing was identified and distributed. Then there was dinner, and Morrigan announced that she was prepared to fulfill her obligation



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as the night's storyteller. Bronwyn wondered what she would have to say.

Looking around, she could see she was not alone. Cullen looked nervous, as he always did in any situation involving Morrigan. Alistair looked wary, and Anders amused and eager. Sten was frowning like a judge. Leliana and Tara's eyes were shining with the prospect of entertainment. Scout, next to Bronwyn, sat up very straight, a model of attention.

With a smirk, Morrigan sauntered to a place in front of the fire.

Said she: "I am called to relate a tale to fulfill my promise. I did not promise that my story would be pleasant, though there is pleasure in hearing any old story. Nor did I promise that it would be true, though I think there is truth of a kind in it. I have this tale from my mother Flemeth, and where she heard it I cannot guess. 'Tis the history of the daughter of the Sorcerer of Wildervale. Listen well, for I do not intend to repeat myself."

MORRIGAN'S STORY OF THE SORCERER OF WILDERVALE'S DAUGHTER:

Long ago, before the days of Prophet Andraste and her tiresome Chantry, there was a mighty sorcerer far to the north, in the Wildervale. He lived in a great castle of magic and marble, and lived there alone but for his daughters.

Seven daughters there were: all beautiful and skilled in magical arts. They served their father's every wish, and lived in fear of his

wrath. Their mothers they knew not. No one had ever heard of the Sorcerer taking a wife or mistress. It was he and they, and that was all. Over the years the Sorcerer of Wildervale had amassed an enormous treasure, and knights and thieves and adventurers from all over Thedas came to win even a portion of the rumored gold. A great horn, mounted in silver, hung before the castle gate, and those who wished to challenge the Sorcerer had but to blow the horn to summon him. Many did, but they were fools, for none was a match for the power of the Sorcerer of Wildervale. He slew them all, and their bleached bones were their only memorial.

One day, a knight, cleverer or bolder than the rest, came to try his wits and strength against the Sorcerer. He did not challenge the Sorcerer outright, but by cunning he crept through the postern gate and wandered the castle until he came upon the youngest daughter, at her work in the stillroom, brewing potions and perfumes.

She screamed out, jumping to her feet, for she had never seen a man other than her terrible father. But the knight was tall and fair of face, and he spoke to the maiden, and comforted her, and gained her favor. She had never imagined a being so pleasing and delightful, and when the knight cajoled her to take him to her bed, she did not deny him, and they lay together in great joy and bliss.

"Oh, that we could be always thus," the knight said, kissing her fondly.

"That would be wonderful indeed," agreed the maiden, "but my father would never allow it. Do not challenge him, for he will surely slay you. I shall keep you safe in my chamber, and none need know that you are here, for the castle is vast, and I do not see even my sisters every day."

The knight sighed heavily. "Nay, that cannot be. I must challenge

your father and claim you as my bride. My honor demands it. If he were slain, we two would rule this castle together, you and I."

"My sisters would not mind, I think," said the maiden. "My father is cruel, and they would be much happier if he were gone."

"Very well, my love," said the knight. "Your sisters will remain here with you always, if that is your desire, but I must find a way to defeat your father."

He asked many questions about her father: did he use arms like a warrior, or did he rely upon his staff? Did he have other items of virtue to lend him power? The maiden answered as best she could, and the knight considered her words.

At length he said, "It seems hopeless. My weapons are as nothing to his, so the fight would be an unequal one. There is a great armorer in my city of Kirkwall. If I had sufficient gold, he could make me armor that would withstand your father's power, and a sword that would cleave even his shield of magic."

"But there is gold in plenty in my father's vaults!" cried the maiden. "I shall give you all you need, if you will only deliver me from his cruelty. I shall give you a sack of gold and jewels besides. Only swear that we shall be together!"

"We shall be together in life or death!" the knight declared, hand on heart. "Let the shadows witness it!"

So the maiden crept into the vault and gathered a great sack of treasure. She gave it to the knight, and he departed through the little postern gate, promising to return when he had the weapons.

The knight was very pleased at the result of his cunning, for he had won a great fortune without even having to fight for it. He



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returned to Kirkwall a wealthy man, and spent the gold on pleasure and sport, on wine and women and horses. He had gold enough to live well for a long time, but then he thought he had not enough, for more gold would buy a great estate, and then he would be rich forever. So after a time he thought that the foolish maiden could be tricked again, and soon he went north to the Sorcerer's Castle.

The little postern gate was open, and he slipped inside and made his way to the maiden's room.

She was there and greeted him, looking older than he remembered, and sadder. Nonetheless, she did not say him nay when he led her to her bed and lay with her.

"I have been waiting for you a long time," she told him after. "Where is your armor, and where is your sword with which you will challenge my father?"

"Alas, my love, the wretched armorer is a hard man. He has taken the gold you gave me as money down, but he will only give me what he has made if I can pay another such sum to him. Only one sack of gold stands between us and freedom!"

She said, "You shall have your gold. You are a strong man and can carry more than I. Come with me to the vault, and you shall have all the gold you wish."

The knight was pleased with her, and followed her into the heart of the castle. An iron gate stood before them, and it opened at the maiden's touch. Down, down they traveled to a vault below. Another pair of iron doors opened and the maiden stood back, while the knight stared at the treasure in awe.

For gold was within: gold covered the ceiling, and lined the



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walls, and paved the floor; gold overflowed from great chests, and amongst the gold sparkled great jewels, and long ropes of pearls gleamed like reflections of moonlight. It was the mightiest treasure of its day, and all of it lay before the knight.

"There is yet more to see," murmured the maiden, given the knight a gentle nudge. Nodding, he stepped into the chamber and then froze, bound by terror and by magic.

For before him stood the Sorcerer of Wildervale himself, tall, pale, and smiling. On a golden bier lay another maiden, dead some months, her dried flesh clinging to her bones.

"You have done well, my daughter," said the Sorcerer to the maiden standing by the knight. "Go now to your tasks, and remember the fate of the betrayer."

The maiden left, tears glittering in her eyes.

The Sorcerer came close to the knight, who struggled in vain against the strange lethargy.

"You could not even tell the difference between them," mused the Sorcerer. "My youngest daughter gave up her life for you, and you did not even trouble yourself to remember her face. You might even have escaped my vengeance had you not returned, for I did not deem you important enough to pursue you. But here you are, greedy for more of my treasure. You shall have all you desire, for should not a father give a dowry worthy of a beloved child?"

"A dowry?" stammered the knight, his jaw stiff with the spell.

"Indeed," said the mage. "'Did you think I do not know all that transpires within the walls of my own castle? Did you not bind yourself to her? Did she not embrace you as your affianced wife?"



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Did you not swear that you should be together in life and death? "He came closer still. "You swore it before the shadows. And I, listening in the shadows, heard. You shall keep your word."

He stepped to the door of the vault and turned, saying. "Bless you, my children. May you be happy."

He was gone, and the iron doors shut, leaving the knight, the dead maiden, and all the treasure within.



"What a powerful story," Bronwyn said. "I really did not see that coming."

Morrigan smirked at Alistair, "*And they lived happily ever after!*"

"Don't!" he waved her away, "That's disgusting!"

"That is why we Qunari cut the tongues from the mouths of our mages, and keep them on leashes." Sten remarked. He frowned, "I refer to the story itself, not to the witch's telling of it."

Tara started up, eyes blazing. "Oh, really? It seems to me a *brilliant* story. I've read that the hearts of men are full of deceit, and I know that everyone thinks mages are less than human. That poor girl loved the knight, and he tricked her and got her killed. No doubt he thought it was just fine, because she was only a *mage*, after all!"

Sten was a little taken aback at the little elf's fury. She got in his face, shouting, "Yeah! Big warrior with the big sword! 'Oh, those wicked mages! How dare they try to protect their own treasure! Let's laugh at the lonely, stupid mage girl!'"

Anders caught at her hand, "Calm down, elfkins!"



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Bronwyn got up and led her to the chair by her. "That's what I meant about it being a powerful story. It's the sort that arouses very strong feelings! Thank you, Morrigan. I'll never forget it. I would point out that the older mage was not the injured party, but rather the young girl, who was victimized both by her lover and her father. At least in Ferelden, fathers cannot lock their daughters away!" She winced, remembering how Rendon Howe treated Delilah. "Completely."

Cullen was dissatisfied by the story for other reasons. "It seems to me that all the knight needed to do was take the poor girl with him that first time. They could have escaped together..."

Leliana was excited by the idea. " – and then they *could* have had a 'happily-ever-after!'"

" – unless the cowardly knight," scoffed Sten, "deserted the maiden once he had reached safety, or worse, treacherously sold her to a brothel!"

"Not even *he* would do that!" Alistair countered hotly. "*Sell her to a brothel!*" Nobody would do something like that!"

Dismissing that remark as too naive for comment, Anders said calmly, "Nobody could get away with trying to sell a mage anyway. If the knight tried it, he'd be sorry." He gave Tara a reassuring grin. She settled down a little, and ate a cookie from the plate Bronwyn passed her.

Bronwyn was thinking. "It seems to me that the knight *was* cowardly. Unimaginative, too. If I had been the knight, I would have made friends with the girl, and with all her



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sisters, too. Then I would have challenged the wizard, and even if he were tremendously powerful, surely all of us working together could defeat him. And then we could share the treasure and the castle, and *everybody* could live happily ever after! As far as humanly possible," she added, in deference to reality.

"Except for the Sorcerer," Morrigan smirked, amused that she had so stirred the pot with her little story.

"Except for the Sorcerer," Bronwyn agreed equably, taking another cookie herself. "But he was cruel, and a tyrant to his daughters. Of course, it would have been *really* bold to confront him in the castle, and ask outright for permission to marry the girl, and see what the Sorcerer had to say about it."

"Maybe he would have respected the knight then," Alistair said hopefully, glancing for support to Cullen. "Maybe he would have given him some challenges to overcome so they could get married..."

"— and then," cried Leliana, swept away by the glory of it, "when the knight succeeded, the Sorcerer gave them a wonderful wedding, and the other sisters were bridesmaids in beautiful gowns, and the Sorcerer gave the young couple a bag of gold, and they —"

"— went to the seaside for the honeymoon?" grinned Anders. "Well, in *my* version, the hero would be a mage himself — only young, handsome, and with a killer fashion sense — and he'd stroll in and burn the father to a crisp



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and get the girl. End of story."

"Oh, you!" laughed Leliana, amused and exasperated. "What do you think, Sten? What ought the knight to have done? You have an opinion, yes?"

The Qunari frowned, but answered readily enough. "Obviously he should have fought, but not challenged the Sorcerer with the horn, for then the mage could fight on familiar ground with plenty of warning. No. Cunning is required when fighting against magic. He should have taken the mage by surprise, and slain him on his own terms. Then he should have seized the castle and married the daughters. And then one would hope that he ruled with logic and reason." He shrugged, as if such a thing were clearly unlikely, given that humans were involved.

"All the daughters?" Cullen asked, a little taken aback.

"Married *all* the daughters?" Alistair repeated, blushing.

Anders nodded slowly as he thought it over. "Works for me." "Yes," Sten answered frankly. "I am not familiar with all the minutiae of human marriage customs. However, as all the females of the Castle have been deprived of their male protector, it seems to me just that all of them be recompensed. Why should one female have a mate when the others do not? Would that not be a future cause of resentment and discord? Better that he mate with them all."

Morrigan laughed with delight. Leliana and Tara stared in amazement.

Bronwyn said, "Sten, I cannot *wait* until we hear your story!"



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Seriously, the Qunari answered, "You must. There is the Chantry sister to be heard from first. My own story is not yet complete in my mind. When it is, I shall inform you."

The cookies were soon gone, but the ale held out. There was more laughter, more debate, more drinking. Bronwyn took her tankard and stepped out into the starry night, wanting to escape the stuffiness of the inn and the unceasing din. Scout trotted along beside her, and then took off after an unlucky rabbit, out for an evening's grazing.

The cooling breeze refreshed her at once, and she strode over the rocky lawn, going down to the lakeshore. Birds called from the trees, settling down for the night. She took another sip and thought through the next day. Scout seemed to have chased down his rabbit, and looked up, ready to share it with Bronwyn. She shook her head, and waved at him.

"No, old boy, it's all yours."

He thought her silly to waste good meat. He would certainly not do so, and was pleasurably busy for some time. Bronwyn strolled in the other direction, and soon heard boots crunching sand and gravel behind her.

"Sten and Tara are engaged in a life and death struggle at the chess table now."

It was Alistair. Bronwyn felt a curious racing in her blood before she turned. Edgy and exciting, like sensing darkspawn, but not so relentlessly unpleasant.

Am I sensing fellow Wardens now?

Alistair had once hinted that that was another Grey



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Warden power. It was nice, she thought. One need never feel alone. It was not quite *family*, but it was something, perhaps, of the sort. And given her ruminations earlier in the day, it might be all the family most of her companions would ever know. They had sacrificed much — and would sacrifice more yet — but they had this. At least they had this.

She turned, and gave him a smile. "I'm glad you're here. I've been struggling with a decision, and I'd like to hear your opinion on the subject before I start giving orders."

"Ask away."

"We have no idea if the blasted boat is ever coming or not. I've decided that perhaps it would be for the best if we left tomorrow. We have our supplies — what we can get. We have no hope of purchasing other animals here. I'm inclined just to tell everyone that we're packing up and riding north in the morning."

"Fine with me."

"Really?" She asked doubtfully. "No regrets? No wishing we had waited just one more day?"

"No," he maintained, "and I'll tell you why. I don't know anything about boats. The only boat I've ever been on is the boat to the Circle Tower. If something goes wrong on a boat, there's nothing I can do to fix it. On the other hand, if we're attacked on the road, I can fight. I'm quite good at it. I won't mill about looking stupid and excessively sinkable. Let's forget the boat and just go, Bronwyn. Sure, it'll take longer than it would if the boat had come today,



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but it didn't. It may not come till Firstfall, for all we know, and then we'd look like morons. Besides," he finished off his ale, "King Maric died when his ship sank, you know. He drowned. He couldn't do anything about it, King of Ferelden as he was."

"I know," she said softly. "When he was declared dead we had a service in the chapel for him."

"I'll never forget the day I heard about it. It's one of those kingdom-changing events, after all," he said, with a false, self-conscious chuckle. "I found out he was dead by overhearing Sisters Ita and Gruoch exchanging the latest thrilling gossip."

She poured out the last of her ale onto the beach, the taste souring on her tongue. "Alistair..." she sighed, not knowing if she should say anything or not. "I did hear King Cailan speak to you when we were leaving."

"Then you know. I thought maybe you did. I appreciate that you didn't start treating me *differently*. I'm glad I didn't have to tell you. Not that it matters to anyone. Not even to me."

"I suspect it means something to the king, or he would not have wished you well and called you brother. Who was your mother?"

"Nobody special, I'm told. She was a maid at Redcliffe Castle, and died when I was born. Maybe that's why I stayed there."

All right, the mother was baseborn, but Alistair was still King Maric's son! Why had he not cared for him?



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Why had he left him to be raised in a stable? By the time Alistair was born, Queen Rowan was dead and beyond caring. It was cruel to have deprived Alistair of a decent upbringing, and Cailan of a brother. If someone had kept Fergus from her, she would never have forgiven it. And she was still thinking over his earlier words.

"But when your father died... I can't believe such callous behavior! No one wrote to you? No one came to break the news to you?"

"No. I suppose everyone assumed that someone else would do it." He shrugged. "It's not like my father and I were *close*, after all. I can tell you this: Duncan was more my father than King Maric ever was."

"It still must have hurt horribly."

"I suppose what hurt was the end of possibility: once he was dead, we were never going to have the big, sobby reconciliation scene with the manly hugs. That was a nice fantasy. I enjoyed it for years, and it hurt to let go of it. I was able to, finally, when the Wardens became my family." He cleared his throat, embarrassed even in the shelter of the darkness. "I can't tell you what having you with me means. You're the one bright spot in this whole awful mess. I thought about it, and I wanted to give you a present."

"Alistair, you don't have to —"

"I want to!" he cut her off, his voice sounded high and young in the open air. "Actually, I have two presents, but the first one is stupid." He pulled some folded linen from a pocket.



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"I found this in Lothing, and it reminded me of you."

She unwrapped the cloth carefully. Inside was a dried and thorny stem, and some scattered petals with a sweet, fugitive scent.

"Umm – this is – er, was – a rose, Alistair."

"That's right. I was going to give it to you, telling you it reminded me of you: something rare and beautiful amid all the terror and danger. But I couldn't find the right time, and it's kind of... fallen apart. Sorry. It all sounded really impressive in my head, but it's really pretty silly, I suppose."

He looked so uncomfortable. Bronwyn thought quickly, and said, "It was a lovely thought, Alistair, and not silly at all. I have an idea..." she stripped off the last of the dried petals and wrapped them carefully in the scrap of cloth. The stem she threw away into the bushes. "What I can do is sew this linen up into a sachet and keep the petals that way. They're still fragrant, and I think Morrigan might have a bit of orris-root to preserve them. I'll put it in my backpack to perfume my shirts. It's actually a wonderful gift, Alistair. Thank you so much."

"Really?" he grinned, his strong young teeth gleaming. "See – that's what I like about you. You're always thinking about how to make things turn out right. I'd given up, so I bought a real present off that dwarf peddler. Here." He dangled a silver chain before her, the pendant in the middle reflecting moonlight. He must have made out her expression, because he hurriedly added, "I know. I know.



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Unmarried ladies aren't supposed to accept anything but candy and flowers, but you've seen that I'm completely hopeless with flowers, and we're weeks away from a Denerim confectioner. See," he held it closer. "It's the Sword of Mercy. You like swords and I like swords. I'll bet you wouldn't mind if your brother gave you this, and I'm sort of your brother, too, so... " his voice faded into embarrassment.

"Oh, Alistair!" Touched, she burst out gratefully. "You *are* my brother! It's beautiful! Here... put it around my neck. I'm still holding the flower bits together."

He might be shy about speaking, but his big hands were quick and deft enough. He fastened the chain and stood back, smiling. He said, "I'd say something smooth and witty if I were Anders, but being me, I'll just be satisfied that you like it."

"I do," she replied. "Very much. Come on, then. Now that we are united in brotherhood, we can face the rest of the orphans and wanderers and give them the bad news. We ride for Orzammar tomorrow!"



CHAPTER 17

ON THE ROAD
TO HERO'S
REST

ARKSPAWN!" BRONWYN
SHOUTED. "KILL THEM ALL!"

The loathsome little warband rushed to meet them, fangs exposed in murderous grins. Hurlocks, genlocks, a powerful Hurlock alpha a little way back, an emissary already firing a poisonous green mist at them.

To her new recruits' credit, they moved into action with surprisingly little hesitation. There was the grimace of horror and disgust on each face, but no one was running away or even stopping to gawk. They remembered their training, and were doing just as they should.

Anders had positioned himself in the rear, as instructed. He could cast ice and lightning early on, targeting any magic user, but was needed to stay safe and heal the front-line fighters. Leliana was near him, nocking arrow after arrow with lethal speed. She was far and away their best archer, and had just brought down a genlock. It squealed and thrashed on the ground, dust rising up, and Sten finished it off. The Qunari was a rock that the darkspawn

cast themselves against in vain. Any downed darkspawn was prey for Scout, worrying at them with powerful jaws.

Cullen was not bad with that big sword of his, and he was quick enough to evade the alpha's massive blows, while getting in his own. There was quite a lot of shouting and screaming, much of it from the Wardens, but Bronwyn was yelling herself, and as long as they could hear her orders, they could do whatever they needed to get the job done.

Tara was learning how to kill darkspawn very quickly. Her cold spells were powerful, perhaps even more powerful than Morrigan's. She shrieked with triumph when she hit a frozen genlock with a concussive spell and it shattered to pieces. Bronwyn stopped to blink, just for a fraction of a second. That was impressive.

And she found she was getting better at killing darkspawn herself. They really weren't so hard, if you went in fast and knocked them silly — *her sword's pommel against a bony skull* — and then when they were stunned and groggy, *jamming her dagger into an exposed throat to the hilt-twisting through the veins and arteries until the blood spurted in throbbing jets*.

They took more killing than a human target, but nothing survives when its throat is cut through to the spine, or you can see daylight on the other side of its gut, or its head is flying off into a patch of deathroot...

The Hurlock alpha was weakened, but still fighting: its blows slowing painfully. It would not run to fight another



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day, or change its tactics, or beg for mercy. Darkspawn didn't, she had found.

She rushed in to backstab the creature, thrusting through where its kidneys ought to be. It was collapsing to its knees, its reek rising up into her nostrils like a blow to the skull. She must have hit something vital. Did anyone know if darkspawn were made the same inside as humans?

She glanced around. Her people were up, and the enemy was down, and all was as it should be.

Tara was ten yards away, jumping up and down, running over to a dead genlock, kicking its head. It bounced a little, and she kicked it again. She screamed a wordless war cry, waving her staff. Morrigan rolled her eyes. Cullen backed away, glancing uneasily at Alistair. Scout approved of Tara's celebration, prancing around and barking joyously.

Anders trotted up, grinning. "Calm down, elfkins," he called out. "We won. Yay!" He stopped by Bronwyn and pointed at her thigh. "I need to see to that."

She was bleeding where a blade had slipped through a gap in her armor. And then, in a flash of blue light, she wasn't. "Let me bandage you up," Anders said, moving in, professional and cheerful. "One of the shorties nicked you as he went down."

She did not even have to remove the armor for him to bandage the wound. It was rubbish, and left too many vital areas unprotected. She did not feel they could spare coin for new armor now, but someday... She scowled, thinking



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of her situation. At least her weapons were first-rate.

Leliana walked among the dead, looking for valuables. She grabbed Tara by the arm, and showed her what she was doing.

Tara glanced behind at Bronwyn, and whispered to Leliana, "Is this all right? Can we really take things, or will we get in trouble?"

"It's fine," Leliana soothed her. "These are spoils of war. We're supposed to take them, especially from darkspawn. If we find anything particularly valuable, we'll show it to the company, and that way everyone gets a fair share."

"Well, if it really is our *duty*..."

Alistair talked for a minute to Cullen in a low voice, and then came over to Bronwyn, grinning broadly.

"Pretty awesome, I'd say! How's the leg?"

Anders considered. "Gorgeous. One of the finest I've ever —"

"Oh, hahaha. Very funny," Alistair loomed over the busy mage, looking threatening. Or he would have looked threatening, if Anders had paid him the slightest attention.

Bronwyn smirked. "I'm fine, Alistair. I thought that went well, don't you?"

They were all getting good at killing darkspawn, but Tara's spirit and skill had surprised her. And the girl seemed to actually enjoy combat. She was quite the little battlemage.

Of course, that was just what they needed, but Bronwyn had not really expected much of her: she was an elf, and



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she was small, and she had not made a very impressive showing on her departure from the Circle. Above all, she had seemed to Bronwyn to be a mere victim of the more powerful; a victim in need of rescue.

However unpleasant it was to consider, Bronwyn realized that she herself might not have been very fearsome had she been locked up naked by armed men — by Howe's men for example. Or by Howe himself, a thought that made her shiver, even now in the warm sun.

But no one in her party was a victim anymore. They were working well together, and everyone was learning how to kill darkspawn, which was a primary mission. She herself was learning new ways to kill them all the time, in fact.

Learning to camp was something else, however. To reduce the weight on the horses, it was necessary to share tents to some degree. Morrigan tried to camp apart, with her own fire, but Tara would hang about, talking, sharing spells, asking questions about woodcraft, and the camp boundaries seemed to stretch a little, including Morrigan whether she willed it or not.

It was important to learn to live off the land, so Bronwyn encouraged Tara to go with Morrigan on her gathering expeditions. And Anders, too. Morrigan would huff and grimace, but Bronwyn wondered if Morrigan did not like Anders, just a little. He was a handsome and powerful mage, and he paid Morrigan extravagant compliments non-stop.

Bronwyn thought more about their little magical team-



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within-a-team. It seemed to her that Tara was encouraging Anders in his pursuit of Morrigan. It was something of a mystery to her. Tara had told her that the Circle was a world of its own, with its own rules, and that Bronwyn would not understand.

The road curved up against the lake again, and they stopped to camp. The horses were hobbled and unloaded and Cullen and Leliana led them to water. Anders showed Tara how to search for firewood, while Morrigan and Sten began setting up camp. Bronwyn walked along the lake shore, and found a stretch where the lake bottom was covered with round pebbles. The clear water revealed the silvery forms of big lake sturgeon and bluefins. Bronwyn wondered if she could still catch them the way an old woodsman had showed her. She went back to her gear and pulled a long, fine-tipped arrow from her quiver. Scout trotted up, eager to help if anything involving food was involved.

"What are you doing?" Alistair asked, seeing her shedding her greaves and boots.

"Going fishing," she told him. "Want to come along?"

He stared. "Don't you need a stick — pole — thingy with a line and a hook? You know... things?"

"That's one way, but I haven't any fishing tackle. Take an arrow. If you're quick, you can spear them. No, a longer one..."

She led the way into the shallows, beckoning to Alistair. "Come on!"

"Ow!" He complained. "It's cold. That is really, really cold water!"



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"Shh!" Bronwyn hushed him., pointing at some dim, misty shapes below. "You'll frighten them away, and then we'll be wet and cold for nothing!"

In the end they were very silly over the fish, laughing and splashing. Scout swam around them, knocking Alistair off his feet. If there hadn't been so many, they would have been dismal failures at spear-fishing. A sluggish, unwary sturgeon was messily skewered, and then dragged out of the water.

"That's a sturgeon?" Alistair asked. "Aren't they supposed to be delicacies? They look weird."

Tara came up, her arm full of sticks. "Are you using that creature for potions?"

Bronwyn shook her head, unable to stop laughing. "No, we're going to eat it." Scout barked a proud affirmation.

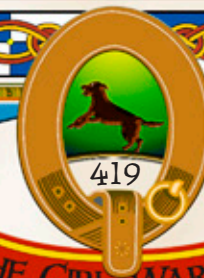
"Eww."

"I don't suppose you've ever seen a live fish – or a recently live fish. Take the wood to Morrigan and bring me back that long pan from the pack and some parchment. I'll show you how to clean a fish."

"Just me, or doesn't Anders have to come too?"

"Yes, Anders has to come too. If he runs away again, he needs to know how to feed himself."

Tara dashed off on her errands, digging through the packs for the needed parchment. Morrigan asked her what she wanted it for, and Tara told her, pointing down the water's edge to Bronwyn. Leliana overheard, and put up her hand up to her eyes to see what was going on.



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"Ooo! Sturgeon!" Leliana called, very pleased. "How delicious! Will we be preparing it *en papillote*?"

Bronwyn paused, mentally translating the Orlesian. "That's the plan," she called back.

Getting the mages to help turned out to be more difficult than she anticipated. Tara, especially, was disgusted by the smell, by the idea of scraping off the scales, by the idea of gutting the fish. Her pretty piquant face was screwed into a grimace of disgust.

Bronwyn urged her on impatiently. "I saw you killing darkspawn. This isn't nearly so bad."

"Yes, but –" Anders pointed out. "We don't kill darkspawn with sharp, pointy things that make their insides fall out. We just wave our hands while remaining unsoiled by gory bits. Mostly."

"Do you have a spell to clean fish while remaining unsoiled by gory bits?" Bronwyn asked, a little sharply. Alistair was grinning. She glared at him. "Because if you do, I'll really like it if you performed it right about *now*!"

"Sorry," Anders apologized meekly. He and Tara scraped half-heartedly at the fish, and it was all Bronwyn could do not to shove them aside and do it herself. She thought, oddly, of her mother's patience with her when teaching her sewing.

But this was more important. A warrior had to know how to find and prepare food. Bronwyn was not about to be their kitchen maid for the duration of their quest. And Alistair was having far too good a time, so she made him



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draw his knife and take a turn. It transpired that he had never cleaned fish, either. Thus, it all took much longer than it should have. By the time they were cutting the fillets into portions, Leliana was coming over, armed with salt, and Morrigan had brought some herbs, shaking her head at the helplessness before her.

The pieces were wrapped carefully in parchment pouches which were folded tight to seal them, and then laid near the coals of Morrigan's good fire to steam slowly.

"You're going to like this," Bronwyn insisted. "It's a very good way to prepare fish. We need to conserve our supplies as far as we can, and fresh food is always best."

She gave thanks to the Maker when the fish was unwrapped from the many little pouches, and was tasty and succulent enough to please even her finicky mages.

"This is wonderful," said Cullen, mopping up fish juices with a bit of bread.

"It's good," Tara agreed. "I'd rather find smaller fish with smaller guts, though."

"Catching them was the fun part," Alistair said. "Except for the very, very cold water. Can't we just shoot them with a bow and arrow next time?"

Bronwyn shied a ball of crumpled parchment at him, and stretched her legs out with a deep, relaxed sigh. She pulled out her map. Loghain's clerk had copied it hastily, but it was a good general map of Ferelden, with not only the towns and villages marked, but also the principal



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inns. Not far west of the River Dane, where the Lake Road met the North Road, there was written "The Hero's Rest."

She smiled, thinking of the hero in question. Leliana peeped over her shoulder. "I can guess who stayed there once, yes? Teyrn Loghain after his great victory. I wonder if they hung a placard over the very bed."

Bronwyn was still smiling. "It's entirely possible. We can be there in another day. I'd like to hear the news in these parts."



In a few days they would not be far from the fortress of West Hill, and closer still to the bannorn of Waking Sea. It was all becoming familiar country: not quite home, but the land of known neighbors and friends.

The quality of the road deteriorated as they traveled north. The River Dane had flooded here about ten years ago and washed away much of the old paving. Bann Loren, the husband of her mother's late friend, Lady Landra, was lord of the lands here about, and had never troubled himself to spend the money for the necessary road work. It would have been expensive, certainly, but maintaining the roads was a lord's duty.

Not that Bann Loren was a shining exemplar of nobility. His wife and son had spent as little time in his company as possible. Poor Lady Landra had been a sweet, well-meaning woman: not terribly clever, but very good-hearted. She had sought refuge from her unhappy life in constant visits to noble lady friends, and eventually in



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drink. Bronwyn would never forget the spectacle the poor woman had made of herself at Mother's last spring salon.

Dairren, their son, had been different. He was a sensitive, intelligent young man, frank about his unhappiness at serving as a squire to her father in the upcoming campaign against the darkspawn. He had hinted that he would not refuse a call to serve as a Grey Warden. Lady Landra had longed for a match between Bronwyn and Dairren, but that was never going to happen for a multitude of reasons. If nothing else, Dairren wanted something other than the life of a Fereldan bann, and Bronwyn wanted someone else, and had not ceased to want him.

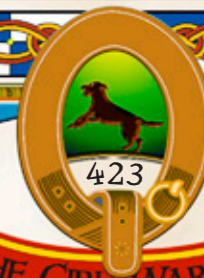
She wondered if Dairren had escaped the massacre at Highever. Mother had wept over her friend's body, but they had not seen Dairren among the dead.

Had Bann Loren even sought to find out what had happened to his wife and son? She wondered if she should call on him. It would take another day to reach his manor, and then who knew what might happen? It would certainly complicate things, and she really could not spare the time. Orzammar was calling to her, a necessity that could not be denied.

In the mid-afternoon, a young woman appeared from a side road, and ran to them, screaming for help.

"Please, please!" she cried. "They attacked the wagon! Please... this way!"

Bronwyn had no time to see her properly, other than



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to notice that she was young and pretty and blonde, and possibly an elf from her short stature and delicate features. The long golden hair covered her ears.

Alistair rode over, frowning. "What was that? Isn't she going to tell us what the problem is?"

"Apparently not," Bronwyn said wryly. "Keep your eyes open, everyone. You too," she directed to Morrigan, flying overhead. The hawk creed and soared away, after the running blonde girl.

There was a tangle of brambles and logs, and a very narrow wagon track through them. It all looked perfectly natural, if you didn't look at it carefully.

Morrigan was back, and changed to human shape, landing lightly on the ground.

"A trap," she said laconically. "There are eleven of them. They look well-trained and well-armed. I believe that girl is a mage of sorts. Shall we walk by, or engage them?"

"Oh, engage them, by all means," Bronwyn said. "Why allow them the chance to create an even better trap elsewhere? Besides, I'd like to know why they want to attract our attention, instead of seeking easier prey. Dismount and tie the horses here. If there are traps, I don't want the horses breaking legs. I can spot traps more easily nearer the ground. Morrigan, get behind our new friends. The rest of you, follow me. Wedge formation."

With a grim smile, she led the way, and the group arranged themselves as they had planned, back in front of



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the fire at the common room of the Spoiled Princess: Scout at her heels; Tara to her right and Alistair to her left; Sten and Cullen on either flank; between them and slightly behind, Leliana with her bow and Anders with his staff.

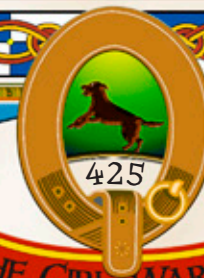
The falling log was no surprise. Nor was it a surprise that the blonde girl was looking back at them slyly, speaking to another fair-haired enemy — a handsome... elf, it must be. They turned and eyed Bronwyn and her party with anticipation.

The elf stepped toward them, giving a signal. *An elf was in charge?* Bronwyn had never seen a elf in charge of much of anything before, and certainly not in charge of a band of warriors. It was interesting, but... *strange*. Behind him the girl mage smirked with menace, lightning building in her hands. Another two thugs rose up from behind the shattered wagon. Bronwyn's peripheral vision caught two armed men watching the scene from the hill to the right.

"Lady Cousland dies here!" shouted the elf, lunging forward with feral grace.

"Have we met?" Bronwyn muttered. "I feel certain I would have remembered you." She adjusted her grip on her weapons, and moved in to meet him. Scout rushed past to knock a hireling off his feet.

Tara raised her staff, and the mage girl was suddenly still, paralyzed by magic. Two more attackers materialized from behind some barrels to their left. Morrigan froze them in place, and then directed her attention to the surprised



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archers on the heights above them. A twang of a bowstring, and a man fell back, feathers sprouting from his throat.

Bronwyn crossed blades with the elf in a music of silverite and steel. He was fast, by the Maker: very fast and very smooth, and she needed all her concentration to deal with him. Their weapons locked, and they glared at each other fiercely for a moment before Bronwyn smashed her head against his, her wonderful Grey Warden helmet a lethal weapon. The elf went limp, and Bronwyn leaped over his still body to get at the underlings behind him.

Sten roared in triumph, somewhere to her left. A man rolled in front of her, nearly tripping her up, as Alistair knocked him down with his shield. Cullen was swinging his sword with creditable speed, and there was a horrible noise like a melon being split as he sliced a man nearly in two. Bronwyn cut her way past an attacker, barely noticing that the mage girl was on the ground, eyes empty. Bronwyn had no idea who had done that.

She charged up the twisting slope, Tara and Alistair just behind her. "Watch out!" she yelled, pointing at the traps. There was a quick, nasty struggle with some bowmen who were ready to fight for their lives. A light flared blue as Anders cast a healing spell. Leliana's bow sang again, and it was over.

It could not have lasted more than five minutes.



"The leader's alive!" Cullen called. "Just knocked silly."



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"Nifty use of the helmet," Alistair said, grinning. "I'll have to try that one."

"Why thank you, good ser. Don't kill him!" Bronwyn called to Cullen, pointing to the stunned leader. "I really want to ask some questions. Scout!" she shouted. "Go guard the prisoner!" The dog barked once and ran at full tilt, crouching threateningly by the supine elf assassin.

Other than the massive bruise on his forehead, said elf looked comparatively unhurt and even reasonably well-groomed, his golden hair shining, his slim, bronzed body muscular and fit. Bronwyn smiled her amusement at herself for ogling him. She had never really noticed how good-looking a male elf could be before. He was well-armed, and wore well-made light armor. A thorough professional, she would guess. And the identity of his employer was perfectly obvious.

Leliana and Tara began picking their way through the pockets of the fallen. Morrigan glanced over and helped them, watching to see what would happen to the one who had led the attack.

The elf stirred, and groaned. He blinked up at Bronwyn, and was bold enough to smile faintly. Scout growled very softly.

"Ugh." The elf noticed the dog, and remained carefully still. "I rather thought I would wake up dead – or not wake up at all. But I see you haven't killed me yet."

"No. Not yet," Bronwyn agreed, unable to resist a superior smirk. "I have a few questions."



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The elf laughed weakly, but seemed resigned. "Ah! So I'm to be interrogated! Let me save you some time. My name is Zevran Aranai... Zev to my friends. I'm a member of the Antivan Crows, brought here to slay Lady Bronwyn Cousland, which I have failed to do, as you see."

Antiva! His accent stirred memories: some sweet, some painful. When Fergus had come home from Antiva, he had brought his new bride, Oriana, with him, and for years her accent had delighted Bronwyn. She had mourned when Oriana, by dint of careful, diligent work, and Mother's endless coaching, had discarded it, wanting to be a true Fereldan for Fergus' sake. Oriana had been full of stories of Antiva: the beauties of its cities, the beaches of fine white sand, the abundant flowers blooming year-round. Oriana had also told stories of the Crows, Antiva's famous guild of assassins, but those had been merely exotic tales. Here was the reality, and memories of Oriana softened Bronwyn's heart a little. She considered speaking to this Zevran in Antivan, but decided against it. It was always good to be able to do something that no one knew you could.

"I do see, Zevran Aranai. I am, in fact, Bronwyn Cousland, and I'm extremely happy you failed."

"So would I be in your place. Not so good for me, of course. Getting captured by a target seems a tad detrimental to one's budding career as an assassin."

Bronwyn nodded sagely. "It could certainly prove *fatal* to one's reputation."



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"Perhaps you would like to know my employer's name —"
"No, no!" Bronwyn put up her hand to stop him. "Let me guess! Tall, thin, greying, with a bit of a beard below his lower lip, and a remarkably well-developed sneer. I see you nodding. It was my old family friend, Arl Rendon Howe, wasn't it?"

"You astonish me," Zevran said gallantly. "This is a long-standing quarrel?"

"Not really," Bronwyn laughed. "I don't know of anyone else in the world who hates me enough to pay good coin to kill me. Where was he when he spoke to you?"

"In his city of Amaranthine. May I sit up while we converse?"

"Very carefully. My friends are a bit on edge, and all their edges are very sharp." Everyone moved back a little, watching the elf narrowly. He sat up, rubbing his brow and wincing. "So you are loyal to Howe, Zevran Aranai?"

"I have no idea what his issues are with you. I imagine they are the usual thing: you threaten his power. No, I am not loyal to him. I was contracted to perform a service: that is all."

"And now that you've failed?"

"Well, that is between Arl Howe and the Crows, and the Crows and myself, unfortunately."

Alistair broke in, demanding, "Why are you telling us all this?"

Zevran laughed. "Why not? I wasn't paid for silence!"

Cullen frowned. "Aren't you even loyal to your employer?"

A lazy smirk, directed at Bronwyn. Zevran said, "Loyalty



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is an interesting concept. If you wish, and you're done interrogating me, we can discuss it further."

Bronwyn waved at him to continue.

"Well, you see," declared the assassin, "The Crows do not reward failure. I failed to kill you, so my life is forfeit. Thing is, I like living. And you, obviously, are the sort to give the Crows pause. So —" he paused and went on, "let me serve *you* instead."

"Ha!" Bronwyn laughed then, genuinely laughed at the elf's daring. A number of other laughed too: Morrigan, in a single, rather high-pitched burst of contempt; Tara, astonished that anyone would ever hope for mercy; Alistair, in angry indignation; Anders, admiring the elf's effrontery. Bronwyn kept smiling, thinking it over. She said, "You must think I'm royally stupid."

Zevran was not deterred, but immediately said, "I think you're royally hard to kill, and utterly gorgeous." Seeing her raised brows, he hurried on suavely, "Not that I think you'll respond to simple flattery. But there are worse things in life than serving the whims of a deadly sex goddess."

Cullen and Alistair flushed red, perhaps dangerously red. Cullen's grip on his sword tightened noticeably.

She laughed even more at that. "And what's to stop you from trying to finish the job if I let you live?"

He blew out a breath, considering his words carefully. "To be completely honest, I was never given much of a choice about joining the Crows. I was bought on the slave market



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at a young age. Even if I did kill you now, they might just kill me on principle. I'd rather take my chances with you."

It was very tempting. "And what would you want in return?"

His reply was instant. "Being allowed to live would be nice. I'm more useful that way. And somewhere down the line, if you should decide you no longer need me... then... I go my way. Until then, I am yours. Isn't that fair?"

Alistair hissed, "Bronwyn!"

She said to the others, "Watch him! Alistair and I need to talk."

They stepped away from the others. Alistair whispered, "You're not really considering taking the assassin! I mean... I understand not wanting to slaughter him in cold blood now... but to take him along?"

"I think he could be useful," she said, and then added in a lower voice, "Would you want him following us, not knowing what he's up to, or coming with us, where we can keep an eye on him?"

Alistair bit his lip and nodded, thinking it over. "I see your point. You're not thinking of conscripting *him*, are you?"

Bronwyn glanced at the handsome elf. "I think... not. He's doesn't seem to have liked being conscripted by the Crows. I daresay he wouldn't like being conscripted by the Grey Wardens any better. However... *he could* be an asset to our party." She slapped him on the shoulder, grinning. "Besides, collecting cast-offs seems to be what we do! Ex-Templars, ex-sisters, ex-nobles, ex-apostates! I think an ex-Crow would fit right in!"



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"I suppose," he surrendered. "All right, the assassin stays, but I'll be watching him."

"Good."

They walked back, and Zevran relaxed slightly at the expressions he was seeing.

"Very well," Bronwyn said. "I accept your offer."

He rose to his feet gracefully. Hand on heart, he declared, "I hereby pledge my oath of loyalty to you. I am your man, without reservation. This, I swear." He bowed, and Bronwyn smiled and granted him a nod.

"Lovely," Morrigan sneered. "Let us all examine our food very carefully in future."

"Always a sensible precaution," Zevran agreed cheerfully.

Morrigan was also displeased when the assassin was allowed to ride the horse she considered her own, although she almost never rode herself. Bronwyn soothed her with promises of buying more animals at the first opportunity, even ponies or donkeys if they were all that were to be had. The thought of the assassin riding a long-eared little donkey was amusing to several in the party.

"Ponies?" Tara asked. "You mean, baby horses? Can people ride them?"

Cullen told her quietly, "They're not babies. They're just small horses."

"Well, I think that's a brilliant idea! No offense," she told her own patient mount, "but I would *love* to have a small horse. I'm a small *person*. I think we'd get on! Bronwyn,"



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she called. "Can I have a pony?"

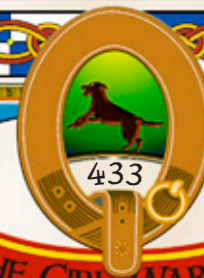
The Hero's Rest was a good-sized inn, with other guests. The party stabled the horses, unpacked, and then headed for the ale. They would once again have to share rooms, but that was always better than the bare ground. Bronwyn thought about her dwindling coin, and gave thanks that people were not demanding private quarters. She ordered Zevran to share with Sten, thinking if anyone could deal with the assassin, it was the Qunari.

The innkeeper here was a woman named Tansy, stout and grey-haired, with shrewd eyes, a gruff voice, and a ready smile. She welcomed the Wardens' party, admired Scout even to Bronwyn's satisfaction, and raised her brow at Zevran.

"Not the lot I saw you with before!"

"Ah," Zevran replied. "These people are just so much more fun!"

Tansy gave Bronwyn a raking once-over, and then nodded in approval. "You're the Girl Warden, aren't you? Heard about you. Been hoping to set eyes on you myself. I've served all the great names of Ferelden in my time: King Maric, Queen Rowan...young King Cailan was here not too long ago." She pointed to the portrait over the bar. Loghain Mac Tir glared at her over his drawn bow, much younger than the man she had seen at Ostagar. "He slept here the night after the Battle of River Dane!" She leaned toward Bronwyn, and growled confidentially, "If you like,



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you can sleep in the very same bed."

Bronwyn laughed, feeling herself flush. "And on the very same sheets?"

The innkeeper burst out laughing herself, and winked. "Well...I had to break down and wash 'em, after a while... but it's the same bed. Seems fitting, you being such friends with him and all."

Bronwyn blinked. Composing herself, she said, "Thank you. It's very...thoughtful of you."

The innkeeper lowered her voice even more. "You should know that that elf was here two nights ago with a gang of sell-swords, and I could tell they were up to no good!"

"I know," Bronwyn assured her. "We dealt with the problem. He's helping us now. I was hoping to hear some news."

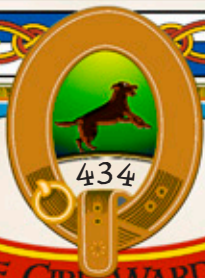
"Well!" And the woman was off, with a string of rumors that seemed endless.

They say that the Girl Warden is raising armies for the King... Sent him hundreds of mages, all primed to fight the darkspawn... Word out of Redcliffe is that it's overrun with monsters. Not darkspawn, mind you, but but dead people walking and attacking the living...

"Wait!" Bronwyn protested. "How do you know this? Who told you this?"

"I overheard a fellow not a week ago. Come through to go live with relatives. Says that Redcliffe's lost."

Bronwyn raked a hand through her hair, wondering if she had to do something about this, too. "Has anyone sent



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word to the King?"

"Oh, I reckon they did. The fellow said they did, anyway, but didn't think it'd make any difference, with the King and Teyrn Loghain busy with those darkspawn."

"All right then, What else have you heard?"

Word is that the dwarven king is dead, and that there's some sort of tussle going on over the succession...you know how those dwarves are!

Bronwyn groaned inwardly, wondering how this would affect her mission to Orzammar. With any luck, the new king would be enthroned and in a very celebratory mood by the time she arrived.

...and that Arl Howe is making trouble all through the north... Not enough he murdered the Couslands, but he's trying to take over Highever for good and all... his men were in the city, killing and looting... They burned the fields of freeholders who wouldn't swear allegiance to him... Some of them got their comeuppance though. They were marching along the coast between Amaranthine and Highever and somewhere they fell afoul of something — maybe darkspawn or maybe ghosts, but folk saw lights in the sky over the Coast Mountains, up at the Lost Peak, and none of those men have been seen since... The young Teyrn of Highever has sworn to kill Howe: scared him so he's hiding in his castle at Vigil's Keep, and only comes out at night... Maybe Arl Howe's possessed... or maybe controlled by blood mages!... That would explain a lot... and the old Teyrn of Highever's daughter became a Grey Warden...



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"Oh!" Tansy gasped, turning red. "That's you!"

Zevran had come up, and was listening in fascination.

Bronwyn nodded, with a lop-sided smile, glancing at the elf. "That's me. The Teyrn and Teyrna were my parents, and I am indeed a Grey Warden now. As soon as I finish my mission against the darkspawn, I'll deal with Arl Howe." She raised her brows at Zevran. "And I won't need to hire anyone to do it."

Zevran accepted this without demur, only saying, "But help is often useful, yes? Even when one is the Girl Warden and a great hero."

Bronwyn took a tankard from the embarrassed innkeeper. "Thank you. Yes, help may indeed be useful. The darkspawn are a threat to everyone, but Howe knows that I'll come for him in the end."

