

ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION

VICTORY
AT
OSTAGAR
BOOK
THREE



DRAGON SLAYER

ARSINOE DE BLASSEVILLE

A RED HEN PUBLICATION



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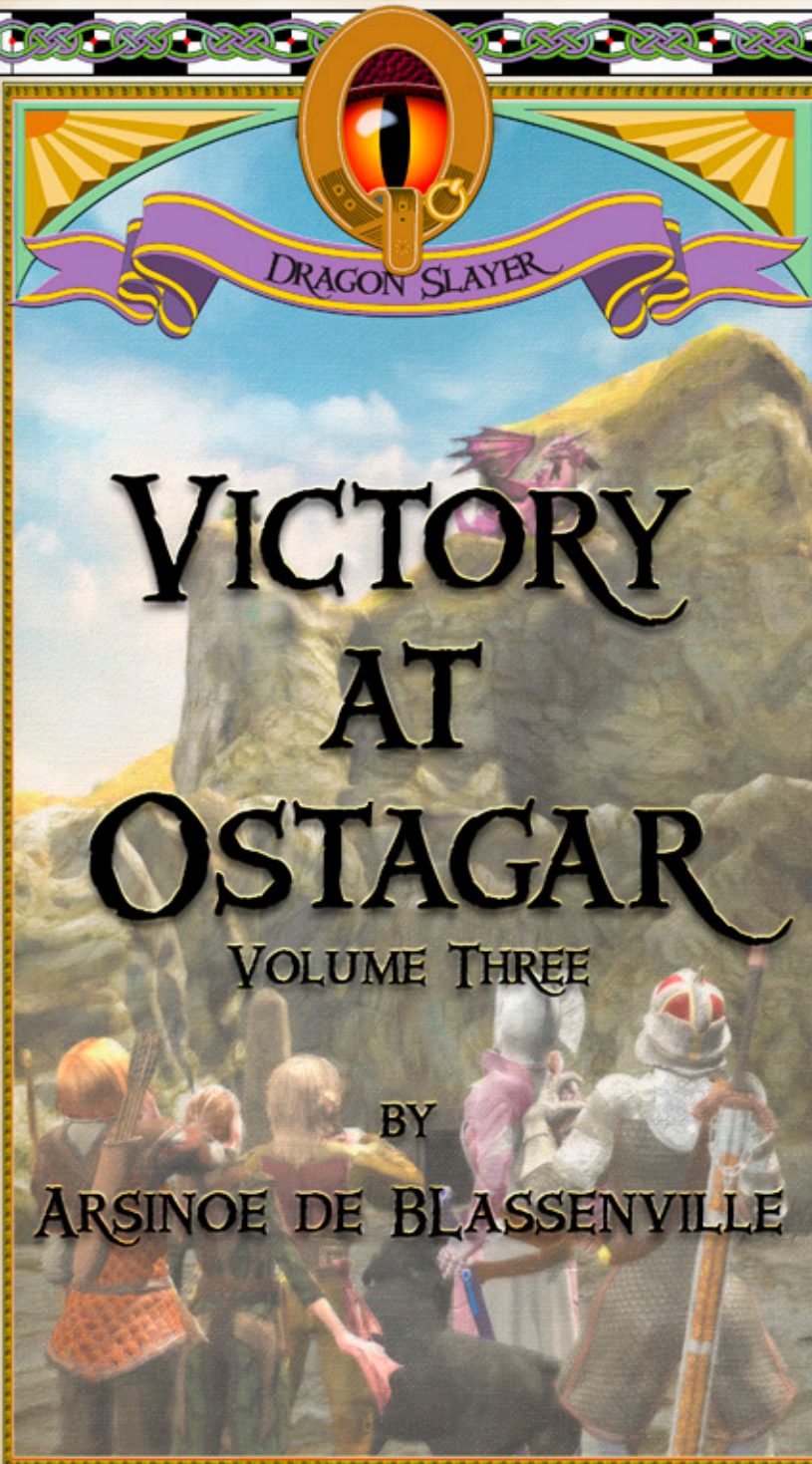


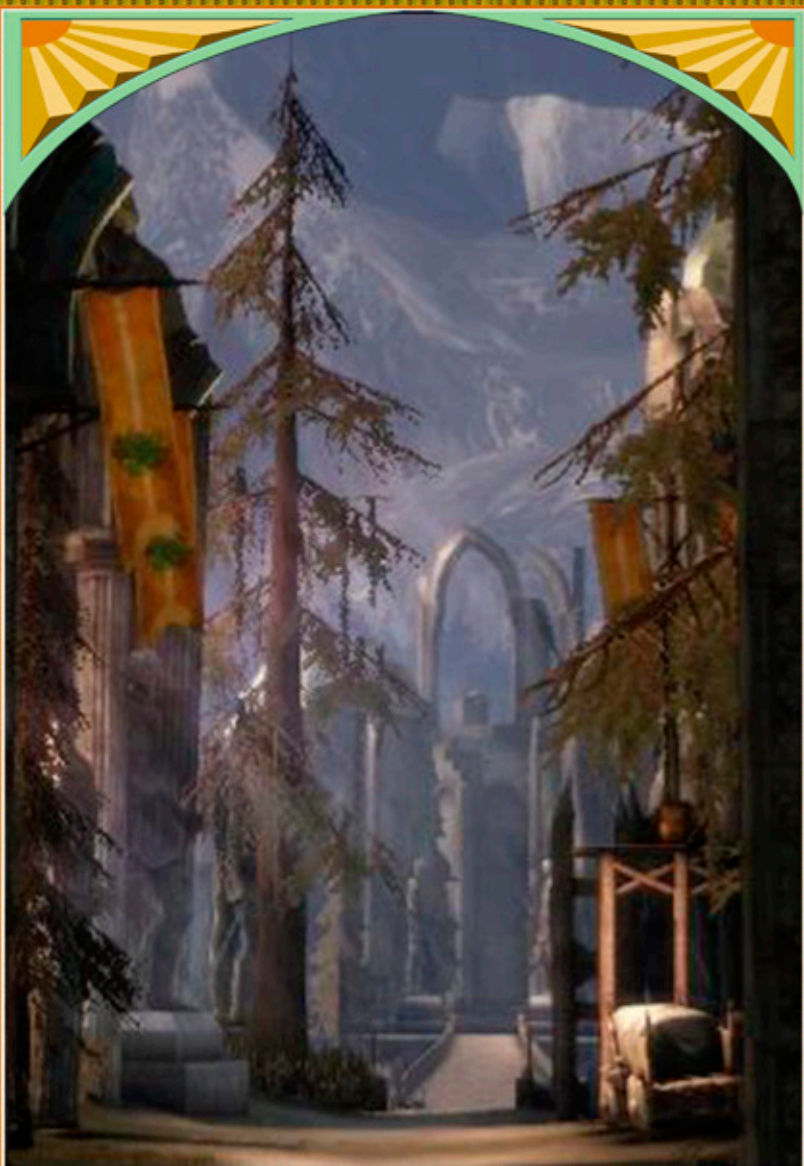
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VICTORY AT OSTAGAR

VOLUME THREE

BY
ARSINOE DE BLASSEVILLE





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DRAGON SLAYER

CHAPTER I

T

FUNERAL GAMES

THE WORLD HAD CHANGED IN AN INSTANT. The men and women crowding around the king's deathbed stared at

each other helplessly, wondering what they ought to do.

The traditional cry on these occasions was to hail the successor. "*The King is Dead: Long Live the King!*"

But Cailan had named no heir. A void gaped where men's loyalties should lie. Some still cared for the king they had lost.

"Maker receive him," croaked Elric Maraigne. "There will never be another like him."

The King's Friends murmured fervent agreement. Meanwhile, Wulffe whispered to Bryland, "Does this mean that Fergus is King?"