"You do that," the innkeeper said feelingly. "You show him what's what!"

There was an explosion of laughter from the end of the bar.

"No more putting it off! It's Leliana's turn now!" Alistair declared. "Time for the ritual humiliation!"

Zevran looked at Bronwyn. She explained, "We have a pact that each of us must tell a story, in the order that we joined our company."

The innkeeper perked up her ears at that, moving closer to the group by the fire.

Applause and hoots from some, from others more dignified approbation. Leliana smiled, coming forward.



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"Oh, I love stories!" she told them, flashing her beautiful smile. "I have had so much trouble deciding which to tell you! There is the story of Aveline, Knight of Orlais – the first woman to hold that title among the Orlesians – or I could speak of Alindra and her soldier, and how her tears became a river of stars – or I could tell the tale of Flemeth, the Witch of the Wilds –"

Morrigan looked over at Bronwyn, a very sour expression on her face.

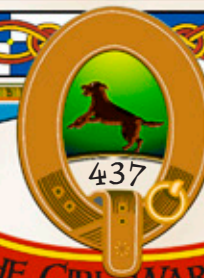
" – or I could tell you of our beloved Prophet Andraste, and how she became the Bride of the Maker –"

Bronwyn politely assumed an encouraging smile, cringing inwardly. She noticed a similarly forced expression on a number of faces, most notably the innkeeper's.

" – but I think there is another story I would rather tell tonight, because it has a combination of merriment and melancholy that speaks to my heart. I shall tell you of the Bard of Val Royeaux and the Flying Lute Case."

LELIANA'S STORY OF THE BARD OF VAL ROYEAUX AND THE FLYING LUTE CASE

There was once a clever bard in the city of Val Royeaux. She was beautiful and witty, with a voice like silk, and she could play any instrument in the world. She could uncover any secret and master any lock. She was skilled with bow and dagger, but also with fan and flirtation. She knew a thousand



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stories and a thousand songs, and had made a thousand friends and a thousand enemies.

At length she backed the wrong horse, as we say in Orlais, and fell from favor at Court. No one dared to engage her, for the Empress was angry with her. So she grew poor, and began to think it was time to find greener pastures.

Her bard master was angry with her, too, and disappointed that all her training should have been for nothing. When the bard wrote to her old friend for help, the bard master would not give her any coin to help her, but sent only the empty case of a bass lute.

The little note with it said, "You say you will soon no longer have a roof over your head. Sleep in this then, and trouble me no longer!"

The bard was very sad, and sadder still when she read the note. She looked at the case with a sigh, for soon she would indeed be put out of her rooms. She sat down in the case to see if it would fit her, when suddenly the room vanished, and she found herself flying through the air!

The case was a magic one, but no one in ages had unlocked its secrets. The bard was brave, and held tight, praying for the Maker's aid.

At length the flying case stopped, and then floated down onto the topmost tower of a castle in a faraway land. A prince lived in the tower, and he was delighted to meet the bard. His parents did not want him to meet common women, and had locked him away up here.

"It has been so dull," he mourned. "Do you perhaps know any stories?"

Well, of course the bard knew stories. She told the prince stories about his eyes: that they were lovely dark pools. She told him about his thick black hair: that it was like the crashing waves of the sea that swept all before them. She told him about his long, long eyelashes:



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that they were like the wings of a rare butterfly. She told him about the world outside the tower: about the birds and bees and the ducks and the drakes.

Yes, she told him all sorts of lovely tales. She was so clever that the Prince was convinced that his parents the King and Queen would approve of her, so he rang a little bell, and asked to be admitted to their presence for tea, and he and the bard went downstairs.

"They love stories, too," he said. "My mother likes serious stories with a moral at the end, and my father likes jolly ones, so he can laugh."

The King and Queen were impressed with the bard's cleverness in reaching the top of the tower, for it was very high.

"Perhaps you would be so good as to tell us a story," the Queen said, "but mind you, it must have a moral."

"But not too serious, I beg you!" cried the King. "I can't bear too much pomp and ceremony!"

The bard thought a minute, and then told her tale:

There was once a pile of kindling that was very proud of its noble heritage. Its family tree — that is to say — the big fir tree of which each piece of kindling was a tiny stick — had been a huge old tree in the forest. The kindling lay in a box in the kitchen, and went on and on to the iron pots about its youth.

"Yes, when we lived high on the green branch," the bits of kindling bragged, "we were really living high. Each morning and evening we had sunshine, and dew for tea, and the birds to tell us stories. We were very rich then, for other trees had their green clothes only in the spring and summer, but we were well-dressed all year 'round! But then came the Great Disaster: the woodcutters came, and the



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family was split up. That is why we, from a noble family as we are, come to be in a kitchen.'

"They went on and on about their importance, but suddenly the door opened, and it was the kitchen-maid. She took the kindling and straightaway made a fire in the hearth.

"The kindling said, 'How glorious we are! How our nobility shines forth!' And they boasted for several minutes, until they were utterly consumed and nothing more than ash. And that was the end of their pretensions."

The King and Queen were very pleased with the bard's tale, and decided they would like her to be part of their family.

"Our son has been so lonely. This is certain to settle him down, and we should enjoy hearing your stories, too!"

The bard was happy to marry the handsome prince, but remembered that all her possessions were back at her rooms in Val Royeaux. There were her silk dresses, and her satin shoes, and her lute, and her books, and her fine daggers, and she decided that she would fly back there one last time and pack.

She promised to return to the Prince before the day was out. He climbed up to the top of the tower with her, and said he would wait there until she came back.

So the bard sat in her big lute-case once more and was flown away. The wind whistled in her ears, and at last she came back to Val Royeaux. She rushed into her bedroom and began packing as fast as she could.

As she packed, the landlord came in, very angry, wanting his rent. The bard shouted at him from the bedroom, telling him she



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would pay him in just a moment. She folded her linen quickly, and quickly tossed her special mementos into a little casket, and turned to hurry away.

And there in her sitting room were the landlord and his son, and they had taken an axe to the big lute-case and were chopping it up for firewood!

"At least we will have something for our trouble!" the old man said spitefully.

The prince waited for the bard all day at the top of his tower, and for all I know he is waiting yet.

The Bard of Val Royeaux still wanders the world telling stories, they say, but they are not so merry as the one she told about the kindling.



A brief silence, and then talk and applause.

Tansy declared, "That was some fine story-telling. Well worth a round on the house!" More applause.

Sten nodded sagely. "A wise warning against putting too much value on material possessions."

Bronwyn blew out a breath. This from one who was desperate to find a sword, when he was currently using a weapon that was unquestionably superior. The lesson here, she thought, was that people did not always understand one another, or comprehend why a thing despised by them was precious to another.

Anders, surprisingly, agreed with Sten. "If I hadn't left things behind that I cared about, I never could have escaped from the Circle. I learned that from my mother. She told me



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about the rebellion in Gwaren. People wouldn't leave their houses or their shops until it was too late, and they were slaughtered. Or they'd try to sneak back and pack up later, and they were hanged for 'looting' their own houses!"

There was solemn agreement at this. Alistair, however, was grinning.

"I like the story-in-a-story, and how the bard made fun of snobbery. Made fun of it right in front of the King and Queen, too! People are always going on about their ancestry, but without money and land it's worth less than zero."

Bronwyn had her own and somewhat different viewpoint about the value of family, but she understood why Alistair might think his own ancestry not worth boasting of.

Tara smirked. "I liked it when the bard told the prince all those stories about how gorgeous he was. I'll have to try that."

"You may start with me, fair one," declared Zevran, hand on heart. Tara giggled.

Cullen glared at the assassin suspiciously. Bronwyn could hardly blame him. She had never met anyone who merited constant suspicious scrutiny more. And that was when he was simply sitting and listening to stories...

Morrigan was sitting back with an air of superior understanding. Clearly, she felt she had learned something about Leliana that the others had not, but Bronwyn thought the two of them had come to the same conclusion.

Supper was served: a good supper, with more talk and



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more laughter. Bronwyn was quiet, thinking over the news she had heard, and thinking, too, over Leliana's story.

Later, when Bronwyn was alone with Leliana in their comfortable room upstairs, she asked the question that had needed asking since Lothing. "You're a bard, aren't you?"

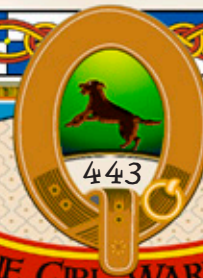
Leliana did not appear startled, but merely smiled ruefully. "Once I was. I left that behind me in Orlais, with my silk dresses and my beautiful shoes. I am a servant of the Maker now, and I have sworn myself to the Grey Wardens."

"Why did you leave Orlais?" Bronwyn probed. "You could have entered the Chantry there."

"Perhaps someday I shall tell you," Leliana said, one hand resting lightly on Bronwyn's brown hair. "Oh, look, what a tangle is here! Let me brush your hair, Bronwyn. You don't take proper care of it, and it is such pretty hair, too."

"If you must," Bronwyn sighed, secretly pleased not to have to deal with that awful mess herself. She glanced around the room. Sure enough, there was a carved wooden placard above the bed, telling of the distinguished visitor, with the name "Teyrn Loghain Mac Tir" in huge letters, and an arrow pointing down at the bed. She laughed at the sight. She leaned back as Leliana began brushing her hair, and asked, "And would you tell me about Aveline, please? I don't know that one."

"Well," Leliana paused, smiling at the prospect of telling another story, "A long time ago, a girl-child was born to a poor farmer... "



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CHAPTER 18



QUEENS AND KNAVES

OUR TEA, MAJESTY," ERLINA MURMURED.

Fragrantly steaming, the little tray was arranged on her desk exactly as the Queen liked. Before her was a dainty pot of Highever honeygrass tea, her special painted cup, and a silver dish with half a cucumber sandwich and two oatmeal cookies. In a slender, iridescent vase two white roses were arranged, proud and perfect.

Anora was a disciplined person, first and foremost. Unlike her disorganized and lovable King, she was an adult, and behaved so on all occasions. There was a time and place for everything: mornings for the careful grooming befitting a public figure, a brisk walk in the garden, a sensible breakfast, reports from her seneschal, her guard captain, and her major-domo; afternoons for the verbal combat of audiences and council meetings and the respite of a quiet cup of tea; evenings for correspondence and wholesome suppers, followed by some music or reading or a game of chess; a relaxing bath, her hair brushed a hundred strokes,



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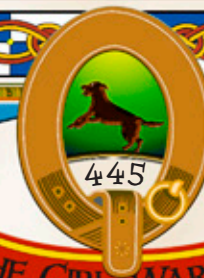
and then plenty of refreshing sleep. It would be so easy to grow slovenly and self-indulgent; sitting up all night in revelry and drinking and flattery. She was Anora Mac Tir Theirin, Queen-Consort of Ferelden, and did not need the opinions of others to judge herself fairly.

She was quite aware that Cailan found this regimen of hers a trifle — dull. He was such a boy, after all. And naturally, as a young man, he felt the need for more physical activity. Anora was quite willing to walk with him in the palace garden, but he walked so *very* fast, and was so easily distracted by everything from a new guard to a pair of butterflies, that it was difficult to achieve the proper rhythm for the exercise to really do one good.

The parts of her day that he found the duller were the ones she found the most essential: the cup of tea, partaken of in quiet, while she digested the latest news; and the long ritual of bath and hair-brushing and eight hours of sleep, without which she would be raving like a madwoman and tearing out huge clumps of the golden hair that Erlina brushed so assiduously.

She allowed herself a small sigh, glancing at the neat pile of correspondence. There was plenty of cause to tear her hair and rave.

That unspeakable ruffian, Rendon Howe, had set the north of Ferelden ablaze, murdering Bryce and Eleanor and their little grandson and their daughter-in-law. Anora hated the thought of Eleanor being dead. When Anora had

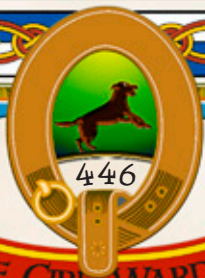


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first come to Denerim, so many years ago, it had seemed to her that the only real people there were her father, King Maric and Cailan, and Bryce and Eleanor Cousland. Otherwise the much-anticipated Court was a snake pit of petty spite and selfish maneuvering. Eleanor, especially, had been unfailingly kind to her, and had been able to converse with Anora about the things that mattered: about politics and foreign affairs; about poetry and history. She had fought as well as read, and had stories of her own about the Rebellion. And both her appearance and her manners were irreproachable, and would have been quite acceptable even at the Court of the Empress herself.

It was Eleanor who had helped her to accept that things are the way they are, and that most people were blind to anything but what they perceived as their own personal interest. Most of the time they were deceived even in that. The ability to rise above greedy short-sightedness was the hallmark of the truly great, like her father, and to a certain extent, like King Maric, she supposed. The Couslands, too, had had a touch of greatness, and put duty before all else. Fergus would be *teyrn* now, of course, which was as it should be. Anora quite liked Fergus Cousland. He was a genuinely nice man, and too devoted to his wife to remember that he was supposed to stupidly flirt with the Queen. It was very refreshing. How tragic for him to lose his little son...

It frustrated her beyond words that the forces she had at her disposal in Denerim were completely unequal to doing



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anything at all about Arl Howe. They could only guard the northern approaches to the city and keep watch lest the madman try to attack while the bulk of the nation's forces were in the south. Meanwhile, what intelligence she received indicated that Highever was in chaos, and that Amaranthine was being squeezed by the Arl's ruthless demands for money to prosecute his campaign to subdue the Couslands' rightful teyrnir.

If only Father would settle the darkspawn, and come home!

That was a foolish fantasy, and Anora sipped her tea, forcing herself to be calm. Cailan was convinced that this was a Blight, and even her father now seemed to believe it. Of course, that was only because *Bronwyn Cousland* said so.

As fond of Eleanor and Bryce as she had been, Anora was not sure what she thought of their daughter. She had not seen Bronwyn in years, and there had been horrid gossip about her: Habren Bryland had told her that Bronwyn had had a bastard by an elven servant, and had been sent to a remote farmhold to deliver the child, which was born with a harelip and six toes on each foot, and which was then shipped to distant cousins in the Free Marches. No one else seemed to believe that, and Habren was so very, very nasty that Anora acknowledged that she was capable of concocting that vicious lie all by herself.

The story that Anora *did* believe was that Bronwyn had been rustivating in the country because she was in love with someone unsuitable, and her parents wished to avoid a scandal.



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Was it Cailan she loved? That had been the most likely possibility, and it had bothered Anora a great deal. It had bothered her even more when that first dispatch came from Ostagar, consisting nearly entirely of Cailan's rhapsodizing over Bronwyn the Beauteous Battlemaiden.

For Bronwyn Cousland was now a Grey Warden, and Anora knew from experience that Cailan found the Grey Wardens very exciting. Cailan was such a boy.

However, Father himself had written of Bronwyn's brave deeds in the great battle against the darkspawn, and Father was not one to exaggerate heroic exploits, whether his own or anyone else's. He did not go on as Cailan did about her appearance, but rather wrote quite a bit about her fine mabari hound, who was named Scout and who evinced near-human intelligence. That Father actually knew the name of Bronwyn Cousland's dog seemed very significant to Anora.

A subsequent letter had piqued her interest further. Cailan waxed hilarious over the sight of Father flirting with the young Grey Warden! Anora found the idea markedly less amusing, but Cailan could not have invented every detail.

"There he was, Anora — I swear to you. He was whispering in her ear, and his fingers lingered on hers as he passed her a cup of wine. Bronwyn blushed very becomingly, and looked into his eyes with her soul shining in hers. It is perfectly clear that she fancies him: her warrior's heart beating in sympathy with the rugged older hero's. All very understandable, I suppose, though the sight of Loghain expressing the tender passion to a



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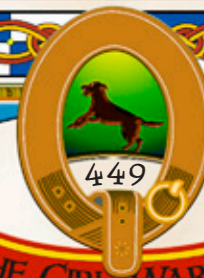
beautiful young woman was not one I had previously hoped to witness in this life or the next...

Allowances, large allowances must be made for Cailan's tendency to embroider the truth when he found it too dull. He was hopelessly fantasy-prone. Nonetheless, the sight of Father flirting with Lady Bronwyn had quenched Cailan's own desire for her quite entirely, for while he described her as beautiful and heroic and all that was admirable, Anora noticed that his descriptions were no longer those of a man personally enamored. Perhaps Father should try that technique more often.

Could Grey Wardens marry? It had occurred to her from time to time that a second marriage might be a very nice thing for Father, if only to absorb some of his boundless energy. Cailan did not seem to consider Lady Bronwyn marriageable, but Anora had heard that Orlesian Wardens did in fact sometimes marry. Duncan himself had referred to such a couple in her hearing once.

Duncan! Well, he was gone now, and Cailan remembered to be sad about it from time to time, but Father could hardly contain his satisfaction. Whether it was simply satisfaction to be rid of someone he had disliked so cordially, or satisfaction that Duncan had been replaced by the comely and amiable Bronwyn, Anora could not hazard a guess.

And she was a true Fereldan, which clearly pleased Father, as it would any sensible person, for that matter. People were already calling her "The Girl Warden," which



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was an perfectly ridiculous name, but just the sort of thing to capture the imagination of the common folk.

At any rate, Bronwyn had left the camp to track down Grey Warden allies for Ferelden, which was more than Duncan had ever undertaken. Anora liked that very much indeed. Whether Bronwyn succeeded in her quest or not, she was not in Ostagar flirting with Cailan or enticing Father into an undignified dalliance.

She did not like so well the news that Bronwyn was accompanied by the only other Warden in Ferelden: Alistair, Cailan's bastard half-brother. It was a niggling worry in the back of her mind. A Cousland and a Theirin – even a half-blood – made for a potent combination. Were Bronwyn not romantically involved with Father, it might even be alarming.

A knock at the door already, and she had not even finished her second cookie. Anora eyed it with a hint of regret. Erlina went to speak to the visitor, explaining that Her Majesty was involved in affairs of State and could not be disturbed.

"She'll see *me*, surely," the self-satisfied male voice declared. Anora forbore to make a face. Making faces, even when alone, was a bad and undisciplined habit. She found Bann Vaughan profoundly repugnant, but he was part of her world, and she must deal with him.

After she finished her cookie.

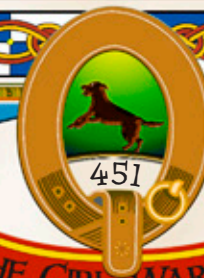
While munching, she mused on the complications of being Queen in the city of Denerim, which, while the capital of Ferelden, was not precisely the King's – or Queen's



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— city. It was the fiefdom of the Arls of Denerim. Anora could command the Palace and Fort Drakon, and to some extent the Great Gate. Everything else was under the direct jurisdiction of the Arl of Denerim, and in Urien's absence, of his son, the odious Vaughan. So it had been for hundreds of years, and so it would be, it appeared, for hundreds of years to come. It was a most unsatisfactory arrangement. In a well-ordered world, the King of Ferelden would also be the Arl of Denerim. Anora had amused herself once, planning out a very pretty and efficient city charter that eliminated the existence of the inconvenient Kendells family. It was tucked away in a drawer, along with her plan for a Fereldan university that Cailan had found so very amusing and that Father had grunted at dismissively.

The cookie was consumed, and she had no further excuse for delay, other than the fact that Vaughan really was odious. Anora knew more than she liked about him. Erlina hated him, and had told Anora how he leered at her, and touched her in 'accidental' ways. Vaughan's behavior in the Alienage was a scandal known to the entire city. The most recent story put about by the Arl's people was that an elven whore had attacked the bann and tried to rob him after a night of sport. Opposed to that was the tale, spread by a reputable priest of the Chantry, of young brides and their attendants abducted from their own wedding and brutalized. One of the brides had attempted to preserve her honor and had been killed. Her



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body had been strung up in front of the Arl's estate, naked and bloody, as a warning to — what? Anora's lips thinned. To other women not to resist Vaughan? It was cruel and unfair, but the elf had raised a weapon to the bann and he was legally within his rights to have her killed as he liked. There was no doubting he had the law on his side in that, and it was impossible for the elves to sue for satisfaction in the matter of the abductions and rapes. The bann had legal jurisdiction over the Alienage, and the cases would obviously never be heard. However, Anora herself was keenly aware of the difference that sometimes existed between the *legal* and the *right*.

The Alienage itself was a scandal, for that matter. Perhaps Alienages were a necessity, but it was hardly necessary for them to be so entirely squalid and disorganized. It was impossible for her to interfere directly, and Vaughan — and his father Urien — were deaf to her hints.

She would certainly not admit *Vaughan* to her private sanctum. If he wished to speak to her, he could do so next door in the Little Audience Chamber, with her guards out of earshot, but able to see her clearly.

The linen napkin was touched briefly to her lips, and she rose, drawing herself up straight. She glided through the door, head held high. Vaughan bowed, and gave her that horrid, slieazy smile he imagined charming. Anora noted with satisfaction that the well-deserved scar from jaw to ear was still luridly red.



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"Your Majesty," he simpered.

"Bann Vaughan. An unexpected pleasure..."

"Another caravan on its way, my lord," Captain Chase informed the arl. "Went past the Keep just now. Three wagons, and six-and-twenty elves. Wagon master told me that elves were coming from all over the country now, hoping to be hired on."

"Splendid," Rendon Howe told the man. "Accompany the wagons to Amaranthine, and send someone ahead to alert Caladrius."

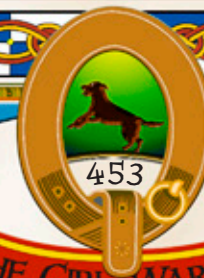
Just when he thought there was no more coin to be had, a brilliant idea had come to him.

Rendon Howe had been let down by some of his more recent brilliant ideas – the purging of the Couslands had not gone at all as he had planned – but this was a genuinely brilliant idea – an idea that no one who mattered would care about. He could take a resource of no value – something that Ferelden had entirely too much of, and which was worthless to the nation – and turn it into pure gold.

Pure gold Tevinter coins, to be exact.

If a few elves left to seek their fortunes and never returned home, who would be the wiser? If every elf in Ferelden vanished, who would care?

The idea had needed some tweaking. It had not come to him instantly. Amaranthine had no Alienage of its own, and the elven population was not large. Highever's Alienage



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however, was just as unruly as the rest of that contentious, desirable teyrnir. The elves, for some unfathomable reason, were very attached to the Couslands, and had rioted in the streets. A number had been hanged or otherwise colorfully executed to make Howe's ascendancy perfectly clear, but shortly after the fact, Howe had found himself approached by an – entrepreneur, he might call him. Yes, an entrepreneur of sorts, who explained that *dead* elves were worthless, but that *live* elves, while not exactly worth their weight in gold, could still have real value among men of good sense.

The deal was struck, the ships were loaded under cover of night, and Highever lost its excess population. Strong males and pretty females commanded the best prices, but even children were worth something. The story given out was that the elves were to be imprisoned in Amaranthine for their trouble-making. For the most part, not even the rebels themselves cared for the fate of the elves. It had been done all at once, too, so there were no survivors telling tales. Howe had learned his lesson about leaving survivors. The Alienage itself would be demolished, and a fine estate erected in its place. Highever Castle was hopelessly antiquated, and no one had yet managed to scrub out the bloodstains.

So the elves were sold, and that great, sudden infusion of gold brightened Howe's prospects immeasurably in the north. He had paid his men, kept their loyalty, and gained precious time.

For time was what he needed most: time to strengthen his



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position; time to subdue Highever; time to gain allies; time to correspond with Loghain, to make him understand the absolute necessity of what he had done; time for the Queen to calm down; and time for his assassins to do their work.

While he could not duplicate the feat of turning hundreds of elves into gold with a single transaction, he still had a steady income, due to his quiet arrangement with that greedy fool Bann Vaughan. Howe had sent a reliable agent to tell Vaughan about Amaranthine's desperate need for manual labor, and they had settled on a moderate sum, in exchange for which Vaughan would send teams of elven laborers up from the Denerim Alienage, up the Pilgrim's Path, to Amaranthine. Vaughan welcomed this opportunity to get the overcrowded population of the Alienage under control. The elves were driven directly to the docks; with some persuasion, they were loaded on to the ships, where they were promptly chained and caged; and then, after Howe received a bag of gold of appropriate size, they were taken away, over the horizon, and good riddance.

Really, when the people of Ferelden understood what he had been doing, they would probably erect a statue to him.

"Father!" Thomas Howe barged into his father's study, made bold by indignation and a little too much to drink too early in the day. "That bastard Chase forbade me the stables! Says I can't have a horse to go to Amaranthine!"

"Not today, Thomas," Howe said calmly. "This is not a good



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day for you to go. *Tomorrow* you may go to Amaranthine. Perhaps we should all go: you, I, and your sister as well. You can enjoy yourself with your friends, and Delilah can do a bit of shopping. I have some people to see. Yes, tomorrow will do very well."

"As long as I don't have to make up to that horse-faced Esmerelle," Thomas muttered.

"You will speak courteously of our loyal ally Bann Esmerelle. She is a personal friend of mine. I do not ask you to "make up to her," but to conduct yourself toward her as a nobleman does to a noblewoman. *'Make up to her?'* What a vulgar phrase."

Thomas studied his boots, cowed and unhappy.

His father walked over to the window and looked at the little wagon train disappearing into the northern horizon. "However, there will be a dinner, no doubt, that I require you to attend, and to attend in possession of all your faculties. Afterward, you may do as you like. There's no reason we need hurry home the following day."

Thomas had not left, but lingered, looking anxiously at his father's desk.

"You've had a letter from Nathaniel."

"I have."

"Is he all right?"

"He is." Thomas was looking at him like a child pleading for sweets. Howe hated that kind of sniveling, but he supposed the cause was not inappropriate. Brotherly



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affection, after all, was a useful tool in maintaining family alliances and standing strong against the enemies of the Howes. "He has learned all he believes he will learn there. If the situation here improves in the next month or two, I shall send for him. It is time."

"He'll find himself in a hornet's nest if he comes."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I am hardly beaten, Thomas."

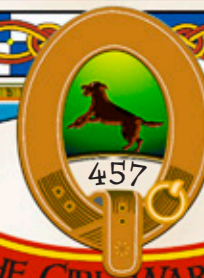
"The Couslands aren't exactly beaten either."

Howe laughed mirthlessly. "Perhaps not yet. 'We have scotched the snake, not killed it,' as the old story says. Never fear. The Couslands are doomed. Even if my hirelings fail, the evidence is on my side. Bryce and Eleanor were traitors, and sold themselves to the Orlesians a thousand times over. I suspected the worst when Bryce lingered there a little too long last year. When those documents came my way, I was not entirely surprised."

"What about Fergus' son? He was six years old. Was he a traitor, too?"

"The death of young wolves is never to be pitied," Howe declared loftily. "Once Loghain examines the documents, the Couslands and all their heirs will be attainted traitors. Fergus will be lucky to be exiled, rather than executed outright. He can scrounge for scraps at the Empress' table like the dog he is. The Couslands as a family are dead. They just haven't realized it yet."

"Bronwyn's a Grey Warden now, and I hear the King thinks a lot of her. Teyrn Loghain, too. Won the Battle of



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Ostagar for them, everyone says..."

"Yes, yes, how very nice. Bryce's little spitfire, still playing the man. No doubt Loghain finds all that rather stimulating. Quite understandable, and right up his alley, if the old rumors are true... It is even possible that the girl was ignorant of her parents' plans for her — which are now moot, due to the interference of that fool Duncan. At any rate, she will be exempt from the King's Justice, as the crime was committed prior to her recruitment. If she survives — which given her adventurous nature is rather unlikely — she will no doubt be allowed to slink off to the Anderfels when the darkspawn incursion is over and done."

"Father — " Greatly daring, Thomas burst out, "Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure? Or do you believe this because it fits in with your plans? Because Bronwyn said no? Could the papers be forged? What if it's an Orlesian plot to divide the nobility — ?"

"The evidence was damning," Howe said with satisfied certainty. "A disaffected bard picks up all sorts of odds and ends. I have seen the papers for myself. The Crown for Bryce, and marriage with an Imperial Prince for the daughter. Ferelden sold like an ox at the market. Once the woman finishes collecting the rest of the correspondence, I shall present it to Loghain, and I have no doubt he will know exactly what to do with it. I am happily certain that the Girl Warden's charms are not proof against threats to the security of Ferelden."

CHAPTER 19

IN THE HALLS OF THE DWARVEN KINGS



THE ONLY CHALLENGE THEY FACED
IN THE FOOTHILLS OF THE FROST-
BACK MOUNTAINS WAS THE LAND

ITSELF. In between the rocky outcrops, the soil was thin and poor, the grass thinner. The few fields were unsuited for any grains other than oats and barley. The people kept sheep and goats mostly, and a few cattle. The only horses were shaggy hill ponies. Luckily she had done her serious horse-trading down in the flats, and had laid hands on a smallish Frostback Traveler, and most fortunately, another mule.

Bronwyn felt a little guilty about the mule, knowing that the man had only given in and agreed to the sale out of fear of Bronwyn's well-armed party. They had gathered about, watching the haggling, hands on their swords. She had not actually threatened the man, but she knew that he had *felt* threatened.

While the land might be unprofitable for farming, no one could complain of the scenery. The Frostbacks, serene and snow-capped, grew closer every day. The sky was a delirious,

burning blue as they gained elevation. In such a landscape, it was possible to think of their lives as a great adventure.

Zevran was a decent rider, and got on well enough with his new mount. He did not seem to be able to stop talking, but that was a failing he shared with Leliana, Anders, and Tara. And Alistair, too, all too often.

They stayed at farmholds when they could, and camped when there were none nearby. Most farms had a barn large enough to bed down in, and straw was warmer and more comfortable to sleep on than the bare ground.

Bronwyn continued to write to Fergus, nearly every night, her bundle of parchment grower thicker and thicker. At times she thought about finding a bookbinder, and sending her epic letter to Fergus in codex format.

One night, Alistair came to sit by her as she wrote. There was whispering among the mages. Leliana and Zevran were trading witticisms, and Sten was polishing his armor. Scout came over to see what Bronwyn was up to, and if it involved food.

"So..." Alistair began, his brown eyes alight with mischief. "I think it's time you told me your real opinion of our companions!"

Bronwyn raised her brows, and set down her quill. "Time for the juicy gossip, I take it? Well, since you ask, I like and esteem all our wonderful companions equally!"

He poked her, grinning. "Always the diplomat! No, really, I want to know!"



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"Alistair, I don't think dishing the dirt on everyone is exactly —"

"Morrigan, for example," he went on, "You're always talking to her. Do you really *trust* her?"

As it happened, Bronwyn did not, entirely, but did not think it a good idea to voice that openly. "She's been very brave, Alistair, and she's stood beside us all the way from Ostagar. Have you ever seen her shirk a duty?"

"No, but that doesn't mean...Oh, all right, her mother is horrible, anyway. I know we can agree about that!"

"Flemeth? Yes." If there was anyone who Bronwyn *did* distrust, it was Flemeth.

"And what about Sten? The way he's so silent. Creepy."

"It's the custom of his country to speak only when he has something to say, Alistair."

"Is that a rebuke? Should my heart be broken because you are implying that I talk too much?"

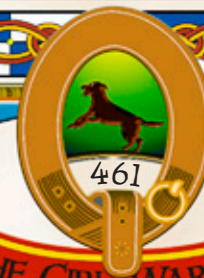
She laughed. "This is about them, I thought. Not about you."

"All right, then. Leliana. She's crazy, right? I mean, you don't believe she really had a vision from the Maker?"

"I think it's possible that she believes it. If she does, and it comforts her, what harm does it do?"

"You are no fun at all to gossip with, you know. Isn't there anybody you *don't* like?"

Bronwyn thought instantly of Rendon Howe, the murderer of her family, and decided not to mention him. Alistair was just having fun, and did not deserve



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to be slapped down by a reminder of her own disasters. She answered, "Among our companions? No, not really. Everyone is different, Alistair. I can't expect all the world to be like my home in Highever. People have their own way of looking at things, and their own dreams and goals. Sometimes they won't be the same as mine. As we travel farther, we're going to meet even stranger people, and we're going to have to find a way to deal with them. I don't think waving a Grey Warden treaty at them and demanding they do as we say is necessarily going to work."

His face fell. "I'm worried about Orzammar, too. I wish I knew more about it."

"So do I," she confessed. "It's going to be a different world."

"Anyway," he said, leaning closer, "back to our gossip session. Who is your absolute favorite of everyone in camp?"

"You really want to know?"

"Absolutely."

She told him, and laughed at the face he made as he stamped off to play chess with Cullen.

She returned to her letter:

...and I take a great deal of pleasure in observing my little company, seeing how alliances are being formed amongst them. Despite Morrigan's aloofness, the mages get on well together, each finding a niche within the party: Morrigan, the shape-changer, is our formidable scout; Anders is our healer, of course; and Tara the aggressive battle-mage, usually at the vanguard of the attack at my side.



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Alistair and Cullen get on very well together, their similar background and training creating a bond, despite Alistair's avowed dislike of his Templar days. Cullen also gets on surprisingly well with Sten, perhaps due to their use of a greatsword and the same fighting style.

Leliana and Zevran chat a great deal, though much of that is Zevran attempting to flatter and beguile her, as indeed he does all the companions, men as well as women. Leliana is full of lively talk about her youth in Orlais, when she was the ward of a wealthy noblewoman who left Ferelden in the wake of King Maric's victory. She has made no move to establish any outside contacts, which is somewhat reassuring. She is certainly a pleasant companion, and quite a good camp cook.

Alistair just had the impudence to ask me to name my favorite companion! I told him that it was Scout, of course! You should have seen his face...



The great monolithic statues were the first indication that they had reached their destination. The admirable stonework was alien in style, the figures mere impressions rather than lifelike representations. Perhaps they were meant to symbolize the strength of the dwarven people as a whole. They crossed a long stone bridge and before them was the Frostback Fair. Beyond the colorful tents and the tables of the traders loomed the Gates of Orzammar.



There were humans and dwarves, in a fairly even ratio.



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Some of the dwarves' faces were heavily tattooed. Bronwyn wished she knew more of dwarven culture, for she had no idea at all what the tattoos represented. Was it a sign of high status or maturity, as it was among the Dalish? Her father had visited Orzammar once, but had said nothing of the people being tattooed. She was becoming more and more aware that she would be entering an unknown world when she entered Orzammar. She wished she had a guide – or even a book to advise her.

Down the valley to the other side were a few log buildings. One thing she had heard about dwarves was that often, when a dwarf left Orzammar to live on the surface, he was not welcome again below. Apparently the buildings were lodgings for surfacers, warmer and more permanent than the tents of the fair.

Their horses were attracting a great deal of interest. There was something in the distance that looked like it might be a stable, and Bronwyn headed toward it, hoping to find a place to board the horses. They did find so, and the cost was startling.

"That's robbery!" Alistair nearly shouted, as they walked away.

"Stabling and feed for eleven beasts," Cullen sighed. "It was bound to be expensive."

"We have to pay them enough to keep them honest," Bronwyn said grimly, "and I think one or two of us should visit from time to time to make sure the horses haven't been traded away!"



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"I do not think that will happen," Sten said, surprisingly calm. "I made the proprietors aware that I would fold them in half backwards if anything untoward befell our mounts."

"That would probably hurt," Anders agreed, with a slow smile. "Can we have a look at the fair before we plunge into oblivion, Bronwyn?"

Bronwyn glanced at Alistair, who was looking at her with puppy-dog eyes. "Absolutely. It will do us all good. Besides, I have to look for a trader named Faryn..."

There was much to see. Bronwyn had not visited such an event for several years. There were many weapons-vendors, naturally, but other goods were for sale as well. From the growing delight in nearly every face, it was apparent that most of her companions had never been to a fair at all.

Tara grabbed Morrigan by the hand, and dragged her away, pointing. There was a table laden with pretty flasks—probably of scented oils—and small shining objects. Morrigan pretended to be above it all, but her eyes gleamed. Bronwyn already knew about Morrigan's penchant for jewelry.

Alistair and Cullen were looking at a display of figurines, talking. Bronwyn kept her face grave. Alistair was no doubt sharing his delight in... no, Bronwyn would never say the word... not "dolls." Certainly not. Alistair liked "action figures:" educational models of historical Thedosian warriors, for the most part.

"Look!" he was saying, "it's a Tevinter cataphract! You can make out the scales of his armor. You don't see that every day!"



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Zevran seemed to be examining the stalls of the leatherworkers—perhaps looking for something practical. Leliana was admiring a silk-dealer's wares.

No one troubled Bronwyn, for she was accompanied by a mabari warhound on one side, and a heavily-armed Qunari on the other. Nevertheless, she learned a great deal as she made the rounds of the vendors. Among other things, she found that the tattoos were hardly the mark of the elite. She had heard that dwarven society was highly stratified and that social mobility was nearly non-existent. One's place in life was determined entirely by one's birth. The tattoos were the mark of the casteless, those on the lowest, most hopeless rung of dwarven society. Those born casteless were doomed to remain there: unemployed, unemployable, and utterly despised. Sten growled his contempt for such foolishness. Bronwyn, accustomed to the privileges her birth gave her, saw the point of social classes, but among the humans of Ferelden, nothing was, so to speak, set in stone.

A common man, like Loghain Mac Tir, could rise to the ranks of the nobility by means of his courage and outstanding merit. The wastrel younger son of a noble might find himself stripped of privilege by base deeds. One could marry above or beneath oneself, and consequences would follow.

And the daughter of the greatest nobleman in all Ferelden might find herself a Grey Warden.

Really, compared, to the dwarves of Orzammar, social



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status in Ferelden was as fluid as oil over shifting ice. When Bronwyn took vengeance on Rendon Howe, it was likely that an ancient noble family would cease to be represented at the Landsmeet. Such were the whims of Fate. The dwarves behaved as if they had never heard of Fate.

There was talk of the contest for the throne. Most of the dwarves – men and women of the smith and merchant castes – seemed to support the young Prince Bhelen, who had the name of a reformer. Harrowmont, a friend of the late King, was clearly the choice of the traditionalists. Bronwyn simply did not know enough about Orzammar to hazard a guess as to which was better.

When they reached a boldly-striped tent that sold wood carvings, success was theirs at last.

"Faryn? Foxy little bloke that way. You can't use a candlestick, Warden? How about these napkin rings?"

They walked over to said Faryn. Bronwyn stood a good six inches taller, and Sten simply towered over him. The merchant began his pitch, but Bronwyn interrupted him.

"We're looking for a Qunari sword."

Faryn tried looking stupid. "A qun-qun-qunwazzit? Sorry, I don't know –"

"It's *mine*," Sten snarled. He could see the hilt, half-concealed by spear shafts.

"Oh – that? I had no idea it was stolen! I swear, by Andraste's dirty knickers! Here, I'll make you a deal..."

It could have been worse. Bronwyn made the trader



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throw in a little portrait miniature she saw Sten eyeing appreciatively, and the bargain was made. Sten clutched his own sword once more, and appeared to be actually smiling. At least it, Bronwyn hoped that expression was a smile.

"Yes! Completion." Sten admired the gigantic blade in quiet content. "I had almost forgotten the feel of it. You say you are a Grey Warden," he said. "but I think you must be an ashkaari, to find a lost sword in a country at war. I call it Asala, the soul. It is my soul, and I cannot offer thanks sufficient for its return."

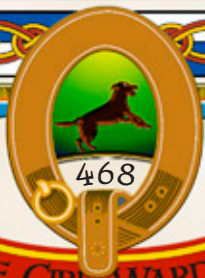
"It's a beautiful weapon," Bronwyn told him. "I am very glad to have found it." As they walked away, Bronwyn remarked, thinking about the miniature, "I did not know you were interested in the Fereldan Royal Family, Sten."

"I am not. I am interested in the art of the painter. This work was performed with skill and discipline. Observe the fine depiction of the eyes and the reflection of light on the jewels. Splendid craftsmanship. This is a picture of one of your rulers?"

"Yes. Moira, the Rebel Queen, the grandmother of the present King Cailan. She was noted for her courage and inspiring leadership."

"It is well. This will serve admirably as a keepsake of my travel to your land, and a sample of the skill of your artisans."

Everyone was glad to see that Sten had his sword back, but they were also very interested in the wares for sale, and the fact that Sten had got something new. That was a tricky business, for there were many things of wonder



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and delight to be had at the Frostback Fair, and the companions were short of cash.

"You can each choose something," Bronwyn said finally. "The price can be no more than fifty silver. One thing."

They all went mad. Sten declined, as he already had Asala and the fine portrait miniature, but the others enjoyed their fairing even more for having something to take away from it. Morrigan found a jeweled bangle, and Anders a gold earring, which he rather horrified everyone by putting through his ear on the spot. It was fortunate that he was a healer, and could stop the bleeding with a word. The effect was not bad. With the earring, Anders looked like a rather posh pirate-mage.

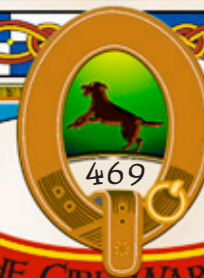
Alistair had a a little warrior carved of onyx, and Leliana a pretty silver amulet. Cullen liked a cleverly-made bootknife, and Tara was in ecstasy over a pair of combs studded with amber.

Zevran did not seem to want anything, instead saying, "If it is all the same to you, I would prefer to have the fifty silver. The Crows did not trust us with money."

Bronwyn paused, but then understood. Money was independence to Zevran. Money represented his new status as a free man.

"Fifty it is, then."

They had to decide what to do with Yusaris, since Sten no longer needed it, but it is indeed an ill-wind that blows nobody good. Sten might have set Yusaris aside for Asala,



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but Cullen was only too grateful to be gifted with the ancient blade. They sold Cullen's greatsword for a decent price, and added it to their treasury. Sten had regained his "soul," and Cullen now had a better weapon.

"This is superb!" he said, a shy smile on his lips. "I'll use it well, Bronwyn."

"I am sure you will," she said, glad to make someone else happy.

"But what did you get, Bronwyn?" Tara asked. "Didn't you get anything for yourself?"

"I really don't nee –"

"You have to get something," the elf insisted. "It's only fair! Aren't I right?" she demanded of the rest. There was some shuffling, and a general admission that Bronwyn, too, ought to have something from the fair.

Rather than make a scene about it, Bronwyn quickly found something suitable. One booth had journals and notebooks for sale – very nice ones – bound in buttery-soft leather. Bronwyn quickly picked out one with a green cover wrought with the image of a dragon in flight.

"A dragon!" Alistair complained. "Isn't that rather...ominous?"



No further delay was possible or appropriate. Orzammar must be faced. They marched up to the Gates. Bronwyn stated her business and, by way of a letter of introduction, presented her treaty.

"This treaty is with the King of Orzammar, Warden," the



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guard told her. "In the absence of one such, I advise you to find Steward Bandelor at the Assembly. He will know what to do."

Well, that was something. Or at least a starting point. It was enough to open the gates for them. They yawned wide, and the companions stepped forward, into the underground kingdom of the dwarves.

It was a new world: stone beneath their feet, stone forming the walls, heavy stone over their heads. Bronwyn took a deep breath, refusing to think about tons of stone crashing down upon her. Dwarves lived under the stone all their lives. Surely she could manage it for a day or two.

There was something to be said for wearing their Grey Waren tabards and helmets. The dwarven guards recognized them at once, and gave them respectful greetings. This was the Hall of Heroes, of which Bronwyn *had* heard. heated by streams of lava, lined by the statues of the dwarven Paragons: those remarkable individuals whose historic achievements caused them to be revered among the dwarves almost as gods.

Bronwyn looked about. The only other people here were dwarves. She wondered what it would be like to spend days — possibly weeks — among people so much shorter. She must be very careful about implying that anyone else was short. No doubt they regarded her as unnaturally tall!

Another set of heavy doors, and they were in Orzammar proper, and in the midst of the city's unrest.

A man was being mobbed up ahead. Two groups of men



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were snarling at each other like dogs, and one had gone too far. An axe swung wide and then up and down. Both sides hurried away, looking over their shoulders, but the side that had killed looked smug.

A heavily armed and armored dwarf came upon the scene almost as they did, and they learned he was a guard captain. "Stupid deshyrs," he snarled. "They'll never be happy until they've destroyed the city." He look at Bronwyn and her companion with no attempt to conceal his hostility. "This is not a time to admit strangers among us. No doubt you'll carry tales of the savagery of Orzammar to the surface."

"I know that there is a contest for the throne," Bronwyn told him quietly. "Those men were obviously of the warring factions."

The captain laughed grimly. "Those weren't just faction members. Those were the men themselves: Bhelen and Harrowmont. This time I'd say that Bhelen had the better of it."

"I may need to speak to those men," Bronwyn said. "Where can I find them?"

"For the most part they speak only through their seconds: Harrowmont's representative Dulin Forender is usually with his master at Harrowmont's house. Bhelen's man Vartag Gavorn tends to haunt the Assembly."

Bronwyn had no idea where to begin. "Is there a place where I can learn more about your city? Perhaps I should understand more of your ways."

"Yes, perhaps you *should*," the captain sneered. "Go to the Shaperate. Up through there to the Diamond Quarter. The



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Assembly, the Palace, the noble houses, the Shaperate are all up there. Take all the time you want, Warden. I don't see this mess being straightened out any time soon."

It would be rude to sneak about Orzammar without paying respect to its leaders. As the city was temporarily under the tenuous control of the Steward, Bronwyn decided they must go first to the Assembly. The setting was exotic, but the nasty quarrelling of the deshyrs was not that different than the mutual recriminations one always heard at the Landsmeet. The dwarves were, perhaps, a little more forthright in their death threats. The presence of the Grey Wardens was noted, and very shortly the Steward met with them outside the Assembly Chamber.

Stress lined Steward Bandelor's eyes. "This is a city in crisis," he told them candidly. "Blood runs in the streets, and so it shall be until the contest for the throne is resolved. Nonetheless, Wardens, we can make you welcome. Respect for your role is great. The Grey Warden hostel is at your disposal. I shall instruct a guard to direct you."

Bronwyn and Alistair exchanged quick, interested looks. *Grey Warden hostel?*

"Let's go there," Bronwyn whispered. "We'll get ourselves in order and have a meal, and then we'll find out where this Shaperate place is and figure out what to do."

It transpired, much to their pleasure, that the Grey Wardens had permanent lodgings in the Diamond Quarter. A fine house, attended to by members of the servant



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caste, with a sizable hall for gathering and dining, ten bedchambers, and two bathrooms. They were currently the only Grey Wardens in Orzammar, and the house, for the moment, was all theirs. It was the baths that excited Bronwyn the most, and she was not the only one.

"This is brilliant!" cried Tara. "What a use for runes! Look, Morrigan! Come on and look! All you do is touch it to get hot water!"

"I can heat water with magic, and so can you, you foolish child!"

"But now we don't have to heat water for everybody else!"

"Ah, now that is indeed something to celebrate."

They could bathe. They could be clean, and the servants would do their laundry. They could rest, and enjoy the simple fare provided. The hostel was a home-like place. Within these walls, Bronwyn could forget the tons of stone overheard, pressing down on her.

She pushed the unpleasantness of being enclosed by rock aside, and decided to chat with her companions instead.