"Could be," Bryland whispered back, his eyes on Loghain and Bronwyn, speaking urgently and quietly to each other. "Maybe not."

"Get Wynne out of here," Loghain ordered Bronwyn, in a thread of breath. "Get her out of the Revered Mother's sight. Hide her with the Wardens and get her out of camp

before daylight." He moved toward the priest, his voice commanding. "Revered Mother... if you would lead the intercessory prayers...? Shall we send for the archpriests and the incense-bearers?"

Distracted by the formal demands of death, the Revered Mother did not see Bronwyn take Wynne by the upper arm and push her discreetly from the room. Then, too, she was too taken aback at the presence of Alistair.

"My lord!" she whispered, scandalized. "Surely you will not sully the King's passing with the presence of a bastard! Do you mean to have the nobles acclaim him as the successor?"

"Sshhh," Loghain hushed her. "Revered Mother, I had no such intention at all. The Landsmeet will deliberate the succession in due course. Alistair was here as a Grey Warden, an order the King looked on with special favor. I believe he meant to reward them further, but it was too late. Let us allow the boy to mourn. We have much to do..."



"Quick!" Bronwyn muttered to the older woman. "Upstairs!"

"But the King..." Wynne protested, still grieving for the charming young monarch.

"The King is dead, and the Revered Mother was on the point of having you arrested when Loghain caught her attention. We need to get you out of Ostagar and off to Denerim to care for the Queen."

"I'm supposed to report to the mage's quarters..."

"Everything will be in such confusion tonight that no

one will notice. I'll have Anders get your things. Whom do you trust among the mages?"

Wynne drew herself up. "I trust them all!"

Bronwyn clicked her tongue impatiently.

Deflating a little, Wynne said, "Very well. I trust Petra in particular. Not Keilli, though. She's convinced that we're all accursed."

"All right. You can sleep in the Warden's room. We'll get you tucked away. Anders can talk to Petra – spreading the awful news, you know..."

A mob of Wardens awaited them at the door to their quarters.

"Wynne?" Tara asked. "I thought you were looking after the King..." Anders caught her eyes and the two exchanged shocked looks.

"Well, what's going on?" Oghren demanded. "And why is she –" he pointed at Wynne – "here?"

Bronwyn shooed them back into their quarters, and shut the door.

"The King is dead," she said tonelessly. Over the questions, she said, "There will be a Landsmeet in three months. Meanwhile, the King's will was that the Queen rule until the successor is chosen. Wynne is here because Teyrn Loghain ordered me to take her away from the Revered Mother, who seemed on the brink of making nasty accusations against her."

"Against Wynne?" Anders was incredulous.

"Wynne?" Tara echoed.

"But Wynne is an exemplary mage!" Cullen protested.

"You know that, and I know that," Bronwyn shot back, "but in these circumstances people will be looking for a scapegoat. She was *there*. Tara," Bronwyn asked the elven mage. "It's an imposition, but please take Wynne into your corner for the night so no one can see her if they poke their noses in."

"She can sleep there, of course," Tara said kindly. "Zevran and I can certainly be apart for one night... "

"I am crushed," swooned Zevran, hand on heart. "My world is tottering. Speak for yourself, *bellissima*, but I submit to your cruel caprice, and shall endure Oghren's snoring once more."

"Zevran, take her over there now," Bronwyn ordered, "and the rest of you have not seen her! Is that understood? And I need to speak to the Wardens privately."

There were nods and murmurs of assent, and those not Wardens departed. Cullen nodded, too, but his brows were knit in perplexity.

Bronwyn gestured the Wardens closer and lowered her voice.

"We sent her out of the room and tried the Joining. It failed. The King was too far gone. He started choking and Loghain called for Wynne. She tried to revive the King, but it was useless. The Revered Mother seemed to think Wynne was at fault, I'm afraid."

"At the worst," Leliana said gently, "she'll only be sent back to the Circle."