"You called me an ashkaari, Sten," Bronwyn said, sitting down by him. "I do not understand the word."

Sten pushed his plate aside, and devoted himself to the conversation, steeping his enormous fingers. "An ashkaari is a seeker after truth – a philosopher, some might say – but that is insufficient. An ashkaari sees beyond the surface and moves ever toward the light of knowledge. To understand better, perhaps I should tell my story now, for an ashkaari appears in it."



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"That would be wonderful!"

In a few minutes, everyone was gathered at the table, and Sten began his tale:



STEN'S STORY OF THE FIVE WISE WORDS OF THE ASHKAARI

There was once a young soldier of the Qunari, who was declared ready to begin his service. He was ordered to report to the fortress of Qunab, and it came to pass that he met an ashkaari on his way: an enlightened seeker after knowledge. He conversed with this wise one, gaining much insight, and when the time came for them to part, the soldier requested some parting words of advice.

"You are a soldier," said the ashkaari, "and your path lies clearly before you. My words to you are few, but of great worth. If you can remember these five precepts, no evil can befall you."

The soldier listened with suitable respect to the ashkaari's five wise words.

"First," said the ashkaari, "always obey without question the commands of your superior officer; second, never speak rudely of anyone, for it is unnecessary; third, never lie to your commander; fourth, never attempt to change the condition in life to which you have been assigned by the Tamrassan; fifth, wherever you go, if you meet those who teach the way of the Qun, stay and listen, even if only for a few minutes, that you may be strengthened in the path of duty."

They parted, and after some days, the young soldier arrived at



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the fortress of Qunab. He was brave and skillful and willing, and the commander regarded him with satisfaction. They received orders to protect a trade caravan that would be traveling through the dry lands of Abbassir, and the young soldier was chosen to serve in the guard.

They traveled for several days, until they entered a country that was like a sea of sand, where the swirling dust floated in clouds, and men and beasts were half choked by it. They came at length, parched with thirst, to a village of elves, who regretted that they had insufficient water for the caravan.

However, the elves told them that to the north, only a few miles away, was a great well, which the Tenvinter lords had made hundreds of years before. It was immense and inexhaustible, covered in heavy stonework, with steps that spiraled down into the very bowels of the earth. They themselves did not go near it, for they believed it to be the habitation of demons, and none that went there ever returned.

"It is said," said the commander, turning to the young soldier, "that no one can be trusted until he has been tried. Go then, and scout for this well."

The young soldier well remembered the first counsel of the ashkaari: *Always obey without question the commands of your superior officer.*

He struck out for the north and in a short time came to a spot where great trees towered above the barren country, whilst under their shadow lay the dome of an ancient building. The soldier found the opening of the structure, and descended the winding alabaster stairs down into the darkness. All was silent, but for the echo of his



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boots. Still he went on, until at last he reached a wide pool of sweet water, and saw that the well was indeed as the elves had said.

Suddenly, something moved in the shadows, and he saw a mage standing not ten yards away. His staff was in his right hand, and in his left arm he clasped to himself a dreadful looking mass of bones.

"What thinkest thou, O Qunari," asked the mage, "of my fair and lovely wife?" And he looked lovingly on the bones.

Now it is written that this mage had had a very beautiful wife, but when she died, her husband, not being fortified by the Qun, had refused to believe in her death, and always carried her about long after she had decayed. The soldier of course did not know this, but there came to his mind the second wise saying of the ashkaari, *Never speak rudely*, so he replied:

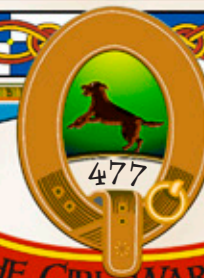
"Truly, I am sure you could find nowhere such another."

"Ah! What eyes thou hast!" cried the delighted mage. "I cannot tell thee how often I have slain those who insulted her by saying she was but dried bones. Thou art a fine fellow, and I shall grant thee a boon."

"The favor I would ask," said the soldier, "is that you leave off haunting this well, so that all may come and fetch water."

Perhaps the mage expected some more difficult request, for his face brightened, and he said he would depart at once. As the soldier returned south to his company, the mage strode away north, further into the desert, with the bones of his dead wife in his arms.

Great was the approval in the camp at the soldier's success. No one ever saw the mage again, and all in the caravan drank their fill. The elves of the village, too, offered thanks to the soldier, and listened with respect to the lessons of the Qun.



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The commander was much pleased with the soldier's conduct, and as time passed, gave him promotion, for the soldier was mindful of the third wise saying of the ashkaari: *Never lie to your commanding officer*.

Unfortunately, the magistrate of the district in which they were stationed was not a man of integrity: he sought to use his position for personal enrichment and power. He wished to lay hands on the funds of the fortress of Qunab, and to do this he needed to gain the compliance of the soldier, who was now entrusted with their protection. He was too cunning, of course, to tell the soldier all his wicked plans, but he sought to win the soldier's allegiance, and offered to remove him from the dangers and hardships of army service to a position of comfort and power as his First Secretary.

The soldier, however, would have none of this, remembering the fourth wise saying of the ashkaari: *Never attempt to change the condition in life to which you have been assigned by the Tamrassan*. Therefore, he respectfully declined the magistrate's offer, and told him he would live and die a soldier of the Qunari people.

The magistrate was enraged by his refusal, and resolved that the soldier must die.

He sent a message to the guard of a neighboring town, telling them that if someone were to come the next day to inquire when the new granary was to be finished, they should chop off his head and bury his body in secret. The magistrate then went to the commander of the fort, and requested the services of the soldier as courier.

The soldier rode to the neighboring town as ordered the next day, but as he passed the market, he saw that people had gathered



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around one who was reading from the Qun, and he recalled the ashkaari's fifth saying: *If you meet those who teach the way of the Qun, stay and listen, even if only for a few minutes.*

So the soldier dismounted, and sat down to listen. He did not mean to stay long, but the sage was very wise, and he became so deeply interested in the lesson that he sat, and sat, and sat, while the sun rose higher and higher.

Meanwhile, the wicked magistrate was waiting to hear of the soldier's execution, and being a greedy fool could not be patient. He rode to the neighboring town and approached the city guard, saying, "Now then, you men, why do you stand idling? Is it done yet?"

The guard, thinking from that question that he was the one they were bid to slay, dragged him from his horse. A sword flashed in the sun, and off flew the wicked magistrate's head. The body and head were immediately and thriftily disposed of by adding them to the foundation of the new granary.

The soldier, who had listened to the lessons of the Qun with great attention, realized that he had tarried too long. He went swiftly to the Master Builder of the town, obtained a detailed report of the progress of the granary, and returned to the fort to give this information to the magistrate.

But the magistrate did not come, and the soldier notified his commander of his absence. At length the magistrate's fate was revealed, and all found enlightening how his stupidity and greed had led to his own undoing.

The soldier continued to be the trusted subordinate of the commander. In time, he rose to become the commander himself,



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and he imparted to all his young recruits the five wise sayings of the ashkaari.



Approval and applause followed. Bronwyn was pleased, feeling that she had learned something useful about Sten and the Qunari. Alistair rather tactlessly said, "So, not all the Qunari are perfect, after all!"

"I am unaware," Sten replied, gritting his teeth, "that I ever made any such claim for the Qunari people. Better, yes. More efficient, yes. Only a fool would claim perfection."

"Indeed," Morrigan agreed. "I found the story most interesting."

Anders grinned at her. "A tale of discipline and ultimate success. What's not to like? Except for the creepy mage and the bones. Actually, I admit I liked that, too. Devoted mage husband and all that. Love beyond death." Morrigan rolled her eyes, but looked smug, all the same.

Leliana complimented the Qunari. "You are an excellent storyteller, Sten! Is this a common skill among the Qunari? Do you have bards of your own?"

"Naturally, we have those who entertain and teach and tell tales and perform music. Those who have those gifts are assigned those tasks. I was not trained in such, other than the training that comes with learning to give a clear military report. The two skills overlap somewhat, I suppose."

"Yes, I can see that." Bronwyn thought about it. "You really do tell a good story, Sten. Thank you."



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She excused herself early, and went to her quiet chamber, almost comfortable in the strange stone bed. The servant told her that the mattress was filled with dwarven hair, of all things. Bronwyn found that faintly disturbing, and mentally listed what she thought a mattress ought to be filled with: straw, feathers, wool. Those things, however, were not readily available to the dwarves. This was a mysterious land of stone and metal, and Bronwyn had better adapt herself to it, before seeking interviews tomorrow with the seconds of the warring lords of Orzammar.



STEN OF THE BERESAAD



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CHAPTER 20



HEARTS OF STONE

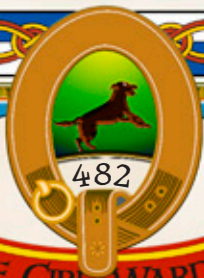
RONWYN AWOKE WITH A PLAN.

The scornful guard had been right: she was too ignorant of dwarven ways to act effectively. So to the Shaperate they went.

And after all, it was just a library. Well, that was not entirely true: it was the best run, best organized library she had ever seen, with none of the dotty carelessness of the Circle's cataloguing, or the idiosyncrasies and gaps of the Cousland collection. The elderly Shaper of Memories was cooperative, respectful, and willing to talk endlessly of history and customs. He had a large staff, all highly educated and well-trained.

She could not do all this herself, so everyone had an assignment. This morning they would read. They would all read, and they would all learn something about Orzammar and the dwarves. Not everyone was happy with the assignment.

"Oh, come on, Alistair! You like history. You told me so. Look," she said, tapping on the thick green volume she



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had given him. "TOGETHER AGAINST THE DARKSPAWN: THE GREY WARDENS IN ORZAMMAR. I thought that sounded like just the thing for you. Read as much as you can, especially the first and last chapters, where the writers always summarize things."

"I like history I *understand*. I don't know any of these places they're talking about, except for Orzammar."

"Anders," she called, noting with vexation that Tara and Anders were giggling over their reading like a pair of schoolchildren, "you've got the THE DWARVEN THAIGS over there. Help Alistair out."

It really was a problem, Bronwyn agreed, sighing over her book on the genealogy of the noble houses. It was not easy to understand many of the books, since the authors took for granted the reader's understanding of the underlying context. She would have to look at those maps of the thaigs herself. In fact, she needed a copy of them. The Shaper did not seem inclined to let the books walk away from the Shaperate. She needed to know who among her people might be best at copying drawing and maps.

Thank the Maker for Sten, who was studying his book on dwarven social customs with admirable diligence, the pages turning with relentless regularity. Morrigan looked a little bored, and perhaps reading about crafting with lyrium might not be particularly exciting, but the dwarves thought it was. Leliana was smiling over dwarven poetry.

Cullen was reading about the Legion of the Dead, a



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frown knitting his handsome face. Zevran rarely allowed himself to frown – probably concerned that it would make wrinkles – and he was serenely studying the dwarven economy, or at least the chapter titles and the charts. That would have to do. To truly understand the dwarves would take years. She had only a morning – or what she thought might be a morning – to spare.

Aldous had always deplored Bronwyn's ability to skim a book and gather sufficient information to answer questions in a glib, superficial way. "Tasting books" he called it, shaking his head. She was doing it now, but in the end she also would have to take some notes and then pick the Shaper's brains. She had vaguely remembered before she arrived in Orzammar that the dwarven King Endrin had three children, and that was all. Who was this Harrowmont, and by what right did he claim the throne?



The more morally upright of her companions were not satisfied with their current mission, and were asking questions.

"Because I don't want to publicly unsheathe my sword over dwarven politics!" Bronwyn answered wearily. They had met with the seconds of the claimants for the throne, and now they were reduced to running errands.

They were off to Tapster's Tavern at the behest (through his second) of Prince Bhelen, whom Bronwyn now knew was the third and only surviving child of King Endrin. Who, furthermore, was widely thought to have



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murdered his elder brother, and pinned the blame on his innocent and very popular sister. The sister had been exiled to the Deep Roads, unarmed and unarmored, and was now presumably dead. The King had purportedly named Harrowmont his successor, and further had made Harrowmont swear never to let his kinslaying youngest child succeed to the throne.

But this was all rumor and hearsay. Ultimately, Bhelen's possible guilt and Harrowmont's possible claim were not issues that should concern the Grey Wardens.

"That fellow Vartag is a sleazy piece of work," Alistair grumbled. "I hope Prince Bhelen isn't as oily as his second."

"He can be an animated oil jar for all I care, if he'll fulfill the terms of the treaty," Bronwyn shot back. "It is not our duty to determine the best possible king for the dwarves. They should have done that for themselves. It is our duty to determine the king most likely to support the Grey Wardens and the struggle against the Blight. Everything I hear about Bhelen indicates that he has a lively interest in surface matters, and everything I hear about Harrowmont indicates that he is a traditionalist who barely acknowledges the surface exists. Because he has the name of an honorable man, he will do his duty, but no more. And I will not engage in some ridiculous Honor Proving so I can be shown off like a Grey Warden trophy!"

"For all their talk about respect for the Grey Wardens," sneered Morrigan, "both parties are quite happy to demand



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you perform errands for them as proof of your good faith."

"Exactly," agreed Bronwyn, with a nod to Morrigan. "That is *exactly* how I see it. Therefore, I shall deliver these papers to Lord Helmi and Lady Dace, a task less conspicuously partisan than fighting in the arena."

She took only Alistair with her when the tavernkeeper, Corra, pointed out her first target. The rest of the companions were free to mingle in the tavern, find themselves some drinks, and generally become more acclimated to Orzammar.

Lord Helmi, in the midst of a radical political rant at the tavern, was affable enough to her. He apparently had views about the caste system, which while rather naively expressed (he actually seemed to think that surfacers were all "equal," whatever that meant), seemed less hidebound than the average deshyr. He accepted the documents at face value, and promised his support to Prince Bhelen.

Her companions had learned interesting things while she was occupied. Dwarven ale was nearly undrinkable, and the tavern was filled with a number of strange types. Cullen fell into an interesting conversation with a warrior who had known Duncan. He gestured Alistair over to talk at length with the dwarf. The title "Grey Warden" meant something in the place, though, alas, it did not mean "free drinks."

Bronwyn attracted a great deal of attention, or rather, Scout did. Dogs were virtually unknown in Orzammar, and animal life was largely limited to vermin like



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deepstalkers and giant spiders. The only domesticated animals she had heard of were creatures called "nugs."

Eventually, when they left the tavern and continued their exploration of Orzammar, they actually saw one. "Oh!" cried Leliana. "I've heard of those! They're a kind of subterranean bunny-pig. Aren't they adorable?"

Scout whined. Bronwyn caught her dog's rolling eye, and scratched his ears consolingly. She thought the half-blind, hairless creatures revolting, but there was no accounting for lack of taste.

She talked to every merchant who would talk about politics. Bhelen was definitely the choice of the lower castes: the smiths and the merchants above all. Those were the people who had the most to gain by increased contact with the surface. She had only met one noble, and she suspected he was not representative of his class as a whole.

Back in the Diamond Quarter, they found that Lady Dace was not so agreeable as Lord Helmi. On the contrary, she made plain her contempt for all surfacers. Only after seeing the documents did she show any interest in the conversation. Bhelen apparently had evidence that Harrowmont was cheating on some sort property agreement – or Bhelen had manufactured such evidence.

Bronwyn found she did not much care. Resenting with all her heart the labyrinthine politics of Orzammar, she simply presented the documents without comment.

And then an additional complication unfolded. Lady



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Dace could not make decisions for House Dace without the consent of her father, Lord Dace. Lord Dace was currently in the Deep Roads, leading an expedition to the Aeducan Thaig. Bronwyn ground her teeth in frustration.

Lady Dace was good enough to give them a pass to the Deep Roads, and a detailed map. The rest was up to the Wardens.

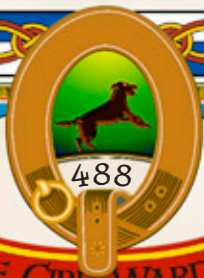


The Aeducan Thaig had once been a settlement belonging to House Aeducan, the family of the late King Endrin, and was the thaig closest to Orzammar. The Shaper repeatedly told her that a thaig was not a town or a city or a village. It was a thaig. There were always problems when communicating with a different culture. "Thaig" *did* seem to have some of the meanings of "colony" or "settlement." However, it was easier, safer, and less confusing just to use the word "thaig" herself.

The thaig had been abandoned for many years, one of the last lost to the darkspawn over the past millennium. From time to time the dwarves attempted to reclaim the lost thaigs, but only a great effort enabled them to seize the closer ones even temporarily.

"My readings," Sten said thoughtfully, "lead me to conclude that there are simply not enough dwarves."

The entrance to the Deep Roads spoke of dwarven power and ingenuity in the ancient days before the darkspawn. A magnificent highway stretched out before them: carved pilasters soaring up to the dim ceiling far overhead. It was



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majestic, it was like nothing Bronwyn had ever seen, and it came to a halt a few miles away, where the darkspawn had hewn side tunnels and blocked the way. From then on they moved back and forth between the fractured Roads proper and the network of tunnels, and they lived in a world of stale air and hard stone; of ambushes and traps. The constant presence of the darkspawn crawled like spiders over Bronwyn's consciousness.

"I'm getting better at sensing darkspawn, I think," Bronwyn told Alistair, "or maybe they leave traces wherever they go."

"That's certainly true," agreed Alistair, wrinkling his nose. "Everybody, be careful of that black stuff you see on the rocks. That has something to do with them, and it can poison you."

"Up ahead!" called Zevran, from his position on point. Bronwyn mentally blessed the Maker for giving elves their superb night vision. They broke into a run and heard the deep shouts of dwarves intermixed with horrible squeaks, all echoing off endless stone.

Thus, they did not meet the deepstalkers unprepared. The foul little creatures had attacked Lord Dace and his party. With the bodies of naked geese, and worm-like heads on their long necks, the deepstalkers were a nasty and persistent enemy, and the poisoned spit *hurt*. Once again, Bronwyn thanked the Maker for mages and their freezing spells.

"My thanks, strangers. You pulled me from a tight spot."

Lord Dace was not as arrogant as his daughter, or perhaps he was simply grateful for his life. Bronwyn



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showed him the documents, gathered that he was equally grateful to be apprised of Harrowmont's dishonesty, and together they returned to Orzammar.

The dwarf noble unbent somewhat on the way. He showed a certain respect for Bronwyn's status as a Grey Warden, and some of it seemed genuine. Bronwyn saw no reason not to tell him the reason she was here.

"You say the darkspawn have risen to the surface?" the noble asked, frowning. "But that only happens during a — " he paused, and said slowly, " — a Blight. I see. You are certain?"

"There is no question."

"This is grave news." The old man looked weary. "Mind you, I don't know if it will make any difference to most of the deshyrs. We are locked in the contest for the throne, and all eyes are on that."

"It sounds like the ideal time for the darkspawn to strike in force," Bronwyn agreed coolly. "Thrones mean nothing to them."

"Too true. For good or ill, we must resolve the succession, and soon." He nodded. "Very well. Bhelen will have the support of House Dace. May the Stone accept it."



Success brought them an invitation to the Palace, and an introduction to Prince Bhelen himself.

"I am impressed, Warden. Not many visitors to Orzammar grasp our rather...*convoluted* politics so quickly."

Bhelen was in fact *much* oilier than his second, but he was also vital, energetic, and driven. Bronwyn thought briefly of



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King Cailan, and wished her own king showed a tenth of this dwarf's burning ambition. And then thought again. If Cailan were anything like Bhelen, she would tremble for Ferelden.

He was not unappealing, too, despite the dwarven stature and a nose of truly prodigious size. And he agreed with Bronwyn on the main point.

"We both know that fighting the Blight is all that really matters. We must have absolute unity to face the fulcrum of true evil."

Bronwyn regarded him gravely. The phrase might be considered hyperbolic, but it was also completely true. She suspected that he thought his own elevation to monarch equally important. Nonetheless, if he believed that only he had the ability to recognize the danger facing them for what it was, then she could understand his will to power. As he pointed out very justly, the treaty only bound the *King* to assist the Grey Wardens. In the absence of such, she would be quite out of luck.

Her intervention had won him two more votes, but more was needed. Bronwyn listened to his further demands, willing herself not to sigh.

"Crime is rampant in the streets. How could anyone win the support of the Assembly if they permitted such chaos?"

There was a something called the Carta, which was a criminal organization based in Dust Town, the home of the casteless. Bhelen believed that the current gang leader was a woman named Jarvia. Bronwyn's mission was to hunt down this Jarvia and her Carta, and eliminate them.



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With that, he dismissed them.

"More errands," muttered Alistair.

"At least these errands involve fighting," said Sten.

"They involve fighting *dwarves*," Bronwyn frowned.

"When did we become the Orzammar City Guard? I'd go to Harrowmont, but I suspect he'd ask exactly the same of us."

"And so you'll have to unsheathe your sword over dwarven politics after all," Morrigan said dryly.

"So it would seem."

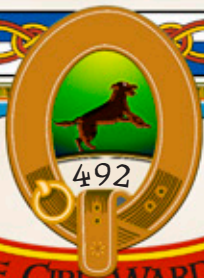
She strode to the Palace doors, head down in thought, and nearly trampled someone.

"Your pardon, lords," squeaked the young dwarf woman, scurrying out of their way. Bronwyn noted that she was pretty and well-dressed, and that she had the mark of the casteless tattooed on one cheek. That was...interesting.

Bhelen had a casteless mistress? She must be his, for no one else would dare bring a "brand" here. That certainly threw a new light on his politics. It was possible that his liberalizing attitude was not a mere pose.



What a thing it was to travel and to see the wonders of Thedas for herself, Bronwyn thought, grimacing at the irony of it. She descended into Dust Town, where the Carta had its base, and thought the Deep Roads might even be an improvement on this. The construction here was cruder, and its crumbling, unfinished nature reminded Bronwyn somehow of the Highever Alienage. In one way



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it was better, for the inhabitants never needed to worry about the weather, but in every other...

Tara faltered. "This is..."

"...horrible," agreed Anders.

"No one should have to live like this," Leliana said softly.

Morrigan sneered. "Why do the poor not rise up against their betters? This I have never understood."

Sten nodded. "I estimate that the dwarves waste a full sixth of their population. It is irrational, as the population is already small to begin with."

It was filthy, and it stank. It *reeked*, actually. The companions passed a sort of crude butcher shop, where the carcasses of gutted nugs were hung on display. The proprietor grinned at them with green and filthy teeth. The dwarves here were all tattooed across the face, and scuttled from shadow to shadow, dressed in filthy rags.

Until they leaped out and attempted robbery, poor fools.

So Bronwyn indeed drew her sword and killed them. Killed them dead in the dusty pathways, and no one said a word.

"I take it the City Guard doesn't come here much," Alistair remarked.

"Why would they?" Tara said bitterly. "Nobody cares what happens to these people."

There were beggars, of course, just as there were beggars everywhere. An older woman gladly gave Bronwyn directions to a Carta safe house for the price of a meal. Hungry eyes fastened on the woman as Bronwyn and her



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companions stepped away, and who knew how much of her money the old woman would be allowed to keep?

"Please," called a young woman in a soft voice. "Please... my son is sick. Can you spare a few coins?"

Bronwyn looked at her, and then looked again. "You're not one of the casteless," she said slowly. "What are you doing here?"

It was the same old story, with dwarven variations. Listening to it, Bronwyn learned more about dwarven inheritance customs than she might have from any book. Caste was inherited by gender, mother-to-daughter and father-to-son: the sex of a child determined its entire future.

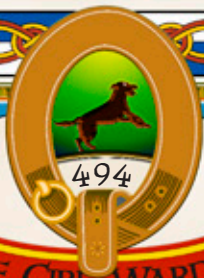
Zerlinda had fallen in love with a casteless man and had born him a son. He had hoped for a daughter, and indeed that was the entire reason for his pursuit of a young woman of the smith caste. A daughter would have inherited her mother's caste, and the father would have been permitted into the family. Instead, the unwanted son inherited his father's casteless status, and was useless. Zerlinda had not seen her lover since. Her parents had thrown her out, demanding that she abandon the child in the Deep Roads before she could be welcome at home.

It was a sad story indeed, and Bronwyn was so impatient with the lords and the deshyrs and the castes of Orzammar that she gave the young woman her real opinion and ten silver coins.

"Go to the surface and make a new life for your son there."



The secret lair of the Carta reminded Bronwyn irres-



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istibly of the Royal Palace: a twisting tunnel with stone chambers branching from it. There were bedchambers, and storage vaults, and offices. All of them were filled with warriors, and none of the warriors fled their duty. Here, in the depths of Orzammar, the casteless had made a kingdom of their own.

It even had a doorman.

"What's the password?" he demanded gruffly.

Anders burst out laughing. There were smirks and some rolling of eyes. Scout lowered his head and growled.

Bronwyn smiled faintly. "Get out of my way, or I'll kill you."

"But — that's not the passw — "

Their invasion was a slaughter. The casteless were good fighters, but not brilliant ones. The few mercenaries they had as support — some Qunari whom Sten held in contempt for abandoning their customs, some elven apostate mages — were cut down too. There were no escape routes built into the Carta's den. Once the Wardens pushed defenders into a stone chamber there was almost never a rear exit. The defenders stood and died. No one offered to surrender. Mercy was unknown in Dust Town.

Around another outcropping, they came to a kind of crossroads. On impulse, Bronwyn chose the door to the left.

"Cullen," she whispered. "You, Tara, and Sten stay here. Watch to see if anything comes out of there — " she pointed to the right-hand door " — to attack us."

Yes, the Carta hideout was much like a palace. It even



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had its own dungeon.

The stone chamber they next attacked was well-defended. A burly dwarf with a maul rushed them, flanked by some hard-eyed thugs. One flinched away from Bronwyn's sword flashing before his eyes, and stiffened as she plunged her dagger into his side. Within a few minutes, the guards were down, and the companions were studying the little prison with curiosity.

"Over here!" croaked a voice from the next room. Bronwyn made her way over there warily, and Zevran pushed to her side, sword at the ready.

There were cells. And prisoners. The Carta *jailed* its enemies?

One of the prisoners was male, a small, emaciated dwarf who pleaded, "Let us out! Just let us out! We've been here for a Stone's age!"

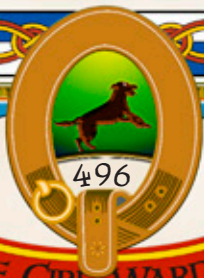
In the other cell was a woman, who stared at Bronwyn with burning eyes. "Yeah," she rasped. "Let us out. I got a score to settle with that bitch Jarvia."

"Actually," Alistair said pleasantly, "we're on our way to pay a call on your friend Jarvia ourselves."

"No friend of mine!" protested the scrawny female. She shoved past the unlocked door, all wound-up energy and focused hate. "I'm going to gut her, and dig out her eyes with a *spoon!*"

"Why a spoon?" wondered Alistair.

"*Because it'll hurt more!*" snarled the dwarf. "You got anything to eat?"



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Bronwyn, her eyes still on the woman, dug into one of her small pouches for the snack she always carried: some jerky, some hard and crunchy biscuits, a bit of cheese. They were snatched from her hand by the woman, almost faster than Bronwyn could see. The man scrambled over, trying to catch at the crumbs, but the woman kicked him aside, and shoved the food into her mouth, hardly chewing, grunting like an animal.

Alistair grimaced and felt in his own snack pouch. He pulled at the man by his bony shoulder.

"Over here," he muttered, and gave the poor soul what he had.

Within seconds, the food was consumed. The woman wiped her mouth with a grimy forearm, and considered Bronwyn.

"By the Stone! You're really... tall!"

She was a dwarf, of course, though not short for one of those. Her filthy hair stuck out from her head in a few short pigtails. It was impossible to guess at its real color, for she was dust-colored all over, all but her fierce black eyes. She stank worse than the rest of Dust Town put together, but that was understandable, given her captivity. Tara looked at her with wide-eyed pity, obviously remembering her own days in a cell.

Bronwyn thought this her best chance to find out more about the Carta.

"I am the Grey Warden Bronwyn. What is your name?"

The dwarf woman stared at her blankly, nonplussed that anyone would want to know her name, especially a rich surfacer with fancy armor. And a Grey Warden, too!



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After a moment, she replied cautiously.

"Brosca. I'm Freydis Brosca. People just call me Brosca. That's my friend Leske."

"Very well, Freydis Brosca. Tell me everything you know about Jarvia and this Carta."

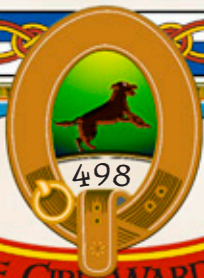
She knew a lot, having been a member in good standing before she became a member in such poor standing indeed that she was locked away to die. After she told Bronwyn everything useful, she and Leske began scrambling around the room, looting the dead men. Alistair made a face, but Bronwyn shook her head at him. The rest were sympathetic, and Leliana helpfully pointed out some dropped coins that Leske had missed.

"You're all right, Red! I mean... my lady," the dwarf mumbled, ducking his head as if expecting a blow.

"So anyhow," said Brosca, as if continuing a conversation begun long ago, "we go find Jarvia and kill her, and then we loot the place from end to end. I know a good fence here in Dust Town. Make a bundle." She peered up at Bronwyn. "What do you say to fifty-fifty?"

Bronwyn opened her mouth, but Brosca cut her off, "Yeah, I know. Leske and I get ten percent each then, all right? That's fair, isn't it?"

Bronwyn had actually been about to say that the dwarves could have it all, but then shut her mouth. Her funds were seriously depleted, and the Carta's storerooms were stuffed with valuable goods: mostly arms and armor,



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but some food and clothing and luxury items, too. Neither Bhelen nor Harrowmont had offered her any recompense for her trouble and danger. Father had always told her that wars were fought with coin as much as they were with blood and iron. They had already found quite a bit of coin here, but they could sell other things for even more.

"All right, ten percent each. Eighty percent to the Wardens. First we deal with Jarvia."

"I like the way you think, Boss," grinned Brosca, hefting a dagger in either hand.

At the next chamber, they burst in like a thunderbolt. The carta thugs were frozen and knocked down before they could breathe twice. Brosca gave a whoop and sat on one of them, holding a dagger to his throat. His eyes opened, and he grunted in surprise.

Brosca grinned back at Bronwyn. "Sorry, Boss, but I've got to talk to this one. Gotta find out about my sister. You know Rica, don't you, Folden? Where's Rica? Did Jarvia get her?"

The dwarf snorted a laugh, cut off suddenly when Brosca dug the point of her dagger into his neck.

"She's all right! Rica's all right!" he screamed. "I'll tell you about it! She bagged a noble! I swear! Bagged the biggest one of all! She's up in the Diamond Quarter, living like a noble herself. She had a boy, and she's made for life!"

Brosca's face stretched into an expression of incredulous joy. "You mean it? You're not lying? Rica made it out of here? What about my Ma?"



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"Lives with her! I swear! They're living in the Palace, they are! I swear! Too good for the likes of us now!"

Very interested, Bronwyn leaned over to ask, "Are you saying that her sister Rica is the mistress of Prince Bhelen, and that she has born him a child?"

"A boy!" shouted Brosca gleefully. "A boy! I have a nephew! I'm aunt to a prince!"

"Where is Jarvia now?" Bronwyn pressed.

"In her quarters, meeting with some of the boys," Folden gasped out. "I swear! She wanted to fix Rica, but she couldn't. That prince of hers sent for her as soon as he heard she had a nug under her apron, and she cleared out before Jarvia could get her."

"Thanks, Folden," Brosca said, very sincerely. "That's the best news I ever heard." With a quick slash, she cut the man's throat to the bone, and he died with a red, bubbling protest.

She got up and slapped herself across the chest. "Well, I feel great! I never have to worry about Rica ever again! Let's go kill Jarvia now. She's one tough bitch, but I'm tougher today!"

Bronwyn turned into the tunnel, "I take it you know where her quarters are?"

"Oh, yeah," Brosca said, falling into step beside Bronwyn, black eyes gleaming like a hard coal fire. "Oh, yeah."

Alistair and Cullen raised their brows. Sten merely looked interested.

The best fighters in Dust Town were in Jarvia's quarters, and she was the best of them all. She was very strong, very



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fast, and an imaginative fighter who knew every dirty trick and had invented some of her own. She was surprised to see Brosca and Leske, but unimpressed with her other visitors.

"Grey Wardens? Huh! Not very choosy about the company you keep, are you?"

"You screwed up, Jarvia," Brosca drawled. "The nobles didn't give a shit about what we do in Dust Town until you gave them a reason, you stupid nugsucker!"

"So the mighty nobles have decided they have to do something about me?" Jarvia sneered back. "It doesn't matter who's King in Orzammar, as long as they know who's the Queen!"

Acid splashed into Alistair's face, and he screamed, temporarily blinded. Brosca dove, and hit Jarvia at the knees, bringing her down. Bronwyn ducked under an axeman's furious swing, and stabbed him in the back of the neck during his follow-through, neatly severing his spine. Scout bowled an archer over, and shook him like rat.

Anders was casting healing on Alistair, while Morrigan and Tara sucked the life from the Carta thugs. Dwarves were resistant to magic, but they were not immune.

A blast of fire knock Cullen's feet from under him, and he fell heavily on his back, winded.

"Traps!" shouted Leliana. "The room is rigged with them!"

Sten roared, and his greatsword swept a vast arc of destruction in the wake of Tara's paralysis spell.

Jarvia kicked Brosca away and darted, blades out, straight at Leliana, who was disarming a tripwire. Zevran



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threw a dagger, and Jarvia shrieked, weapon dropping from her ruined hand.

Alistair smashed her down with his shield, and Brosca tackled her again. Around them was a hell of slaughter, as Jarvia's henchmen were cut down, one by one.

In a last, desperate ploy, Jarvia pulled a thin bodkin from her coiled hair and thrust it into Brosca's face. Brosca dodged, and the point pierced her ear, ripping it open. Brosca bellowed in rage, and drove her daggers into either side of Jarvia's throat. Sprays of crimson dyed her hands.

"Bitch! Fucking bitch!" screamed Brosca, stabbing at the dying Jarvia again and again. "Think you can lock up me and give me to your goons?"

Bronwyn eased her stiff neck and shoulders and walked over to watch the dwarf vent her fury on the dead Carta leader. Cursing, Brosca viciously stabbed at the dead, open eyes. Blood and matter squirted up. Scout sniffed at the interesting smell. Bronwyn grimaced and scratched his ears.

"Feel better?" she asked Brosca.

"Yeah. I do. So much for that bitch." Brosca began rummaging through Jarvia's armor for her possessions. "Fuck! I ruined her armor! Fuck, fuck fuck!"

Leske slid over and whispered, "Hey, Brosca! We're not supposed to talk like that in front of folks who aren't Dusters! You can get in trouble!"

This penetrated the bloodthirsty haze. "Sorry. I guess I got too excited. That was good armor. I shouldn't have



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gone crazy like that."

"What will you do now?' Alistair asked.

"Don't know. Think of something," Brosca mumbled. "Got to get the loot first."

Leske's eyes widened, "We could take over the Carta," he breathed.

"No good," said Brosca, shaking her head dolefully. "Carta's dead. We killed it. It'll take years to come back. Besides, I don't want to see this shithole ever again. Excuse me," she apologized to Bronwyn.

"If your sister is the King's mistress," Anders suggested, healing her torn ear, "maybe she could do something for you."

"That's true!" Leske said, full of excitement. "Member, Brosca? Beraht was gonna tell everybody he was Rica's brother and live in the Palace. You really are her sister, so you could live there. And maybe," he said, with pitiful hope, "you could put in a good word for me? Say I was a relative or something?"

"Right," Brosca snorted, trying to wipe her face, and smearing the blood instead. "Can you picture me in the Palace!" She finally got to her feet and said to Bronwyn, "But I need Rica to know I'm alive. If you've got an in there, could you get a message to her? Tell her I'm all right?" She shuffled, and said, "cos I could pay you and everything..."

Weird and brutal as this woman was, Bronwyn understood what it was to long for family. She said, "You can tell her yourself, but you'll probably want to get



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cleaned up first. Why don't you both come back to the Grey Warden hostel and have a bath?

Or two, she thought to herself.

"Really? You'd let me have a bath at your place? That's in the Diamond Quarter!"

"You're all right, Warden!" Leske said. "She's all right!" he told Brosca.

"Let's grab what we can and go to Alimar's Emporium," Brosca said, licking her chops at the thought of the stuff that was in this place. "We can't do it all in one go, but we can make a start. No more nug leather for me! I could get clothes of real cloth like a lady, and Rica wouldn't be ashamed of me!"

Their garments were so forlorn that Bronwyn allowed the two dwarfs to equip themselves out of the Carta's bounty: light armor, sound boots, strong studded gauntlets. Helmets even, and proper weapons. The two of them were still scrawny and hollow-eyed, but they no longer looked like dying beggars. Everyone in the party gathered up as much as they could. Even Scout carried an axe in his powerful jaws. Laden with loot, they followed Brosca and Leske out of the tunnels to Dust Town, and through the door of a very shady establishment.

"Hey Al!" Brosca grinned at the proprietor. "We just cacked Jarvia! All this stuff is from her place! Neat, huh?"

Their loot brought in nearly sixty sovereigns. With the coin they'd uncovered, their total take was over seventy. After the dwarves' commission, the Grey Wardens had



fifty-three gold, twenty-six silver, and a heavy bag of copper. They could count the copper back at the hostel. Bronwyn felt deep relief. They would be able to reequip and provision themselves for the return journey without stinting necessities. Some kegs of surface ale and dried fruit they would take back to the hostel now. And there was still plenty of loot left, back at the ravaged hideout...

"Eleven sovereigns!" Brosca exulted. "I'm as rich as a noble!" She grabbed up a dwarven woman's dress: a strange garment of cloth, leather, buckles and mail, and held it up to herself, dancing. "Thanks, Jarvia! Dying was the best thing you ever did!"

Leske gaped slack-jawed at his coins. "By the Stone, I never got more than two silvers for killing *anybody* before! This is great!"

"Warden, get those stinking Dusters out of here," growled the storekeeper, "and tell them to shut up about killing Jarvia!"



CHAPTER 21



CITIES OF THE DEAD

WARVEN PLUMBING WAS A MARVEL. It was quite impossible to present themselves at the Palace in their current condition,

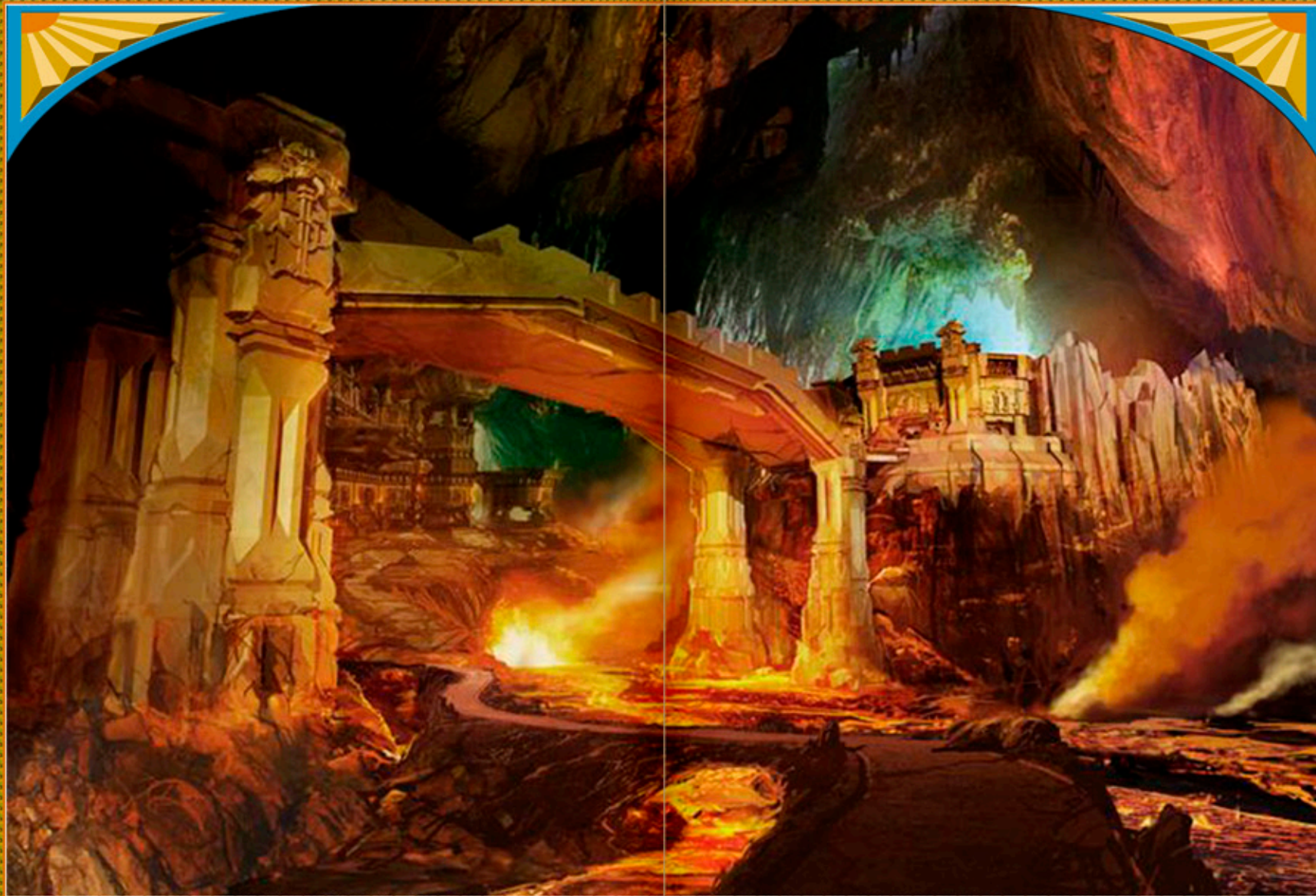
so Bronwyn led her party – along with their two new acquaintances – back to the Warden hostel. Rank had its privileges, and she had her bath first. That gave her time to have a welcome meal and think over her next moves, while the others ate and bathed and rested.

Admittedly, it did not sound like Brosca was resting. She was enjoying her bath entirely too much. She emerged, her freshly braided pigtails still wet, wearing the elaborate dwarven garment she had bought at the shop. It bunched at her shoulders and bulged at her waist, but she was clearly very, very proud of being so well-dressed.

"So we're going to the Palace, Boss?"

"We are. I see you are dressed for the occasion."

Bronwyn was not planning to take her entire retinue on this visit: Scout, of course, and just Anders and Sten. She and Alistair had decided between themselves that when



THE CITY OF ORZAMMAR



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they divided their little company, one of the Wardens must remain with each group in case of disaster.

The two dwarves were very impressed by Scout. With considerable bravado, Brosca swaggered up to make friends.

"So I hear you're a dog. Never met one before. You're from Ferelden, I guess. I'm Brosca, but you probably heard that already. I didn't catch your name."

Scout cocked his head, puzzled.

Bronwyn smiled, and said, "His name is Scout."

Now Brosca looked puzzled. "Yeah, I heard he was your scout, but what's his *name*?"

Bronwyn stared at her, nonplussed. Anders was convulsing with laughter, and Bronwyn shook her head at him.

Sten frowned, and said, "His name and function are identical. It is a logical system of nomenclature. My own rank and name are the same."

Scout barked, agreeing with Sten's sensible remark. Brosca asked, "Does he speak some sort of foreign language?"

Beginning to understand, Bronwyn said, "Scout doesn't speak language in the sense I think you mean. Dogs' throats really aren't designed for it. He understands everything you say, and he can communicate with barks when he needs to." Scout's means of communication were actually far more extensive than that, but Bronwyn was not quite ready to discuss the subtleties of communication between a mabari and his imprinted human.

Scout barked a proud assent. Leske said, "Yeah, 'member



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old Cut-Throat Karney? After Beraht stabbed him in the neck, he couldn't talk anymore, but you could understand his signs."

"Yeah, that's right," Brosca nodded. She said to Scout, "Didn't mean to be impolite, big guy."

They entered the palace without hindrance, and with only a few looks askance at the two casteless accompanying them. In fact, news of their approach had preceded them, for the timid and pretty dwarf woman Bronwyn had noticed before came rushing at them, arms out to hug her sister.

"Freydis! You're alive!"

"Yeah, the Grey Warden here busted me out of Jarvia's jail. Wow! Look at you, Rica! Is that really you under all those jewels?"

"It's me! Hello, Leske! I'm glad to see you!" She beamed up at Bronwyn, eyes shining with a hint of tears. "Thank you so much. You don't know what this means to me."

Bronwyn smiled kindly, surprised that the rowdy Brosca's sister should be so well-spoken. Obviously, she had received whatever education the family could afford. "I have a brother I once thought was killed in battle, so I think I do. Your sister and her friend were happy to hear that you were well and safe, too."

"Oh, thank you, thank you! Come on, Freydis, you have to see my little Endrin! Mother is here too, and I want to show you two where I'm living now!"

"Great!" Grinning, Brosca let herself be pulled along.



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Leske followed, calling over his shoulder, "Thanks, Warden!" Brosca yelled, "Yeah, thanks a lot! If I can, I'll do the same for you someday, if you get thrown in jail or somethin'..."

"You've simply outdone yourself, Warden," Bhelen purred. Oozing charm from every pore, he sprang his next demand. "The elimination of Jarvia won me great favor, but to truly displace Harrowmont, we'll need something... dramatic..."

Bhelen wanted the support of a Paragon. Bronwyn understood a little better now what a Paragon was, and what such a being meant to the dwarves. Dwarves didn't have religion, as topsiders understood it. If they worshiped anything, it was the memory of their ancestors, and chief among them were the Paragons, dwarves who had contributed meaningfully to dwarven society. And there was one living Paragon at the moment, the Paragon Branka.

Branka sounded like a very difficult person. Individuals of genius often were, of course. This Branka was born of the smith caste, and had invented something that impressed the dwarves, a smokeless forge, to be exact, and had thus been empowered to establish a House of her own. She had taken said House with her when she departed for the Deep Roads over two years before, on a hunt for some sort of lost dwarven treasure. Bronwyn's heart plummeted at the idea of a wild-goose chase far in the Deep Roads, following a two-year old trail.

"And what do you expect me to do if I find this Branka?"



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she asked, her face carefully blank.

"I was hoping you could use your legendary charm to persuade her to support the election of the rightful King," Bhelen suggested, his flattery smooth as a greased griddle. "If, however, her time in the Deep Roads has addled her wits, perhaps it would be best that she not return from the Deep Roads alive..."

He could provide her a map that would take her at least part of the way: a map to a place called Caridin's Cross, named after a great Paragon smith of old. The rest of the impossible task was pretty much up to her. And he let her know that Harrowmont was looking for Branka as well.

She stalked out of the palace, burning with fury, wishing she had never heard of Orzammar. It was made clear to her, too, that there was no changing sides at this point, when a gang of truculent dwarves attacked them outside the palace, shouting their support for "Lord Harrowmont!"

Bronwyn was too angry to try to reason with them. They met, sword to axe, and the dwarves were knocked off balance by Scout's powerful rush, and hampered by Anders' powerful magic. Between them, Bronwyn and Sten hewed the opposition down, and walked on.

And the battle had not cooled her anger, for now she would need another bath.