"Oh, really?" Anders challenged, his handsome face

twisted in an unaccustomed sneer. "After being accused of killing the King? You think she'll live that long? You're very optimistic. Of course, you've never been a mage in custody. A mage suspected of murder... or regicide? It shouldn't be that hard to make sure an old woman dies in pain..."

"Anders..." Cullen said, reddening.

"Enough!" Bronwyn said, stepping between them. "Wynne is not going back to the Circle. Her healing expertise is needed in Denerim. Urgently. She is leaving in a few hours. If I have to, I'll conscript her. We are going to keep her here and tell absolutely no one about her. Anders... go to the mages' quarters and have Petra pack Wynne's things up — *discreetly* — and give them to you."

Anders grinned at the prospect of tricking the Templars once more. "On my way!" He shot Cullen a cocky grin and slipped through the door.

"Really," Cullen objected, "there is surely no need..."

"Yes there is," Bronwyn replied instantly. "Wynne is needed. The Queen needs a first-rate Healer. Do you want to leave the Queen's care entirely in Jowan's hands?"

Cullen straightened, his eyes wide. "Jowan is caring for the Queen?"

"Is she having a baby?" Broasca wanted to know.

That remark was the spark that stirred interest into a blaze. Everyone crowded in, full of questions. Bronwyn put up her hand.

"This is a matter of deepest secrecy. The Queen needs the

services of the best Healer in Ferelden. We Wardens are going to make sure Wynne gets to the Queen. No one can know that the Queen needs her or that Wynne is going there. There are a great many people who have a malicious interest in seeing that it falls out otherwise." She turned to Carver.

"Find your brother and bring him here. He's downstairs with the King's knights. Don't say anything indiscreet. Just a word in his ear that I require his presence immediately. He was going to leave tomorrow morning, anyway, with some letters for the Queen and for my brother. I always intended for him to accompany Wynne. They will leave a little earlier than we planned."

"Right you are," Carver said eagerly, and darted away.

"And Adaia," Bronwyn sighed. "I haven't forgotten you. I'd like to have your Joining as soon as possible, but perhaps tomorrow would be better, when we're not all running about like mad folk. Don't lose your vial."



A knighthood, Adam Hawke reflected, was a fine thing: but without lands and coin to support it, the title was a largely empty honor. Mother would be thrilled to spread the word in Lothing, but that was just about all the King's last official act was good for.

He had been close — so very, very close — to glittering success. He had saved the King's life... however briefly... and certainly would have been given generous, material rewards. Possibly the Queen...

True. There was the Queen. Only to remain in power for another three months. How should he refer to her now? "Queen Dowager?" A stuffy title for a famous beauty — and still young...

No. That sort of thinking would lead nowhere. Raising his eyes too high could ruin everything.

Well, he still had Lady Bronwyn's letter of recommendation to the Teyrn of Highever. A good fall-back plan, certainly.

He was not the only one looking like he'd lost his best friend. The King's companions had enjoyed the prestige and advantage of royal patronage. That was over now. The band of friends and rivals would break up, as each of them hunted out a new place in the new world.

And Alistair was still here, slumped in a corner. He was looking pretty depressed, as well. Maybe the Wardens had been hoping for a deathbed bequest. Bronwyn wasn't so upset, was she? Actually, where was Bronwyn? Maybe off to tell the rest of the Wardens... Why didn't she have her second do that?

Teyrn Loghain was still in serious conversation with the Revered Mother, discussing the plans for a funeral and associated rites. Adam supposed there was no chance of getting a letter of recommendation from Loghain now. The man was too busy for such a minor concern. It was a rather comical show, though: he kept talking steadily about the arrangements, while the Revered Mother wanted to blame the mage who had been taking care of the King. Rubbish, of course. The King had clearly died of the Blight sickness,

caused by that too-close encounter with the ogre.

Thinking of the ogre made him shudder. Was there any way he could arrange for a long, hot bath in this place? He had been close to the ogre himself, though none of the creature's various fluids had come in contact with his bare skin. The squire who had helped him remove his armor had worn gloves.