"We could be down there for weeks!" Alistair protested, horrified at the idea. "For months!"



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"For years, decades – even centuries. *Forever*, in fact," Bronwyn agreed bitterly. "I think we have to make at least a show of going. Maybe we can find some reliable evidence that she is dead. That would satisfy Bhelen, I think, for if he could not rely on her support, he could be certain that no one else could have it either." She slumped... gingerly... on the stone bench, and placed her elbows with care on the stone table. It did not due to be reckless in this hard land of stone.

"We'll need a lot of food – and at least *some* water."

They put it to the fellowship, and everyone had ideas of what needed to be done before they left on an expedition of such magnitude in the tunnels under the earth.

Alistair, Cullen, and Sten would go to the surface, check on the horses, and buy some foodstuffs to take with them. Morrigan, Anders, and Tara would copy maps and lore at the Shaperate. Bronwyn, Leliana, and Zevran would go about the city, visiting the various shops and taverns to listen for gossip: especially the least morsels of information they could discover about Branka.

"I think we should get every bit of loot we can out of that Carta hideout," Tara suggested. "If we don't, somebody else will. I think we should go down there right away and clear it all out first."

It was a sound plan, and they acted on it without delay. It was not just the loot, but the food and drink as well. There were little luxuries that would improve the Grey Warden hostel. Amidst a heap of treasure, Bronwyn had



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noted a lute. Leliana had her own, but it was something that could be left at the hostel, a source of recreation for some other Grey Warden.

Most of inhabitants of Dust Town gave them a wide berth, since word of the Carta Massacre had spread. A few harsh words were shouted, but Bronwyn's party was simply too numerous and powerful to defy. No one was thanking them for clearing out the gang, which probably meant that the casteless had probably been as proud of Jarvia as they were afraid of her.

They even discovered another entrance to the tunnels, and it came up inside one of the merchants they had visited earlier: the armorer Janar. He was horrified at their sudden appearance and their revelation that there was a hidden door in his shop, but he was willing enough to trade for their loot. Bronwyn made arrangements with him to use his shop in future to enter the hideout, and thus they no longer needed to go through Dust Town. In a few more visits, they would have cleared out everything of use or value. It was very agreeable to have Sten amongst them, as he was able to carry entire barrels of ale or flour.

In the confusion as they emerged into the Orzammar Market district, a young girl outside Janar's shop approached Tara. In the brightest, perkier voice possible she asked her, "Excuse me! Have you ever heard of a place called The Circle?"

Tara stared at her. A host of memories horrible, happy,



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tender, and heartbreaking assailed her. After a moment, she said, "I was trained at the Circle."

"That's wonderful!" A wave of enthusiasm threatened to drown Tara, as the the dwarf girl chattered on about her interest in magical theory and the readings she had already undertaken. "Oh, I'm Dagna, my lady. I so honored to meet a real mage of the Circle at last! I've written to the Circle, asking for permission to come and study there, but they've never answered."

"You *want* to go to the Circle," Tara managed, not quite sure she had heard correctly. She waved Anders over. He listened, bemused, and then shrugged.

"You can't *do* magic. Dwarves just can't. You know that, don't you?"

"I know, I know! But the theory is so fascinating!"

"You'd have to go live on the surface, and from what I've read, you couldn't come back to Orzammar," Tara added.

"I'd do anything to study at the Circle of Magi," Dagna said fervently. Her hands twisted anxiously, as if these two outcast mages had the power to make or unmake her life.

Anders looked at Tara. "Since she's not a mage, it's not like she'd be a prisoner. Why not? I tell you what, Dagna: if we survive the next few weeks, I'll write you a letter of introduction. Won't Irving be excited to hear from *me*?"

Cullen overheard, and snorted. "You'd do better if Warden Bronwyn wrote the letter," he told Dagna.

"Where's the fun in that?" Anders protested.



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Their preparations were nearly complete. There was nothing for it but to descend into the Deep Roads. Everything they had heard indicated that this was pointless nearly to suicide, but they still had a King to crown and a treaty to enforce. After selling all the loot, Bronwyn sent the appropriate share to the Palace for Brosca and Leske. Not too long after, the doorknocker to the hostel boomed.

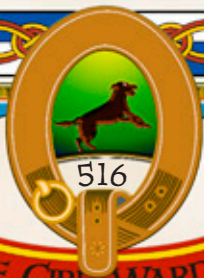
"That crazy dwarf is back," Alistair told Bronwyn, "and she wants to talk to you."

Brosca was at the door, shuffling and fidgeting: no longer in the elaborate dwarven gown but once more in her serviceable armor.

"Come in, Brosca," Bronwyn welcomed her. "I trust you found your nephew well? And your mother?" she added, remember Brosca's mention of "Ma."

"Yeah, yeah, they're great. Except Ma, of course. Not even living in a Palace with all the food she can eat could make *her* happy. Rotten old bag," she muttered. "Anyway, Rica's fine and the kid, too. They're all fixed up. Rica told everybody Leske was her long-lost brother, and so they found a corner for him to bed down in. He'll be all right."

Bronwyn waited, but the dwarf woman kept shuffling around the point. "Would you care for — " she was about to say "tea" and realized that Brosca probably would not know what that was. " — some ale?"



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"That'd be great!" The big common room was filled with interested onlookers, and she whispered to Bronwyn, "but can I talk to you private-like?"

"Certainly. Come over here," she gestured Brosca to a corner and looked at Leliana and Zevran until they moved.

Once they were gone, the dwarf asked, "Is it true that you and your gang are going down into the Deep Roads?"

"My companions and I are going, yes," Bronwyn said carefully, adding, "The Grey Wardens are not a *gang*."

Brosca looked confused, but said, "Whatever. I mean, gang, Wardens, companions – that's a fancy word. You're a noble. I get it. Anyway, you and your boys are all right. I'm in."

"You want to come along with us? I thought you were going to live with your sister at the Palace."

"I tried that. Now I think I'd better do something else. Leske may be happy finding a corner of the Palace to hide out in, but I'm too loud. I don't want to embarrass Rica or the kid, and that's all a brand like me could do. But if Rica could tell the kid that her sister was a Grey Warden, then that's something he could be proud of, right?"

Bronwyn had seen her fight, and did not want to turn away skilled help. For her own conscience's sake, though, she felt she had to say something.

"Becoming a Grey Warden is dangerous."

Brosca stared at her, not quite comprehending.

Bronwyn tried again. "You could be killed."

Brosca was still puzzled, but nodded, thinking it over. "I



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figure you got to die of something."

So be it. "Then welcome to the Grey Wardens."

The dwarf grinned enormously. "Thanks, Boss! I brought all my stuff along in case you said yes."



They agreed they would have a meal and a long sleep in actual beds before departing. Bronwyn wrote diligently in her beautiful leather-covered journal. She was recording all the companion's stories, and of course, adding to her continuing letter to Fergus.

We have quite the little army now. Ten of us two-legged creatures, and eleven with our mighty Scout. My dwarven recruit thought dogs could talk! She really and truly attempted to chat up Scout. It was very amusing, though she meant only to be polite.

There are a great many flirtations going on, here in the Warden hostel. Sometimes rather more than flirtation. I do not forbid or interfere in any of it. Indeed, I am only too glad that some of my companions are finding some measure of joy in our current situation. Leliana is such a sweet girl. I sometimes wish that she and Alistair could come to an understanding.

Unfortunately, Alistair seems to have eyes only for me. He is a very fine man, and a formidable warrior, but I feel nothing for him but friendship and sisterly affection.

Bronwyn paused over her writing, uncomfortable with the half-truths she was writing. Alistair was a very fine man indeed, and a handsome one, and had a sweet way

about him. Bronwyn's heart and faith belonged to another, but sometimes she was so lonely...

Cullen fancies Tara, I believe, but it is difficult to tell. He stammers and blushes when speaking to her, but so he does when he speaks to me, too, and I do not believe he is in love with me! I hope not, anyway, because that would be very unfortunate. For that matter he stammers and blushes near Morrigan and Leliana too. Not too much with Brosca, which is all to the good, since she would certainly laugh at him.

I think of you often, and of everyone at Ostagar. I hope the King is behaving himself, and I hope Teyrn Loghain is not too taxed by the incompetence of the rest of the world. I am trying very hard not to be incompetent myself, but it seems that whatever I do, there is something or someone hindering me, preventing me, throwing obstacles in my way like poisoned caltrops.

And there is more. My time at Orzammar has opened my eyes to the larger issues in our world. Our friend Morrigan was studying the lore that the dwarves have collected about the darkspawn, and in a book called THE STONE UNHELD, there are references to Blights as seen through the eyes of the dwarves. We surface folk do not appear very impressive in them. Here are some excerpts:

3:10 Towers – They name it a Blight, the third by their reckoning. It was just "the fight" to our ancestors, continued even though it shifts setting. The hordes that press their border surge and release, spilling across the

surface. They fortify and follow. It was not their way to let the enemy rest.

3:25 Towers – The surface kingdoms declare victory. The horde is crushed, the push halted, and celebrations begin as humans thank the skies and their Maker. Beneath their gaze and their feet, the darkspawn retreat to the steps of our thaigs. New front lines are drawn across old. They settle in to breed, the memories say, as happened twice before, and likely in the darkness before that.

5:12 Exalted – The surface declares the fourth blight, a number that means nothing to the Stone. In the depths, the events are inverted, our blight spanning the interim years. Seven generations of shifting lines and darkness. Our ancestors are the reason the surface kingdoms don't know a darkspawn by sight, why even their eldest have never heard an accounting first-hand. They believe the blights are defeated by a gathering of allies with singular focus. Eventually, they will be lost by attrition in the depths.

The spawn surges and releases. We fortify and follow, although doubts are raised.

7:0 Storm – The wars continue in the depths and the border thaigs are lost. Orzammar fortifies and holds, but the lost ground is not regained and remains dead space, where darkspawn multiply. It was a surge, but the surface was not breached, there was no great archdemon



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BEHIND THEM. NO BLIGHT WAS DECLARED, NO RALLYING CRY WAS GIVEN. THE WARDENS SLUMBERED.

AFTER CENTURIES OF CONSTANT SKIRMISHES, A TREND BECOMES CLEAR. THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE, UNACKNOWLEDGED FOR CENTURIES, WEAKENS.

9:13 DRAGON – THE BLIGHT IS BUILDING, THOUGH IT IS YEARS FROM BEING NAMED BY THE SURFACE. BUT THE MEMORIES KNOW THE SIGNS. THE LEGION HAS LOST BOWNAMMAR, THOUGH IN TRUTH, IT WAS LOST TO THE LIVING LONG AGO. THE SPAWN ARE MOVING FREELY AND HAVE NUMBERS EVEN THE MEMORIES HAVEN'T SEEN. THEY WILL SURGE, RELEASE. WE WILL FORTIFY AND FOLLOW. THAT IS THE WAY, AND WILL ALWAYS BE SO. UNTIL WE FALL, AND THE SURFACE WONDERS WHAT HAS CHANGED.

How cowardly and feeble our efforts – and in this I include those of the Wardens – sound in this context. In this thirtieth year of the Dragon Age, are we to do the least amount possible or are we to honor our obligations to the fullest? I wish I knew more of the Grey Warden strategy against the darkspawn. I wish I knew that there was a Grey Warden strategy against them. It all sounds like a patched-up business, quickly forgotten when the darkspawn no longer threaten the surface.

It is apparent to me that the dwarves are fighting a losing battle, and have been for a number of centuries. Slowly and inexorably, they have been pushed out of the thaigs until only Orzammar and distant, disaffected Kal-Sharok remain. It is a defeat: a defeat so slow and incremental that most the dwarves themselves are not fully conscious of it. I fear it will end in



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annihilation, and then, without the dwarves to hold them, very likely the darkspawn will spill out onto the surface, unhindered and unabated. Why do we not

"All right, all right!" Anders shouted back. Bronwyn glanced up, distracted from her writing. It was not a quarrel, she was glad to see, but a friendly dispute.

"But perhaps your eloquence is unequal to the task," Morrigan said archly.

Tara shook her head. "That would be a sorry thing to contemplate."

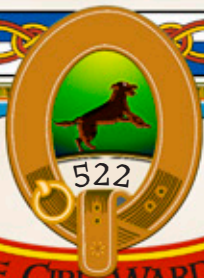
"And it is your duty," Sten pointed out. "Our commander wishes to hear these stories in order to comprehend our characters."

"Are we going to have a story?" Bronwyn asked, pleased at the thought of some distraction.

"A story!" Brosca said, looking excited. "A real surfer story? What do you people tell stories about?"

"About the world and everything in it, my little friend," Zevran assured her. She laughed and slapped him on the shoulder, rather heavily. Zevran caught Bronwyn's eye and winked.

"Very well," Anders conceded, with mock despair. "Everyone grab a drink, put your feet up, and don't stand on ceremony with me. We shall commemorate our departure to the nether regions with a bit of entertainment, provided by me! Yes, Tara, I go first, because I am senior to you by a quarter-hour, and you will just have to show some respect.



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So, Bronwyn, what would you like to hear a story about?"

Instantly, she answered, "Something that has nothing to do with being underground."

"Something with fighting in it," Alistair suggested. "Oh, that's right, you're a *mage*..."

"Excuse me," Anders replied haughtily, "remind me not to save your unmagical arse anymore. Or heal it, either."

"Now, now, children..." Bronwyn rebuked them mildly.

"Something with romance and adventure," Leliana said dreamily.

"Romance and adventure are good," Tara agreed. "Well, they are," she told a skeptical Brosca.

"If you say so. Romance usually means gold exchanging hands, and adventure usually means somebody getting knifed. I guess that's all right."

Zevran burst out laughing. "I could not have put it better myself!"

"Can we get on with it?" Sten asked, though clenched teeth.

"We can," Anders assured him. "I have a fabulous story. It's about mages," he said, with a mocking bow to Alistair and Cullen, "so brace yourselves for something very shocking. It's about free, adventurous, romantic mages. And they fight, so I believe it has something for just about everyone..."



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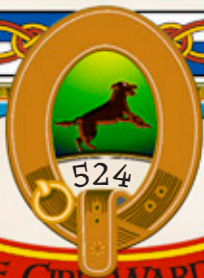
ANDERS' STORY OF THE ARCHMAGI VIRGILIUS AND FLAVIA

Long ago, in the great days of the Tevinter Empire, there was born to a Tevinter knight and his lady a little boy named Virgilius. He learned to read when he was only three years old, and by the time he was seven, he was already famous for learning. Many stories are told about the youth of Virgilius: how he defeated a demon, how he found the fabled Black Book of Enchantment, how he escaped the boredom of country life by studying with the greatest magisters of the Empire.

His only rival was the brilliant and beautiful Flavia, niece of the Chief Archon. She, too, was a prodigy, and was mistress not only of magic, but of all the logical and rhetorical arts. When Virgilius came to Minrathous, there was endless trouble and confusion, for the two of them were at odds, playing tricks and performing enchantments and illusions of every kind, wishing to prove themselves the better mage.

At length, the Chief Archon, to quiet the chaos their magical rivalry had unleashed, proposed a contest. Whoever could devise the best means to avert danger and promote peace would be declared Archmagus of Tevinter, and Protector of the Empire. Virgilius and Flavia withdrew to their libraries, to ponder the matter.

At length they emerged, ready to challenge the other with their creations. The people of Minrathous gathered in a great multitude to see what feats of magic would be performed, and high above on their marble dais, the archons prepared



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themselves to judge the contest.

Flavia clapped her hands, and cried out in her sweet voice. At once the multitude screamed and drew back, for seven huge dogs of solid bronze leaped forth, eyes rolling, and they rushed about the city, catching thieves and rioters, shaking the malefactors in mighty jaws. The criminals tried to climb up steps and hide, but the dogs could sniff out wickedness and always catch them. In less than an hour, the city was at perfect peace, and the citizens eyed one another in fear and wonder, resolving never to do anything to attract the attention of Flavia's Hounds.

Virgilius bowed, and then, with great ceremony, pulled away a sheet and revealed a display of statues: the gods of all the neighboring nations and of the subject peoples of the Empire. In the middle was a great statue of the God Dumat, the mightiest of all dragonkind, as a symbol of Tevinter power. The other gods, it was noted, each held a bell in one hand. The bell in the hand of the God of the Rivainni rang, and Virgilius explained that when any nation wished harm to Tevinter, that god's bell would ring. They knew that the Rivainni were rebellious, as the archons had sent troops there to subdue the people. However, the beauty of Virgilius' statues was that they would ring their bell if the people even so much as thought of violence, and thus troops could be sent more quickly.

The archons conferred, and the Chief Archon pronounced that they could not judge one feat greater than another: Flavia's Hounds would protect the people of Minrathous from criminals, and Virgilius' Statues would protect them from invasion and rebellion. Both were vital for the stability of the Empire.



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"Therefore," pronounced the Chief Archon, "We name Virgilius and Flavia equally to the title of Archmagus, and thank them for their contributions to the might of Tevinter!"

Flavia and Virgilius glared at each other, furious, for the Archon's judgement resolved nothing between them at all. Flavia transformed into a hawk, and swooped up to peck at Virgilius' eyes. He fought back, transforming into a great raven. The birds darted and soared above Minrathous, attacking with beak and claw, flying so high as to be lost in the sun, and then diving down, scattering the people in confusion. For hours they fought and flew until Flavia alighted on the Great Tower of Zazikel, and transformed back into a beautiful human woman. Virgilius transformed, too, and they stared at each other, blood surging in wrath and pride.

"To fight each other profits nothing," said Flavia softly. "Think of what the two of us could achieve if we joined together!"

Virgilius agreed with all his heart, and swept Flavia up in his arms, kissing her passionately. Hardly had his lips touched hers when she slapped magic-suppressing charms upon him, rendering him helpless. Quickly she conjured a rope and tied it round and round his body, and then tied the end to the stones of the Tower. Heedless of his shouts and protests, she pushed him off, and Virgilius hung there in sight of all the people, speechless with humiliation.

"Let all see who is the real Archmagus of Tevinter!" cried Flavia. She leaped from the tower, arms outstretched, transforming into a hawk in midair. With another triumphant cry, she sped away, back to her own palace. Not for some time could the servants of the archons rescue Virgilius and remove the charms

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that bound his magic.

Virgilius swore revenge of Flavia for this trick, and the very next morning every fire in Minrathous went out, nor could any mage light a fire by magic. The archons, guessing that this was the work of Virgilius, begged him to break the spell. Then Virgilius ordered a scaffold to be erected in the market-place, and for Flavia to be brought, clothed in white. He bade everyone to take fire from her, for to her horror and embarrassment, flames blossomed from between her legs. The citizens brought torches, and straw and tinder, and fires were kindled in Minrathous again. For an entire day she was forced to stand there, her skirt up to her hips, exposed to every eye in Minrathous. Virgilius felt he had won the war.

But the Chief Archon was furious, for Flavia was his kinswoman. He sent his mages and knights to take Virgilius, and they locked him in a tower to await execution. The day was hot and Virgilius asked for some water. A pail was brought, and Virgilius cried, "All hail the Archons! No one can hold me captive!" With that, he jumped headlong into the pail, and vanished from their sight.

He was gone from the city for some time, and events moved on. One day, word came to the Archons that some sailors had discovered the Tree of Life in a land far to the east, across the great Amaranthine Ocean. It was clear, even from studying the leaves retrieved by the sailors that this tree had astonishing powers. Naturally, the archons wished to obtain it, or failing that, to obtain a living specimen: a cutting, or a seed, in order to examine it. As Archmagus of Tevinter, the duty fell to Flavia, and she devised a wonderful ship that could sail without wind to propel it. The ship

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was long and narrow, with room for an entire tree. Eyes were painted on the prow with lyrium, so that the ship could see dangers ahead in the water. Flavia stepped aboard the ship and it slipped away from the harbor of Minrathous, and was soon lost to sight.

But Virgilius had heard of the Tree of Life as well, and he thought that finding it for the archons would be the perfect way to win back their favor. He too, devised a ship, stole a copy of the map they had given Flavia, and traveled east, along the path of the rising sun.

The Tree of Life was near the shore, and it was enormous: many branched and glowing with power. Its trunk was as thick as the hindleg of the God Dumat. Scattered about were a quantity of golden nuts, which themselves had great powers. And there Virgilius and Flavia met once more.

Flavia was greatly shocked to see her rival, but before the two of them could begin to quarrel, they found themselves in terrible danger. The sailors had seen the tree in summer, and had arrived and departed unnoticed by the inhabitants of the land. Flavia and Virgilius arrived in the autumn, when the boughs of the Tree were heavy with nuts. Those inhabitants arrived on the scene. Hearing a shout of rage, the two mages saw an immense host of fierce savages, enraged at the sight of Virgilius holding one of the precious nuts.

Suddenly nets were cast down from the trees branches, surprising the two mages. They could stir neither hand nor foot, for the nets were soaked in a potion that made them sleepy and unable to gather their strength. Their staffs were taken from them, and they were carried to the native village and were shouted at and cursed, for the people of that place hated all strangers. More and



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more people poured into the village: a host too great for two mages to overcome, even with the most powerful blood magic. Dark days passed, in which Flavia and Virgilius were imprisoned in a filthy hut, thinking that this might indeed be the end.

At length, they were carried to the place of execution. There they were cut loose in order to lay them more easily on the great blood-stained stones where the savages cut out the hearts of their enemies. This was the chance they had needed, for luckily the savages did not know with whom they were dealing.

"Flavia! Fly!" cried Virgilius, himself transforming in a bird. The people of that place had never seen such magic, and in that moment of surprise, the mages made their escape. They flew swiftly away, and the savages pursued them with bolts of raw magic of their own, and with a host of spears and a cloud of arrows. The mages' first thought was to find their ships and sail away, but when they reached the shore, they found, to their horror, that the savages had found them first and had burned them both to the waterline. The savages pressed their attack, and Flavia and Virgilius flew west, out to sea, only wanting to be far from that terrible land.

A long time they flew, days and nights together, but they were weary with magic and with hunger. They were faltering, no longer able to sustain their shapes. For a moment, Virgilius turned into a man, and the nut he had gathered dropped from his garments. No sooner had it touched the water, than it sprouted into a great tree, and earth rose around it, making a fair island in the midst of the ocean. Flavia and Virgilius dropped down to it, overjoyed to be saved. They rested, and made peace with one another, and found



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the new land so beautiful that they had no desire to leave it and return to the endless strife and politics of Tevinter. Together they worked wonders, creating a palace of matchless beauty on that island, which they named Aureliana, the Golden. And there they remained, happily together; and there it is said, they remain to this day, welcoming any wandering mage to their magical island as to his rightful home.



"When we're done with saving the world," said Tara, "let's all go live there."

"We 'll never be done with saving the world," grunted Alistair, "so *that's* a moot point."

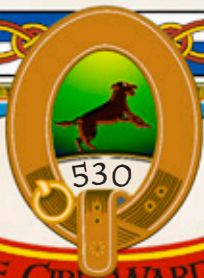
Morrigan smirked at him. "*You* are not a mage, and thus you are not invited. It sounds a pleasant place to me." To Anders she murmured, "You will never stop bothering me about learning to shape-shift, will you?"

"Never," Anders admitted, without a trace of shame. "It would have saved my hide a hundred times. Maybe more. I think all mages should learn it."

Sten considered the story. "This tale may have fighting and romance and adventure in it, but it is not about those things. This tale is about escape. Do you wish to escape from the Grey Wardens?"

Bronwyn thought this a very just analysis, and wondered the same. Anders must have seen it in her eye.

"Not likely! I have a comfortable, if hair-stuffed bed, I'm surrounded by pretty girls, and I'm allowed to shoot



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lightning at fools. What more could I ask?"

A half-drunken storm of red hair, red beard, and giant axe descended on them as they approached the entrance to the Deep Roads. Out of the whirlwind, a whiskey-bass voice growled a greeting:

"Stranger, have you seen a Grey Warden around here? I heard he – or she – was setting out to search for Branka on the Prince's own orders!"

Bronwyn paused to consider the burly dwarf in her path. "I am that Grey Warden, and that would be 'she.'"

The dwarf muttered, "Guess the quality's gone down a bit, at that." He spoke up, noticing that she was listening. "Say! Can I ask you a favor?"

"Why not?" she said bitterly. "Everyone else does."

He fixed her with a rolling, blood-shot eye. "If you're looking for Branka, you want to talk to me, because I'm the only one in all Orzammar who sodding knows what she was looking for."

Alistair looked at her, brows raised. She sighed. "All right, talk."

"Yeah," the dwarf agreed. "I'll talk all right, if you take me with you. If we pool our knowledge, we have a chance. Otherwise, you got nothing."

The companions were looking at each other skeptically. Brosca stood on tiptoe to speak in Bronwyn's ear. "That's Oghren, Branka's husband. Everybody knows about him.



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He pisses ale and kills little boys in first-blood duels."

Oghren snorted, and said to Bronwyn, "That's... mostly true. Take me or leave me, I'm the one who knows what she wanted, and I'm the one who knows where she went."

The shadows closed in about them as they moved along the great underground highways of the Deep Roads. The ancient lighting system the dwarves had devised still worked, after a fashion, though dimly. In the crude connecting tunnels, they relied on their mages to cast enough light to find their way. This time Bronwyn was glad to have two dwarves traveling with them. The dwarves' stone sense would tell them if they were moving in the right direction, and even help measure time, to a certain extent. They were not the only people in the Deep Roads, they discovered, and the first few fights would have badly disoriented them, had they had nothing but their own surfacers' instincts to rely upon.

Having gained his point, which was to be part of any expedition to rescue Branka, Oghren became expansive, telling them all they wanted to know about her and more. Branka, it seemed, was looking for an artifact called the Anvil of the Void, created by the Paragon Caradin to produce the golems that had given Orzammar a century of peace.

"She'd look for it in the Ortan Thaug, because that was Caradin's home. He was an Ortan before he was made a Paragon, and spent a lot of time there, even afterward.



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Nobody's been to Ortan Thaig in five hundred years. You could get there from Caridin's Cross, I hear, but..."

"I have a map to Caradin's Cross," Bronwyn told him, tapping her cuisse.

Oghren grinned. "And I have a map from Caridin's Cross to Ortan Thaig. Guess we're in business."

Bronwyn supposed they were. They had maps, and a plan, and a pretty solid force. Oghren had gone all out in those first few skirmishes, fighting like a madman. Or like the berserker he was, she thought, using the correct term. He had squinted at Brosca, and Brosca had glared back at him, but Bronwyn had made clear that there were no castes in her company. They could fight as far apart as possible, if they liked, but they were allies and equals in Bronwyn's eyes.

As they penetrated deeper, they made contact with darkspawn: first in small bands, then in larger, more concentrated ones. By the time they reached Caridin's Cross, they were clearly in darkspawn country, not just in connecting tunnels, but even in the main halls of the Deep Roads.

Traps and ballistas challenged them, and even some of those huge beasts of burden the dwarves called brontos. The brutes had hide like veridium plate, and were as hard to kill as an ogre.

And they were seeing ogres, for that matter, now and then. They brought back horrible, heart-racing memories of the Tower of Ishal. Constantly, Bronwyn



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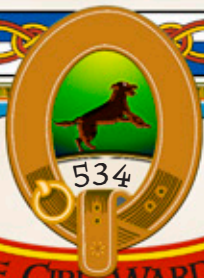
reminded herself that she was not alone: she had a trio of powerful mages, and she, Leliana, and Zevran could do great damage with their arrows before the the monsters could close with them.

There was no day and no night in these endless halls: only endless twilight, the reek of darkspawn, and the constant danger of a hideous death. One ate when one was hungry. One slept when was one was tired. There was not a breath of clean air, nor the softness of grass underfoot, nor the sweetness of flowers, nor the blessed light of sun, moon and stars.

But there was treasure. Other adventurers had been here before them. Zevran stumbled on a cache of weapons and gold in a side tunnel. There was so much treasure than they started making caches themselves: marking their maps to remember what they could not carry with them; keeping some of the gold and the best jewels; sometimes trading an inferior weapon for a work of genius.

No one needed tents in the Deep Roads. They would make camp and build a fire with roots and discarded trash, with old axe handles and crumbled coal from the seams in the tunnel walls. They would lie down on their blankets and shut their eyes against the dim, eternal light, and try to sleep.

After an appropriate interval, they were on the move again, following the the map, trusting to the copyist's accuracy. Endless miles of magnificent, ruined hall, endless miles of winding tunnel, one foot in front of the other.



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Bronwyn experienced unutterable relief when at last a tunnel opened out into a vast vaulted space, and Oghren declared, "There it is. Ortan Thaig."

It was like and unlike the Aeducan Thaig she had visited before. This was bigger and even more fouled with centuries of darkspawn. The Aeducan Thaig was still somewhat in contention, and was visited regularly by dwarves seeking to regain it. This, however, had long ago been abandoned, and it looked it. Filth coated the walls of the dwarven dwellings, carved with such craftsmanship into the rock. This thaig must have had a large population in the great days of the dwarven empire. Stone bridges soared over rivers of dark water and rivers of glowing lava. The remaining sections of Deep Road attached to the thaig were still masterpieces of the mason's art.

It was full of darkspawn of course, but it was also the domain of giant poisonous spiders. Some of her companions really, really did not like spiders, Bronwyn discovered. Cullen, for one, found them so repulsive that he could hardly bear to look at them once he had killed them. He even tried to physically restrain Tara from approaching the carcasses.

"Don't be a baby, Cullen," the elf said, shaking off his hand. "We need some of the toxin. It's very useful in pain relievers."

"And it is *essential* for many poisons!" Zevran grinned, neatly extracting a sac.

Anders smiled smugly at Cullen, and eased another



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spider's tissues apart so Tara could get at the poison sac with her knife. "That's right," he said, very loftily. "Don't be a baby." The ex-templar glared at him.

They camped there, allowing time for everyone to brew. Bronwyn lent a hand herself, learning a bit of the craft from Zevran and Leliana. Brosca edged in, listening hard, relating what she had heard about the spiders. The mages worked together too, very efficiently.

"Morrigan," murmured Anders, "your emulsion is so lusciously *smooth and creamy*..."

Tara giggled.

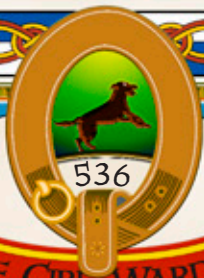
Bronwyn rolled her eyes, but was glad that there was something to do to break the horrible monotony. She performed her share of the stirring dutifully, and refilled her little crystal phials with the feeling that she had actually accomplished something.

While she was putting her gear away, Oghren came up and squatted down by her. "I've been taking a look. This place has Branka written all over it." He held out a massive hand. In it was a bit of rock. Bronwyn looked at it blankly.

"See," he said impatiently, "From this side you can tell it was deliberately chipped away to mark the walls. Branka always did that, marking her way and taking samples to analyze. She was here, all right."

"The map indicates there's a lot more to the thaig."

"Aye, that there is." He pulled out his map. It was greasy, and stained with substances Bronwyn dared not guess at.



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"She might still be here, I suppose... Or we might find a few more clues. Let's get some rest, and then — " He traced a tunnel from the big chamber they were in " — let's go down that way. That was the heart of the old thaig. They might even have moved into the old houses. There were over two hundred people in Branka's House, after all. They must have left something behind!"

It occurred to Bronwyn to wonder why of those two hundred people, Branka had not chosen to take her husband.

"Bronwyn."

She thrashed out of the Fade and immediately went for her dagger. Leliana was leaning over her, shaking her shoulder. For a moment the pretty face was one with that of the menacing Archdemon of her dreams. She hissed and lay back, feeling sick.

"Fool," said Morrigan, from a few yards way. "Do not touch her when she is having one of her nightmares. Here." She rose and brought over a steaming cup. "Drink this," she told Bronwyn. "'Twill quiet your mind."

Bronwyn warmed her hands with the cup and breathed in the fragrant steam, the scent of the sweet herbs raising the ghosts of summer grass and wildflowers in the sunlit world above. She sipped the drink slowly, wanting to smell it as long as she could. After a while, she subsided back onto her blanket, staring up into the dim stone above, wishing she were anywhere else in Thedas.



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How long have we been here? Is this all a terrible mistake? What if I have led all these people down here to die in the dark to gratify an ambitious dwarf?

She did not want to die. Not here, not now, not so utterly stupidly and pointlessly in this strange and loathsome place.

The others were stirring, and the dwarves were already getting their gear in order. This, then, must be "day." It was Sten's turn to cook, and he had prepared oat porridge, the amount nicely judged to sustain them, but nothing more. Bronwyn sighed, and resigned herself to hunger. Scout licked his bowl, and whined a little. Bronwyn dug out a piece of jerky and slipped it to him. They had to manage their supplies very carefully. At a certain point they would simply have to return to Orzammar and resupply, and they must make certain they had enough to sustain them on the journey back.

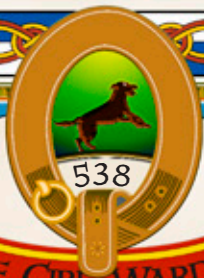
Brosca was whispering with Zevran, who was explaining to her about how elves and humans dreamed, and about the Fade, and what they saw there when they slept.

"By the Stone, I'm glad I'm a dwarf!" Brosca swore. "I don't want to see whatever it is the boss dreams about!"

"No," Alistair said sourly, sitting up and scratching his head sleepily. "You really don't."

Bronwyn decided she could tell time by marches. They headed out, with Brosca on point. During this march, they found Branka's journal, and a cache of equipment that had been left behind.

"She gone out to the Dead Trenches!" Oghren shook his



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head. "Then I guess that's where we're headed."

"Dead Trenches?" Alistair muttered to Anders, "Doesn't that sound... ominous?"

"So we must wander even farther in these tunnels?" Sten demanded. "At what point do you say 'enough?'"

Bronwyn looked him in the eye. "When the King of Orzammar agrees to honor his treaty with the Grey Wardens. Move out!"

There were golems, and more spiders, and even a pitiful dwarf who lived in a little hidden alcove in the rocks. This dwarf, Ruck by name, frightened Bronwyn more than the spiders, for he admitted to consuming darkspawn flesh, and was well on his way to becoming a ghoul. Most horrible of all, he sensed the Taint in Bronwyn, and claimed her as kin.

"Pretty Lady. Pretty hair, pretty eyes, blue as the deepest rock...when you take the Darkness inside you, then you do not miss the Light so much. You know what it is I mean..."

"Come on, Bronwyn," Alistair whispered, pulling on her arm. "Let's get away from here."

"Yeah," Brosca agreed. "Crazy bastard." She scowled back over her shoulder at Ruck, and flipped him off.

Once again, they were on the march, one foot in front of the other. Darkspawn barred their way, viciously identical. And after three long marches, Oghren finally called out, "We've made it! Around the bend is the road to Bownammar, City of the Dead!"

Rounding the bend, Bronwyn discovered that there



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was plenty of life there, despite the name, for there she saw the Archdemon, her nightmares made flesh.



It was big. A very, very, very big dragon, and it looked *wrong*. Bronwyn had seen it in the Fade, but now she saw it, undistorted, with her waking eyes. It was across a gorge, bellowing a challenge, rallying its followers. Far below the steep stone cliffs, the Horde was marching.

Bronwyn felt for her bow, but knew she could not make the shot at this distance. She could, of course, draw the attention of the entire Horde to her, but perhaps that might not be the most effective way to end the Blight. The monster bellowed again, and backwinged off its stony perch, soaring away under the vast ceiling of the Dead Trenches.

A huge stone bridge spanned the gorge, and on the other side were gigantic gates that, according to Oghren, could only be the gates of the Fortress of Bownammar, once the home of the Legion of the Dead.

"Of course, the Legion still exists," Oghren rumbled. "They just don't control Bownammar. It belongs to the darkspawn now."

Nonetheless the Legion was still out here, and still fighting. Another turn led them to one end of the bridge, and directly into a battle. Bronwyn shouted, "Charge!" and they joined in, fighting beside the famed Legion of the Dead. Some of the warriors sported the tattoos of the casteless, for in no other context were the casteless legally



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permitted to bear arms.

The commander himself was heavily tattooed. He called out to her as he kicked a dead hurlock aside. "You're far from the surface, stranger!"

Bronwyn tapped her chest by way of introduction. "Bronwyn. Grey Wardens."

"Kardol. Legion of the Dead."

There was no time for further ceremony. Soon the Wardens were moving further along the bridge, ahead of the Legion, meeting small bands of their mutual enemy. Zevran and Brosca, Tara and Scout ran beside Bronwyn, freezing and stunning and knocking the darkspawn off their feet, while the warriors behind her hewed the creatures apart. Magic and arrows from further sought their targets. They ran all the way across the bridge, hardly slowed by the darkspawn coming to meet them.

At the other end were the Gates of Bownammar, held by ranks of genlock archers. The massed darkspawn were consumed by a storm of ice and fire. The mages stank of lyrium, the air around them crackling with power. Dim shapes tottered and fell, shrouded in steam. A limping ogre blundered out of the whiteness. Bronwyn forced herself to run at the thing, grasping a massive arm and swinging up to slash the throat open; jumping down and running past to hamstring the legs. The ogre clutched at its throat and sank ponderously to the stones, measuring its length at last. Brosca did a little victory dance on the



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corpse. Bronwyn scowled and beckoned her away.

"Maker's Breath! Be careful! Their blood is deadly poison, and you have no immunity!"

"But you practically drink the stuff, Boss!"

"I'm a Warden, and you're a recruit. When you're a Warden you can drink their blood, too!" Bronwyn shouted, exasperated.

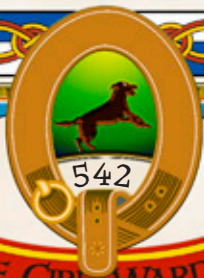
Alistair began choking. Cullen thumped him on the back. Bronwyn realized what she had said, and burst out laughing. Her people looked at her, wondering if she'd gone mad.

The Legion caught up with them. Kardol looked up at her with some curiosity. "You've got skills, Warden, if not much sense." His eyes slid to Oghren, and he grunted, "Drunks make poor allies."

Bronwyn was perfectly aware that they did, but Oghren's supply of strong spirits was long-since consumed, and the berserker was as sober as he was likely to be. Instead, she questioned Kardol about Branka and the Anvil of the Void. He was convinced that Branka had been dead for two years, and that the Anvil was a fairy tale. He thought her plan to travel beyond the Gates of Bownammar further proof of her insanity, but did not bother to talk her out of it. He wished her luck and turned away.

"Boss!" shouted Oghren. "Over here!" The dwarf was standing in the mouth of a tunnel that seemed to wind past the Gates. Bronwyn walked over, Scout trotting at her heels.

"Look!" Oghren pointed at the tunnel wall, squinting. "More



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chips were taken here. Branka came this way for sure!"

Alistair looked at her. She walked away to talk to him privately. He said, his voice low, "At least we're on the trail. It looks like we can go another seven days – I mean – marches or whatever they call days around here – before we absolutely have to turn back. If you want to try, I'm with you."

"It's going to be bad, Alistair. From now on it's nothing but darkspawn all the way. I find it hard to believe that Branka survived, even with two hundred followers and good equipment. How would they reprovision themselves? There's been no communication with the rest of Orzammar in two years."

The likeliest scenario was that Branka and all her people had been massacred shortly after she passed the Gates. If they had survived, it could not have been for long. They might eat deepstalker and the occasional bronto, but in the end they would have turned to the darkspawn, or equally horribly, on themselves. At that, if they turned on themselves, at least they would not become ghouls. It was in every way appalling, but Bronwyn must have an answer that Bhelen would accept.

So they followed the signs: through mobs of darkspawn, through traps and ambushes, through ancient tombs and rifled sarcophagi. The name 'City of the Dead' was no exaggeration. Bownammar was nothing so much as a vast cemetery. That, too, disturbed Bronwyn, who found the whole idea of bodies stuffed away in stone boxes to slowly rot – or, as here, to be pawed at by the darkspawn



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and curious adventurers – profoundly disgusting.

Tara and Brosca walked at the rear of the party, searching the broken coffins for coin and small, portable treasures. Zevran saw them at it and gave them a wink.

"You're sure the Boss doesn't mind?" Brosca asked. "What kind of cut does she get?"



"Well," Alistair said, attempting to make light of it, "that's new. Anybody know what that is?"

Bronwyn shook her head, gazing at the long streaks of red, fleshy matter spilling across the stone floor. "There are worse things than monotony, I suppose," she murmured.

Tara kicked at the red stuff, and then backed away. "It's soft," she said, wrinkling her nose in distaste. "I think... maybe... it's sort of... alive."

Cullen took a swing at it. Very thin ichor oozed from it. The mages leaned over, and Anders pulled Tara's hand away. "Don't touch it. I can say with an expert's certainty that this is Bad Stuff. I don't know what kind, but I know it is."

There was more of it, and it was everywhere, thick and ropy, covering the floor and walls, dripping down from the ceiling, forming nasty, flesh colored pockets and sacs.

They began to have a better idea of what kind of Bad Stuff it was, after they met the crazy dwarf woman. Taint was erupting from her body, greying her flesh, filming her eyes with the blank glassiness that heralded the transformation into a ghoul. She had a great deal to tell



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them, though very obliquely.

Oghren knew her. She was, in fact, a cousin: his cousin Hespith. The little rhyme she mumbled unceasingly froze Bronwyn's blood.

*"First day they come and catch every one;
Second day they beat us and eat some for meat..."*

"She was captured by the creatures?" Morrigan mused. "Why would they have let her live?"

"Fifth day they return, and it's another girl's turn..."

"Hespith!" Oghren roared. "Stop it!"

Anders put his hand on the dwarf's shoulders, and told him quietly, "We have to hear this."

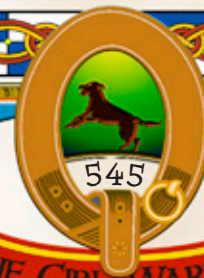
*"Seventh day she grew as in her mouth they spew;
Eighth day we hated as she is violated;"*

The women looked at each other, realizing something quite awful, realizing their personal, peculiar, *specific* danger...

*"Ninth day she grins, and devours her kin;
Now she does feast, as she's become the beast...
Broodmother..."*

She could not get away. Bronwyn would not let the woman get away until she gave them answers, and the answers were not very satisfactory for anyone.

It was knowledge no one could want, this knowledge of how the darkspawn replenished their numbers. It had never occurred to any of them to think about it, and it was so vile in so many ways that they shuffled and avoided each other's eyes, not wanting to talk about it.



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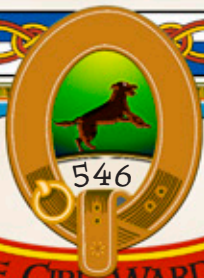
Except for Oghren, who merely grunted, "So that's how it's done."

He was hardly pleased to know that he had been left behind because his wife was having an affair — a poetic, romantic, soulful affair — an affair in which the parties called each other love names like "dream-friend" — with his cousin Hespith, whom he had never thought particularly attractive.

She chose her over me?

No one else was pleased to know that the Paragon whom they were searching had used her people with ruthless calculation to further her own ends. The Anvil of the Void was not far away, but it was protected by a gauntlet of ingenious traps. First, Branka had sent her people through, hoping that they would either disable the traps or spring them, rendering the traps innocuous. That had not worked. As the numbers of her followers dwindled, Branka hit on a new tactic: offering the last women of her House to the darkspawn, knowing that they would be made into broodmothers. Their monstrous offspring would be forced into the gauntlet, as a last-ditch effort to clear the way.

"Broodmother," Bronwyn murmured, the new word unfamiliar and sour on her tongue. The word opened a door into terror and darkness: a whole new way of thinking about the darkspawn, a whole new reason to fear them. Who knew about this? Did the Wardens know how the darkspawn reproduced? Had Duncan known? Was that the reason there were so few female Grey Wardens? Had



he known of this, and still recruited her?

Hespith whispered on, her story a web of horrors. "...I prayed that they would take Laryn instead of me... she ripped off her husband's face..."

"So Branka," said Bronwyn, "deliberately gave you and this Laryn to be raped by the darkspawn. And Laryn was, and she has... become... this thing?... this Broodmother?"

Hespith stared dully before her.

"That's where they come from,

That's why they need us,

That's why they hate us,

That's why they feed us."

"Bronwyn," Alistair said thickly, "maybe we'd better..."

"Right," Bronwyn interrupted him. "This Broodmother creature. We've got to kill it. We can't allow anything like this to go on. We'll continue down the tunnel... very carefully... and I think we can guess what that stuff on the walls might mean. Don't touch it except with your weapons. I wonder how big this Broodmother is..."

They moved along the corridors. One of the fleshy sacs sticking to the wall had grown large, and pulsed like a beating heart. Cullen looked at Bronwyn, who nodded. He cleaved downward with Yusaris, and a half-formed genlock spilled out, squeaking and struggling. The party groaned with unanimous disgust and hit it with everything they had. As they moved along, they found more of the sacs, and destroyed them all.



"They're all attached to ropes of this... matter," Morrigan pointed out to the thick red strands twining along the walls.

"And they're all genlocks, so far," Brosca remarked. "Anything about that seem strange to you?"

They could sense a big chamber up ahead. The air was different and there was a deep groaning sound, as if the earth itself were vibrating. Red matter covered the floor like a vile and spongy carpet. Bronwyn made herself walk lightly, not liking the sensation of sinking into darkspawn flesh...

And then, there she was. 'She,' indeed: prominently, archetypically female, with rows of breasts all the way down her vast, putrid hulk. Legless, tentacled, stinking, pitiful: her tiny, distorted head a mockery of her past existence, mounted like a toy atop her swollen carcass.

Very softly, Bronwyn whispered, "Laryn?"

The Broodmother saw them, and screamed.



CHAPTER 22

THE LAST
OF THE
PARAGONS

AUCOUS, ANIMAL, MIND-
LESS: THE SHATTERING SCREAM OF
THE BROODMOTHER GAVE NOTICE
THAT WHATEVER THIS CREATURE

MIGHT ONCE HAVE BEEN, IT WAS NOW A MONSTER.

"Stinks worse than a cesspit," Oghren grunted, just before a massive tentacle shot out of the ground and slammed him against the wall of the cavern.

Horribly startled, Bronwyn ducked away from another tentacle, and nearly tripped backwards onto the vile and spongy floor. The strands, the ropy matter they had seen before, it was all the Broodmother. So were these tree-like tentacles, suddenly bursting out of the floor, flailing at them, smashing them down. They were tough as dragonthorn, hard as whitewood. The warriors hewed at them with the swords, with just about the same effect as they would have had in cutting down a tree. Oghren, with his massive axe, stumbled toward one of them, half-dazed. The tentacle wriggled, and he struck at it with a bellow and a two-handed blow, biting deep.

Bronwyn saw only the Broodmother's bloated body. There

were the shriveled useless arms, the tiny, distorted head...

Kill the head, and the body dies.

"Freeze it!" she shouted to Tara. "Freeze that thing! Morrigan! Lock it down!"

She was fast: she had always been fast. She could dart past the sweeping tentacles and close with the creature. The feeble, atrophied arms held no weapons, the slack, mindless face hid no clever tactics. "Follow me!" she shouted.

"I'm with you, Boss!" Brosca yelped, and pounded after her.

Bronwyn dodged the thick, stumpy tentacles nearest the gross bulk of the creature. She vaulted up, clambering on the doughy grey flesh, pulling herself up toward the lolling head. Her boot slipped, and she dug a dagger into the screaming Broodmother to give herself purchase. Down below, Scout's jaws closed on a massive grey nipple. Bronwyn grimaced in disgust.

Up closer, the arms did not look so impotent: the bony fingers ended in claws that sliced out, ripping at a leather strap. Zevran was beneath her, stabbing into the body, defeated by the massive layer of fat protecting the creature's vitals. Brosca used her daggers to scramble up, and was suddenly flung away by a grasping tentacle.

Bronwyn glanced to see if the dwarf was all right, and then turned back to face the Broodmother. She had attained eye-level with the monster now, and stared deep into the red and rheumy eyes. The Broodmother opened her mouth, almost as if she meant to speak. Bronwyn paused in mid-



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stab. In a flash, she wondered if she was wrong, and it was possible to communicate with this creature.

And then the mouthful of poisoned spit hit her full in the face.

She saw that thick goblet of phlegm, green as early apples and young leaves, for a split-second, before she saw nothing else. She shrieked, her eyes on fire, her face on fire. Fire raged red before her. She groped for the Broodmother's face, stabbing, ever stabbing. She scissored her sword and dagger against something that might be the flabby neck, and she gritted her teeth at the feel of bone and cartilage parting. More wet slime sprayed on her, hot and viscous. The Broodmother's howls become guttural, choked on her own blood. Bronwyn stabbed the thing again and again, and felt it weakening.

A lull, and a gasp of relief. She tried to wipe her eyes with the back of her gauntlet, but she was still blind. The Broodmother shuddered and grunted as if deflating. Bronwyn's grip slackened, as she took a deep breath.

Then she shrieked again as a claw ripped down her face, tearing the skin away. There was a horrible moment of cold air on bone, and she was falling, landing hard on solid rock. Scout howled, and Zevran swore in Antivan.

"Finish her!" Morrigan was raging nearby, her magic crackling wildly. "Finish her!"

Hacking sounds, the noise of blades on butchered meat echoed wetly. The Broodmother uttered a long moan and



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was silent as last. It all barely registered on Bronwyn. Zevran was dragging her away, one hand holding her face together. There were screams when people saw her, and Anders shouting, pushing everyone aside.

"Maker's blood! Put her there. Elevate her head a bit. Yes, thanks, Tara! Lie still, Bronwyn. Let me have a look at you."

Sheer pain made it difficult to speak, difficult to think. Bronwyn trembled on the cold stone, her head in Tara's lap. Scout whined, driving Bronwyn in a panic.

"Is Scout all right? Is he hurt? Tell me!"

Alistair was murmuring in her ear, his voice thick. "Scout's fine, Bronwyn! Just a little scratch. He's already healed. Don't try to talk — "

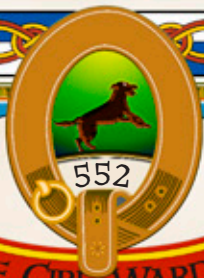
"Hold her still!" Anders snapped. "Here! Sten! Help hold her!"

Huge hard hands grasped her on either side of her skull. Someone was sitting on her legs. Disembodied hands held her wrists. Panic swelled, bursting out of her in a shriek.

"Yell all you want," Anders said to her. "That might help. I've got to clean this wound before I can heal it. It's going to hurt a lot."

"It *already* hurts a lot," Bronwyn choked, swallowing sour bile, swimming in nausea. She screamed as something ripped her face away again. Scout whimpered pitifully, and then growled. Anders muttered, "Quit it, you bloody mutt, I'm trying to help her. Sit down by her so she can feel you. That might calm her down a little."

Massive doggy warmth curled against her side. The



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musty canine smell of Scout drifted up to her, reassuring and familiar. Faint and far off, she heard sobbing, and Morrigan scolding someone.

"Be quiet, fool! Tears are useless."

"Is the Boss going to die?" That was Brosca, sounding scared. With terrible calm, Sten asked, "Will she be blind?"

"Shut up! Everybody just shut up!" Anders' shout was warm on Bronwyn's face. "She's not going to die! That's not going to happen!" He added, a little more uncertainly, "And she won't be blind... Just shut up and let me work!"

A silence more dreadful than clamoring panic blanketed Bronwyn's world. There was now only Anders' ragged breathing; scrapes of boots on stone; an occasional grunt from one of her captors, Scout's quick, anxious pants. Cold water splashing in her face made her whimper. Anders pried her eyelids open and bathed the sightless orbs. Bronwyn tried to imagine that the lights had gone out and everyone was as in the dark as she, but that illusion was spoiled when Anders said, "A little more light, Morrigan. Cullen: hold the torch a bit higher so I don't cast a shadow."

She moaned when a white-hot seam of fire scorched down her face, around her eye.

"You're doing fine, Bronwyn," Anders murmured. "I am the best, remember? You're still going to make all the other noble ladies jealous with that face of yours."

"What's wrong with her eyes?"

"Brosca! Shut up and stand back. Now." Anders' voice grew



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soothing. "Your eyes were irritated by the poison, Bronwyn. That's why you can't see right now. I'm going to cast several layers of healing spells on your eyes, and then I'm going to close and immobilize them. We'll put a bandage over them, with a poultice to ease the pain. It will take some hours to work, so maybe we should get some rest and eat something."

"The Healer speaks sense," Sten rumbled.

There was a pause, and a longer pause. Bronwyn longed to see what was going on, but Anders was murmuring strange words, and her eyes felt sore and heavy, as if they had turned to heated stones inside her skull. She bit back a cowardly whimper.

"Right," Alistair said at last. "Oghren: keep watch at the mouth of the tunnel over there. Brosca, the other side. There doesn't seem to be any other way darkspawn can get at us. Morrigan and Leliana, get a fire going with whatever you can."

Anders's hands were gentle as he pressed a damp poultice over her eyes, and bound it round and round with a linen bandage.

"You can let go of her now," he told the rest, and Bronwyn sighed with relief as her legs and arms were released. Sten removed his hands from her head, careful not to jar her.

"Thank you all for your help," she said softly.

Zevran's lighthearted voice came from somewhere near her feet.

"Anything for a chance to get closer to you, Fair and Noble One."



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Bronwyn smiled, and smiled again as she caught the scent of the poultice on her eyes. It had a musky, flowery fragrance that recalled the gardens of Highever: roses and feverfew and yellow madcap. She forced herself to slow her breathing. Scout pressed closer, and she groped out, smoothing his short, silky coat. A wet tongue licked her jaw.

"It's all right, boy," she whispered. "I'm all right now."

Tara brushed Bronwyn's hair back. "Anders," she asked "Can Bronwyn have some water?"

He nodded, and then remembering that Bronwyn could not see him, said, "Yes. Would you like some water, Bronwyn?"

"Thank you," she managed. "That would be very nice."

Cool, with a heavy mineral tang like all water they had found in the Deep Roads: it soothed her throat and calmed her somewhat. "I need to talk to Alistair, Call him over here."

"Alistair!" Tara's clear voice rose of the hum of conversation and activity. "Bronwyn wants you."

A familiar tread, a crunch of boots, the creak of leather and the clank of metal as he crouched down by her. "I'm here, Bronwyn."

"Alone," she said. "I need to speak to him alone. Just for a little while."

Most of the companions were not surprised to hear Alistair start shouting.

"Absolutely not!" he protested. "How can you even imagine



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I'd do that?"

Sten and Zevran looked at each other. Zevran blew out a breath. "Would he be able to do it, do you think?"

Sten frowned, and considered the matter. "No. He would not. She would have to order someone else to. It is the logical decision if she is blind, but he is not a logical man. I would not relish the duty, but I would follow orders, as a soldier must."

"And I swore to be her man, without reservation," Zevran mused. "It would be ironic beyond measure if I left the Crows to follow her, only to kill her at last."

At first hesitating, the companions came back when Alistair waved to them, and then began crowding around their fallen leader.

"Is there anything you would like, Bronwyn?" Leliana asked, hovering. "Anything we can do for you? Anything at all?"

"You could try not harassing her with your useless sympathy!" Morrigan suggested.

"I would like not to think about myself," Bronwyn said quietly. "I would like to be distracted. Could I hear a story, do you think?"

"That's a great idea!" Alistair seized on the suggestion. "Tara, it's your turn. Are you ready? If you aren't –"

"Stories?" Oghren asked, nonplussed. "She wants to hear a story at a time like this?"

Brosca gave him a shove. She whispered. "It's a thing they do. Everybody tells a story. Shut up and pay attention."

The group settled down to listen, and those on guard sat a little further off to keep their eyes on the possible points of attack.

"Wait!" said Tara. "Let me think! Uh — yes. Yes. I've got one, but it's going to sound stupid," she apologized. "I can't remember any grand epics or noble romances right now. The only story I can think of is one I learned when I was a very little girl."

"From your mother?" asked Alistair.

Tara shook her head. "I suppose other people have family to tell them stories, but I don't remember my family at all, so they don't count. I can't remember anything before the Circle. When I arrived I was very, very young, and I made a friend who was a little older than I was. He knew how to read, and I didn't. In a corner of the library, on a low, low shelf, he found a thin little book of children's stories, and he read them all to me, over and over. This is the one I liked the best, because it's about friendship and about magic, and about how both can save us. It's the story of Sparrow the Elf Child."

TARA'S STORY OF SPARROW THE ELF CHILD

Long ago, in the days when the elves of the Dales fell to the Exalted Marches, there was a human lord who lived with his little son in a remote castle.

One day, when the lord was out hunting, he heard a strange cry. He followed the sound and at last came to a big tree where a little elf child was sitting on a high branch. The child was trembling and covered in blood, and the lord guessed that this elf child had escaped the slaughter of her clan. The lord was a kindly man, and he said, "I will protect this child, and bring her up with my little Roland."

So he took her home to his castle, and the two children were brought up together like brother and sister. The foundling was called Sparrow, because she had been found in a tree like a little bird. Roland and Sparrow were very fond of each other and could not bear to be out of the other's sight.

But the lord had a younger brother, who was secretly envious, and all he thought of, all day long, were ways to get his hands on his brother's lands. When the lord had to go to Lydes, he left his brother in charge of the castle, and made him swear to look after the two children. And so he rode away.

Sparrow was very small, and very good at hiding, and the day after the lord left for town she overheard the wicked brother talking to two of his henchmen.

He said, "Take the boy into the forest and kill him. We shall say he was lost, and then I shall be heir to my brother's castle and land."

Sparrow ran to Roland and said, "Never forsake me, and I will never forsake you."

Roland answered, "I will never forsake you as long as I live."

Then Sparrow said, "I must tell you what I heard. Your uncle is planning to kill you, so he can inherit your father's castle. We must leave quickly and run away."

So the children got up, dressed in warm cloaks, and hurriedly left the castle.

The henchmen looked for the boy, and could not find him. The brother shouted, "Fools, go look for him! And when you find him, kill him!"

The children grew tired, and rested under a linden tree. They heard the men coming, and Sparrow said to Roland, "Never forsake me, and I will never forsake you."

Roland answered, "I will never forsake you as long as I live."

Then Sparrow said, "Do not be frightened. I shall turn you into a rosebush, and I will be a bee buzzing nearby."

When the three men reached the wood, they found nothing but a rosebush and a bee buzzing by it. They stumbled and bled as the rose's thorns ripped their legs.

They said, "Let us leave this place. We have lost the trail."

So they went home, and told the brother that they had seen nothing but a rosebush and a bee buzzing by it.

"Fools!" raged the brother. "You ought to have hacked the rosebush to pieces and crushed the bee. Off with you now, and do it!"

But the children heard them coming a long way off, and Sparrow said to Roland, "Never forsake me, and I will never forsake you."

Roland promised, "I will never forsake you as long as I live."

Sparrow said, "Do not be frightened. You shall become a warm rock, and I a serpent sunning myself upon it."

The henchman found nothing but a serpent sunning itself on a large boulder. When they tried to get by, the serpent hissed at them and stung them.

"Let us leave this place," they said. "We have lost the trail."

When they returned to the brother, they told him that they had seen nothing but a rock, with a serpent sunning itself upon it.

"You idiots!" stormed the brother. "You should have cut off the serpent's head and smashed the rock to flinders. Why must I do everything myself? Get out of here before I kill you!"

So he ran off in search of the children alone. The children saw the brother a long way off.

Sparrow said, "Never forsake me, and I will never forsake you."

Roland answered, "I will never forsake you as long as I live."

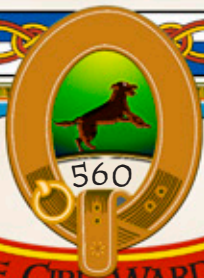
"Do not be frightened. You shall become a clear stream, and I a duck swimming in it."

When the brother reached the stream, he lay down on the bank and tried to drink it up, but the duck swam forward and seized his nose with her bill and dragged him underwater. The brother thrashed and shouted, but he was carried away and drowned, and that was the end of him.

When he was dead, the children went home, and they were very glad when their father came back. He wondered what had become of his brother, but the children never told: neither that the brother had tried to kill them, nor that Sparrow had done magic. And they lived happily together to a very great age.

"A lovely story, Tara," Bronwyn murmured. "Thank you."

Anders thought about it. "That was Jowan who told you the story, wasn't it?" He said to the others, "Jowan was a mage who perpetrated the most spectacular escape in



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recent memory. Successful too, or at least if the Templars caught up to him, they're not telling."

"They'd tell us if they caught him," Tara said.

Cullen was angry at the sound of the name. "Jowan was a blood mage. He deceived us all – especially you, Tara, and that poor initiate. Then he ran away and left the two of you to pay for his crimes. I know he was your good friend for years and years, but what he did was unforgivable!"

"He was my first friend, and my best friend, and they were going to make him Tranquil!" Tara shot back. "He was terrified at the idea. Who wouldn't be? To be stripped of emotion – to be ripped from the Fade – to be made an obedient slave of the Chantry? It makes me sick. No one should have that done to them against their will, and in fact, I don't think it should be done at all. Jowan wasn't half as powerful as I am, and using blood magic he knocked the Knight-Commander and the First Enchanter off their feet when they confronted him. Me, too," she confessed. "If I'd had my wits about me, I would have run out the door right after him. I'll never be so unprepared again."

Alistair protested, "The Tranquil aren't slaves! Don't you think you're exaggerating –"

"They are so!" Tara hissed. "Do they get paid for all the amazing things they create? No. Are they given any choice about where they go and what they do? No. Mundane humans in Ferelden are so proud of their freedoms, but they certainly don't want to share them with anyone else!"



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"Don't say 'mundane,'" Cullen was indignant. "It makes you sound like a Libertarian!"

Tartly, Tara answered, "If I wasn't a Libertarian before I was locked up, I certainly am now!"

"Could we not argue about politics right now?" Leliana pleaded. "Bronwyn needs rest and quiet. Everyone have something to eat. I have the rations here. You are a wonderful storyteller, Tara. Your tale was sweet and deceptively simple. That is a subtle art."

Bronwyn wanted to refuse to the piece of hard waybread, but ate it hungrily enough. It stuck in her teeth until Tara handed her another cup of water to wash it down.

Sitting down by her, Anders said, "I'm going to cast Sleep on you, Bronwyn. You'll sleep a pretty long time. Later, I'll take off the bandages and we'll know more about how you're doing."

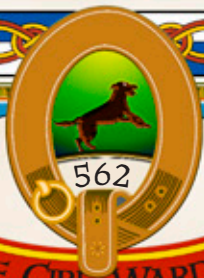
"And you're going to be fine," Alistair insisted. "Don't worry about anyt–"



She was already asleep. This was the Fade, which she knew well. She stepped cautiously through the fog, careful not to stumble. Vague shapes formed and broke at a distance. Darkspawn chuckled and gibbered, but she walked past them, and they did not seem to see her.

The path before her was winding and treacherous. A small boy dashed in front of her, chasing a ball.

"Oren?"



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He was gone, and from far away, another woman's voice echoed, "Oren? Oren?" It sounded like Oriana.

A roof slanted down over the path. Bronwyn opened the door before her, and walked through. She recognized the distinctive profile of the man in the High Seat immediately. Rendon Howe was receiving his vassals, smug in his power. Bronwyn drew her sword, and shouted a challenge, but no one took any notice of her. The room swam away, and Bronwyn, after a moment of baffled rage, found herself going through another door. Queen Anora was suddenly illuminated, pacing back and forth in her bedchamber, a long furred robed trailing behind her.

"Your Majesty..." Bronwyn called. Anora paused, as if listening, and then resumed her restless pacing.

Bronwyn pushed the next door open and was in a sunlit garden. Two young people sat side by side on a marble bench, holding hands. Bronwyn did not recognize them at first, but then gasped and rushed to them.

"Mother! Father!"

They did not hear or see her. They had eyes only for each other, and were speaking with them, needing no words.

"Don't you see me? Can't you hear me?" Bronwyn pleaded. Her father pressed a kiss on her mother's hand, and she smiled on him with all the love in the world. Then they embraced and kissed passionately. Bronwyn felt herself blushing, and hurried away, conscious that she ought not to see her parents like this.

Another door. King Cailan was naked, in a wide camp bed, and not alone. Bronwyn did not recognize the woman, but she



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had the look and physique of a soldier. Rather scandalized, Bronwyn stalked away, slamming the next door open.

Her heart lifted. It was Teyrn Loghain, looking younger and happier than she had seen him at Ostagar. Then she saw that he was speaking to a tall woman with curling dark hair, dressed in an old-fashioned gown of flaming red silk. They were deep in conversation, though Bronwyn could not hear their words. Disappointed and embarrassed, Bronwyn turned away, and nearly walked into a young King Maric, who came bounding into the room. Loghain and the woman smiled at his entrance, and King Maric put a hand on each of their shoulders...

Another door. Bronwyn pushed it open and gasped. She was looking out to sea, over the cliffs of Conobar. A younger, beardless Fergus was checking the ropes for their climb today, and looked up, smiling. Relieved to tears that someone here would acknowledge her, she smiled back.

"Come on! I think there's a tern's nest down there. I want to take the eggs to Father as a joke. You know — a tern's eggs for a teyrn!"

"Your wit is dazzling."

"Well, it's not so bad, especially if we can get the eggs. What are you wearing all that armor for? Take it off, and come on..."

Bronwyn caught at his arm and whispered, "Never forsake me, and I will never forsake you."

Fergus grinned. "I will never forsake you as long as you live."

Light glinted off the peaceful sea, the wind was mild and fragrant, and there were the two of them, alone on the edge of the world...



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"Bronwyn," said Anders, "it's time to wake up. I'm going to take off the bandages. All right?"

She was on her back, looking up. She squeezed her eyes shut and then blinked. Looking back at her was a circle of anxious faces. She blinked again, but they remained. Alistair and Tara might have been crying. Sten and Morrigan were very grave.

"Andraste's nightgown," Bronwyn's wondered aloud. "Was it something I said?"

Instantly, their worried faces transformed into templates of joy and relief. Anders said, "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three."

"How many am I holding up, Boss?" Brosca asked, leaning over and grinning.

"Very funny. I don't believe that is an official Warden greeting."

A ripple of laughter.

"Move your eyes, Bronwyn," Anders ordered. "Follow the tip of my finger. Look up. Look down. How do your eyes feel?"

"Sore." Bronwyn got up slowly, her muscles objecting to having been unused so long. She forced herself to ask, "How bad do I look?"

"You look beautiful," Zevran said at once, in a tone of complete reassurance. "If there are scars, I cannot see them in this light."



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"Your eyes are funny," Brosca told her. Alistair stepped on the dwarf girl's foot. "Ow!"

Leliana said softly, "You must be bursting. We can go up this tunnel. It is safe."

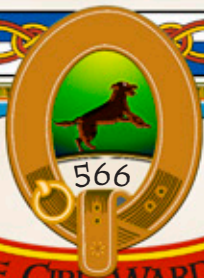
Bronwyn needed relieve herself very badly. Letting Leliana lead the way, she left the renewed gossip behind. They went deep into a cul-de-sac, where the voices grew jumbled and indistinct.

After Bronwyn rearranged her clothes, Leliana pulled a small mirror from a pocket. "Here," she said. "You should look."

Bronwyn studied herself in the dim light, and sighed, willing herself to accept it. Zevran was not perfectly truthful, or perhaps had not looked closely enough. She could certainly see a thin white scar, marking her from above her right eye to just under the hinge of her jaw. Considering what had been done to her face, she knew that she was incredibly lucky to have been in the hands of a healer of Anders' skills. More disturbing were her eyes, which simply did not look like hers anymore.

Her father's grey-blue eyes were gone. The Broodmother's spit must have leached into the fragile membranes. Now they were a shocking green. Not a natural green either, but the color of the poison that had nearly blinded her.

"Thank you," she said to Leliana, giving her back the mirror. She leaned against the stones of the tunnel, taking a deep breath. She had been impetuous: she had been a fool, charging like an idiot against an enemy of which



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she knew nothing. The scar and her altered eyes would remind her not to be so impressed by her own reputation. "It could have been so much worse. I can live with this. I'm lucky to have a face, and the eyes are certainly distinctive."

Leliana laughed. "Yes. You must find some green velvet to match them! And emerald jewelry. It will be very striking." She took Bronwyn's arm. "And the scar is not bad at all. It may fade in time, and there are cosmetics in Orlais that would cover it entirely. I know that men like to show off their honorable scars, but it is different for women, yes?"

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed. "It certainly it." However shallow it might be of her, she hated the idea of losing her looks. Being pretty was part of what she was, and she did not want to let it go. The idea of men who had once sought her favor – even men for whom she cared nothing – now turning from her in disgust was a painful and disturbing one. It was different for men, certainly, no matter what people liked to pretend. "We'd better go back."

She came back to the others, blinking a bit, but full of grim purpose.

"Now," she said, accepting her weapon harness from Zevran and buckling it quickly, "before we go a step farther I want to know everything anybody knows about golems and about this bloody Anvil of the Void. I need to know why Branka would think it's valuable enough to kill everyone in her House or give them to the darkspawn! Oghren!" she snarled. "Start talking!"



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Oghren scratched his beard. "Well, Boss, what do you want to know? Everybody's heard of golems, but I've only seen a few. Nobody knows how to make them anymore, see. The Paragon Caridin invented them, which is why we went to his thaig first. Then he disappeared and they never found him. They sent the Legion of Steel after him –"

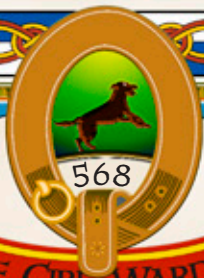
" – What," Bronwyn asked wearily, "is the Legion of Steel? Don't assume I know anything. Pretend I'm a child who knows nothing at all."

"The Legion of Steel was a regiment of golems. Like I say, they went to look for Caridin. They never returned. What few golems remain are locked up tight by the Shaperate. I know that in ancient times, we dwarves sold lots of golems to the Tevinter Empire, but they're too valuable now. Sometimes if things get bad enough, they're hauled out of storage, but only if the battle with the darkspawn is desperate enough to risk losing them."

"I didn't know about golems," Brosca declared. "I bet other people don't either."

Cullen agreed. "I've only barely heard of them. Back during the Rebellion, there was a mage in King Maric's service who had a golem. Some sort of huge fighting machine. Because the mage did so much to help the king, he was given his freedom and disappeared shortly after the war, along with that golem of his. Are they always made of stone?"

Oghren shook his head. "Stone sometimes, but they can



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be metal too. They're not really machines at all. More like stone or iron creatures, really, I guess you'd say. I've heard it has something to do with lyrium, and that golems aren't mechanical at all. I do know that they have these things called 'control rods' so people can make them follow orders."

Bronwyn nodded, thinking to herself. "Branka thought she could use this Anvil of the Void to produce golems again."

"An army of golems," Morrigan considered, "would be of great assistance against the darkspawn."

Bronwyn shrugged. "Maybe. Branka is quite obviously insane now. It would be madness to trust her with any power whatsoever after what she's done. Besides, the dwarves tried the golem solution: this Legion of Steel Oghren speaks of. It did not work then, and there is no reason to think it would work now."

Consulting together, Bronwyn and Oghren drew the new places they had found on their maps, while the rest packed up the camp.

"You want to move on, then?" Alistair asked her quietly.

"Oh, I wouldn't miss this for anything. Maybe we'll find Branka's body, or Branka turned into a Broodmother. If we do, we'll use ranged weapons at first... and long-distance spells. We'll hack down the big tentacles one a time: it will take some time for the Broodmother to generate more, I would think. I suppose it's even possible we'll find Branka alive. I daresay she'd have enough to eat, since her House is no longer alive to consume their supplies."



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They moved out without much more conversation. Oghren pointed to the marked walls, testament that Branka had continued to chip away rock samples.

"I can't believe Branka could have gone much farther on her own. Wherever she is, she will not be unprepared."

Bronwyn only grunted, deciding that she had had just about enough of the Paragon Branka for one lifetime.

After a long march, the caverns opened out once more. Zevran shouted back that he thought he had seen someone, when a barricade slammed down behind them.

A hard-faced dwarven woman emerged from behind a rock shelf.

Without preamble, she said, "Let me be blunt with you. After all this time, my tolerance for social niceties is limited. I hope that doesn't bother you."

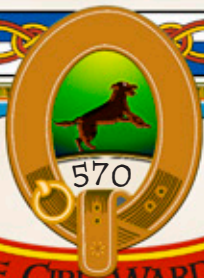
Oghren's face lit up. "Branka! Shave my back and call me an elf! I hardly recognized you!"

The woman's face did not betray a flicker of anything other than contempt.

"Oghren. It figures that you'd eventually find your way here. Hopefully you can find your way back more easily." She cocked her head, studying Bronwyn.

"And how shall I address you? Hired sword of the latest lordling to seek me out? Or just the only one who didn't mind Oghren's ale-breath?"

"Be respectful, woman!" Oghren protested. "You're talking to a Grey Warden!"



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"Oh?" Branka was unmoved. "An important errand-girl, then. I suppose something has happened. Is Endrin dead? That seems likely. He was old and wheezy the last time I saw him."

Bronwyn narrowed her eyes. "Yes. The King is dead and the Assembly is deadlocked. The heir, Prince Bhelen, seeks your support to succeed to the throne."

"I always thought him a twisted little cretin," Branka shrugged, "but I really don't care if the Assembly puts a drunken monkey on the throne. I've put all such trivialities behind me. There is only one thing that matters: the Anvil of the Void. It was our protector, our great invention, the thing the ancients created that made our armies the envy of the world. The Anvil of the Void was the means by which the dwarven armies held off the first Archdemon. Now it is lost to the very darkspawn it was created to fight. It's here: so close I can taste it."

Bronwyn considered her words. "Close it may be. As you are not currently in possession of it, it is apparent that you have a problem."

Branka's nostrils flared. "Caridin created a gauntlet of traps to protect the Anvil. My people have given body and soul to find their way through. This is what's important. This is what has lasting meaning. Kings... politics... all that is transitory. I have sacrificed everything to find the Anvil."

"And that would include Hespith and your entire House, I take it?"



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"I needed people to break through Caridin's traps. There is no way to do it but by trial and error. They were all mine, all pledged to my house. Enough questions! What you need to do is find your way through Caridin's maze. I command you to do this as your Paragon. There's only one way, Warden. Forward."

Bronwyn snorted in contempt. She had not gone this far already to run away like a little girl. "Come on," she said to her people. "Let us solve this *Paragon's* problems for her. It's what we do."

Bewildered, Oghren rumbled, "What has this place done to her? I remember the girl I married, who could talk for one minute and you could see her brilliance. Now — "

Alistair patted his shoulder. "Let's go."

Mobs of darkspawn crowded together in the narrow tunnels: mostly genlocks. They were poorly armed and quickly dispatched.

Anders wondered aloud, "I wonder if these were that dwarf's — "

"Don't!" cried Leliana. "It's too horrible!"

Morrigan shrugged, and drained the life from the last monster. "Horrible or not, we must face the truth. These are the brood of that wretched creature. Branka must periodically force them through the gauntlet of traps ahead, hoping to clear the way. As the traps are obviously not cleared, 'twould appear that the scheme is ineffective, and a useless waste."



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Alistair turned on her, "*Ineffective?* Branka killed her people or turned them into monsters, and you object only because it was *ineffective?*"

Morrigan's voice sharpened, "I object to stupidity, in all its forms!"

There was no time for this. "Then I suggest we all use our wits," Bronwyn hissed, "and be very, very *clever*. Zevran, your eyesight is the best. You and Brosca take point, and look for anything that might be a trap. Let me know, and then we'll all think *very carefully* about what to do!"

These tunnels had obviously been mines once. Hot blue streaks of raw lyrium fluoresced in the half-light. Ribbons of the mineral twisted overhead in fantastic whorls and flourishes. Cullen hung behind and scraped bits into a leather pouch. Bronwyn considered taking some herself. The Chantry had a monopoly on the lyrium trade, and even a pouch like Cullen's would be worth a fortune. Perhaps later...

After a short walk through the twisting tunnel, the way straightened. Brosca called out, "Boss! There's a room up ahead."

A haze hung heavy in the air, pooling to the floor in the chamber they approached. The green color of the air made Bronwyn nauseous: made her remember the Broodmother. Anders flicked out a spell, testing the air. "Poison," he said briefly. "Not powerful, but enough to kill you if you linger too long."

"Could it have killed all of them?" Tara asked, pointing



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at the corpses scattered over the chamber floor, corpses of dwarves and of darkspawn. Some hulking figures stood rigidly at attention in the middle of the chamber.

"So," Bronwyn said, "those must be golems. Are they dead?"

"Hard to tell," Oghren said. "If nobody's operating their control rod, sometimes they stand just like that."

"Look at the bodies," said Anders. "Some might have died of the poison, but that thing over there had its skull crushed. Poison gas doesn't do that. From the condition of the body, that was fairly recent. Those golems aren't dead."

"Perhaps moving through the room sets off an alarm of some sort," Morrigan suggested. Anders nodded with admiration, and casually laid a hand on her back. She did not shake him off.

"Let me go first," Leliana offered. "I am quick, and light on my feet."

"Not alone." Zevran shook his head. "This gas — it must come from somewhere. Perhaps there is a container of some sort. Perhaps one can shut off the flow of the poison. If the golems attack, one of us can distract them."

Bronwyn considered. "No. We're all going. Mages: freeze anything that moves. Alistair, Sten, Cullen, and Oghren — concentrate on the golems. You too, Scout. Leliana, Zevran, Brosca, and I will look for the source of the poison gas. Let's go."

She moved quickly, refusing to let the idea of poison frighten her. Once in the room, she could taste the substance in the air, feel it seeping into her lungs, constricting them.



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Her eyes began to water...

And the golems burst out of their slumber, shaking the stones under their feet, lashing out with their boulder arms. Bronwyn saw one stopped in its tracks by Morrigan's spells, and then focused on her own task.

The room was ingenious, interlaced with pipes carrying the poison, and with spouts that spewed it into the room. The closing valve was not hard to find. She closed it and shouted to the others. The valves were scattered through the room, and it took agility to dash past the battles and reach them. One or two people alone could not have survived.

So they left the room behind, quite pleased with themselves. The poison was dissipating, unreplenished by more. The guardian golems were in pieces.

"We know how to fight them now," Bronwyn said. "A good thing. Somehow I think we'll see more of them."

More traps. There were indeed more rooms with golem guards. Ice was the best weapon against them. Further on, they came upon a device that released enraged spirits to attack them. While it was time-consuming, it was easy enough to defeat it. From the lack of remains, it was clear that none of Branka's people had ever made it this far.

Around another corner the walls opened out into a vast cavern vaulted with lyrium veins, and lit with lava flowing in channels down the walls. To the back of the chamber, an immense block of shining metal gleamed, and Bronwyn realized what it must be. A double rank of



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golems stood guard, and at their head was another golem: one of immense size. Bronwyn walked softly into the vast chamber, clinging to the walls, wondering if they could expect an attack.

And then the huge golem spoke, its inhuman voice rolling like thunder.

"Welcome, strangers. My name is Caridin. Once, long ago, I was Paragon to the dwarves of Orzammar. If you seek the Anvil, you must hear my story, or be doomed to relive it."

"Caridin?" Bronwyn looked at Oghren.

He stammered out, "Caridin? The real Caridin? As in Caridin's Cross? As in Anvil of the Void Caridin?"

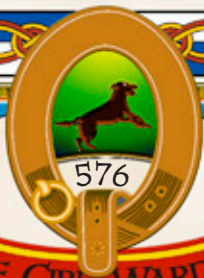
"Impressive," Morrigan whispered to Anders. "Extraordinary, really."

The golem answered them. "I was once that Caridin, indeed. I made many things, but was famed for the Anvil of the Void above all. You see it before you. It allowed me to forge a man of stone or steel, more powerful than any before, but I told no one the cost." The golem rumbled, "No smith, however skilled, can create life. I had to take life from elsewhere."

All right, Bronwyn thought, now we're going to move past the realm of myth and legend, and find out the awful truth. And I suspect it will be truly awful.

Caridin said, "At first, we used only willing volunteers, but it was not enough. King Valtor had many enemies, and soon a river of blood flowed from this place."

"Volunteers?" croaked Cullen. "Who would volunteer to



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become... this... ?”

Bronwyn saw it, too. “You had to use other dwarves.” She felt sick, imagining it: a living soul trapped inside a shell of stone or steel...

Caridin did not deny it. “At last it became too much. I refused, and Valtor had me placed on the Anvil myself. It was not until I too felt the hammerstroke that I fully realized what I had done. I entombed myself here to find a way to destroy the anvil, but no golem can accomplish that. I cannot destroy the Anvil myself, but I beg you, stranger, to help me. Do not let the Anvil enslave more souls than it already has!”

“Do consider — ” Morrigan began.

Bronwyn did not want to hear it. “No — I agree with Caridin. How would *you* like to be made a golem? Branka would never hesitate to throw away more lives, and Bhelen would never hesitate to make his political enemies his victims. Very well,” she told Caridin. “I will help you destroy the Anvil, but you must lend me your support in choosing a King — ”

Bearing down on them, eyes fever-bright, Branka burst out of the shadows, her harsh voice unnaturally loud.

“No! The Anvil is mine! You can’t take it from me!”

Bronwyn turned sharply toward the maddened dwarf, loathing twisting in her belly. “Yours? In what way? Because you *want* it? Not good enough. It is I who won the way to the Anvil. In less than ten days from Orzammar, I



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might add, and with all my companions alive and whole. In two years, you could not do this. Instead, you have killed your people — or worse. You were not able to defeat the traps, which I believe you easily could have, had you gone yourself and used the wits that so impressed your fellow dwarves. Instead you hid behind your people, and, like a coward, sent them to their deaths. Then you whored the last of your women off to the darkspawn.”

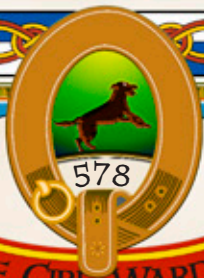
“Nothing is more important than the Anvil. When you reach for greatness, you have to make sacrifices! As many sacrifices as are needed!”

“Your *sacrifices* were wasted. Your people approached the gauntlet too few at a time to overcome the golems. The darkspawn are mindless, and could not think their way past the gas valves. Your people gave their lives for nothing.”

Branka snorted something resembling a laugh. “Plain-spoken, aren’t you? I thought you were looking for a Paragon to help you deliver Bhelen his throne, errand-girl! With the Anvil I can make you an army the like of which the world has never seen!”

Oghren muttered, “Branka, you crazy nug-tail!”

“We don’t need golems to defeat the Blight.” Branka threatened another rant, and Bronwyn cut her off ruthlessly. “Because you are a smith,” she said with nicely-judged contempt, “you see only a smith’s solution. Smithcraft will not save the dwarves. My father said to me, long ago, that in the end, flesh is stronger than steel. For every golem



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created, Orzammar loses a dwarf. Dwarves can create more of themselves: golems cannot.”

There would be blood over this, Bronwyn knew, and shifted her weight, readying herself. There was one more thing she had to say...

“A Paragon indeed,” she drawled out, in her most insufferably upper-class tones. “You *are* a perfect example of what happens when someone unqualified by training, aptitude or birth assumes military command. Because you invented some kind of fancy oven, the dwarves gave you a title that went to your head. You left behind your husband, who is an experienced and capable warrior...”

Oghren perked up noticeably at the praise, and puffed out his chest.

“— and instead took command yourself, I suppose to impress your girlfriend. I met her recently, and she’s not so impressed with you now...”

She saw the shield coming at her face in plenty of time to sidestep it. What she had not expected were the golems. In the Deep Roads, Branka had somehow found a pair of control rods and had two golems to fight beside her.

But Caridin was there, and he was greater than them all. Strong as the foundations of the earth, invulnerable, relentless, he crushed everything in his way. Bronwyn left him to it, and concentrated on Branka. She was a smith, but she was also a strong swordswoman. Bronwyn parried a lunge with her dagger, hooking the guard



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around Branka’s hand. There was a crunch as a knuckle snapped, and Branka grunted, surprised by the pain. A mutual battering: Bronwyn using her greater height and reach, and Branka relying on her low center of gravity and well-forged armor.

Oghren was lost in the berserker blood-rage, swinging his axe in huge arcs, stone cracking and crumbling from the golems with every blow. Bronwyn had wondered which side he would choose, in the end. Perhaps had not chosen to support Bronwyn, as much as he had chosen to defy Branka. It made no difference at the moment.

Zevran backed into her, and then grinned, twisting in mid-air to strike at Branka from the side. From the corner of her eye, Bronwyn could see the mages engage the golems, freezing them into immobility, smashing at them with hammer-blows of magic.

Another buffet from Branka’s shield forced Bronwyn back, toward the melee. She whirled, dropped her weapons, and threw herself flat, knocking Branka’s legs out from under her.

Branka howled, thrashed briefly on top of Bronwyn, and then rolled away, unbalanced. Her grasp on sword and shield was too tenacious for her to lose them, but they were useless when she was face-down on the stone. She was strong, too, very strong, and began to rise, trying to throw Bronwyn off. Bronwyn kned her in the back, and grabbed her by the head, twisting with all her strength. Branka’s neck should have snapped, but she was a dwarf,



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not human. Bronwyn snarled, and smashed the woman's head against the stones, again and again.

Brosca saw them wrestling on the stones, and screeched in triumph. Diving down, she drove her dagger into Branka's sword hand. Zevran ripped the shield away. Branka howled with rage and scabbled with her shield hand at a hidden dagger. Bronwyn yanked her elbow straight back, breaking her arm. With her right hand, she snatched the dagger from its sheath and drove it into the unprotected back of Branka's neck, using all her weight, severing her enemy's spine. A brief, frenzied convulsion, and Branka groaned and lay still.

Branka's golems were down too, sprawled like so much rubble on the stone floor of the cavern. One of Caridin's golems was dead as well. Bronwyn hauled herself up, and strode toward the massive form of Caridin, wanting to have this over and done. Absently she wiped Branka's blood from her face. She glanced back. Oghren was looking down at the lifeless Branka, shaking his head. Bronwyn hoped he would not completely lose his mind and insanely seek revenge. Luckily, he seemed weary and listless in the wake of his berserker rage.

"Another life lost to my invention," Caridin mourned. "I wish the Anvil had been utterly forgotten."

"Yeah, you ain't kidding," muttered Oghren. "Crazy woman. I always knew the Anvil would kill her."

"I am very sorry it came to this," Bronwyn said. She



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walked forward to Caridin. "I will do as you asked me, and destroy the Anvil, but you must grant me the boon of your support in the Assembly's election of the next King."

A pause, as the golem considered. "Your boon is granted. I shall put hammer to steel one last time, and give you a crown for the king of your choice. No. Do not tell me his name. I do not wish to hear it, or know anything about him. I have lived too long past my time."

Slow as boulders in a river, Caridin and his remaining golems ascended the tongue of rock where the Anvil gleamed. They conferred, and then the sound of hammer on metal resounded.

Meanwhile Anders treated the injuries: Leliana's bad scrape, Cullen's broken nose, everyone's cuts and bruises. As soon as they were fit, Tara, Brosca, Zevran and Leliana began searching the bodies and the area for treasure. There was quite a bit of it.

"Let's have a rest and something to eat," Bronwyn ordered. "Also, I'd like everyone to gather some lyrium. Our party will have enough to supply us for years, and that will save us a great deal of gold. Be careful and don't get it on your skin."

Oghren lifted Branka in his arms and carried her over to a crack in the rocks. He laid her out gently and folded her hands over her breastplate. Bronwyn watched him from a distance, not wishing to intrude.

He slumped on a stone, and motioned her over. Bronwyn




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sat down beside him, waiting for him to talk. He ran a hand through his wild red hair and grunted, "That pretty much beat the sod out of how I imagined it. Ready to head back and share the news? Those deshyrs have been trying to destroy the city for years. Haven't managed yet."

He was taking it better than she had any right to expect. Perhaps he had bidden Branka farewell long ago, in his deepest heart. "We'll go back a lot faster than we came," Bronwyn said, with a wry smile. "With any luck the darkspawn haven't filtered back to the tunnels we cleared. I won't mind some easier going."

"You and me both."



The crown Caridin presented to her was the gaudiest object Bronwyn had ever seen. The most elaborate goldsmithing imaginable, a rainbow of jewels set cunningly in channels: it was glorious and depressingly ugly all at once. No one but the greatest of craftsmen could have devised it. Morrigan opened her mouth to suggest a change of plans about the Anvil, but desisted at Bronwyn's level look.

Destroying the Anvil was rather fun. They all joined in and released a lot of anger and tension in the act. Many took a turn with the immense hammer, and the mages had tricks of their own. When the device was utterly ruined, Caridin spoke briefly to Bronwyn in farewell.

"You have my eternal thanks, stranger. *Atrast nal tunsha*: may you always find your way in the dark."




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He moved to the edge of the cliff, tottered at the brink, and then the glowing river of lava below them swallowed him whole. Bronwyn and her party watched the solid figure break apart and tumble away in the current.

Bronwyn said, "So much for the last of the Paragons. Let's go." "Can I carry the crown, Boss? Can I?" Brosca asked. "It would be neat to wear it! Can I? Just for a little while?"



They made their way back in less than half the time it had taken them to reach the Anvil. Past rotting darkspawn and dwarves, past shattered golems and broken swords they traveled. They retrieved treasure from their caches, and found booty they had hitherto missed.

Coming back through Bownammar, they met the Legion of the Dead. Kardol stared at Caridin's Crown, which was currently decorating Zevran's head.

"That's quite a chunk of gold."

"It is a crown of Paragon make for Orzammar's next king," Bronwyn said briefly, having practiced her speech about it. "The Anvil was not a myth, by the way, but it is gone now."

"And Branka?" the tattooed warrior asked.

"Yeah," Oghren growled. "We found her. She's dead. We've got to get back to the Assembly and settle things while there's still an Orzammar."

Kardol stared at them a little longer, and then nodded. "I'll come back to the city with you. If we really are to have a new King, he'll have orders for the Legion." He shouted

back at his soldiers, "I'm going into Orzammar with the Wardens! Tharkel! You're in charge while I'm gone. I want four volunteers to travel with me!"

They were on the move again, and moving fast. Kardol's warriors were a taciturn lot. Only once did one of them speak to Bronwyn, coming to her side while they ate another tasteless meal of waybread and water.

"So you're going to make Bhelen King?" The woman warrior asked. She was young: Bronwyn guessed her to be about her own age, but it was hard to tell with dwarves...

"If I can. He's the best choice to face the Blight. Harrowmont would only do the minimum, and Orzammar needs more than that."

"It doesn't trouble you that he's a kinslayer?"

"He's the right choice to fight the Blight. That is all I ought to concern myself with. And I don't know that he is a kinslayer."

The dwarf woman smiled bitterly. "I do. Is it true that he has a son? Bhelen, I mean?"

Brosca overhead them and bounded over. "Does he ever! My sister Rica is the new prince's mother! He's the best-looking kid you ever saw!"

"The mother is a noble-hunter?" the warrior asked, with a faint hint of distaste. She slipped her helmet on again, completely covering her face.

"Hey!" Brosca protested. "As noble hunters go, my sister is the best! Bhelen doesn't have any reason to complain.

She worked hard to get where she is!"

"I noticed that your sister was a woman of some education," Bronwyn said kindly. "Your family must have made great sacrifices – "

Oghren cackled to himself, and Brosca just look puzzled.

She explained the situation to the surfacers. "Nah, it was Behrat. He was head of the Carta before Jarvia. Leske and me cacked him, too. He looked on Rica like sort of an investment. He took her off the street and paid for her to learn to dance and sing and play the string-harp and give massages. With her looks, he figured she just had to get lucky, and then he was going to claim to be our brother and live in the Palace with us. Bastard."

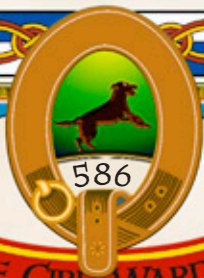
"Massages?" Leliana asked. "Music and dance yes, but *massages*?"

"Massages are good," Zevran countered. "People really like them, especially rich, important people. I myself have such training, and I would be delighted to share it with you... "

Alistair and Cullen looked at each other. Alistair ventured, "You mean your sister was... I mean... I don't mean to be rude..."

Brosca was still puzzled. Oghren slapped her shoulder. "These surface folk don't know about noble hunters! They're too polite to call your sister a whore!"

"A noble hunter is a really *high-class* kind of whore!" Brosca protested. "The very best, especially if they give their patron a boy! It's not like being a street-walker, or working



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in Walleda's house. You know dusters aren't allowed to work at anything respectable. So it's be a beggar or a whore or Carta muscle like me. Rica got lucky, and so did I!"



They wrapped the amazing crown in a cloth before they entered Orzammar. They had washed and polished their armor after their last sleep, and marched in looking nearly respectable. Without delay they presented themselves at the Chamber of the Assembly, which was in complete chaos, as threats and insults echoed from the ancient walls.

Steward Bandelor gave Bronwyn a look of desperate hope, when she appeared at the door of the Chamber. He proclaimed, "The Grey Warden has returned!" and the pandemonium hushed somewhat, while Bronwyn strode to the center of the room. Oghren flanked her on one side, and Alistair, holding the hidden crown, on the other.

Bronwyn looked at the bickering nobles without fear and without respect. These were not her people, and there was no shared history between them to soften their failings. It really was a wonder that Orzammar had survived at all, with leaders like this. Harrowmont and Bhelen stood above the fray, but were certainly part of it.

"Well, Warden? Have you news for us?" demanded the Steward.

Bronwyn declared, "I bring a crown forged by Paragon Caridin on the Anvil of the Void." She flicked away the coarse linen. A gasp of wonder rose as Alistair lifted it up



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for their inspection.

Oghren took up the tale. He was even sober. "Caridin was trapped in the body of a golem. This Warden granted him the mercy he sought, and in exchange he forged a crown for Orzammar's next king, chosen by the Ancestors themselves!"

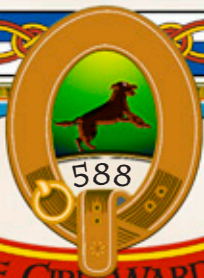
Bronwyn had not quite believed that such a claim would be credited for an instant by anyone with a full set of wits, but Oghren had known his own people best. Only Harrowmont expressed doubt. "I would like to believe Oghren's tale, but everyone knows that the Grey Warden is Bhelen's hireling."