From what Adam could see of the body through the doorway, they would have to dispose of it sooner rather than later. Adam was a little surprised that Loghain was still talking to the Revered Mother, rather than ordering the pyre. Of course, there were more than a score of mages in camp. They could incinerate the remains without the time and trouble of a pyre. He bit back a malicious grin. Wouldn't that absolutely make that old prune's head explode?

"Adam!"

He looked up. Carver was just outside the door, held back by the guards.

"I tell you, I have Warden business in there," he told one of the exhausted, stolid soldiers.

"You don't look like the Girl Warden to me," the man shot back. "No one else goes in at this point."

Carver gestured hugely to his brother, mouthing the words, "*I've got to talk to you!*"

Well, there was nothing to be gained by remaining here. Even some of the other knights were edging away. Some were talking casually with the noblemen in the room, jockeying

for favor and appointments. Nobody had dared approach Loghain yet. He was too busy and looked too... distraught.

Yes, the Teyrn looked distraught. Of course the King was his son-in-law, and he had practically raised him. The man was probably wondering what would happen to him, now that the son of Maric Theirin was gone. Who would be King? Would he appoint a different Commander of the Armies? That seemed a very, very bad idea to Adam.

"Adam!" Carver yelled. "It's important!"

Sighing, Hawke bowed to the powers in the land, and edged sideways from the room. So much for his brush with royalty.

The news was spreading through the Tower of Ishal and out to the door to the army. Some important-looking dwarves were coming up the stairs. Hawke doubted that the surly guardsmen would try to *keep them* out.

"What is it, Carver?"

His brother pulled him along, taking him upstairs. He leaned close to whisper.

"Bronwyn wants to talk to you. There something she needs you to do, and it's not just carrying a letter."

Well, that was all right, then. Plan B was working out, it appeared.

"You can take two of our horses," Bronwyn said crisply. "Wynne may not know how to ride, but she'd better learn quickly, and she can heal herself, of course, if she's saddle-sore. Teyrn Loghain and I are entrusting you to carry out

our orders. Wynne may be accused or threatened if she stays here in Ostagar, but she is needed in Denerim. The Queen's life may depend on it. There are those who would prefer that you not succeed, for many and varied reasons."

All the Wardens were listening breathlessly.

"I think you should tell him the whole story," Astrid spoke up. "I think all the Wardens should know what happened when we were in Denerim."

Bronwyn frowned at her. "I told Alistair, of course..."

"Told Alistair what?" Leliana asked, with not-so-smothered excitement.

Did she dare trust them? Bronwyn shivered, hoping that she was not deceived in her companions. "It is best that the Wardens not be directly involved at the moment, since it would smack of political intrigue. However..." she paused. "All right. When we were in Denerim, I foiled an attempt to murder the Queen. More or less. Her Orlesian maid had been poisoning her for some time, trying to make the Queen's death look like a natural illness. We really don't know who else was involved in the plot, other than some Orlesian agents."

Leliana was looking at her, in wide-eyed horror, a name on her lips. Bronwyn gave her a slight, almost imperceptible nod.

"At any rate," Bronwyn continued, "I left Jowan with her, ostensibly doing some dragonslaying research, but really to treat her for the poisoning. Teyrn Loghain knows, of course. Obviously we need the Queen alive and healthy.

Her physical collapse now would mean chaos throughout Ferelden when it is at its weakest. Wynne is the best choice to care for her."

"Of course the Queen must be saved," Cullen muttered. "But a mage should have a trained Templar escort! For her own safety, if nothing else..."

"Oh, Cullen!" Tara threw up her hands in exasperation. "You said yourself that Perfect Wynne is 'an exemplary mage.'"

"She is!" Cullen defended himself hotly. "But if she goes traveling about the countryside, people might think she's an apostate! They might take the law into their own hands! She might be arrested by other Templars! And if she were to be frightened, or unduly stressed..."

Hawke looked the tall ex-Templar in the eye. "I know about mages. A lot about mages. I am perfectly capable of traveling with a mage and keeping her safe. I've done it before. And nobody will know she's an apostate."