The words were deeply offensive, but Bronwyn only gave the elderly man a burning look, and waited for the Steward to examine the crown himself. He said, deeply impressed, "Silence! This crown is of Paragon make and bears the seal of House Ortan. Tell us, Warden, who did Caridin choose?"

She smiled coldly, and made them wait, glancing over the room, watching the nobles eye each other, as they hoped to hear something to their advantage. From his place across the room, Bhelen stared at her with blazing expectation. She was not feeling particularly friendly to him at the moment, and so answered in a way calculated to make clear to him exactly how much he owed her.

"Caridin left the choice entirely to me."

An uproar. Harrowmont's supporters shook their staffs of office at her, and their leader shouted, "That is preposterous! Why would a Paragon leave the choice to a



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stranger who knows nothing of our ways?"

"Because I was *there*, and you were not, my lords! I delivered him from his penance, and his gratitude was *mine*!"

Banelor called the Assembly to order. "We have argued in these chambers too long. The will of the Paragon is that the Grey Warden decide. Tell us, Warden, who shall be King?"

"I grant the crown to Bhelen, son of Endrin."

Bhelen stamped triumphantly, and roared, "At last! This farce is ended and I can take my place on my father's throne!" He sneered at Harrowmont, "Do you accept this?"

Harrowmont sank to one knee. "I cannot defy a Paragon. Take your throne, King Bhelen."

Bhelen stepped forward, victorious, and Banelor set the crown on his head, saying, "Let the memories find you worthy, first among the lords of the Houses, the King of Orzammar."



Bhelen being Bhelen, Bronwyn was not surprised that his first act of office was to call for Harrowmont's execution. There were quite a few executions that day, and Bronwyn watched them impassively. Alistair was distressed by the idea that he had helped unleash a tyrant, but even he could not find fault with the honors and respect being heaped on the Wardens and their companions.

"I remember, I remember," he muttered to Bronwyn at the inevitable celebratory banquet. "Duncan always said we had to do whatever was necessary, but I'd rather be fighting darkspawn than playing politics!"



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"I, for one, am glad of a decent meal," Bronwyn answered, digging into her dinner. She kept her eyes on her plate and her companions, preferring to look there rather than at Harrowmont's head, on display above the throne. "Bhelen's giving us everything we wanted. We have his word, his signature, and his enthusiastic cooperation. Sending his army out against the Blight is his way of uniting the dwarven people behind him. He recognizes the darkspawn threat, and it also fits in with his agenda. We may not trust him personally, but he will honor his word because it suits his own plans. He wants stronger ties with the surface, and aiding in the defense against the Blight is the best way to do it." She speared another piece of lamb, imported from the surface, incredibly tender and juicy, and tossed it to Scout. "And now Kardol has agreed to lead the Legion of the Dead to our aid. The King's all for it, too. That's more than the treaty even called for. We've done well. Better than I hoped."

"I suppose Cailan will be pleased," Alistair sighed. "Can we go? Really soon?"

The others were looking at her. Alistair had spoken for them all.

"I agree that we should leave as soon as possible," she said, "but I don't even know what time of day it is. Cullen, I want you and Leliana to go check that out as soon as this gala event winds down. The rest of us will go back to the hostel and start getting our gear together. I need some straps replaced on my



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armor. If anyone else needs gear repaired, see me."

They were happy enough to return to the hostel and its baths again, though Bronwyn felt that no place underground could ever truly feel like home. She was approached by the head servant as soon as she arrived, and given a letter.

"Grey Warden," said the dwarf respectfully. "One of your order arrived a few days ago and left this for you. As you were not expected anytime soon, he did not linger, and only asked that you read it as soon as possible."

"A letter?" Alistair gazed on it in awe. "From other Grey Wardens? Wow! Open it, Bronwyn!"

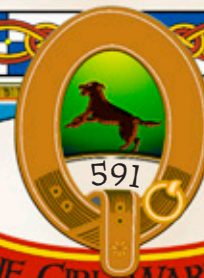
"Let's go to my room," she said, "It may contain Warden secrets." She snorted. "Warden secrets that we do not even know yet."

Alistair nearly carried her off in his eagerness. They closed the door on the little stone room, and Bronwyn broke the griffon seal. She read it aloud, but quietly.

Greetings, sister:

Word reached us some time ago, both of the disaster at Ostagar, and of your brave deeds there. More recently, we learned that you were on your way to Orzammar, to seek alliance with the dwarves, according to the ancient treaties.

Do not imagine that you are alone in your struggles. The Wardens of Orlais are also your brothers and sisters, and we stand ready to give you all the assistance in our power. To that end, I ask that you come to the border crossing at Gherlen's Pass. The guards on either side are always courteous to Grey



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Wardens, and allow us to move freely. Simply give a note to the guard on the Orlesian side, and word can be brought to Jader in less than a day. It would appear that both of you are young in the Wardens, and may not be aware of the full range of our responsibilities.

I Joined the Wardens with Duncan, and was proud to call him my friend.

Your brother,

Riordan

Senior Warden of Jader



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CHAPTER 23

SHIELD WALLS AND SIEGE ENGINES

OLD THEM! HOLD THEM! Cauthrien's shout lashed at the soldiers and mages at the palisade. The darkspawn impaled themselves on the ranks of pikes in their mindless bloodlust. Dead grinning faces were pushed forward by their fellows, their tainted blood oozing over the pike shafts.

"Another ogre! You mages! Freeze it!"

A hint of chill in the air, a crackle of cross-firing spells. The ogre stopped in its tracks. Some of the weaker darkspawn next to it crumpled to the ground, dead. Blue and green lights streaked to the ogre, prying its life away with tendrils of magic. The ogre took a faltering step, attempting to shake the spells. It took another, and then tottered over, crashing like a felled tree.

Loghain watched from the upper works, smiling grimly. His army had learned new ways of war to fight the darkspawn. He was learning new ways himself. Luckily for him, he had no noble knightly traditions to uphold.

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If a weapon worked, it was fine with him. Case in point: the curious machine the dwarven engineers were about to demonstrate for his edification.

From an observation post, a lookout bellowed. "They're forming for another attack! They're on the move!"

"We're ready now! Watch this, my lord!" the dwarf beside him cackled. "You're going to love it!"

Another mass of darkspawn broke out of the trees across the valley, rushing at the fortress in a wide dark wave.

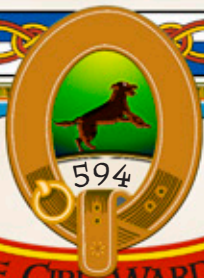
"Archers, make ready!" Cauthrien commanded. From the terraced breastworks and upper palisades, from the high redans thrown out from the stones of Ostagar, the archers nocked their arrows and bent their bows. And waited.

On the parapet where Loghain stood, the dwarven engineers were grinning wider than any darkspawn.

"Now!" screamed Dworkin Glovak, and his brother yanked the trigger. This huge mechanism — they called it a trebuchet — thudded into movement, launching its heavy missile at the massed darkspawn. Loghain watched its trajectory, soaring out, and then down, down...

A thunderous explosion. Smoke and fire rushed up from a massive gap in the darkspawn ranks. It was as if the Maker had struck them with a hammer. The darkspawn on the leading edge of the wave escaped the worst and came on, into bow range.

"Loose!" shouted Cauthrien. Hundreds of arrows soared out, seeking their targets.



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More darkspawn fell, and the mages raised a blizzard of ice and lightning, all along the line. One of the mages, a pale blonde girl named Gwyneth, looked a little crazed. It was astonishing that such a delicate creature could wreak such havoc. If Loghain had his way, not one of these mages would return to captivity in the Circle.

For some reason, he remembered that Wilder girl who had hung about the Highever tent. A hawk! He would ask Uldred if any of his mages could shape-shift into a bird. Such a scout would be invaluable, and if the Grand Cleric disapproved, she could put on a suit of mail and fight the bloody darkspawn herself.

The storm died down, giving the captains a chance to see what was left of the darkspawn. Unlike a human enemy that might retreat and live to fight another day, the darkspawn would keep on coming until you killed them, or they killed you.

"Loose!" Cauthrien shouted to the second rank of archers. This volley finished off most of the attackers. Few made it to the shield wall and the merciless barbed pikes. Most of the arrowheads were poisoned, since they had a better idea now about what slowed or killed the darkspawn, and what did not.

There was a little shed nestled safely behind the stones of the upper citadel where clever craftsmen – and women – brewed poisons day and night for the army. Wulffe and Urien were uncomfortable with the use of poisons in warfare: it was unchivalrous and simply not done. Loghain had shrugged off



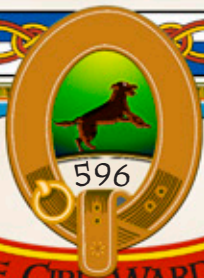
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their discomfort, more easily since Cousland and eventually Bryland had accepted new ways. Cousland, especially, was young and pragmatic, and was willing to do whatever was necessary to beat back the darkspawn.

What worked against other men did not necessarily work well against darkspawn: a cavalry attack was pointless. Horses could not be made to charge darkspawn. Nor were the mindless, fearless darkspawn intimidated by horses, as human footsoldiers were.

On the other hand, darkspawn were so stupid and so utterly unable to improvise that Loghain had discovered that long pikes behind a solid shield wall were tremendously effective against them. A company of Maric's Shield and a company of Highever men had been armed and trained to move as one, and to execute maneuvers efficiently, while not breaking formation. With archers and mages protected behind them, the pike companies could hold ranks until the darkspawn dashed themselves to pieces. And a pike was not expensive or a difficult weapon to use, nor were there complex techniques requiring years of training. One did not even have to be exceptionally strong, as long the shields were held in the correct overlapping position. They could double their defensive power, with one rank kneeling and the second rank standing behind them. The old Tevinter legions had used similar tactics, and they had conquered all of Thedas.

It was safer for his soldiers, too. After all, the darkspawn



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spread disease, and their casualties sprang from the Blight disease as much as from battle. Better to keep the darkspawn at the end of a ten-foot pole.

The Glovak brothers and their team – surface dwarves all – had arrived in Ostagar, offered their services for a reasonable sum, and had done a great deal to make Ostagar more defensible. Loghain had already ordered ditches dug and abbatis constructed, stretching out like fangs toward the enemy. The dwarves had done more: repairing the ancient stonework; creating fire and acid bombs and pit traps that would decimate the darkspawn; throwing out redoubts and redans to break up a massed attack; inspecting the camp and the fortress for possible tunneling.

They had caught two attempts to burrow up under the camp, and another to break into the lower chambers of the Tower of Ishal again. The tunnels had been collapsed, and poison poured into the breaches, killing anything down there that moved. It had been quite a success.

"So, my lord?" asked the older, saner brother, Voldrik. "What do you think?"

"Effective enough against a mass attack by darkspawn. In more normal times it would be a usable siege weapon against a fortified enemy."

"Yeah," Dworkin said, "that's what we thought. You could blow a breach in a wall bigger than the Hall of Heroes with this thing. So, whadda you say? Can we build some more for you?"



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Hard bargaining followed. The price the dwarves were asking for three of the monstrosities was astronomical. Then they showed him how neatly the machines could be disassembled and transported. Even when not fighting darkspawn, and with only stone as missiles, the engines were of great value. Loghain maintained his most impassive and unimpressed countenance, and eventually squeezed an agreement for five at the same price.

His gaze shifted toward the distant shadow of the trees. Movement had ceased out there. The darkspawn seemed to be done for the moment.

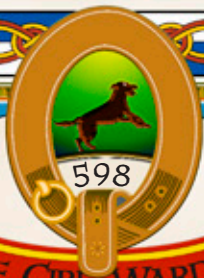
The men were cheering now, as time went by and the attack was not renewed. Loghain gave his officers grave nods, but did not cheer himself, even in his heart.

For all his successes, the darkspawn were growing no weaker. They would attack and die, but there were always more of them in a day or two. Was this what always happened during a Blight? Bronwyn clearly thought all these buildups were merely preliminary to the appearance of the Archdemon, who would manifest when the horde was large enough. At least the current attrition of the darkspawn ranks might delay that for some time.

But for how long? Could the army winter at Ostagar? That was the question that plagued Loghain, night after night. They *should* be able to, but *could* they?

Cauthrien ran up the steps, eyes shining.

"My lord! That was amazing!"



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Dworkin winked at her. "More where that came from, Missy!"

She actually smiled back, rather than taking offense. "I hope so! The whole center was pulverized. Just pulverized!"

Loghain moved away, to speak to her privately. No sooner had he done so, than she said, "You look tired, my lord. It should be quiet here for days, after the darkspawn spending themselves like this. Perhaps you should –"

"Don't try to mother me, Cauthrien!" he said, more sharply than he meant to. He lowered his voice, and said, "I shall return to my quarters. I need to talk to Cousland anyway, and see if our King found his company more amusing than mine."

The commanders, along with a great number of their men, were now housed in the Tower of Ishal, and stone-hard and stone-cold they found it. It had taken the elven servitors quite a long time to clear out the darkspawn and human dead and scrub it out, and even now one sometimes found...traces. Most difficult to get rid of was the huge ogre carcass at the top, Bronwyn's trophy. That had been hacked into pieces, and the elves had gingerly thrown them through the windows to the ground far below, rather than try to carry them downstairs. He had seen the remains himself, and was impressed by anyone who took on such a monster alone.

A sudden tingling: a boost of vitality and well-being flowed through him. Loghain stopped and glared,



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catching the sight of the hem of that little mage Keili's robes, just fluttering around a corner. *Interfering girl* –

He stalked across the bridge, barely noticing his guards, deep in thought. With the end of the attack, the mountains and forests surrounding Ostagar had fallen into stillness again, a dreamy peace broken only by the hoarse shouts of soldiers and the chopping of wood.

Somehow Ferelden had to keep feeding this mob in the south. Ostagar and its environs was pretty thoroughly bare of game now. Either they were hunted out, by human or darkspawn, or the wiser and more wary had fled.

Once in his room, away from prying eyes, he could sag wearily into his chair, and drop his head into his hands. Yes, they were holding the darkspawn. Yes, the mages were performing splendidly. Yes, the dwarven engineers had done wonders. All of this would mean nothing, of course, if Orlais decided to march over the border. Stripped of its defenses and its defenders, northern Ferelden could be swallowed in a week. Perhaps it was only fear of the Blight that was holding the Orlesians back. Perhaps it was only the shadow of his own reputation.

Winter would be upon them in only a few months. *Could* the army winter here in the south? Perhaps the real question was: could the army winter here under constant attack, with its supply lines threatened? And what if the Archdemon, the Grey Wardens' great bogeyman, actually made an appearance? How big and how dangerous was



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an Archdemon, anyway? What were its capabilities against their fortifications? How did one fight an enemy that could fly? He had filched Cailan's Grey Warden books to find out, but to his disgust he discovered that Cailan had only brought the silly ones: fairytales with colored illustrations of Wardens and their loyal pet griffons.

He should talk to that madman Dworkin some more. Could a ballista be modified to shoot a bolt into the air? Could it hit a flying target? Was a ballista bolt too heavy to ascend far enough? Would it also need modification? Maybe if it were lighter, thinner, poisoned – no, it would fall to earth again, possibly on the very engineers who had launched it. But if it exploded in the air...

Boots scraped outside his door, and his guard challenged the newcomer. A young, breathless voice answered.

"I'm a courier arrived with letters from Denerim. This lot is for Teyrn Loghain."

Loghain raised his voice. "Bring them in."

His guard showed the courier in: a young lad smelling of horse sweat and cheap leather. He bowed shyly, and set the letter bag on the table, where Loghain was pointing.

"Any trouble on the road?"

"A bit, my lord. Darkspawn patrol ambushed us about five miles north. Killed one of the horses, but there were only four of them, so we were all right. Darkspawn attacked Lothering a few nights ago, but the militia and the Templars held them off. There's some letters in the bag about that, too."



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Loghain grunted and waved him out, and then set about looking at what he had. His secretary emerged from his own little cubbyhole.

"My lord! Allow me!"

Impatiently, Loghain dumped the contents of the bag on the table, sorting through it. Some of the letters he threw at the secretary. There was one with the Queen's seal that he would look at himself. Another... he paused at the bear crest. He would read Howe's letter last, after all the rest. So Howe wanted to make terms, did he? Loghain sneered, and the secretary flicked an uneasy glance his way. Nothing with a griffon on it. His secretary looked through the papers before him.

"A letter from Bann Ceorlic, my lord. A letter from one Ser Bryant, a Templar of the Lothering Chantry." The secretary smirked, "A letter of a sort from a fellow named Tobery, calling himself Captain of the Lothering Militia..."

"What does Ceorlic want?"

"He's protesting the conduct of 'that Cousland girl,' as he calls her. His seneschal wrote him about her taking his horses and leaving a promissory note, and his lordship says this was not at all his intent in allowing the use of his manor. He demands immediate restitution, or her arrest for horse-thieving. He's also very angry to hear that a village militia was organized without his permission and contrary to his wishes. He wants to know what you're going to do about it, my lord."



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Loghain scoffed, and poured himself a cup of cider. "Set it aside. I'll worry about Bann Ceorlic later. What's in the two letters from Lothering?"

"This letter from Ser Bryant details an attack two nights ago — from the time the letter was written. Around fifty darkspawn made an assault on the village. Luckily the village lookouts saw them coming in plenty of time and sounded the alarm. The militia got behind the town walls and did pretty good service with their bows. Not all of them: some of the militia ran on home at the first sight of the brutes, but enough stayed that they accounted for a good half of the enemy at long distance. The Templars reinforced them. Three villagers were killed, one of them a child. A party of darkspawn attacked the manor, too, and there was some fire damage, but luckily there's been a lot of rain lately... There's implicit plea for troops to bolster Lothering's defenses."

"No doubt," Loghain snorted.

"And he commends the conduct of the militia captain, Tobery Salt, who fought most bravely and effectively."

"Let's hear Captain Salt's report," Loghain said.

The secretary raised his brows, and read:

"Yer Lordship.

"I am Tobery Salt of Lothering and the Gurl Warden came throo awile bak and made mee Capten of the Lothering Milisha. Yer lordship wee have dun ar best but the Darkspoon ar too much for Man nor Beste and too nights bak they attaked us



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and ther war Peeple kilt ded by them Monsters and even if the litle Child was an Elf she was a Child of the Maker. If the Gurl Warden had not ordred us to bring our Wepons to the Muster and made a Milisha we wud all bee ded. So we ar thankful to her. We need mor Men heer in Lothering. Can yer Lordship send sum?

Respectfully,

Yer sarvant,

Capten Tobery"

The secretary set down the dirty parchment and remarked, "A hand more accustomed to the sword than to the pen, apparently."

Loghain bridled a little at the condescension. "A good thing for Lothering, too!" He wondered briefly what his soft-handed secretary would have made of the brash young Loghain, who had so grudgingly learned his letters from his mother at the rough kitchen table of their farmhold. He had not been more than barely literate until he was in his twenties.

"I will take Captain Tobery's request under advisement. I may be able to spare a company. The villagers may find they don't like billeting troops, but we cannot lose Lothering."

No, they could not lose it. The Imperial Highway had to be kept open, and Lothering was that vital, closest link.

"I'll read these others myself. Do what you like with yourself until this evening."

"My lord." The secretary happily bowed himself out the door, and Loghain was left alone to deal with his two letters in peace, Anora's first. It was in cipher, of course, but it was their personal cipher that he knew well.

Dearest Father,

I would like to say that I am well, and that everything is quite under control. That would be a slight exaggeration. I am well, I suppose, as far as physical health is concerned, or I would be well, did I not have this constant sensation of being squeezed by events. At times I feel that I am Queen of the Palace in Denerim, and of nothing else.

As to Denerim itself, I shall write more below, but I first wanted you to know that I received a very curious missive from Arl Howe: a very soothing, flattering epistle indeed, assuring me of his heartfelt loyalty. I feel some alarm even at his name, for my people tell me there is word that he is hiring mercenaries at a great rate, though no one seems to know from whence his gold is coming.

He insists that he has written proof that the Couslands were in league with the Empress of Orlais to overthrow Cailan's rule. According to these documents, Bryce was to have had the crown; and to strengthen the ties between the two nations, Bronwyn was to have been married to the Imperial Prince Florestan. That, Arl Howe writes, would explain Bryce's curious reluctance to betroth her elsewhere, or even to allow her to go to Court, where she might have become personally attached in a manner that might hinder her parents' schemes.

Granted, it is odd that no arrangements were made for her, especially now that it would seem that gossip was in error, and that she is not disfigured or half-witted or otherwise unpresentable. However, I find the story very difficult to believe. Rumor also had it that she was in love inappropriately, and while I shudder at the implication that Cailan was the target of her misguided affections, it would be just as good an explanation as some sort of plot to transform a Fereldan shield maiden into an Orlesian princess!

Arl Howe, in an attempt to seem reasonable, states that he thinks it possible that Bronwyn was unaware of her family's plans for her: that they indulged her reluctance to bind herself to any than the object of her affections merely in order to keep her unattached, waiting for the right moment to send her to Orlais to cement the alliance.

While we are on the subject of Bronwyn Cousland, Bann Ceorlic sought audience with me to protest the conduct of the Grey Wardens at his manor in Lothering. His seneschal wrote to him of the requisitions and the organization of a village militia, and he is very indignant. Must Bronwyn Cousland be so high-handed? The last I heard of her, she was heading west to Orzammar by the northern land route. The dwarven king, I understand, is dead, and there is a dispute over the throne, so it is unlikely she will get any help from that quarter for some time.

Refugees from the north are in Denerim, and they say that Arl Howe is dealing very harshly with Highever in his attempt to put down unrest. The unrest has spilled over the borders into



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West Hill somewhat, and it has trickled down the Pilgrim's Path, nearly to the gates of Denerim. Something must be done, but I have not men to do it.

And there is unrest in Denerim as well. Bann Vaughan has locked down the Alienage. Some elves stole the remains of the young girl Vaughan killed for her defiance, and he has forbidden the elves to leave their quarter as a punishment. Not all of them, however, for I have learned he is shipping parties of elves out of the city under cover of night. They may be going as laborers to Amaranthine, which implies an alliance between Vaughan and Howe. Such an alliance, it need not be said, makes me very uneasy. Did Arl Urien really mean to give his son such a free hand?

I will not even ask you if Cailan is behaving himself. I am already resigned to the truth...

Loghain read it to the end, and then decided to read it again before he attempted a reply. There was much to consider here, and most of it unpleasant.

After a long swallow of cider, he broke the seal of Howe's letter, as reluctantly as he would have put his hand in a sack of snakes.

Greetings, my lord Teyrn,

Despite rumor to the contrary, I remain your loyal colleague, and the faithful subject of King Cailan and Queen Anora. It was only when I received irrefutable proof of an Orlesian plot to overthrow Ferelden, and make us once again slaves of Orlais, that I struck a blow against the perpetrators...



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Here is was: Anora had not quite presented it fairly, or, more probably, Howe had not sent her copies of the documents. They were only copies, so there was still the issue of forgery, either by Howe himself or by others, but if Howe believed them genuine, it was not surprising that he had taken violent action.

Howe himself did not believe that Bronwyn was party to any plot. Loghain was certain she was not. He considered himself a fairly good judge of character, and nothing in Bronwyn's demeanor or conduct suggested the faintest hint of duplicity. She had, in fact, spoken out strongly against Orlesian intervention, and had presented him with a reasonable alternative.

Bronwyn as an Orlesian Imperial Princess? The absurdity of the thought made him smile briefly. If some mask-wearing, pastry-eating poltroon tried to transform her into a twittering courtier, she would probably break his nose. Then he thought more on the matter, imagining Bryce and Eleanor suddenly commanding her onto a ship, and her tears and resistance. Would she have obeyed her parents? He frowned. Yes. If they had used all the power that her filial affection gave them, then, yes. She would have gone, and done what she mistakenly believed to be her duty. It was a disturbing line of thought.

What about Fergus Cousland, who was all ways that mattered the effective second in command, here in Ostagar? He was a useful and hard-working young man,

and Loghain had no qualms about admitting in the privacy of his own thoughts that he wished Cailan were more like the young teyrn. Would Bryce have told Fergus about this scheme? The bluff, honest young face did not seem the mask of an intriguer, but perhaps it was merely a very good mask indeed.

Except that the man's wife and son had been killed, and if Cousland had known why Howe had attacked, and if Orlesian plotting was at the heart of it, would not the young man be wracked with guilt as well as grief? Cousland's anger was directed outward entirely, as far as Loghain could tell. He spoke of Howe as a treacherous, ambitious snake, whose own lust for the teyrnir of Highever had caused him to stab his old friend in the back.

It did not add up. Perhaps Bryce had kept his own counsel, or shared some of it with Eleanor. Perhaps she knew only that he was seeking to make a firmer peace with Orlais, in the footsteps of Maric. There was the long diplomatic visit, the gifts which the Couslands had not attempted to conceal...

If these were forgeries, they were very good ones. The letter from Bryce sounded like the man: elegant, polished, dignified, and direct. The confidential assessment of Cailan, while scathing, was all too accurate. It was not impossible to credit that a man could, in good faith, consider Cailan an inadequate leader in the best of times, and a disaster in the worst. What was written about Anora hurt more.

Cousland granted Anora's abilities and intelligence, while deploring her base birth. He had not opposed the match at the time, since it was clearly King Maric's own choice, but he had come to believe that Maric was wrong. The marriage had not been blessed with children, and the succession was once again an open question.

Still, the question remained: why had Howe not presented this information to Loghain, or arrested Bryce on their journey south? He could have brought Bryce directly before the King, to face his justice. Fergus would already have been in their hands. Did Howe think that that Eleanor would have opened the port of Highever to Orlesians warships, and allowed her son and husband to have been executed? The only heir left would have been Bronwyn, whom the Orlesians would have been forced to set up as their puppet queen, since the little boy was just too young to make a credible viceroy. Maker help them. He could not imagine Bronwyn permitting any such thing.

Unless the King had killed her father and brother. Then it would be a blood feud, and she might very well accept the alliance with Orlesians in order to have revenge. Perhaps they would have brought in the Empress' cousin, that Imperial Prince, to marry her. That bastard Meghren had never attempted to conciliate Ferelden by marrying a native bride. Perhaps the Orlesians had learned from their past mistakes. An Orlesian prince, as consort to the Fereldan heiress-presumptive: now that was something

that many of the nobles would accept, though it galled him to admit it, even to himself.

Where did Howe say he had come by these documents, anyway? A disaffected bard? That was not promising. The bard could just as likely be a provocateur, sent deliberately into Ferelden to foment suspicion and civil war. Loghain stirred uneasily, considering how very easy it would have been for Howe to make his case, had Bronwyn not been here and so obviously loyal.

An awkward situation. If the documents were fakes, Howe would have to be brought to justice, and even then, there would be those who would whisper at a cover-up. If the documents were genuine...

If the documents were genuine, then Bryce and Eleanor had paid for their treason with their lives, and the life of their innocent grandson. Howe had still not played the part of a loyal subject, for his troops were still in the north, consolidating his power, rather than in the King's service, supporting the war against the Blight. From a pragmatic standpoint, the Couslands were more valuable than the Howes. Fergus was here, with his men, and performing good service. Bronwyn was trying to raise armies for the kingdom...

Unless she wasn't. Loghain grimaced. She had gone west to Orzammar, but Orlais was in the same direction...

No. Probably the best thing, as long as Fergus and Bronwyn could be cleared, would be to leave it to a contest of arms before the Landsmeet. Fergus' odds against Howe

were better than good. Fergus could kill Howe, and the King could mediate an armistice between the warring families. He did not think much of the possibility of persuading Fergus Cousland to marry Delilah Howe, the best option for peace. And persuading Thomas Howe to marry Bronwyn... no... the lad probably would be delighted to marry Bronwyn, but Bronwyn had already refused him, and Loghain did not see the need to sacrifice her. He had other, better, plans for Bronwyn Cousland... as long as she was not a traitor to Ferelden...

"Out of the way!"

"Make way for His Majesty!"

Shouts and shoving pushed milling soldiers aside, where they crowded at the north side of the fortress, the terminus of the Imperial Highway.

"Maker's Blood, that hurts!"

"You're going to be fine, Your Majesty," Wynne told him, her voice warm and soothing. "A little rest, and you'll never know you were wounded."

"I'll never forget an arrow that went all the way *through my side!*" Cailan shouted back.

Fergus led the way, his frown deepening. Loghain had thought the King might respond better to a younger man, since lately Cailan had lived to ignore or subvert Loghain's every order. The King was in nominal command of the northern defenses, but Fergus was supposed to keep him

under control, and safe. He had failed. The King had rushed forward from cover, been wounded, and now they were taking him back to face Loghain's fury.

Not that it was a particularly bad wound. The arrow was not even poisoned. In the excitement of the moment, Cailan had stood up, exposing himself needlessly, and waved his greatsword on high, in a heroic, menacing gesture. He had promptly been shot, and the arrow had gone through the skin right under his arm, where there was a gap in his armor. A flesh wound, only, but it had hurt, and there had been blood, and the King, it appeared, really, really disliked pain.

The darkspawn had been dispatched, and a larger party they had been trailing had suddenly moved south, apparently to reinforce the big attack on the east side of the fortress, down in the valley. That had been defeated too, as Fergus learned as he shouldered his way to the Tower of Ishal, supporting the King on one side.

"Those dwarves threw a bloody big bomb at them from one of those machine things of theirs," a sergeant shouted back in answer to Fergus' questions. "Smashed them to bits. Knocked the stuffing out of them for a week or two, I'll warrant!"

Fergus nodded at the man, laughing, "I thought it was thunder, and under a clear sky and all!"

The King was scowling, and Fergus rearranged his face into the proper expression of concern for the King's pain and distress.

"I've had just about enough of Ostagar," Cailan complained bitterly. "If we had some Wardens here, this wouldn't have happened!"

Fergus bit back a retort to the implied criticism of his sister. The great door of the Tower of Ishal opened, and they made their way to the King's quarters, waving off the questions of the guards.

"His Majesty is perfectly all right. A minor wound."

"It could have gone all the way through my lung!" Cailan contradicted under his breath.

Fergus replied, just as quietly, "We don't want to alarm the men, Your Majesty."

"I know, I know! I just want to lie down a bit!"

The king was helped to bed, and hovering servants removed the armor and cut the bloody shirt away. A young knight of Highever, Ser Rona, pushed forward, her face anguished. Fergus gave the young woman a hard stare, and she blushed and looked away. It had come to his ears this morning that she was the King's latest bed warmer. Fergus was sorry for her family's shame when they heard of it, and he planned to tell Ser Rona so himself. Wynne cossetted the king with more poultices and healing spells.

"Ow! You don't have to rip the skin off!"

"This will ease the pain, Your Majesty..."

Fergus looked on, brows knit, and did not turn around to acknowledge the new presence in the room. The subtle shifting of the soldiers and the looks told him who it was.

Ser Rona slipped away, face averted.

"It's not a serious wound," Fergus told Loghain quietly. "Arrow took him through a bit of the skin near the armpit. It surprised him, naturally."

"Naturally."

Wynne shooed them out, citing the King's need for rest, sparing a little more deference in her shooing for Loghain and Fergus.

Cailan shouted over her head. "We need to talk, Loghain! After dinner tonight!"

Fergus nodded toward his own quarters. The two men rounded the curving hall, and closed the door for privacy.

"What happened?" Loghain asked, without preamble.

"He was posing for a statue again," Fergus answered bluntly. "He stood straight up and waved his sword very impressively. That's when the genlock got him. It completely ruined the effect."

Loghain snorted in disgust and walked to the window, looking out over the camp. "Our King tires of army life, I think."

"He said it wouldn't have happened if the Wardens were here. Bronwyn doesn't deserve to be blamed because he has to make a spectacle of himself."

"Men say stupid things when they're hurt or frightened. Stupid, petty things. I grant that he's been moody and morose lately, but the King loves the Grey Wardens."

Fergus shook his head. "He feels abandoned by them. I suspect he'll have something unpleasant to say at dinner."

The servants were dismissed, the doors closed, and the King and his nobles were left to discuss how things stood. Cailan sat back against the carefully arranged cushions of his chair, his wound heavily bandaged.

"There's so much I need to be doing in Denerim," he pointed out. "I can't neglect all my other duties because we're at war. I think I should look in at the capital — see how things are going — see Anora. I'll return in a few weeks, as the weather permits."

Loghain listened to him in silence, feeling the words like a death knell. If Cailan left the army now, Loghain wondered if he would ever come back at all. Certainly, he would not share the privations of winter in the south with them. And who knew what he would get up to, there in Denerim?

And the King's words launched the inevitable cascade of complaints from the nobles, who had been gone so long from their own lands.

"I think the King has a point," Arl Urien agreed, seizing on the possibility of escape. "I don't like the things I'm hearing from Denerim. At my age, a man needs to take care of himself. I could ride back with the King, and send my son in my place. Maybe it's time Vaughan got a taste of campaigning!"

There was some sympathy for him, since Urien had not been particularly well of late. He was only a little older than Loghain, but had not lived the same kind of life,

nor taken care of himself in the same way. He suffered badly from the joint-ache and a persistent cough that the Healers could not quite eradicate. And after all, perhaps his son *should* experience warfare at first hand against an armed foe, instead of bullying the elves of Denerim.

"We're holding the darkspawn, Loghain," Arl Wulffe said, considering the matter. "We're holding them. I know they keep coming back, but we've held them so far. We've got to do something about the north and all this Howe business. I've heard from my sons and from Alfstanna and Reginalda. Things are in a blasted bloody mess. I know *you* want to do something, Fergus!"

Fergus looked at Loghain, bleak despair in his eyes. "More than anything, I want to kill that bastard. But we can't simply leave, and let the darkspawn swarm up and have the country. We're holding the darkspawn successfully, but *only* holding them, and there always seem to be more."

"With Orlesian reinforcements," Cailan said airily, "We'd be free to deal with the unrest. All I have to do is say the word, and the Empress will send us their Wardens, and four legions of chevaliers besides."

Loghain glared at him. "And just how," he asked, his voice ominously soft, "*just how* do you propose to get them to *leave*, once they're invited over the border?"

"We're doing all right on our own, Your Majesty," Bryland said. The very mention of the Orlesians recalled

the bitter memory of running for his life, terrified and hungry, after the disaster at White River. "We've got the dwarven engineers and all these mages now. That's made a tremendous difference. And Bronwyn's gone to Orzammar, I hear, to raise the dwarves..."

Cailan slammed down his wine cup. "I have heard from the Queen that the dwarven king is dead and the throne is in contention. Bronwyn will be cooling her heels in Orzammar for months!" He subsided into his carved chair, sulking. "I wanted her to go to the Dalish *first*..."

Very offended at more criticism of Bronwyn, Fergus gave his king an unfriendly stare. "Why do the Orlesian Grey Wardens, if they're so eager to help us, need the Empress' permission? Why don't they just come and leave the chevaliers behind? Bronwyn said she'd be glad of some veteran Wardens to fill her in on the lore. We could admit a few as advisers and such. Why the Wardens and the chevaliers?"

"Because that was the deal she offered!" Cailan shot back, furious at being challenged.

Urien supported the king. "It would mean some needed rest for the army, if we could leave the Orlesians to it, down here the South. Nothing here that anyone wants, anyhow..."

"Nothing but the southern half of the kingdom!" Bryland shouted at him. "Maybe it doesn't matter to you, but South Reach is only days from Ostagar, and I don't plan on being ousted by those bastards again!"

Loghain sat back, refusing to intervene. More were with him than with Cailan. It was Wulffe who interposed, his lined face grave and weary.

"I've got to speak plain, Your Majesty. Nobody wants thousands of Orlesian chevaliers prancing down the Imperial Highway, feeding off our crops like they used to, bold as you please! We're doing all right here, as Leonas says, and we'll do better when we get those reinforcements your sister is after, Fergus. I say we've got to do something about the trouble in the north. People are hurting. My boys write me that they've heard dark things out of Highever City. Fergus is too loyal to say how much he wants to go north and settle with Howe. It's got to be done, and sooner better than later. This kind of trouble makes us look weak, and not just to the Orlesians!"

Loghain studied young Cousland. He had been pleased by the lad's words opposing the package deal of chevaliers and Wardens. It tended to support his own belief that Fergus was not involved in any conspiracy with the Orlesians.

"What do you say, my lord of Highever?" he asked quietly.

Fergus sat back, and looked Loghain in the eye, to the furious annoyance of the king. "I agree with Wulffe that we can't let this go on with Howe. He's a traitor, not just to my family, to whom he swore loyalty as a vassal, but to all Ferelden. He hasn't supported the war against the darkspawn, and he's letting us take casualties while he builds up his power and gets rich from picking the

corpses of the people he murdered, like the vulture he is. He's tormenting the people of my teyrnir. My own men are restless and angry. They want to go home and see to their families. Howe must be stopped." He sighed, frowning. "Does anyone think that he could be called to a session of the Landsmeet for a challenge? I would like to meet him face to face, and make him pay for what he's done."

"He'd never come unless he thought it was a sure thing," Bryland muttered.

Cailan was pleased. This was something that he could do, and it would give him a perfect excuse to spend some time for needed rest and recreation in Denerim. "I could call a Landsmeet. I know you can't possibly leave the Army, Loghain, so Anora could represent Gwaren for you. Yes, Fergus, I'll give you your opportunity to challenge Howe. You could come with me, Urien, and send Vaughan down for a taste of campaigning. Give him some experience, eh?" he laughed. "If Howe fails to show, then we'll have to move against him. Perhaps by *then*," he granted to Fergus, "Bronwyn might have succeeded in her mission, and more of the army will be available to deal with something other than darkspawn."

Loghain hated the idea of Cailan on the loose, but Anora would be waiting in Denerim, and presumably could rein him in. No, he could not leave the army. It was extremely unlikely that Howe would put his head in the lion's mouth of the Landsmeet, when Fergus was so much in favor at the moment. The question was: which of the Highever

troops could they spare from the army? For it was certain that a considerable force would have to be mobilized to deal with Howe. Not the precious newly-trained pikemen, but two companies of foot and one of Highever knights, perhaps. Urien would want his personal guard, but that is all he would get, for Loghain would not allow him to decimate the army, especially since there was an implicit promise that Bann Vaughan would replace his father.

More talk, more debate. Cailan, having gained his own point of escaping the boredom and danger of the Wardenless army, was prepared to be generous.

"Very well. I shall leave in two days with Fergus and Urien. I'm sure we can raise more men as we go north, Loghain. I wouldn't want to strip the army bare, while you're sitting down here in the south besieged!"

There was an uneasy stir in the room at the word. No one liked to imagine how bad things might become if the darkspawn horde swelled its numbers even more.

"It is not yet a siege, Cailan," Loghain said, keeping his voice level. "In time, it might well become one. For now, there is no better place than Ostagar to hold the darkspawn at bay. If we pull back, the darkspawn will follow, and then where will we make our stand? Lothering? South Reach? *Denerim?*"

CHAPTER 24

A ROCK AND
A HARD PLACE

HIS IS THE PLAN," Bronwyn told her companions. "The dwarven army will move out in two weeks, and go by the Deep

Roads to an exit east of Lake Calenhad where they will resupply. They will go south to the sealed exit just east of Lake Belennas. Bhelen is rallying surface dwarves to set up supply depots in both places. Some contingents will march on the surface to become acclimated."

She produced a map drawn on parchment scraped thin to transparency. It proved to be a map of southwestern Thedas: Orlais and Ferelden. It was to exactly the same scale as a heavy vellum map of the Deep Roads. The map of Thedas could be superimposed over the Deep Roads. The sight intrigued the surfacers, and was of some interest to Oghren. Brosca, to whom both maps and writing were unplumbed mysteries, palmed another piece of some surface fruit that was bright red on the outside and then white and sweet when she bit into it. Wardens ate well. If for nothing else, she'd join for the food.



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Alistair measured distance by stretching out his fingers. "So the Anvil of the Void was under the Dales in the south of Orlais. The same distance, south southeast, takes you to that exit past Lake Belennas."

"But you do not intend to sit here and wait for two weeks, surely," Sten frowned.

"No, indeed!" Bronwyn waved everyone forward to give them the news. "We have received an invitation of sorts that will fill some of that time. A senior Grey Warden from Jader has written to us, offering assistance. Alistair and I have agreed that at the very least, we will go to the border and meet with this Warden Riordan. We hope to hold a Joining ceremony for you, rather than having to wait for the opportunity to return to Denerim, which frankly does not seem likely to happen anytime soon."

"Will we go to Jader?" asked Leliana, tense with excitement. "Jader! It is so close! It is hardly a day away!"

"What's Jader?" Brosca asked, tossing her apple core under the table. Scout sniffed disapprovingly.

Alistair told her, "Jader is a city in Orlais. It's the closest Orlesian city to Orzammar. In fact, it's the closest surface city to Orzammar. The closest Fereldan city is West Hill, and that's a day north of that Hero's Rest inn we stayed at. They say that Jader is the most Ferelden of all the Orlesian cities."

"Well..." Leliana scoffed. "The most Fereldan? Perhaps, but it is really nothing like Ferelden at all. It is a charming place, and many of the public buildings are very handsome



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and faced with dressed greenstone..."

"Sounds fancy," Oghren nodded. He had moved into the Wardens' hostel with them and seemed to have no desire to leave. He had told Bronwyn and Alistair that he had no future in Orzammar, and no past he cared to remember. He had not exactly expressed a desire to be a Warden, but he wanted to continue to fight at their side.

"Our plan is *not* to go to Jader," Bronwyn said firmly, giving Alistair a significant look. "I don't see any reason to go that far out of our way. We will travel to the border fortress of Gherlen's Halt. I will cross the border, and give a letter to the commander of the Orlesian fortress of Roc du Chevalier. Warden Riordan says that a courier there can bring my letter him within a day. I hope that this Riordan will come and that we can arrange for a proper Joining for those of you who wish it. And there are other matters that Alistair and I need to discuss with him as well."

"Roc du Chevalier," Cullen murmured. "I've heard of that place. Though people just call it the Rock. Back during the Occupation, a lot of Fereldans disappeared into its dungeons, and were never seen again."



Some would have to ride double. There were no more horses to be had, and no time to acclimate the dwarves to the concepts of horsemanship.

"Cullen, look after Brosca. Zevran, Oghren will be with you."

"You are a hard mistress, *bellissima*," sighed the elf. "It is,

perhaps, a just punishment, but a stern one, nonetheless.”

Oghren was not particularly pleased, either. “Say, Boss, you couldn’t see your way clear to putting me behind Red, could you? Huh. Thought not.”

There was another party member to provide for. On their way up to the surface, Bronwyn was waylaid by a warrior of the Legion of the Dead, who quietly asked for a word with her before she left.

Wondering if Kardol had a final message for her, Bronwyn allowed herself to be drawn into the shadows. The warrior removed the heavy helmet, and Bronwyn recognized the woman who had accompanied them to the city.

“I hear you are recruiting Grey Wardens. I wish to volunteer.”

She was a handsome woman, with strong, regular features, unmarked by duster tattoos. Bronwyn sensed an air of someone accustomed to respect — even command. She was a sound fighter, from all reports, but Bronwyn did not want to antagonize Kardol, and said so.

“Here is his permission,” the woman said, passing her a parchment. “He gives leave for me to accompany the Grey Wardens, as he thinks it will help to have one of our number accustomed to the surface when we march out. That is perfectly sensible, of course, but in truth, I would want to leave, whether the dwarves mobilized or no.”

Bronwyn considered her. “There is little to choose between the Legion and Wardens, as far as I can see. We

are both pledged to fight darkspawn until death.”

“That is true,” the woman granted, “but at least I will not die in service to *King Bhelen*. My belly roils at the very thought of it.”

“You are a partisan of Lord Harrowmont?” Bronwyn asked. There were plenty of those about Orzammar, and very discontented they were.

“No. My name is — or was — Gytha Aeducan. I am King Bhelen’s sister, whom he killed.”

“So she’s technically dead?” Alistair whispered loudly. Bronwyn hushed him. Much of their conversation could be covered by the sound of him honing his beautiful new sword. They had found it in the Deep Roads, long abandoned, and it was a beauty: a dragonbone longsword, richly enchanted with runes. It was a sword fit for a King...or a Warden. They had done a bit of research, and believed they knew who it had once belonged to — a Warden who had come, centuries ago, to the Deep Roads to fight his last battle.

Bronwyn admired the blade, and whispered, on a thread of breath, “Yes. She was put out in the Deep Roads without armor or weapons; without an opportunity to defend herself before the lords of the Assembly. She found the Legion and joined them, but in doing so, lost all right to challenge her brother for the crown of Orzammar. She is legally dead, and that, by ancient law, cannot be reversed. She has no future here.”

Alistair grinned. "It's true. Being a Grey Warden is totally better than being dead. You're going to bring her along, aren't you? Gossip says that she's quite a warrior – she even fought in her own Honor Proving and defeated all comers!"

"Frankly, I'm worried about how well our dwarves will adjust to the surface, but yes, I won't refuse her. If it's all right with Kardol, I see no reason to object. I'm glad she's kept her helmet on, though. Someone might recognize her, and the King would certainly get the wrong impression, if he heard she was in our company. She wishes to use the name Astrid, which was the name of the warrior who last wore the armor she bears now. It was her name in the Legion. I'll have Leliana ride double with her. If we're attacked, the dwarves are to dismount immediately and fight on foot."

"And then we hope that Riordan will put together some sort of Joining for our recruits."

"I don't see why he couldn't," Bronwyn said, pulling a flask out of a bag. "While I didn't have everyone gather a vial of their own, I collected this. Anders put a preservation charm on it for me. There should be enough here, don't you think?"



Oghren dealt with the surface the best of the three dwarves. He swayed, his eyes rolling a bit, and took deep breaths.

"Remember what I told you," Tara said anxiously. "Don't look at the sky. Look at the ground. Focus on that. I know what it's like to see the sun and the sky for the first time!"

Brosca stared at the sun in awe. "It's so bright. It's like a thousand torches! It hurts to look at it!"

Anders grabbed her head and pushed it down. "Don't stare at the sun! You can go blind!"

Astrid – the former Gytha Aeducan – said nothing at all, but clutched the stone of the doors of Orzammar, looking sick. She glanced briefly at Bronwyn, saw her sympathetic look, and snarled softly. She shook her head, fixed her eyes of the ground, and walked forward into the sunlight.

"This is weird," Brosca complained, clinging to Cullen. "It's like being on the outside of the world!"

"We *are* on the outside of the world," Cullen pointed out.

"Yeah. That's just *wrong*." She hid her face behind his broad back.

It took a day or two before the dwarves could deal with simply walking back and forth from the inn to the stable and back. None of them had ever seen a horse, and it seemed a good idea to accustom them to the idea that they would be sitting on those tall, powerful, four-legged creatures.

"Like brontos," considered Oghren, "but skinnier."

"How smart are they?" wondered Brosca. "Are they smart like Scout or stupid like nugs? Do they eat what we do, or do they hunt their own prey? Are they always big like that?"

Tara told her, "There are short horses called ponies. We don't have any, though. Bronwyn likes big horses."