Carver stood at his brother's side. "And that's something we expect the Wardens to keep quiet about, too!"

Cullen peered at Hawke, a little confused. "You are not..."

"No, I'm not a mage," Hawke snapped. "But I've known mages all my life. Not all of them are abominations in the making!"

"That's enough!" Bronwyn broke in. "Adam is taking Wynne to Denerim. He will deliver her to the Queen, along with some letters. If Wynne can cast Haste, that would be most desirable. Get something to eat and some rest. Carver will pack your things, and we will awaken you

before dawn. The Queen may have tasks for you, Adam; but as soon as possible I want you to ride north and find my brother. He needs this news, as well."

Everyone pitched in: Carver and Astrid retrieving Adam's armor and weapons; Brosca, Danith, and Adaaia making a run to the kitchens for food for everyone. Supplies for the journey were assembled and packed neatly. A convincing disguise for Wynne was assembled. Meanwhile, Adam wolfed down his portion of bread, cold meat, and cheese, and washed it down with weak ale.

"We'll make for Lothering using the hunters' trails," he told Bronwyn. "We can stay overnight with my family. At that point we should be able to use the West Road. It's well thought-of to have Wynne wear something other than mage's robes..."

"And she can't go about carrying a staff!" Tara pointed out. "Maybe you could wrap it up with a bundle of tent-poles..."

That made everyone laugh a little.

"Not a bad idea," Bronwyn said briskly. "Look here, if everything is going well, I've got to get back to the nobles and rescue Alistair, if nothing else."



The late hour, sorrow, weariness, confusion: all these worked in their favor. The King's remains were infected with Blight sickness and could not be returned to Denerim for a state funeral. Tomorrow the laborers would be set to work on a suitable pyre, and the funeral would be held at sunset. Loghain told the senior officers that there would

be a council in the midmorning to consider their options in the light of today's loss. Bronwyn gently encouraged everyone to get their rest, the better to face the morning.

"Revered Mother," she urged the old woman. "Tomorrow will be a terribly taxing day – for you especially."

"Very well," the priest agreed reluctantly, "If the King must have his rites here in the Wilds, it behooves us to make the best we can of them. I want that mage brought to me tomorrow morning." She turned to the Templars looming outside the door. "See to it!"

Bronwyn's face was a careful blank. She did not look at Loghain. If all went according to plan, Wynne would be halfway to Lothering before her absence was noticed.

And based on the whispers she was catching, there was enough blame being cast about without the inclusion of one elderly mage, anyway. Suspicion had fallen on the elves, for not fighting well enough at King's Mountain. Loghain did all he could to silence that kind of useless talk. And he sent Bronwyn around to smooth ruffled feathers. It helped if both of them were visible and calm.

The dwarves were doing their bit as well. Cailan's death actually did not mean all that much to them. He had been a pleasant, friendly host and a cheerful companion, but he was not the reason they had come. They were here because of a treaty with the Grey Wardens, which was still very much in effect.

Bronwyn encouraged the remaining knights to talk

about the battle as well. The King had fought bravely, and had exposed himself in a battle with an ogre. Some of them had private views about Cailan's running after an elf girl, but talking about it would reflect badly on the king himself.

"It's too bad the elves sent us the sort of girl the King fancied," Elric commented glumly to Ser Landry, as they left the king's quarters for the last time, "but I don't think they did it on purpose."

Before dawn, Sten and Cullen went out to saddle two of the horses, and loaded them with bags and packs. A short time later a young man in leathers and a helmeted soldier wrapped in a cloak climbed onto their mounts. They trotted away into the darkness, accompanied by a big mabari.

"Couriers going to Redcliffe," the young man told the guards, waving a pass with Teyrn Loghain's seal.

At the first long curve in the road, Wynne cast Haste on horses and hound, and they headed north at tremendous speed.

Worn out by the sorrows and stress of the previous night, the Revered Mother slept late. Thus it was many hours before she was informed that Senior Enchanter Wynne could not be found anywhere in camp.

"I demand that you send troops in search of the apostate!"

Loghain was unimpressed, and did not intend to let the Revered Mother dictate his troop dispositions ever again. It was quite bad enough that she was disrupting

the morning's briefing.

"I do not know that she is an apostate," he said coolly, "only that you seem to have misplaced her. She was fond of the king, and greatly affected by his death. Perhaps she has taken a long walk to compose herself."

"Affected by his death!" sneered the Revered Mother's right-hand, Sister Polycarp. "Gloating over murdering him, more like!"

A burst of murmurs and shocked whispers. The elves leaned close to each other: the grizzled old trackers explaining the oddities of the shemlen religion to a horrified Merrill. Her protests were inaudible, but her sad eyes told the story.

Bronwyn spoke up mildly. "I assure you that she did nothing of the sort. The King died of Blight sickness. I was there and you were not. I am Warden-Commander of Ferelden and have experience in such matters. The Healer attempted to do the impossible: cure a man so afflicted. No one has succeeded in the course of this campaign. Wynne has saved the lives of countless soldiers — including my brother, the Teyrn of Highever. Making wild and unfounded accusations profits us nothing."

Sister Polycarp was deeply offended, but Bronwyn gave her a cool stare, unmoved the priestly huffing and puffing. Between the Revered Mother's interference at the Bloomington battle and these vicious accusations, she was very much of the opinion that the presence of the Chantry at Ostagar did more harm than good. One must not provoke them, of course. Their arm was long...

"Enough of this!" Loghain interrupted the growing noise. "There was no murder. Everyone in the King's quarters saw the Blight sickness in him. The darkspawn killed him. We do not need to accuse one another."

Piotin Aeducan shrugged. "I saw the body, and the Teyrn has the right of it. The Taint killed the young king. You've got to be careful when fighting the darkspawn. We've all got to be careful."

"Perhaps," the Revered Mother suggested, her manner smooth as cream, "It would be best if the rest of mages were returned to the Circle of Magi, where we can be sure they will harm no one."

This was not a popular point of view, to the priest's chagrin. A glance around the council showed her disapproving frowns and shaking heads. The mages' unnatural powers had won friends for them here in Ostagar.

"The mages," Bronwyn replied, equally smoothly, "are obligated by treaty to assist the Grey Wardens in defeating the Blight. They have worked wonders, healed the sick, strengthened the weak, and destroyed scores of monsters. The Wardens will continue to require their services until the Blight is defeated." She smiled mildly and apologetically at the Revered Mother, hating her in her heart.

"Thank you, Warden-Commander," Loghain ended the discussion. "The mages will stay and do their duty. We will do ours. Now to today's orders. Lord Piotin..."

Scouting expeditions were to go east, southeast, and

south, sweeping broad areas of yesterday's battlefield and the neighboring areas, seeing if the darkspawn presence was quashed for the moment. There would be Wardens in each group, and the plans were painstaking and meticulous. Loghain would have liked to have gone himself, but it was impossible. He and Bronwyn must be here to prepare for the funeral. He had already commanded that only the Wardens were to handle the King's body, out of respect, and also out of the need to prevent further infection.

Loghain sent them all about their business, a little impatiently. He had enough to worry about, without the Chantry causing trouble. Morale was low with the king's death, at least among the human portions of the army. Once again, it was left to him to hold things together in a crisis. And he himself was under attack. Cauthrien's inquiries among Bann Loren's men had led nowhere. No one knew the would-be assassins, or where they came from. They were strangers, volunteers who joined Bann's Loren's troops on their journey south to Ostagar. They had not talked; they had not mixed. No one knew anything.

Except for Loghain. He knew that the men had been very professional, and had been only foiled by bad luck and Alistair's quick reflexes. He also knew that with Cailan's death, he would be an even bigger target.