Brosca nodded, and looked closer. "Is that horse – ?" She looked again and burst out laughing. "Somebody cut his

balls off! Did he get in a fight?"

"Horses are cut to keep them docile," explained the better-read Astrid, gritting her teeth. "And *quiet*."

"I can be quiet," Oghren assured them all. "And I'm going to sleep in my armor, just in case anybody's wondering..."

Anders urged his horse forward, and muttered in Bronwyn's ear. "They're not happy. Not happy at all."

Bronwyn looked back at the dwarves, uncomfortably riding pillion behind her other companions. "I don't blame them, but it can't be helped. We'll be at Gherlen's Halt by nightfall, and they'll be indoors then. Of course it's very unpleasant and disorienting for them. Do you think it could actually make them sick?"

"Possibly. It's good that they'll have a rest under a stone roof tonight. I'll keep an eye on them. So will Tara. She understands what they're feeling."

Sure enough, Tara was chatting earnestly with a sullen Astrid, who was riding behind Leliana. Leliana, too, put in some cheerful words. Oghren took frequent swigs from the leather flask at his side. Brosca was completely hidden by Cullen, except for her arms, which were wrapped tightly around him. The *ex-Templar* looked bemused. He sensed Bronwyn's gaze and turned red. Bronwyn hid her smile at the sight.

They stopped for a meal when the sun was directly above them, and Zevran surpassed himself with a tasty stew. The

dwarves did not eat a great deal, but Bronwyn and Alistair certainly enjoyed it, unabashed about consuming what their new companions did not. Astrid sat a little apart, not speaking with her fellow dwarves. Bronwyn hoped that her high birth was not going to prove a problem, because in real terms it was worth less than nothing. Oghren and Brosca grunted agreement that the sun was unnecessarily bright, and that the blue sky was a pretty color, but very flimsy-looking.

It was chilly as they moved into the Pass proper, and Bronwyn began thinking that a warm fire inside stout walls would be the best possible thing for her, too. She was about to tell Alistair so, when Morrigan, in hawk form, screeched out an alarm. Scout barked once, and lowered his head to charge.

A rustle of leaves, a muted whistle, and arrows began thudding into saddles and armor. Trampler reared and screamed an arrow hanging loosely from his powerful neck. Sten ripped the arrow out, and looked about furiously.

The ambush was above them, the assailants sheltered behind a rockfall. Lightning spat at them.

"A mage!" Bronwyn shouted, spurring her horse forward. "Morrigan! Target him!"

More arrows hissed at them. Whoever had attacked them was very professional. There were muttered orders, but no curses or threats, no posturing at all: just a steady stream of arrows and spells.

Tara shrieked an incantation, waving her staff. Brosca

slid off the back of Cullen's horse, and began clambering up the slope, dodging behind rocks and shrubs. Oghren and Astrid were with her.

Charging up on horseback, while tempting, just made her a bigger, easier target. Bronwyn leaped from her horse and ran, crouched low, blocking one arrow, and ignoring another that *thunked* into the ground beside her. Scout was by her side, as she pressed herself flat against the rocks, and caught her breath. Leliana had found a good spot and was returning arrows at the attackers when they stood up to shoot.

"Ha! Got you!" she shrieked.

Astrid called out to Alistair and the two of them locked their shields together. Bronwyn darted out to shelter behind them, Scout running ahead. In a flash, Zevran and Brozca had joined them and they ran as one up the slope. They glimpsed the enemy mage, struggling against a glyph of paralysis, and then they gave a shout, falling on the ambushers, peeling off as each chose a target.

Tara ruthlessly pressed her attack against the mage: another young woman, another elf. Within moment, the unknown mage was fading to the ground, sapped of magic and life.

"Get the little redhead!" ordered a big man further up the slope. "Get her! She's the one we want!"

Bronwyn slashed at a hard-faced man in leather armor, feinting with her sword and stabbing with her dagger. He tried to bash at her with his shield, but she side-stepped

him, and stabbed again, where his armor joined at the side. A howl of pain, and he froze just long enough for Astrid to hew his legs out from under him. Scout grabbed his shoulder in massive jaws, and shook him like a rat.

A tingle of rejuvenation: Anders was looking out for her. Further up, Sten had engaged two of the ambushers, and was using his blade to demolish the stunted tree they were trying to use as cover. Leliana got one with an arrow through the temple. The man's look of horror made Bronwyn queasy for a moment.

A crash of armor: Cullen had been knocked flat on his back by a big Qunari mercenary. Brozca lunged in, cutting the man's hamstrings as he brought up his sword for a killing blow. He sagged, and Cullen was up and ramming Yusaris through him. Brozca squealed in blood-thirsty delight.

How many ambushers *were* there? A few more archers up on the rocks, and that leader who had rallied them against Leliana.

"I want that man alive to answer questions!" Bronwyn shouted pointing at him. The man was tough, no doubt about it: he shrugged off a cold spell, fighting desperately as Zevran and Alistair attacked him from either side.

The twang of a bowstring came only from their side now. One of the enemy archers had fallen from the rocks, sliding down in a rush of gravel and a heedless clatter of arrows. The leader, bleeding heavily, was trying pull back, possibly to make a run for it. Brozca caught him across



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the face with a well-thrown rock, and Zevran tripped him.

He crawled away crab-wise, as if he imagined that he could escape the Wardens. He had good armor. A well-paid mercenary? Bronwyn strode after him remorselessly, a deadly rhythm to her stride.

"Don't hurry away," she said calmly, "We haven't had a proper chat. You're going to tell me everything, or the next few minutes are going to be thoroughly nasty, especially for you."

Anders came up to join them, healing a cut above Cullen's brow. He gave Bronwyn an uncharacteristically stern look at her words. She gazed back blandly. Scout growled at their captive.

The mercenary looked up at the faces around him. His hand moved for a dagger, and was stilled, as Oghren stamped on it with a metal-shod boot.

Bronwyn asked abruptly, "Who sent you?" The mercenary spat on the ground in defiance.

"Ah, my friend," Zevran sighed. "Do not be foolish. I speak as one who has been in exactly your position. You are bleeding, and will not survive long without the favor of this noble Grey Warden. You do not look surprised to hear the name. So you did know that your target was traveling in the company of Grey Wardens. That was very bold of you. I salute your courage."

Leliana spoke up, her pretty voice hard. "It was Marjolaine, wasn't it? Is she still in Denerim?"

The mercenary sneered at her. "You're as good as dead!"



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"Well," Bronwyn said mildly, "You would know. You must be feeling quite light-headed by now. I have an excellent healer with me, but I see no point on wasting his ability on someone who prefers to die."

"I'll talk," the man growled, "but only to *her*." He jabbed a gauntleted finger at Leliana. He grinned horribly, blood frothing over yellow teeth, and beckoned. "Come a little closer, and I'll give you the message she sent..."

"Unacceptable," Bronwyn refused briskly. "Speak up."

"Bronwyn," Anders murmured, "if I'm going to do anything, it needs to be *now*!"

A small sliver of metal spun from the man's left hand, almost too fast to see. Leliana jerked back, and it struck Morrigan, standing just behind her. The witch shrieked, startled and hurt.

"Die, bitch!" the mercenary grunted, and then groaned, impaled on Sten's sword. Oghren kicked his hand away, and he rattled out his last breath.

Morrigan sat down abruptly, eyes wide. The dagger was lodged just under her collar-bone. Anders was with her in an instant, lowering her back gingerly on the stony ground. Scout whined.

"You're all right," he said, voice warm and soothing. "You're fine. I can fix this right away." The tiny dagger was meticulously removed, sniffed, and then cast aside. "Nothing that I can't deal with. Zevran, get the blue flask out of my bag while I work on the bleeding."

The antidote was smeared on the open wound, and then Anders' fingertips shivered with healing magic, running delicately over Morrigan's skin. "See?" he murmured. "Not even a scar."

Morrigan, lips pale and thinned with anxiety, shuddered under his touch. "I had rather not been stabbed at all!"

"No doubt, but it's nothing," Anders assured her. "Absolutely nothing in the world. Have a swallow of this, and don't move for a few minutes." He sat down beside her, holding her hand, and she did not reject him. He waved the others away. Tara and Brosca grinned at each other. Bronwyn stood back, watching the scene, once again congratulating herself for conscripting Anders.

She raised her voice in command. "I want you to search the bodies of all these men!" she ordered. "Search their pockets, their clothes, their boots. Search everything! Lay everything out beside each man, so I know who had what. I have a lot of questions that need answering."

She turned to Leliana. "Come with me," she said quietly, taking the girl by the arm. It was clearly not a request. "Scout! Stay with Morrigan and Anders!" They walked together in silence, until Bronwyn reached a crag overlooking a turn in the road. "Let step a bit out of sight, shall we? I hope it's not necessary for everyone to see how angry I am."

Leliana flicked a guilty look her way. Bronwyn let go of her arm, leaned back against the rock, and wasted no time.

"Now we are going to talk – frankly. And I don't want it to

be about what the Maker told you or about what Andraste said or about anything other than the questions I am going to ask. You are going to tell me why someone spent a great deal of money tracking you down and wanting you and everyone you travel with dead. You are going to tell me all about this Marjolaine person. Now."

Leliana's large blue eyes were full of tears. "I had put that life behind me – " she looked again at Bronwyn's expression, and stopped. "You are right. I must tell you everything. It all happened so long ago. I thought she had forgotten me, or decided I was of no importance."

Bronwyn stared at her stonily. Leliana twisted her hands together. "The man said 'she.' 'She' can only mean Marjolaine. My bardmaster. I was... a bard... before I entered the Chantry."

"I thought as much," Bronwyn said briefly. "You were no mere minstrel. I do know something of Orlais. I assumed you were a bard who found that life tiresome, for some reason or other. Now that your former associates have tried to kill me, I cannot let you keep secrets. Why does Marjolaine want you dead now?"

"She may still be angry about how we parted..."

"No." Bronwyn cut her off, lips pressed together in controlled fury. "No. She could have killed you any time in the past two years. She obviously knew where you were. What is it about your current situation that drew her interest? Which of us in this party? Or is it the mere fact



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that you appear to be going to Orlais? Is she afraid you will contact someone?"

"I am not sure. I am no longer current with the Game. You must understand that I am telling you the truth! I will tell you everything, and you must judge for yourself."

So it all came out: how Leliana had been trained by this Marjolaine. How she had loved her, and how Marjolaine had betrayed her, making it appear that Leliana had stolen state documents. It had all been a prank, Leliana thought, a trick to embarrass a great nobleman. When she had actually seen the contents of the documents, she realized that the Game was being played for stakes far higher than she had imagined. Marjolaine had been very kind, and agreed that she should be allowed to put the documents back where she found them. Leliana had thought herself safe, right up until the moment Marjolaine stabbed her, and turned her over to the guards...

Bronwyn wondered about the documents, and let the girl continue her story.

"This all happened at the *Arl of Denerim's* estate in the city? Not in Orlais?"

"No – no. Marjolaine has worked in Denerim for several years now. When I went for the documents, I thought she was charming an officer away as a diversion, but when I was captured, that officer, I discovered, was her lover. He was a terrible man. His name was Harwen Raleigh."

Brought up short, Bronwyn stared at her. Harwen



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Raleigh had been a very notable figure in the Rebellion, and commander of a famous company, The Hard Line. He had been dispossessed by the Orlesians, and his hatred was such that he and his men had tortured and killed prisoners in ways so vicious that King Maric had disavowed him. Raleigh's lands had not been restored, and he had taken service as commander of the Arl of Denerim's guard. He had been murdered, under mysterious circumstances –

– Two years ago.

"Did you kill him?" Bronwyn interrupted to ask.

"Yes." Leliana met her eyes with a dark look. "Yes. I mean... the last blow was struck by my friend Silas, who had suffered from him as well, but I was there. Marjolaine escaped, and I was sickened by it all, and did not pursue her. You must understand, when I was captured... He did terrible things to me..."

"I am sure he did. Where is this Silas now?"

"I am not sure. He, too, decided to give his life to serving the Chantry. The last I heard, he had become a Templar, and was serving at the Grand Cathedral."

"Do you think this Marjolaine would pursue him, too?"

"No... no. Silas only aided my escape. I think this is about something else."

"It's about those documents you stole and returned isn't it?"

"I think it must be."

"And you read them."

"Of course."

Bronwyn glared at her. "I'm waiting."

Leliana hesitated. "This is... perilous information. I am afraid that it will endanger you..."

"It has already endangered me. This Marjolaine of yours will proceed on the assumption that I have this information, anyway. Tell me everything."

Leliana took a deep breath, and plunged into her explanation. "Marjolaine is a... conduit of information. She is the eyes and ears of the Empress in Denerim – though I believe the Empress has other eyes and ears as well. Many people wish to communicate with the Empress of Orlais, but of course it would be considered treason to do so though any but official diplomatic channels... You know this, I am sure. Still, there are those who *do* wish to communicate privately with the Empress, and Marjolaine is their contact."

"Who?"

"The Arl of Denerim is one. The letters I saw mentioned the Arl of Redcliffe as well – the one who is dead now. Marjolaine also... received communications from the Palace. She did not tell me outright, but I believe King Cailan used her to send messages to the Empress that he did not wish his Queen or Teyrn Loghain to know of."

Bronwyn felt a cold trickle of dread at the words, and believed them if only for that reason. Cailan treating in secret with the Empress? *That fool!* she thought instantly. *Playing at diplomacy like a child! What has he told her? What undertakings has he made?*

Keeping her voice level, she said, "I need to know exactly what those papers contained."

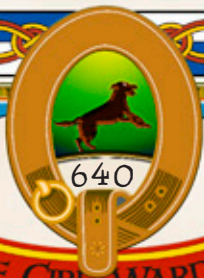
It could actually have been worse. Leliana recalled no explicit vows of loyalty in the letters, but Arl Urien had given the Empress a great deal of useful information, apparently in exchange for gold and some quiet trade concessions: the numbers and armaments of the Royal Army; details of the fortifications of the walls, the Gate House, and of Fort Drakon; plans for ship-building and new fortifications at Highever and Amaranthine; gossip about the fractures in the relationship between the King and his father-in-law; the state of health of everyone of importance; and the Arl's own opinion that the Queen would never bear a child, not because she was necessarily barren (though that was a useful rumor), but because the King was sterile.

At that last, Bronwyn gasped and leaned against the stones, now warmed by the late afternoon sun. "Maker's Blood!" she groaned. "Do you know where Marjolaine lives in Denerim?" she asked, after a moment.

"I know the house where she lived two years ago. It is in the Market District..."

"Good. I believe we shall have to pay her a call. Very soon."

The pass narrowed up ahead, and was mostly filled by the road. Bronwyn could see why the Orlesians had chosen to invade by sea, rather than squeezing through this difficult mountain route. That the Tevinters of old had succeeded



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in putting the road through here was a testament to their brilliant engineering and powerful magic.

Bronwyn called all her companions together, and impressed on them the importance of saying absolutely nothing about the ambush. If they were to have revenge, no warning must reach those who had paid for the attack. No one was to speak of it: not to the the soldiers at Gherlen's Halt, not to the maids, the stableboys, or any chance acquaintances.

The papers on the mercenaries were vague – or more likely, made use of code names – but they hinted at things that made Bronwyn very worried about the state of Ferelden. It would not be enough to simply send a note to Fergus, warning him about this woman Marjolaine. She needed to be stopped, and all her correspondence needed to be impounded before she could destroy it.

But did such a mission justify the attention of all the Wardens in Ferelden? Probably not. If Riordan came... if there could be a Joining... if enough of her companions survived... *Oh, Maker, protect them!*... Then, perhaps, she might consider dividing their force. Alistair could lead the party that would travel with the dwarves on the surface. She could take a few reliable companions and ride for Denerim, as quickly as possible.

A few twists, and they came upon a small fortress, carved out of the living rock. This was Gherlen's Halt. Dwarven work, by the look of it. Not half a mile away,



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its twin frowned at them, The Orlesian castle, Roc du Chevalier, was more elaborate and much, much larger.

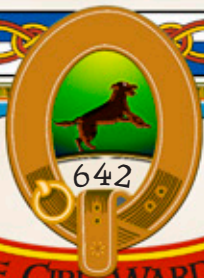
Gherlen's Halt was quite old, and bore the scars of the terrible siege of Blessed 8:85, when it held out for eight months against the Orlesians. It had fallen at last, and the survivors of the garrison had been been slaughtered to the last man, woman, and child. Unsurprisingly, the current garrison regarded their opposite numbers on the other side of the border with inveterate dislike and suspicion.

"I'm not to give passage to parties of Orlesians of over ten," the commander warned them. "Not even if they're Grey Wardens." The man's voice gentled. "Not to be disrespectful. We've received word of the Battle of Ostagar, even in this Maker-forsaken place. We've heard what you did. It's just that I have my orders, you understand."

"Of course. I intend to go to the Rock alone to deliver a message. One of the Orlesian Wardens said he would meet with me if I sent a message to him in Jader. I wasn't a Grey Warden more than a day before the battle, and there's a great deal about the Grey Wardens I simply don't know. Are you sending reports regularly to Teyrn Loghain?" Bronwyn asked, fastening on his earlier remark.

"Every month, my lady. Mind you, I don't always hear back. Queer things happen to the couriers, sometimes."

"No doubt! However, I have news for the teyrn that he will want as soon as possible. Would it be possible for me to send a report to him through you? And a letter to my



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brother, Teyrn Cousland?"

"Of course, my lady!"

This was plain good news. Equally welcome was the commander's willingness to put up their party, dwarves, elves, Qunari, and all.

"I still don't like the idea of you going by yourself, Bronwyn," Alistair complained.

"Alistair," Bronwyn said softly. "You can't cross the border into Orlais. Not half a mile, not a yard, not an inch. It would get about that you "went to Orlais," and you know it would make people suspicious of your motives. You, above all, can't do anything questionable."

"You mean *Teyrn Loghain* wouldn't like it!" he challenged her.

"Obviously he wouldn't like it, but I'm just as worried that other people will start whispering that you were secretly dealing with the Orlesians. After what happened on the way here we can't take for granted that your secret really is a secret. People are watching us, Alistair: people who have motives and agendas of their own. You think nobody knows that you're the son of the King, but I suspect that one day it is going to come out, and then people will scrutinize your every move very carefully."

Alistair was not the only one who disliked the idea of her riding across the border alone.

"I'll go with you," Cullen volunteered. "Why shouldn't you have a companion? It's appropriate, after all."

"I could go — " Anders spoke up.



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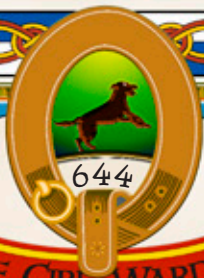
"No mages," Bronwyn decided. "No mages at all. We know that the Orlesians are even more strict about Chantry doctrine than we are in Ferelden. You're not officially a Grey Warden yet, and if they knew that, someone might try to make trouble. If you really want to go, Cullen, let's get moving. No, Scout, you stay. Orlesians don't understand about proper dogs."

The towers and battlements of Roc du Chevalier loomed closer as they trotted across the no-man's land between the two castles. Bronwyn felt horribly exposed. They were challenged at the gate house, and Bronwyn called back. "I am the Grey Warden Bronwyn. I have come with a message for the Senior Warden of Jader!"

There was an inaudible exchange, and the enormous portcullis was cranked up.

"You may pass, Grey Wardens!"

Bronwyn kept her face completely blank, thinking that nearly all Fereldans who had seen the wide and paved courtyard of the Rock had seen it as prisoners, who were either awaiting execution by beheading or breaking on the wheel, or who had been sentenced to be cast into the notorious *oubliettes* of the dungeons, where they would never see the light of day again. She glanced up at the heavy stone gate, and saw a murder hole directly above her, where defenders could pour boiling oil or molten lead on an attacker. She gritted her teeth, refusing to shudder in front of the enemies of her blood.



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Deferential elven grooms hurried up. They helped Bronwyn and Cullen dismount, and held their horses, eyes cast down.

A tall chevalier in splendid armor emerged from a door at the top of a stone staircase. He came down the steps with dignity and gave them a gracious bow. "You are the Grey Warden Bronwyn Cousland, I presume?" he asked. "Berthold de Guesclin, Commander of the Rock, *à votre service.*"

Bronwyn bowed in her turn, and slipped into Orlesian easily enough. Her parents had insisted that she must know Orlesian, and know it well. Aldous had drummed it into her, sometimes with a whitewood switch. A pillar of her education was the demand that she speak, read, and write this language, and thus avoid the thousand inconveniences, embarrassments, and dangers that befell nobles on a diplomatic mission who did not speak the local tongue.

De Guesclin was impressed by her fluency and charmed by her excellent accent. His brows rose and his smile broadened as he complimented her gallantly.

"You are the daughter of that noble man, *le Prince Cousland!* I once had the honor to be in company with him, on the occasion of his visit to Val Royaux."

He was courteous to Cullen, too, at first thinking him Alistair. Bronwyn watched these civilities uneasily. De Guesclin was very well informed about her party. Then she relaxed. Of course, the Grey Warden messenger sent by Riordan would know the names of the two actual Grey Wardens.



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De Guesclin led them to his luxurious office, offered them wine, and mentioned that the last Grey Warden to visit had been hoping that Bronwyn would have a message for the Senior Warden of Jader.

"I received his invitation, as you see," said Bronwyn lightly, "and I am here. I have a letter to be delivered to him in Jader, if it does not inconvenience you."

"No inconvenience at all," de Guesclin assured her with a laugh. "I was not proposing to deliver it myself. Ogier!" he called.

A young officer appeared.

"The Grey Warden Bronwyn has a message for the Senior Warden of Jader. It is to be delivered to him with all speed." He turned to Bronwyn. "Is the letter already prepared?"

"Yes." Bronwyn passed the sealed parchment to young Ogier. "My thanks!"

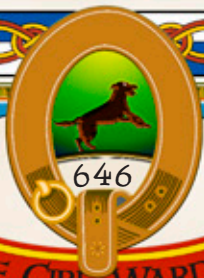
"An honor," Ogier assured her. De Guesclin waved him away, and the young man hurried out, boots sounding on the stone of the steps. He called for a horse and within a few minutes was clattering out of the courtyard.

"He will be there by tonight," said de Guesclin. "The road to Jader is excellent. It is entirely possible that Warden Riordan will be here before noon tomorrow. I gathered that he was most anxious to speak to you."

Bronwyn smiled. "I am most anxious to speak to him." She considered the contents of her brief message.

Greetings, Senior Warden Riordan:

Your message gave Alistair and myself no small amount of



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pleasure. We have arrived at Gherlen's Halt. We bring with us a number of recruits who wish to take the Joining. It would be of great service if you would bring what is necessary. Since some are still undecided, we must plan for a maximum of eight, and a minimum of five.

If you have any books of lore that you think would be of use to new Wardens, it would be a kindness to allow us a look at them.

Your sister,

Bronwyn

Since she had no idea what it was proper to call her herself, she gave only her name. She was about to write "Cousland" after her first name, and then remembered that Grey Wardens were not really supposed to have family names. Teyrn Loghain might regard her as the commander in Ferelden, but to call herself commander when she commanded only one other Warden seemed foolishly arrogant. No doubt this Riordan would regard her as a neophyte, and she had no desire to appear any more green than was completely unavoidable.

And then there was a need to deal with de Guesclin briskly, for the chevalier offered them the hospitality of his castle until the arrival of Riordan. This Bronwyn had expected, and had prepared a polite refusal, and a reference to her companions left at Gherlen's Halt. It was impossible to expect a Fereldan to voluntarily stay at a place so infamous, and perhaps de Guesclin understood that, for he very civilly did not press the matter. Bronwyn



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and Cullen finished their wine, paid the appropriate compliments, and rode out through the portcullis again with all the dispatch consistent with courtesy. Bronwyn gave a deep sigh of relief when she was out of bowshot.

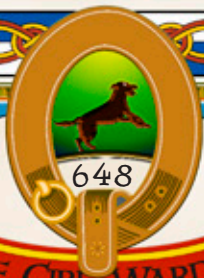


The accommodations at Gherlen's Halt were not at all up to the standard of the Wardens' Hostel in Orzammar, but Bronwyn did not expect them to be. They were given a big stone room with a fire on the hearth and rough bunk beds lining one of the walls. There was a trestle table with benches in the middle of the floor. The food they were served was plain but plentiful, and Bronwyn kept a close eye on her people, just in case someone should start blabbing about today's adventures when the servants could hear them.

Alistair spoke low, his hand over his mouth. "So we're going to Denerim to track this woman down? Isn't that out of our way?"

"It is out of our way, but Marjolaine has threatened the mission of the Wardens. We can't let that stand. And there is the matter of Howe, too. He may be in Denerim, pleading his case before the Queen. He, too, has tried to thwart us. It all depends on who we're left with after the Joining. I'm praying that they all make it. If there are enough of us, we might split up."

"They might," Alistair consoled her. "They just might! They're a tough bunch, and they've all fought darkspawn now. I've heard of Joinings that everyone survived. It happens. One request: if we split up, don't put me in charge,



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and don't make me take Morrigan."

Bronwyn laughed out loud at that, shaking her head. If they split up, Alistair would definitely be in charge of his party, and he would have to accept his responsibilities, both as a Warden and as King Maric's son. There would be time to persuade him of the necessity later. "Cullen!" she called down the table. "Thank you for riding with me today. You looked suitably stern and impressive."

The man blushed, and Brosca jabbed him in the ribs, grinning broadly. "Big and healthy! I like that in a man! So," she said, "How about it?"

Cullen looked at her warily out of the corner of his eye, ready to run. "How about what?"

"A story!" Brosca shouted. "You're next! I know you are! Here we are in a nice, safe, *stony* place, so it's time for you to tell a story."

"I know he's got one," Tara declared. "I've seen him practicing."

Cheers and applause. Now red as a sugar beet, Cullen rose, stood by the fire, and cleared his throat. Several times.

CULLEN'S STORY OF THE KING OF THE GOLDEN MOUNTAIN:

There was once a young man named Jack, whose father and mother had died. The farm went to his elder brother, and the brother's wife wanted to get rid of Jack, for she



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said he was too big and too clumsy, and was eating them out of house and home. So Jack went out into the world to seek his fortune. He took service on a ship bound for the north, but there was a great storm, and the ship broke apart. Jack was very strong, and clung to a piece of wreckage all night, and in the morning found himself on the shores of a strange land.

He roused himself, and looked about, and began walking. Soon he saw a beautiful castle before him, and set out to go to it. But when he entered it, he found that it was cursed. Everywhere were snares and traps. Jack had no weapon but his fists, and fought manfully every step of the way. He went through every room, but all were empty until he reached the last, where a snake lay coiled in a ring. Jack looked for something he could use to kill it, when the snake spoke to him.

Now this snake was an enchanted maiden, who rejoiced at his coming, and she said, "Have you come at last, my deliverer? I have waited so long for you. I and my kingdom, the Golden Mountain, are enslaved by magic, and you must set us free."

"How can I do that?" wondered Jack.

The snake replied, "Tonight will come twelve demon thralls, covered with chains, who will ask what you are doing here; but be silent, give them no answer, and let them do what they will with you. They will torment you, beat you, stab you, but do not speak. At midnight they must go away again. On the second night twelve others will come, on the third, four-and-twenty. These will cut off your head. At midnight, however, their power will be over, and then if you have endured all, and have not spoken the

slightest word, I shall be delivered. After they have gone, I will come to you and will have, in a bottle, some of the Water of Life. I will rub you with that, and then you will come to life again, and be as healthy as before."

Then said he, "I will gladly set you free."

And everything happened just as she had said, the demon thralls could not force a single word from him, and on the third night the snake became a beautiful princess, who came with the water of life and brought him back to life again.

So she threw herself into his arms and kissed him, and there was joy and gladness in the whole castle. After this their marriage was celebrated, and he was King of the Golden Mountain.

They lived very happily together, and the queen bore a fine boy. Five years passed, and then the King bethought him of his brother, his heart was moved, and he wished to visit him. The Queen, however, would not let him go away, and said, "I foresee that it will cause us unhappiness."

He would not be denied, and allowed her no rest until she consented. At their parting she gave him a wishing-ring, and said, "Take this ring and put it on your finger, and then you will immediately be transported whithersoever you would be: only you must promise me to return in three days."

That he promised her, put the ring on his finger, and wished himself at home, just outside the farmhouse where his brother lived. Instantly he found himself there, but when he came to the door, his brother's wife did not know him at first, because he wore such strange and yet such rich and magnificent clothing. Then she

recognized him, and thought, "Jack has come into some money. It is time he shared his good fortune with his family."

His brother came from the fields, and his wife whispered to him of Jack's great wealth. They made a great show of welcome to him and gave him a good meal, and asked him where had been for the past five years. Then he told them that he was King of the Golden Mountain, that a wise and beautiful Queen was his wife, and that they had a fine son, just turned four years old.

"He has come to take back the farm, certainly," said the brother's wife. The brother agreed, for Jack was bigger and stronger, and in the past five years had become bigger and stronger still.

Then the wife put a certain herb in Jack's ale, which caused him to fall asleep. While he slept, the brother and his wife stripped him of his clothes and jewels and coin. They even took the wishing-ring, but when the brother's wife touched it, it burnt her finger, for it was a thing not right for her to touch. This angered her, and she threw it in the dung-heap. They put Jack in a wheelbarrow, and trundled him, half-naked as he was, out to the forest, and left him there.

When he awoke, he found himself in nothing but his smallclothes, and the ring was gone from his finger. He rushed from the forest in a rage to seek revenge against his treacherous brother. When he came near the farm, however, he saw that a crowd of neighbors were there, for the brother and his wife had sent word that Jack was a mage, and had threatened them. Jack listened from hiding in dismay. He could prove he was not a mage, but he could not prove they had robbed and betrayed him. Sick at heart, he turned away, only snatching some ragged garments

from a clothesline to cover himself. Even his fine boots were gone.

He said to himself, "I must be off, and find a ship that can take me back to the Golden Mountain." So he went away in sorrow, and walked far and wide for many months, hungry and alone, but no one he spoke to knew where he might find the Golden Mountain.

He came one day to a glade where some Dalish elves were gathered, disputing with each other because they did not know how to divide their clan's heirlooms.

When they saw him passing by, they called to him and said, "You are a shemlen and have no personal interest in our quarrel, and thus will be able to divide our heirlooms fairly."

There were three items in dispute. The first was a sword, set with fine jewels. This sword had a great power. If anyone took it in his hand, and said, "All heads off but mine," every head would lie on the ground. The second item was a cloak which made anyone who put it on invisible. The third was a pair of boots which could transport the wearer to any place he wished in a moment. Jack agreed to help them, and said, "Give me the three things that I may see if they are still in good condition."

They gave him the cloak, and when he had put it on, he was invisible indeed. Then he said, "The cloak does all you claim. Now give me the sword."

They said, "No, we will not give you that, for if you were to say, 'all heads off but mine,' we would be beheaded straightaway."

Nevertheless they gave it to him on the condition that he was only to try it against a tree. This he did, and the sword cut in two the trunk of a tree as if it had been a blade of straw. Then he wanted to

have the boots likewise, but they said, "No, we will not give them, for if you had them on your feet and were to wish yourself at the top of the hill, we should be left down here with nothing."

Jack shook his head, and said, "Oh, no. I would never do that."

So they gave him the boots as well. When he had got all these things, he could not help thinking of his wife and his child, and no sooner had the wish to see them crossed his mind, then he vanished from the sight of the elves, and thus was their inheritance divided. Jack knew he had wronged the elves, but he did not regret it, for before him was the Golden Mountain, and he would soon see the ones he loved again.

As Jack came to the palace, he heard sounds of joy, of lutes and of flutes, and the people told him that the Queen was celebrating her wedding to a great nobleman. Then he fell into a rage, and said, "The wicked woman! She, too, has betrayed and deserted me!"

So he put on his cloak, and unseen by all went into the palace. When he entered the dining-hall a great table was spread with delicious food, and the guests were eating and drinking and laughing and jesting. The Queen sat on a royal seat in the midst of them in splendid apparel, with a crown on her head.

Jack placed himself behind her, and no one saw him. When she put a piece of meat on a plate for herself, he took it away and ate it, and when she poured out a glass of wine for herself, he took it away and drank it. She was always helping herself to something, and yet she never got anything, for plate and glass disappeared immediately. Then she arose and went to her chamber and wept, but he followed her there. She said, "Am I still in the power of the

demon? Did my deliverer never come?"

Jack struck her in the face, and said, "Did your deliverer never come? I am here, faithless as you are. Did I deserve such treatment from you?" And he removed the cloak, and was visible.

"How dare you strike me!" the Queen cried. "It is you! It is you! You swore to return in three days, and you have been gone a year! I thought you dead, or that you had forgotten me!"

Jack was ashamed, and told her of his brother's wife's treachery.

"Is it not as I said?" the Queen demanded. "Was not your journey a misfortune for us both? And now all the nobles in the land have gathered and demanded that I take one of them as my husband. I have not the power to be rid of them. If I refuse, they will kill me and our son!"

Jack said, "Fear nothing, and stay within these rooms with the door closed."

Then he went into the hall, and cried, "The wedding is at an end. The true king has returned!"

The noblemen who were assembled there laughed him to scorn, but he did not trouble to answer them, and said, "Will you go away, or will you not?"

They rushed at him and tried to seize him, but he drew his sword and shouted, "All heads off but mine!"

Then all their heads fell to the ground, and he was then and forever more King of the Golden Mountain.

"I want that sword," said Brosca, "but only if I'm on my own. It would be really embarrassing to cut off all your

friends' heads, too."

"It most certainly would," Bronwyn agreed sternly. "So don't anybody get any ideas about charming weapons that way."

Leliana thought it over. "That is a very good story. So he did make peace with his wife, did he not?"

Morrigan snickered, "As long as she did not become too curious, and open the door!"

Tara and Zevran were not so pleased. "It seems to me," Zevran pointed out, "that while everything worked out so very well for the hero of the tale, the Dalish elves did not exactly benefit by his mediation."

"He was a thieving shem," Tara muttered, glaring at Cullen. "He didn't mean to be," he admitted sheepishly.

Astrid spoke up, surprising Bronwyn. "He allowed himself to be tricked by his brother. He should have been more cautious."

"Famous last words?" taunted Oghren, setting down his tankard and wiping foam from his mustache.

"Perhaps," Astrid granted sourly. "He underestimated the power of fraternal malice. That is a great mistake. He is fortunate to have survived."

Sten shook his head. "But the brother and his wife were fools. True, they might have obtained some money by the sale of the brother's clothes, but they might have gained more by having a brother who was a king, could they not? They could have asked for an estate in his kingdom and

been rich. They were foolish and short-sighted and greedy, and thus, I must say, all too human. An instructive tale.”

“It’s no joke running through a forest in your smallclothes,” Anders observed. He saw Alistair staring, and said, “What? It happens. I stole some clothes off a clothesline, too, once. A mustard-yellow doublet and striped red pants. The Templars arrested me for bad taste within the day.”



ALISTAIR, SON OF MARIC

CHAPTER 25

HANDS
ACROSS THE
BORDER

IND WHIPPED ALONG THE HIGHEST PARAPET OF GHERLEN’S HALT. It was the perfect spot to see everything that moved

across the border. As such, Bronwyn had assigned a rota of her companions to keep an eye on the road that led to Roc du Chevalier, and monitor any activity there.

“The Commander is of noble birth, then?” Astrid asked Tara, squinting against the strange, cold rush of air and the unnatural brightness of the surface.

“Very noble,” Tara told her. “The Couslands are the most important family in Ferelden after the King. In fact, I heard that her father was nearly elected King himself. They say it doesn’t matter, now that she’s a Grey Warden, but I’ve noticed that often people treat us better because of her name. She knows lots of influential people. Of course, there was that time that some assassins tried to kill us because of a family feud, but we cut them down to size.” She smothered her laughter with a hand. “But don’t talk about that in front of Zevran. He led the assassins. It might

hurt his feelings to remind him about his failure."

"Zevran attempted to assassinate her, and yet lives?" Astrid said coolly. "He must have exchanged a great deal of useful information to buy his life."

"That, too," agreed Tara, "but I don't think Bronwyn likes to kill people in cold blood. Once he surrendered, she felt she either had to let him go or take him along, and he asked to be taken along. Alistair told Cullen that she thought it was better to keep an eye on him than to let him sneak up behind us."

Astrid snorted. "Cutting his throat would have been the simplest option of all."

Tara disliked any criticism of the woman who had saved her. "Well, Bronwyn isn't *simple*."

Hours passed, and the day wore on. The sun dropped from the heights of noon. All the dwarves took their turn on the windy parapet. It was another way to acclimatize them to surface life, and not the most unpleasant. If the empty sky became unbearable, one could admire the engineering of the Rock or turn one's eyes to the stony cliff faces supporting Gherlen's Halt. You could also, like Oghren, learn not to spit into the wind.

And further below, in a corner of the room the Wardens shared, Bronwyn and Alistair bickered over their plans.

"You *will* lead the second party, Alistair, and I know you'll do well. I can't be in two places at once, and I *must* track down this woman in Denerim. Now look," she said,

thumping the map. "We will proceed together to the Gherlen Docks, *here*, and if there is a ship available, sail across Lake Calenhad. The ship will drop me off *here*, and I will make a dash for Denerim through the Bannorn. If no ship is available, we will take the Imperial Highway north to the village by the Lake Calenhad docks. Our party will separate there. You will go to the Deep Roads entrance *here*, and camp, awaiting the dwarven army. Once the underground forces have arrived and resupplied, you will continue south with the surface contingents above ground on the Lake Road down to Lake Belennas, where you will once again reunite with the balance of King Bhelen's army. They will ascend to the surface, and march overland to Ostagar. I will meet you between there — " she pointed to the source of the River Dane " — and there" her finger traveled south to the other side of Lake Belennas. "We can ford the Narrows and take the Imperial Highway to the Hinterland Road, which will cut two days off your journey to Ostagar. We will access the Imperial Highway there, and then, if the army is still at Ostagar, we will join them."

"What if the army *isn't* there?" Alistair asked sullenly. "What if the King's retreated?"

"Well, I'll keep my ears open in Denerim. You do likewise as you go south. There may be news at the Spoiled Princess and all along the Lake Road. Send a rider to Lothing for news. We can't take the whole dwarven army through

there — they would trample it flat — but we can get some supplies there and plenty of intelligence.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I know.”

A soldier popped his head through the door. “Warden! You’ve got visitors!”

Bronwyn stared at Alistair, who stared back. None of their lookouts had reported anyone crossing the border this morning.

Wondering if it might be a courier from King Bhelen, Bronwyn rose, and called back. “Who is it?”

“A man and an elf woman. Wouldn’t give their names. They say you’ve got a ‘mutual friend.’” The soldier snorted at the term. “Should we send them about their business?”

“No. I’ll talk to them.” She and Alistair looked at each other. If they were more assassins, they had picked the wrong killing ground.

Down the endless stairs, through the noisy sparring room, more stairs and then skirting the edge of the Great Hall. Quiet voices echoed off the lofty beamed ceiling. They walked out the wide doors. Down in the courtyard were their visitors, wrapped in anonymous grey cloaks.

Bronwyn’s senses suddenly prickled. She stopped, and threw a wild look at Alistair. He was grinning enormously. “Wardens!” he whispered eagerly. “Come on!”

She had not seen another Warden in months. These beings seemed as implausible as griffons. Striding swiftly

toward them, she looked them over. The man was tall and dark-bearded, in his middle years but brimming with vigor. He looked back at her with a roguish gleam in his eye.

The elven woman’s hair was streaked with white and cropped short. She was carrying a staff. A *mage*? She was not smiling, but seemed instead anxious and strained. She had eyes for no one but Alistair.

Bronwyn extended her hand to the man. “Brother!” she said softly, “— and sister! You are most welcome!”

The man took her hand, and bowed over it. “Riordan of Jader, and this,” he gestured to his companion, “is Senior Mage Warden Fiona. We are delighted to meet you.”

“I am Bronwyn, of course,” she said, feeling a bit awkward. “— and I’m Alistair.”

“We’ve been watching for you all day,” Bronwyn told them, “but you seem to have eluded our scrutiny.”

“And that of others,” Riordan said easily. “We wished to make an somewhat less — how shall I say? — conspicuous entrance than the commander of the Rock had planned. There are many paths through the Frostbacks.”

“Well — ” Bronwyn had rarely been so relieved. “Come and join us! Our accommodations are not the grandest, but you are welcome to all we have!”

“No,” Fiona said, very sharp and quiet. Her eyes left Alistair long enough to give Bronwyn an odd, raking glance, her mouth pursed. She was beautiful, as elves generally were, and was possibly in her late thirties or



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early forties, but hers was a spare, ascetic beauty: to look at, and not to touch. Bronwyn sensed that for some reason the elf disapproved of her. She frowned in response, and Alistair hesitated, unsure of himself.


Riordan smiled at their expressions. "What my wise sister means to say is that the Commander here would not wish to admit two unknown Orlesians to his keep. And we do not wish to give our names, as Monseigneur de Guesclin is impatiently awaiting us at the Rock. His courier is resting quietly, with a most atrocious hangover, at the Compound in Jader, and will return with a message that both I and Warden Fiona were away. When we do arrive at the Rock in a few days, you will already, alas, have departed. Such a misfortune."

"Besides," Fiona added, her eyes still on Alistair, "you wish to hold a Joining, do you not? We cannot hold it in a castle, since there may be bodies to dispose of."

"I see," Bronwyn said slowly. Clearly these Wardens had expected trouble of some sort. "What do you propose?"

"There is an abandoned hunting lodge off the road, not far from here." He very quietly gave directions, while Bronwyn nodded, listening for the meaning beneath the words. "Meet us there. We shall have a long talk, and your friends shall have their Joining."

"Bring only those who have cast aside all doubt," Fiona added, her dark eyes burning.



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"We're going to meet them and confer. Those of you who wish to become Wardens must come with us."

A rustle among the companions at the table. Oghren scratched his scalp.

"You don't think this is a trap or something, do you?" wondered Cullen.

Alistair huffed with annoyance. "No, it's not a *trap*. These are *Wardens*."

"I think it's clear that someone was planning *something*," Bronwyn temporized, "but Riordan and Fiona have evaded it, and wish us to evade it as well. We must go immediately, and we'll be gone all night. Pack up now if you're coming." She paused, and words of Duncan's, half-forgotten, came to her lips. "I will not lie. The Joining is dangerous. If you come with us, you cannot change your mind later on."

A silence. Then Tara got up, shoving her belongings into her backpack. "Well," she said, "I was conscripted, so I *have* to join. See you all later."

"Tara —" Bronwyn began.

"No," the elf insisted. "I *have* to join. If I don't, I might as well go back to the Circle and let them do whatever they like to me, because I wouldn't deserve any better." She managed a bleak little smile. "Maybe someday I'll be a Senior Mage Warden, like that Fiona. I can't wait to meet her."

Morrigan said briskly, "Well, I am *not* going with you, and will instead spend a pleasant day reading while the rest of you risk your lives." To emphasize her words, she

lifted the book in her hands until it covered her face.

"Really?" Anders murmured, as he buckled his pack. "Not going?"

"Absolutely not. If you do not return in three days, I shall send a message to that Circle of yours, telling them that the whole Grey Warden business was perhaps not your best move."

"Suit yourself."

"I am not going either," Zevran said, flashing white teeth at Morrigan, "I shall instead endeavor to amuse the fair Wilder mage."

"Climb to the topmost parapet and let us see how well you fly," Morrigan shrugged. "I should find that *most* amusing."

Oghren stared at the table. "Is this a one-time offer, or can I think about it?"

Bronwyn looked over and smiled briefly. "Of course you can think about it. If you decide you want to be a Warden someday, then you would be welcome. Take all the time you like. But for *today*," she said, "we need to get moving."

So there were Tara and Anders, and Cullen, silently preparing himself, whispering a prayer. There was eager Brosca and further off, aloof Astrid. Leliana was hesitating... then made up her mind to it, and came to Bronwyn's side.

Sten stood at the window, frowning. "I have wrestled with this decision. The Qunari people have no treaty with the Grey Wardens, and thus your conscription has no force with me. I am under orders from the Arishok, and it seems to me that someday your orders and his might

conflict. I will gladly serve you while here in this land, but some day I must return to my people and give my report. Therefore, I cannot join your Order. Do you wish me to leave your company?"

She was a little disappointed, but could see the logic of his position. "No. You are right. If your Arishok has a prior claim, it is proper that you do your duty. I welcome you as a companion, even if not as a Warden."

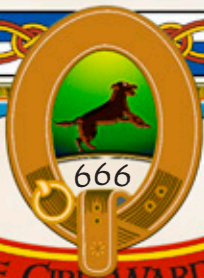
"It is well," he nodded. He sat down again, and took out his whetstone. By the time their party left, he was absorbed in sharpening his eating knife.

Up a rocky, winding path and into the trees. The horses picked their way carefully as the light dimmed. The riders brooded over what was to come. Bronwyn thought of the jar of darkspawn blood, cushioned in her backpack by her linen shirts. She hoped it would be enough.

The vertical shapes of the trees yielded to strange angles. A high-pitched roof and heavy beams appeared, and then, slowly, the lodge as whole, as if it were reluctant to admit to its identity.

"That must be the place," Alistair said quietly. Scout trotted ahead, sniffing. It was old and on the verge of crumbling: the ground floor of stone and the rest of dark timber. Smoke puffed from the chimney. There appeared to be another, smaller building in back that Bronwyn hoped was a stable.

Riordan came out to greet them, arms wide in exuberant



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welcome. Bronwyn returned his infectious smile. He seemed all right. The elf, Fiona, emerged from the lodge, looking far more grave. Bronwyn was unsure what she thought of the woman. Not that it mattered very much. After tomorrow, it was likely that they would never meet again.

"Well met, brothers and sisters!" called Riordan. "There is room in the stable for your horses, and we left hot cider there to warm you. If the rest of you would be good enough to care for the animals, Fiona and I must speak to Alistair and Bronwyn inside."

Bronwyn jumped down and slung her backpack over one shoulder, the vital darkspawn blood concealed inside like poison festering in a wound. Alistair raised his brows, and followed her and the Orlesians up the sagging steps and into the house.

As a shelter, it was not bad. Bronwyn resolved to note this place on her map. It would do well in foul weather, and there was plenty of room for everyone to spread out their blankets at night. A door led to a lean-to, where Fiona had laid out ingredients for the Joining potion on a small table. An ornate silver cup was pushed to the side, absurdly out of place in the rustic shelter.

"A dog?" The elf regarded Scout with no great surprise. "We are truly in Ferelden, aren't we?" She gestured at her work. "We brought Archdemon blood, and *some* darkspawn blood, though you should actually have brought your own. No one should undergo the Joining who has not slain darkspawn."



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Bronwyn, stiffened at the woman's condescending tone. She found her intensely irritating, though it would be impolitic to say so at the moment. Swiftly, she unwrapped the heavy crockery jar and thumped it onto the work table. "Every one of my companions has killed darkspawn," Bronwyn replied. "Lots of darkspawn. We spent *weeks* in the Deep Roads. I collected this darkspawn blood at various battles, and one of our mages put a preservation spell on it for me."

"This should suffice," Riordan agreed, examining it, "though in future you will want to have each recruit collect a separate vial. It's tradition."

Bronwyn only nodded, not bothering to point out that they had had absolutely no idea when they were going to be able to initiate the Wardens. It would have been very peculiar to order each recruit to carry a vial of darkspawn blood in their packs for weeks or possibly months. In a perfect world, she *would* have had her recruits collect their own Joining blood.

"A drop of Archdemon blood, like so. And then the lyrium is added," said Fiona, showing her the procedure. "We brought a Joining chalice with us, as you see."

"Thank you," Bronwyn said, thinking of the handsome cup she had packed for the purpose. It was pointless to argue, and the Orlesians' goblet was bigger and grander, unsurprisingly. She struggled to tamp down a surge of resentment.

"Have you ever attended a Joining other than your own?"

asked Fiona, as she worked.

"No," said Bronwyn.

"— Yes," said Alistair.

"Then Alistair should say the words of the Joining," Fiona decided. Riordan took a breath, but Alistair interrupted.

"I said the words at Bronwyn's Joining! It's her turn this time."

He sounded just like Fergus had, years ago, when they bickered over who would curry the horses or set up the tent. It made Bronwyn smile, and she responded in the way that always drove her brother mad, when she used it in the presence of Mother and Father.

"If you like," she agreed amiably, with a virtuous air. "I don't mind."

Fiona, however, was not her mother. The elf set the potion aside and fixed her with cold eyes. "I am sure you do not! I am sure you do not mind usurping his authority in this or any other thing!" She took a step closer, unintimidated by Bronwyn's height. "I have heard of you, *'Girl Warden!'* Your birth may have been noble, but such things do not matter in the Wardens! It gives you no right to supplant those with more experience!"

Unprepared for such an attack, Bronwyn stared at the elf, only startled at first, then very offended. "I have never *usurped* anything of Alistair's that he wanted," she answered hotly. "I have never *supplanted* Alistair! You make it sound like I've plotted against him to seize the title of Warden-Commander... of all *two* of us! That's absurd!"

"Bronwyn's great!" Alistair objected, bewildered by the elf's anger. "She's a terrific leader, and I *hate* being in charge. So it's perfect!"

Riordan stepped between them. "Fiona," he murmured, lightly touching the elf mage's shoulder. "They know themselves best. We can help them with the Joining, and give them information, but we cannot order their lives for them."

"Quite so," Bronwyn agreed coldly, and turned away. "If we are done here, I shall fetch the others."

Riordan followed her outside. "Fiona had unpleasant dealings with nobles in her youth," he told Bronwyn. "It has made her suspicious of them. She came today because she truly wishes to help in the struggle against the Blight."

Bronwyn blew out a breath and tried to calm herself. "I lead because Alistair *will* not. I saw that in him right away. That does not mean I don't like and respect him. He's a splendid warrior and a loyal friend."

"I understand," Riordan said, his voice warm and soothing. "In the end, someone must be in charge, and it is no pleasure, but a burden that cannot be relinquished. I know this well. However, it is not of that I need to talk to you." He looked at her sadly. "Some of your recruits may flinch from the Joining. If that happens..."

"It happened at my Joining. Duncan killed the man. I know what to do, but I *trust* my people. No one will shirk."

He smiled then, and patted her arm. "May the Maker watch over them. Fetch them. I will deal with Fiona." He

paused, and smirked at her. "You *do* remember the Joining words, do you not?"

A reluctant laugh burst forth. "I've thought about little else for days! Yes, I remember them, and I went over them with Alistair. I think I should be able to acquit myself without causing us all undue embarrassment!"



"We're going to drink *blood*? Darkspawn *blood*?" Cullen stared at Bronwyn in consternation.

Riordan said, "As all Wardens have before you. This is the source of our power... and our victory."

"This is... Blood Magic?" Cullen stammered, completely out of his depth.

Riordan shifted slightly, one hand sliding discreetly to the dagger in his belt. Bronwyn gritted her teeth, and prayed for help to anyone who might be listening.

He must accept the cup. He must.

Anders, surprisingly, spoke up, quick and convincing. "It sounds more like how the Templars use the blood in mages' phylacteries for tracking, only *we* ingest it. That's right, isn't it?" he appealed to Bronwyn. "It's how Grey Wardens are able to track the darkspawn."

Bronwyn felt unspeakable gratitude to Anders, and gave Cullen an encouraging smile. "Yes, that's it exactly."

The ex-Templar shivered violently, stepped back, and gave a nod to say that he was all right. Bronwyn began again.

"Join us, brothers and sisters: join us in the shadows where

we stand vigilant..."

Bronwyn recited the ritual words, looking at each recruit in turn. Young faces glowed with purpose in the last rays of sunset. The shabbiness of their surroundings was softened by the gathering gloom. On a table stood the Joining chalice, brimful of death. and two wax candles in silver candlesticks added a touch of beauty. Soon the room would be lit only by the candles and by the cheerful blaze in the stone fireplace.

"You are called to submit yourself to the Taint for the greater good. Anders, come forward. From this moment you are a Grey Warden."

Bronwyn had decided to take the recruits in alphabetical order, partly because she was so very confident about Anders and Astrid. It was also a way that showed no favoritism.

Anders looked at the contents of the cup, and grimaced. "Yum."

Bronwyn managed a smile, and took back the cup when he was done. His face distorted almost comically, his eyes rolling back in his head. Riordan motioned Alistair over to help him catch the young mage. Together they laid him down gently on the floor on the other side of the room.

"He lives," Fiona declared.

The others shuffled at that. Perhaps they had not fully realized until that very moment that the liquid in the cup was potentially lethal.

So the test of courage was not Anders', but Astrid's. When



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Bronwyn called her forward, she did not hesitate. She boldly accepted the cup and said, "May the Stone accept it."

And she, too, survived. It was Cullen's turn.

He looked at the cup, and then looked again, uncertainty in his eyes.

"Is there no other way?" he pleaded.

Bronwyn shot a fiery glare at Riordan, and stepped forward, putting the cup firmly in Cullen's big hands. She caught his eyes with her own.

"Trust me."

He bit his lip, and nodded, and then quickly downed his share. His face twisted with disgust, and then he was falling backwards, and not, thank the Maker, coughing.

"He lives," Fiona confirmed.

Bronwyn sucked in a huge gulp of air, and then realized that she had been holding her breath. She gave them all a wry smile, and nodded to Brosca.

"Freydis, come forth. From this moment you are a Grey Warden."

"Freydis!" Brosca scoffed. "Aren't we all formal tonight!" She grinned at the contents of the goblet. "If I can drink lichen ale, I can drink this." And proceeded to do so.

"— She lives."

Four done, and safe. And now she called Leliana forth. This was the Joining she had the greatest reservations about, and she struggled to keep her voice steady.

"— you are a Grey Warden."



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"Andraste smile upon me," Leliana whispered. A brief swaying, and Bronwyn dreaded with all her heart that the bard would fall forward, choking...

She did not. Alistair caught her, and carried her to where the others lay unconscious. Riordan's eyes gleamed with growing good cheer. Fiona's expression remained inscrutable.

"Tara..." Bronwyn smiled at the pretty elf. "Come forward. From this moment you are a Grey Warden."

The girl made a joke of it. "I hope you saved the best for last." A swallow. Bronwyn took the cup. A moment of exquisite anxiety...

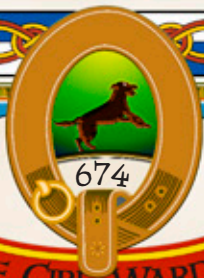
"She lives."

Riordan caught her, and set her down among her comrades.

"Yes!" Alistair bellowed, punching the air in triumph. "Yes!" He grabbed Bronwyn, hugged her, and dragged her into the first steps of the Remigold. "Yes! We are the best Grey Warden recruiters in all Thedas!"

Scout, who until now had sat as still as a mabari carved on a mantelpiece, began bounding around the room, barking loudly. He rushed over to the recruits, and licked their faces, his tail wagging. Fiona made a face at Riordan, who shrugged, still smiling.

Bronwyn felt like curling up on the floor beside the recruits. Instead she kissed Alistair's cheek and hugged him back. "They're alive! Thank the Maker!"



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"It happens, now and then," Riordan confirmed, enjoying their relief.

"Don't expect it to happen *again*," Fiona snorted.

While the newly-Joined slept off their ordeal, Riordan poured cups of cider, and began telling Bronwyn and Alistair the things they most desperately needed to know. "Ordinarily, as Junior Wardens, no one would share this information with you. You are so new to the Order. We prefer that recruits be given time to adapt to this life. I understand that you, Bronwyn, Joined only a few days before the Battle of Ostagar."

Alistair laughed, "Actually, she Joined the day before!"

Fiona shook her head and rolled her eyes. Bronwyn laughed with Alistair and Riordan, and unrolled the recruits' blankets, covering them up warmly.

"Most of them will sleep through the night," Fiona said. "Those on watch can talk to those who awaken early. They will be hungry. Did you bring provisions?"

"We did."

"We can make a big pot of porridge at dawn," Alistair suggested. "Porridge with sweetening. They'll like that. Even I can make porridge. Actually, now that you mention it..."

Fiona actually laughed. At least it resembled a laugh as much as did a sob or an angry gasp. "I shall make for us some *potée de chasse* – I suppose you would call it Hunter's Stew – with good Jader sausages," she told Alistair, "and you will help me, and learn."



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They all lent a hand, in the end, and Riordan and Fiona continued their lessons while lifting or carrying or chopping or stirring. The recruits on the floor sometimes thrashed or moaned in their sleep.

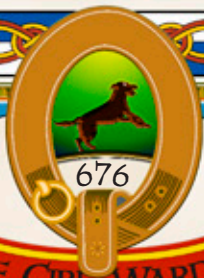
"Who were you evading, in your overland trip?" Bronwyn asked bluntly.

Riordan did not look at her, but said quietly, "You have attracted a great deal of notice, you and Alistair. I was foolishly naïve to send you my invitation through official channels, and think that others would not seek to use this situation to their advantage. As the only Wardens in Ferelden – the only thing standing between that country and its destruction by the Blight – you are important pieces in something certain people persist in regarding as a Game. You, Bronwyn, are known to be the daughter of Teyrn Cousland, a man who aroused such interest and admiration during his diplomatic missions – a man thought to be only a heartbeat away from the throne of Ferelden. Now that he is dead, his royal claim passes to his children."

"I am a Warden," Bronwyn said quietly. "Nothing 'passes' to me."

"Perhaps not, in ordinary circumstances, but with so few having a claim, exceptions might be made, even for a Warden."

"And Alistair –" whispered Fiona. She shook herself briskly, and said, "There are those in Orlais who do not share the concerns of the Wardens. It is possible that



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an attempt might be made to use this Blight to benefit one country at another's expense. That, we, as Wardens, cannot allow."

"Some such rumors were passed to us by friends," Riordan told them, with a wry smile. "We discovered that it would have been quite impossible for Monseigneur de Guesclin to have permitted me to cross the border. He would have, instead, graciously invited you to come to the Rock for the Joining. Once there, circumstances beyond your control would have prevented your return."

"They were going to kill us?" Alistair asked, wide-eyed.

"No — *no* — by no means. No expense would have been spared to make your stay pleasant. Secure, but extremely pleasant. A story would be told to Ferelden of wounds, or sickness, or some such plausible nonsense. Once it became clear that you would not be returning, the King of Ferelden would have no choice but to admit the Wardens of Orlais — on the Empress' terms."

"Which are?" Bronwyn asked, her voice steady.

"Two hundred Wardens, accompanied by four legions of chevaliers, all to be billeted and fed at Ferelden expense for the duration of the emergency — "

"— which will never be over," Bronwyn finished. "I'm sure the chevaliers would make themselves very much at home."

"You see that the Empress wishes to use the Wardens as a political weapon. Fiona and I cannot stomach that. Neither can others, hence the leaked information. No one



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will know of this meeting. We shall return to Jader, and you will complete your mission."

Bronwyn finished slicing the sausage, wiped her hands, and sat down for a moment to think. "That plot only holds if it is truly a Blight. Does the Empress believe it to be so? Teyrn Loghain — and even the King — were loath to credit it."

"*Loghain!*" muttered Fiona, with a very Orlesian gesture of disgust.

Riordan glanced at her and then said, "Naturally, the Empress knows it is a Blight. Heads of state are privy to certain Grey Warden secrets. It must be so, or we could not function during the centuries of peace. The Divine in Val Royaux and the Black Divine in Minrathous also know why we are essential to the survival of Thedas."

"That's... good, I suppose," said Alistair, carefully adding more wood to the fire. "I wish we did."

"Yes," Riordan said heavily. "You must be told, or all of this is vain. Duncan did not have time, I suppose, to tell you how an Archdemon is slain."

Bronwyn laughed lightly, "Or slain without the assistance of griffons!"

Riordan did not smile, but told her the truth in brief, pithy terms: how the Taint in the Grey Wardens attracted the essence of the Old God; how the Warden who struck the killing blow drew that essence into himself; how that resulted in the death both of the Old God-turned-Archdemon and of the Warden; how some thought that the



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very soul of the Warden was consumed by the event. He told them of the horror that would ensue if someone other than a Warden slew an Archdemon, for it would return again, and again, until a Warden put an end to it. Fiona said nothing while he spoke, and looked rather sickened.

Bronwyn's breath was taken away by the grim news. After some time, she pulled herself together, and spoke: "I'm not sure that King Cailan knows this. He's incredibly callous about it if he does. He seemed to think he could take part in killing the Archdemon if it appeared. Do you think Duncan might have tried to spare him? Or are the Kings of Ferelden not privy to Grey Warden secrets?"

Fiona said sharply, "Maric knew everything! What he did not learn for himself, Duncan told him. As to King Cailan, I know that Duncan was fond of him, and considered him young for his age."

Alistair had been quiet since learning about the sacrifice required to kill the Archdemon. Now he smiled up at Fiona from the floor. "You were friends with Duncan?"

Fiona smiled back him. "For many, many years. He once did me a very great service. Pass me that box. No, the other one. It contains dried mushrooms."

"Are there any other secrets?" Bronwyn asked, letting Fiona take charge of the stewpot. The older woman seemed to like ordering Alistair about. "This may be our only chance to talk to Senior Wardens for some time."


"Well..." Riordan and Fiona exchanged a glance, and she



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nodded. "It is a rather long story, but there is something unusual about this Blight..."



Bronwyn ate her excellent Orlesian *potée* in silence, her head whirling with the Wardens' revelations. King Maric had gone on an expedition to the Deep Roads with the newly readmitted Grey Wardens early in Dragon 9:10. Fiona had been one of the party, and knew all the details. Duncan, a young recruit in those days, had also been there. The Orlesian Warden-Commander, Bregan, had heard the Calling, had departed for the Deep Roads, and had been 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. Bronwyn frowned over the name. Genevieve. When she had first arrived at Ostagar with Duncan, she had sought out Teyrn Loghain, who had mentioned the woman briefly.

"Don't let anyone tell you don't belong!" he had encouraged her. "The first Warden Maric brought to Ferelden was a woman: the best warrior I've ever seen."

This Architect creature had at least temporarily won the trust of Bregan, who had told him some of the most guarded secrets of the order: among them the various locations of the sleeping Old Gods.

"Oh, no!" Bronwyn groaned, putting her face in her hands. Scout came over to her, whining with concern.

"Oh, yes!" Fiona replied mercilessly. "It is entirely possible that the Architect *began* the current Blight with a misguided attempt to free the Old God."

While Bronwyn served Scout another bowl from the pot, she was told more: the Architect had proposed melding darkspawn with all other races by forcing the Joining on every human, dwarf, and elf in Thedas. A monstrous proposal, for most would die, and the rest...

Bronwyn shuddered. It might establish a kind of peace, yes, but at what price? It was madness, absolute madness. It was shocking that some of the Wardens in the party had been convinced by the Architect's reasoning, and had joined forces with him. The Circle of Magi had been drawn into the plot, and the then-First Enchanter, the Orlesian Remille, had meant to make use of the Architect to destroy Ferelden. Bregan had shaken off the Architect's hold, and was killed just as Loghain appeared to rescue everyone. It had been for the best, for Bregan's secrets were the Wardens', and must be kept.

"No wonder Teyrn Loghain is so suspicious of Wardens!" Bronwyn finally said. "King Maric was nearly killed. And there was an Orlesian plot at the heart of it!"

"That was thwarted by mostly Orlesian Wardens!" Fiona pointed out tartly. "And by the courage of Maric." Her voice softened at the name.

Bronwyn glanced up at her. Fiona would have been quite a young woman twenty years ago, and beautiful...

Queen Rowan would have been dead a few years before... King Maric was known to have a wandering eye, or at least *Bronwyn* knew it, for there was Alistair...

Who was twenty years old.

Bronwyn looked over at her brother Warden. He was wolfing down the good food, quietly thinking over the story himself. The mage was watching him: very discreetly, but watching every spoonful go into the healthy, handsome young man, with an expression of such tenderness...

Speaking into the quiet, Bronwyn said. "The Orlesians are very interested in Alistair, too, aren't they? In fact, he's the one they're *really* interested in. He's the one you're here to save."

Riordan blew out a breath.

Alistair looked up, even going so far as to set down his bowl. "Me? Nobody's interested in me." He reddened. "I mean... are you talking about what I think you're talking about?"

"That your secret isn't as secret as you might have thought?" Bronwyn said raising her brows. "I think our brother and sister know it. It would be very, very helpful if they would be frank with us."

Riordan cleared his throat. "It is known in some circles that Alistair is King Maric's son, yes. We were not sure that *he* knew it."

"Did Maric tell you?" Fiona asked, her eyes fixed on the young Warden. "Or Duncan?"

"King Maric?" Alistair asked, incredulous. "I never spoke

to the man in my life. I always knew he was my father, though. Arl Eamon told me, and he also told me it didn't matter, because I was a bastard and a commoner."

"The less said about Arl Eamon's treatment of you, the better," Bronwyn muttered. Fiona grew pale. Her lips thinned, and she looked at her hands.

Riordan said, "His wife, the Arlessa Isolde, shared this information in letters to her uncle in Val Chevin. From him, it went to the highest circles. If King Cailan were to die in battle, Alistair would have a strong claim to the throne, Warden or not. The two of you together..."

Alistair was both horrified and amused. "But I'm the bastard son of a serving maid!" he protested. "I never even learned to read until Arl Eamon pledged me to the Chantry and sent me away when I was ten. I mean," he laughed, "You've heard of people who were born in a barn? Well, I was raised in a stable and slept on straw. King's son or not, Arl Eamon thought it was good enough for me, and it was good enough for me. I had some happy times there..."

"That makes no difference to your claim," Fiona said fiercely, "and this Arl Eamon was a heartless fool!"

"He's dead now," Alistair said mildly, "so there's no point in criticizing him. Bronwyn gets angry enough for both of us. There's nothing that can be done about it, and here I am a Warden now. I'm fine. I'd just as soon not be locked away in Orlais when there are darkspawn to fight, though, so I really appreciate all you've done." He laughed, and

said to Bronwyn, "We're pretty popular, aren't we?"

Bronwyn told them, her voice smooth, "Alistair is referring to the regular attacks on us from darkspawn, bandits, and hirelings of Arl Rendon Howe, the man who murdered my parents." She looked at Alistair, willing him to say nothing of Marjolaine's mercenaries. That was an altogether different matter, and the Orlesian Wardens had no business interfering with it.

Anders groaned loudly, his head moving from side to side. The Wardens looked over at him.

"He will awaken soon," Riordan said. "Mages seem to be able to escape the Fade more readily than others."

"We have more experience there!" Fiona pointed out. With a touch more courtesy than she had previously shown, she said to Bronwyn, "You seem to have had your share of adventures. Tell us of them."

The story stopped for some time at the sighting of the Archdemon. Both Riordan and Fiona asked endless, minute questions about its appearance, its size, its ability to maneuver, its apparent intelligence.

"No one has seen an Archdemon in four hundred years!" Riordan laughed grimly. "Many thought that one would never be seen again."

Neither of the Orlesians had ever seen a Broodmother, either, though they had read of their existence.

"I wish to look at your eyes in the morning, when the light

is good," Fiona said to Bronwyn. "That is an interesting phenomenon, and we need all the information we can get about such creatures."

Riordan shook his head in wonder, "I admit I was surprised that no one had spoken of your eyes before. Such a startling shade of green would ordinarily be reported as your most distinguishing feature!"

"I owe Anders my life, my sight, and my face," Bronwyn said frankly. She walked over to look at the young mage. Fiona had told her not to disturb any of them, but to let them reach consciousness on their own. "But all the recruits are remarkable."

"They must be," Riordan agreed. "I am surprised that the Circle allowed you two mages. Generally they hold to the 'one-at-a-time' rule."

"Bronwyn was *very* persuasive," Alistair said proudly. "And it wasn't as if the Circle had much use for either of them. Tara was locked up for helping someone escape, and Anders was considered a flight risk. Tara, especially, had been treated very badly. She didn't remember ever seeing the sun before we left the Tower. I don't think that's right."

Fiona's approval shone in her eyes. "I have some spells to teach your mages that they might find helpful."

"They'll appreciate it," Bronwyn said. "Tara had a hard time adjusting at first, but now she's doing very well. She's extremely brave and powerful – a very aggressive fighter."

Anders coughed, struggling to sit up. "Arrrghh." He

coughed again, and then said, "What was *that*? And what is that taste in my mouth? And how can I get rid of it?"

Alistair laughed, and brought him a cup of cider.

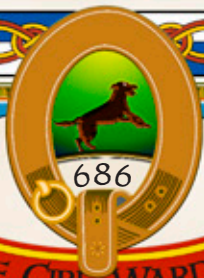
After Anders, then Tara, wild-eyed and shocked. Then Cullen, who had understood that he was in the Fade, and Leliana, who waxed poetic about the ghastly visions she had seen. Astrid and Brosca had never visited the Fade before – it was not a place for dwarves – and were struck dumb by it all.

Everyone was ravenous, and more food was prepared. Most went back to sleep after they had something to eat. The four Senior Wardens – for Riordan and Fiona agreed that Bronwyn and Alistair were, by default, Senior Wardens – took turns sleeping and standing watch. The hours of darkness crept by.

Never was a sunrise more welcome. The Wardens stirred and talked softly, scraped the stewpot for the last bits, gnawed on waybread. Cullen and Anders found the abandoned well, and hauled up water for everyone. Fiona showed Alistair the *correct* way to make porridge. Leliana joined them, and the two Orlesian women civilly debated which spices to use.

Others wandered outside to enjoy the dawn. "I like the pretty colors," said Brosca, pointing to the rosy streaks in the golden sky. "The colors underground are different."

Astrid shrugged. "That's why everyone loves jewels so much. I've heard that some of the surface vegetation is



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colorful. Flowers are ephemeral, though. Jewels last forever.”

“When you can get them,” Brosca scoffed. She had never heard the word “ephemeral,” but it was easy enough to guess what Her Ladyship was talking about. “Though I have a gorgeous chunk of malachite.” She pulled it from a pocket. “See? I like the swirls in the green.”

“Nice,” Astrid said, hoping there would be enough porridge for a second helping. “You could use that for the pommel of a knife.”

Brosca beamed at the brightly colored stone. “That’s a great idea.”

Alistair and Riordan worked diligently, making Joining amulets for everyone. A bit of hollowed out crystal, the last drops of the Joining potion, some leather cords, and they were passed out to the new recruits.

“Amethyst!” cried Leliana, “How pretty! Are they always like this?”

“It’s what we had,” Riordan shrugged, smiling at her enthusiasm.

“Mine is clear quartz,” Alistair said, pulling his own amulet out to show her.

“Mine is green fluorite,” Bronwyn displayed hers.

Riordan’s was also fluorite, but yellow. Fiona’s, like Alistair’s, was clear.

“I shall find a gold chain for mine,” Leliana resolved. “And I shall never, ever take it off.”

Fiona took the mages aside and they went back behind



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the stables to practice spells.

Alistair stood by Bronwyn watching everyone happily eating, washing, or playing with their new amulets. “They won’t be so happy when we tell them the bad news.”

“All the more reason for them to enjoy themselves now. Riordan and Fiona will have to leave soon. We’ll call everyone together and have a talk before we ride back.”

“Are you going to tell them about the Archdemon now? I mean – it’s traditional to wait...”

“Of course I’m going to tell them. What if something happened to both of us? We can’t risk disaster a second time. Everybody needs to know everything. And I’d better wheedle some Archdemon blood from Fiona. Maybe we can make more Wardens on our journey south.”

“Bronwyn!” Riordan came down the steps, porridge bowl in hand, a harried frown creasing his brow. “I forgot to tell you about the caches...”

While Alistair knew the Warden Compound well, he did not know about the secret cupboard in the cellar. Nor did he know about the hidden room in a warehouse in the Market District in Denerim. Riordan gave them some notes, and Bronwyn studied them, trying to commit the codes to memory.

The Orlesians were in a hurry to leave and ride for Jader, and there was a great bustle as they packed up their gear, with everyone’s occasionally conflicting help.

“Fiona!” Bronwyn whispered in the midst of the rush.

"Would it be possible for me to have some Archdemon blood – "

"Yes, yes, yes – " Fiona said impatiently, thrusting a vial at her. "This is for you. There is more at the Warden Compound in Denerim. Do you remember the formula?"

And then she forced Bronwyn to recite it back, her nagging reminding Bronwyn of Nan or even Mother at her worst. The memory softened her irritation at being treated like an idiot child, and she indulged the woman. Besides, it would not do to get it wrong...

"And teach it to your mages!" Fiona scolded. "No...I will..."

So she called Anders and Tara again, and went over the formula, and told them how mages could speed the process when they added the lyrium. And they, too, were made to repeat it back.

"And some last presents!" shouted Riordan. From a saddlebag, he pulled out some Warden tabards, and gleefully tossed them to the new recruits. There was laughter and confusion as the recruits tried to find the ones that would fit, more or less. And naturally, everyone had to put them on.

"This is really nice cloth!" enthused Brosca. "It's shiny!"

While everyone was enjoying their new finery, Bronwyn gently pulled Fiona aside for a last word.

"I know you're in a hurry," she murmured, "but will you go without telling Alistair the truth?"

The elf stared up at her warily. "I do not know what you mean."

"Will you really go without telling him that you are his mother?"

She thought for a moment that Fiona might curse her, or at least slap her. The mage said coldly, "You are wrong. Alistair does not have – or need – a mother who is a elf, a mage, an Orlesian, and a Warden."

"It is *you* who are wrong!" Bronwyn hissed. "Alistair would not care! He is a warm-hearted young man who would open his arms to his mother, no matter who or what she was! I think you should go to him *right now*, and tell him who you are and how much you care for him, and – if you can – explain where you have been all these years – "

"It is very rare for female Grey Wardens to bear children," Fiona told her, her face taut, "and when we do, we are not permitted to keep them. Maric and I hoped to spare Alistair the kind of life he would have had as a bastard prince."

Bronwyn bit back what she thought of all that. Recriminations and second-guessing would do no good at the moment. She spoke with all the force and conviction in her. "He is a Warden, and happy with it. No one cares who the mother of a Warden is. This might be your only chance in life to speak to him as his mother. It would be *wrong* to let it pass you by." When Fiona hesitated, Bronwyn ground out, "Believe me when I tell you that I would do anything – *anything* – to speak to my mother one more time. Someday he may learn who you are and be deeply hurt. Don't *do* that to him."

And so, while the new recruits celebrated, Alistair and Fiona walked among the trees; and secrets, too long kept, were revealed. Bronwyn saw them emerge a little later, and it seemed that both of them had shed tears.

"Fiona!" Riordan shouted, "We must go!" He shook hands and slapped shoulders, and then grabbed Bronwyn in a bear hug.

"Maker watch over you, Warden-Commander of Ferelden!" He held her at arms-length, smiling at her, and then vaulted into his saddle. "You're a fine lass!"

Alistair, his face glowing, helped Fiona mount her horse. "Thanks for everything," he choked out. His hand lingered on his mother's stirrup. Bronwyn went over to him and put an arm around his shoulders.

The Orlesians waved as they trotted down the path. Fiona looked back, her face illuminated by the the morning sun. "Farewell," she called. "Maker bless you!"

When they were out of sight, Bronwyn drew a deep breath, and readied herself to tell her companions about the darker side of duty.

END OF VOLUME ONE



THEDAS, THE WORLD OF DRAGON AGE, IS A WORLD WITH AN EXTENSIVE HISTORY CONTAINING MANY VARIOUS CULTURES. Its name, Thedas, refers to the "known world," composed of a single continent, in addition to those islands which have been explored and settled by Thedosian adventurers over the ages. The continent of Thedas is in the southern hemisphere. Thedosian scholars and explorers are unaware of any other.

We, and the players of the games set in this world are most concerned with the history and culture of the nation of Ferelden. A small, comparatively new kingdom in the southeast of the settled continent.

An extensive and detailed compendium of material pertaining to Thedas may be found on the Dragon Age Wiki at: http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Dragon_Age_Wiki

For the convenience of the reader, some basic information concerning Thedas is included here.

Regarding Ages: most of Thedas currently conforms to the Chantry Calendar. The Chantry calendar measures time as a period of Ages. The one current is the Dragon Age, while the period immediately before was the Blessed Age. Each Age lasts approximately a century and there have been nine so far.

The First Age was marked by the creation of the Chantry. Time periods before the first age are referred to as Ancient, so 400 years before the first Age would be -400 Ancient. This is equivalent to 800 TE by the Imperial reckoning or about 1,300 years before the present.

The first Age is known as the Divine Age. Historical record refers to this age by the years 1:1-99

The Divine Age is followed by the Glory Age. Years 2:1-99

The Towers Age follows the Glory Age. Years 3:1-99

The Black Age follows the Towers Age. Years 4:1-99

The Exalted Age follows the Black Age. Years 5:1-99

The Steel Age follows the Exalted Age. Years 6:1-99

The Storm Age follows the Steel Age. Years 7:1-99

The Blessed Age follows the Storm Age. Years 8:1-99

In the 99th year of each Age the Divine looks for an event or portent in order to determine the name of the coming Age. The last portent was a dragon awakening and going on a rampage. This suggested an age full of violence and destruction. So, it is the Dragon Age.

The Dragon Age follows the Blessed Age. Years 9:1-99
This story takes place during the year 9:30-31.

A fuller examination of the historical events of Dragon Age canon (which this particular story does not altogether follow) may be found on the Dragon Age Wiki at:

<http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Timeline>

Various major events in Thedosian history according to the Dragon Age Wiki are:

CALENDAR			EVENT
ELVEN	IMPERIAL	CHANTRY	
1 FA	-6404 TE	-7599 Ancient	Founding of Arlathan
3000 FA	-3405 TE	-4600 Ancient	1st contact of Elves & Dwarves
4500 FA	-1905 TE	-3100 Ancient	Humans explore Thedas
6405 FA	0 TE	-1195 Ancient	Tevinter Imperium Founded
7205 FA	800 TE	-395 Ancient	First Blight begins
7430 FA	1025 TE	-170 Ancient	Death of Andraste
7600 FA	1195 TE	1:1 Divine	Chantry Founded
7604 FA	1199 TE	1:5 Divine	Second Blight Begins
7809 FA	1404 TE	3:10 Towers	Third Blight begins
7886 FA	1481 TE	3:87 Towers	Chantry Schism
8023 FA	1618 TE	5:24 Exalted	Forth Blight begins
8429 FA	2024 TE	9:30 Dragon	Fifth blight begins

A Thedosian year consists of twelve thirty-day months. In addition, the majority of Thedas, from Tevinter to Ferelden, celebrates five major holidays, each tied to the transition of a season or, in the case of First Day, the beginning of a new year. Although each month has an

THEDAS: AN APPENDIX

Imperial name, in the language of Ancient Tevinter, the people of Ferelden commonly use the "low" names. The Tevinter names are listed first, followed by the more common name for the month.

The system was developed in the early years of the Tevinter Imperium and was influenced by the elves.

The five holidays, or *annums*, take place at the beginning of the months in which they fall.

MONTH ORDER	IMPERIAL	COMMON
<i>Annum: First Day</i>		
First Month	Verimensis	Wintermarch
<i>Annum: Wintersend</i>		
Second Month	Pluitanis	Guardian
Third Month	Nebulis	Drakonis
Fourth Month	Eluviesta	Cloudreach
<i>Annum: Summerday</i>		
Fifth Month	Molioris	Bloomingtide
Sixth Month	Ferventis	Justinian
Seventh Month	Solis	Solace
<i>Annum: All Soul's Day</i>		
Eighth Month	Matrinalis	August
Ninth Month	Parvulis	Kingsway
Tenth Month	Fruventum	Harvestmere
<i>Annum: Satinalia</i>		
Eleventh Month	Umbralis	Firstfall
Twelfth Month	Cassus	Haring

THEDAS: AN APPENDIX

Regarding the Holidays:

FIRST DAY

The traditional start of the year, this holiday involves visits to neighbors and family (in remote areas, this was once an annual check to ensure everyone was alive), as well as a town gathering to commemorate the year past, accompanied by drinking and merriment.

WINTERSEND

Once called "Urthalis" and dedicated to Urthemiel, the Old God of Beauty, this holiday has now become a celebration of the Maker. It stands for the end of winter in many lands and coincides with tourneys and contests at the Proving Grounds in Minrathous. In southern lands, this holiday has become a day of gathering for trade, theater, and, in some areas, the arrangement of marriages. It is celebrated at the beginning of Pluitanis.

SUMMERDAY

Once called "Andoralis" and dedicated to Andoral, the Old God of Unity, this holiday is universally celebrated as the beginning of summer, a time for joy and, commonly, marriage. Boys and girls ready to come of age don white tunics and gowns. They then join a grand procession that crosses the settlement to the local Chantry, where they are taught the responsibilities of adulthood. Summerday is a particularly holy occasion in Orlais. It is celebrated at the beginning of Molioris.

ALL SOUL'S DAY

Once called "Funalis" and dedicated to Dumat, the Old God of Silence. However, since Dumat's rise during the First Blight, Thedosians turn a blind eye to any old ties between the day and the dragon. The holiday is now known across Thedas as All Soul's Day and is spent in somber remembrance of the dead. In some northern lands, the people dress as spirits and walk the streets in parade after midnight. The Chantry uses the holiday to remember the death of Andraste, with public fires that mark her immolation and plays that depict her death. It is celebrated at the beginning of Matrinalis.

SATINALIA

Once dedicated to the Old Goddess of Freedom, Zazikel – but now attributed more to the second moon, Satina – this holiday is accompanied by wild celebration, the wearing of masks, and naming the town fool as ruler for a day. In Antiva, Satinalia lasts for a week or more, while a week of fasting follows. In more pious areas, large feasts and the giving of gifts mark the holiday. Satinalia is celebrated at the beginning of Umbralis.

Regarding the Seven Old Gods

The Magisters worshipped seven Old Gods, all of whom had revealed themselves in the forms of High Dragons. The first – and the leader of the others – was called Dumat, the Dragon of Silence. According to scholars, Dumat was the first Old God to transform into an archdemon and consequently to be slain during the First Blight.

The Old Gods, listed in the traditional order are:

Dumat, the Dragon of Silence and the archdemon of the First Blight

Zazikel, the Dragon of Chaos/Freedom and the archdemon of the Second Blight

Toth, the Dragon of Fire and the archdemon of the Third Blight

Andoral, the Dragon of Unity/Slaves and the archdemon of the Fourth Blight

Urthemiel, the Dragon of Beauty and the archdemon of the Fifth Blight

Razikale, the Dragon of Mystery

Lusakan, the Dragon of Night

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BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ORLESIAN OCCUPATION OF FERELDEN, and those events leading up to the Fifth Blight.

In 8:24 Blessed (around a century before the events in Victory at Ostagar, the Orlesian Empire, under the direction of the "Mad Emperor" Reville, invaded Ferelden. Thanks to the clandestine support of a number of powerful banns, Orlais quickly established a strong foothold. Vigil's Keep and the City of Amaranthine were taken by the Empire, as was Redcliffe. At the Battle of Lothing, King Vanedrin Theirin was killed, and the sword of Calenhad, Nemetos, was stolen. Ardal Cousland, Teyrn of Highever, was slain defending his king.

Though Vanedrin was succeeded by his son, Brandel Theirin, the youth was unable to unite the country, and for the next several decades, Ferelden was mired in blood and battle. Brandel gained the name "The Defeated."

In 8:44 Denerim was finally sacked by the Orlesians, who claimed victory in Ferelden and drove King Brandel into hiding. Though routed, Brandel and others continued to wage guerrilla war.

When Brandel died, several years after the birth of his grandson Maric Therin (b. 8:78), Orlais crowned Meghren as King of Ferelden, though Brandel's daughter, "the Rebel Queen" Moira Theirin, renewed the resistance movement. Meghren's sadistic behavior stiffened hostility to him. The Chantry, however, supported him as the rightful king.

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The Occupation was a dark time. The Empire declared elves to be property and sold them like cattle. Chevaliers routinely plundered freeholds of coin, food, women, and children, calling it "taxation." Fereldan nobles were murdered or dispossessed, and their lands and titles given to Orlesians. During the Occupation, no Landsmeets were held.

In 8:96, Moira the Rebel Queen was assassinated by Bann Ceorlic the Elder and several other treacherous nobles at the behest of King Meghren. Escaping the scene of her murder, Maric joined forces with a young rebel, Loghain Mac Tir (b. 8:80). During their early days as wanderers, they came across Flemeth, the Witch of the Wilds, who had ominous words for both men. However, with Loghain's help, that of the Arl of Redcliffe, Rendorn Guerrin, and the arl's daughter Rowan, the rebellion entered a new phase. Loghain's military genius brought them a wave of successes.

In 8:98, the rebels retook the isolated port town of Gwaren, their first major victory in years. Balanced against this was the disastrous Battle of White River, from which only fifty rebels escaped, including Bryce Cousland, Rendon Howe and Leonas Bryland. Bryland was later to observe that Rendon Howe was never the same after that traumatic experience.

Betrayed by the elven bard Katriel, who had seduced Maric, the Battle of West Hill (8:99) resulted in another disaster for the rebels. Maric, Rowan, Loghain, and

Katriel (whose treason was unknown to them), traveled through the Deep Roads with the aid of the Legion of the Dead, and rejoined the rebel forces at Gwaren. During the journey, Loghain and Rowan (who was betrothed to Maric and deeply wounded by his open affair with Katriel) fell in love. After reestablishing his power in Gwaren, Maric killed Bann Ceorlic and the other traitors who had murdered his mother. Katriel's treachery was uncovered by Loghain, and Maric killed her as well.

At the Battle of River Dane (8:99), the last two legions of chevaliers that the Emperor sent to occupied Ferelden were defeated by a rebel army commanded by Loghain. Three years later, after a long and bloody siege, the rebels retook Denerim, and Meghren fell to Maric's sword. The Theirin dynasty once again ruled Ferelden. Rowan and Loghain renounced their love for the good of the country. Rowan married Maric and became his queen. Prince Cailan was born 9:5. Loghain was made Teyrn of Gwaren, and married Celia, the daughter of a cabinet maker. Until the death of Queen Rowan in 9:8 he almost never traveled to the capital. After her death, however, Maric relied on him increasingly. A marriage was arranged between Maric's son Cailan and Loghain's daughter Anora (b. 9:4).

Orlais did not cease to plot against Ferelden. IN 9:10, Maric was lured into an adventure in the Deep Roads that involved Grey Warden secrets, the schemes of an

intelligent darkspawn called the Architect, and the plots of the Orlesian First Enchanter of the Fereldan Circle of Magi. Maric there met Duncan, later Warden Commander of Ferelden, and had a brief affair with the elven Grey Warden mage Fiona. He was nearly killed, but for a last-minute rescue by Loghain. The Orlesian plot was thwarted, and the Architect escaped into the Deep Roads. The affair increased Loghain's deep suspicion of the Grey Wardens, as he regarded the Orlesian branch of the order as puppets of the Orlesian Empire. Maric's son Alistair was born later in 9:10.

Diplomatic relations between Orlais and Ferelden were not resumed until the accession of the sixteen-year-old Empress Celene (9:20) to the Orlesian throne.

In 9:25, King Maric was lost at sea on a voyage to Wycome, and was eventually declared dead. Loghain Mac Tir searched for him for two year to no avail. Rumors persisted that Maric was alive, held in an Orlesian prison. The Landsmeet chose Cailan to succeed his father, though a large faction supported the candidacy of Bryce Cousland, Teyrn of Highever.

In early 9:30, darkspawn appeared in the Korcari Wilds in the south of Ferelden, and the Fifth Blight began.



IN THE STORIES TOLD BY THE 'BLIGHT COMPANIONS':

Bronwyn's story is adapted from 'Mr Fox' in ENGLISH FAIRY TALES, collected by Joseph Jacobs, combined with a bit of 'The Robber Bridegroom,' collected by the Brothers Grimm, which has a similar theme.

Alistair's story is adapted from 'The Water of Life,' collected by the Brothers Grimm.

As far as possible with such a theme, Morrigan's story is original with me. I thought very carefully about what kind of story Flemeth would tell Morrigan, considering how much she wants to convince Morrigan that 1) she can never trust anyone and 2) children who disobey their magical parent come to a sticky end.

Leliana's story is adapted from 'The Flying Trunk' by Hans Christian Andersen.

Sten's story is adapted from a Punjabi tale.

For Anders' story, I used bits of the medieval legend of Virgilius the Sorcerer, and you can read a bowdlerized version of that by Andrew Lang (THE VIOLET FAIRY BOOK is online). However, the second half of the tale is my own invention entirely. The part about fire issuing from the girl's vagina was a favorite of medieval illustrators.

Tara's story is adapted from 'Fundvogel,' collected by the Brothers Grimm.

Cullen's story is adapted from Grimm, but I have altered

it quite a bit and added some of the return of Ulysses.

And, so on to chapter notes:

CHAPTER 3:

Despite the developers' notes that the proper honorific for a Teyrn or Teyrna is "Your Grace" (like an English non-royal duke), no one seems to use it in-game. The only person ever addressed as "Your Grace" is Arl Eamon, and that is clearly an error. I've decided to go with "my lord," since the use of "Your Grace" for a non-royal duke began around the 16th century in England, and thus is not like the England: 1200 model used by the developers for Ferelden.

CHAPTER 6:

Yes, I agree that Bronwyn breaks the news to Fergus too abruptly. I decided she would do that because she's very young, still grieving, and hasn't had enough experience to know how to do it better. And she's been dying to talk about it to someone who understands. And also, if she didn't tell him, someone else in that crowded camp would – or he'd hear about it through the thin canvas of the tent, and that would be worse.

CHAPTER 7:

And now, Bronwyn is off on her adventures. The shape of the quests is profoundly altered. She will not be seeking out the Arl of Redcliffe, as he is dead. There



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will be a Redcliffe adventure, but it will not be hers. I think the readers will be amused to discover who is called upon to sort out the catastrophe there.

I have had a number of questions about Arl Eamon's death, and perhaps I should go ahead and address them. There are subtle differences in this AU, because canon timeframes are often vague and contradictory. There is about a week's lapse between Ostagar and the Warden's awakening. In this story, my Warden has no such lost time. There was no panicky news of the disaster of Ostagar, which I believe is what caused Jowan's carelessness and his discovery as a poisoner. No one found out that Eamon was being poisoned, and thus no one was sent out looking for the Urn. Jowan realized he was in danger of being uncovered at Loghain's agent. He gave Eamon a final dose and fled the castle. This last dose took some time to work, so Eamon was not unconscious and lying at the point of death at home. That is the scenario that caused Connor's despair and the deal with the demon. Instead, Eamon felt unwell, but still forced himself to ride to Ostagar, where the poison finished him off. Since no one realized what was wrong, they did not succeed in even maintaining him in a coma. Connor does not yet know that his father is dead. That shock will cause trouble, too, though trouble of a somewhat different kind.

Mainly, though, I killed him off because I really, really



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dislike him. Check out my story *The Keening Blade* for my take on Eamon. And this is AU, and I want to see how it plays out without Eamon as a player.

I don't know if the developers knew they were setting up the game for those like me, who are really invested in the whole "Final Girl Theory." Nonetheless, I find using the Final Girl trope handy in determining the shape of the story. (In brief, in horror/fantasy film, the final girl is the one who confronts the monster at the climax of the film – the one whose POV the audience gradually adopts, even if the viewer is male. Ellen Ripley is a final girl, for example. Buffy Summers seems to be one, but there is debate about that, since some feel that Willow comes closer to the usual attributes. Interesting subject.)

CHAPTER 9:

There aren't as many bandits in the area in my story as there are in-game. The large number of canon bandits are probably mostly soldiers fleeing the disaster at Ostagar, who have turned bandit to survive. Since in my story Ostagar was a victory, there haven't been as many deserters.

CHAPTER 10:

Oh – and some have expressed dismay that Zevran might not make an appearance. Do remember that it was Howe who contacted the Crows, not Loghain!

I am including quite a bit of canon dialogue here for the



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benefit of my readers who have never played the game.

CHAPTER 12:

Uldred is wrong in saying that Wardens cannot be possessed, of course, as the Soldier's Peak add-on suggests. Whether he is honestly wrong or simply lying doesn't matter. What matters is that he is believed.

Game players will have guessed that Shah Wyrd was accidentally summoned by the apprentices touching the statue bases, and hitting on the right combination. Whether Irving or Greagoir will ever realize this, I don't know. It doesn't matter at this point, anyway.

I originally planned to include Lily in the party as well, but the name confusion between Leliana and Lily was too great, nor was I sure I really had a use for her in the party. However, her imprisonment in the Aeonar will be mentioned in a future chapter.

CHAPTER 17:

The portrait over the bar at The Hero's Rest is inspired by a chapter in Amhran Comhrac's *Apostates of Amaranthine* called 'THE SECRET HEARTTHROB OF FERELDEN.'

Chapter 18:

Yes, there were little bits from Macbeth, Othello, and the Duchess of Malfi among Howe's speeches.

Yes, the Orlesians are up to something, because the Orlesians are always up to something. They may be up to more than one thing, and they may be up to something



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you didn't expect, and not up to something you anticipated. Ever since David Gaider announced that Loghain was absolutely correct in his analysis of the Ostagar letters, I've been revising my original outline like mad.


CHAPTER 23:

The command for archers is "Loose!" rather than "Fire!" Ain't no gunpowder in a bow. Early firearms, however, did require the use of a match or lit fuse, hence the command.

I know the cut scene of the Battle of Ostagar seems to imply that the darkspawn have siege weapons, but nothing we see of them later would support that. Their only devices are crude traps and ballistae, and the latter were probably made by someone else. Their emissaries might be able to throw long-distance fireballs. Possibly with dwarven ghouls/thralls, they could have some decent weapons, but the darkspawn could barely learn how to load them, much less repair them, and siege weapons require constant maintenance.

CHAPTER 25:

Yes, they survived. Most of them have to survive because they are actually Wardens in canon. As for Cullen and Leliana, I tossed a coin. They won. Twice. They look tough enough to me, anyway.





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.

Fonts used in this project are: the Journal family, from Emigré foundary for body text. Titling and chapter headings are set in Quasimodo, from David Nalle of the Fontcraft Scriptorium. Story Titles are Solemnity, by Harold Lohner. Story text is Romic Light by Esselete Letraset. Drop caps are by Marwan Aridi.

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