"You're sure you're all right?" Hawke asked, drawing rein to allow the horses a rest. Haste might increase their speed,

but a horse had only so much strength. Hunter looked ready for another rejuvenation spell, tough as the dog was. Still, at this rate they would be in Lothering in a few hours, even without the advantages of the Imperial Highway. He had thought it best not to attract attention, which their unusual speed would certainly do. He would take Wynne home with him, and there they would have food and shelter. Mother and the girls knew how to be discreet about mages. With luck, Uncle Gamlen was still bedridden.

"I'm fine," Wynne said patiently, removing the heavy, uncomfortable helmet. "I have ridden a horse before, young man! Not often and not recently, I'll grant; but I'm managing. We must get to Denerim as quickly as possible."

She tucked the fluttering cloak in closer, feeling a little undressed without her mage robes and weighed down with the unfamiliar weight of steel weapons and armor. In a saddlebag, neatly folded, was a nice gown of blue-grey wool. Warden Leliana had been most generous.

"We won't be far behind the official couriers," Hawke judged, "Not at this rate."

In his saddlebag was the correspondence: the private letter from Teyrn Loghain to the Queen, and his letters to the Arl of Denerim and the Commander of Fort Drakon; the private letter from Lady Bronwyn to her brother the Teyrn of Highever, and another from her to Warden Jowan.

Inside his jerkin, Hawke carried two precious documents: his letters patent of knighthood, of course; and

an official letter of transit, signed and sealed by Loghain himself, giving him (and whatever companions he had) leave to travel at will through Ferelden without question or hindrance. It was his pass through the gates of the Palace and into the Queen's presence.

He put his hand on his chest to reassure himself that it was still there. That was the one piece of parchment that he must not lose.

His private interview with the great man himself had been brief enough, to be sure. Lady Bronwyn and her dog had lounged in the background. Loghain had not looked her way but the once, and Hawke, who prided himself on his powers of observation, instantly knew that the gossip about them was true. The Hero of River Dane... and a Cousland...

Was Loghain going for the Crown? The Couslands were the next in line, after all. While the King had never officially named an heir, everyone knew that, absent a child of the King's, the Couslands were the heirs presumptive.

Hawke wondered uneasily if he was already committed to their cause, simply by being their courier. Perhaps not, though. A newly-made knight was a small affair in this game of kings and crowns. However, if he were to get an early foothold with the new regime, he – and his family – could not help but gain by it.

"There it is!" Bronwyn cried in relief, as her fingertips found the Joining cup where it had rolled under the bed.

"I'd forgotten about it completely!"

"Hardly something we'd want anyone else to find," Cullen agreed. He looked anxiously at Alistair, who was silent and depressed. Cullen had heard the faintest, strangest rumor about Alistair, and his friend's demeanor today seemed to confirm it. He knew all the right portions of Chant of Light to say over the dead, of course. Alistair and he recited them together, taking comfort from the beauty of the words. Afterwards, they bathed and anointed the King's poor Blighted body as best they could, and wrapped it in the fine linen shroud.

Everything in the room that bore the slightest hint of Taint must be burned... or at the very least, cleansed with fire. Before the scouting parties had moved out, Loghain had called for Senior Enchanter Uldred, who had carefully seared the Royal Arms Chest and the other trunks and boxes in the king's quarters. The armor, of course, was fairly easily made safe. That would be repaired and preserved, and ultimately returned to the palace in Denerim. All such items were carried from the room and stored elsewhere.

As for the rest... as soon as the Grey Wardens were finished preparing the King's body for his rites and carried him down on the litter, the clothes, the bedding, the bed itself – everything in the room would be incinerated and the stone walls themselves scorched back into purity.

The royal litter was nothing more than a simple

stretcher with folding legs, draped in black and purple silk. Alistair held himself together with visible difficulty as he and Cullen eased Cailan's lifeless, enshrouded body onto this makeshift bier of state for the king's last trip down the staircases of the Tower of Ishal.

Bronwyn made a final check of the room, looking for anything they should take with them. In a pouch she carried the jewels found on the King's person: the great seal-ring of Ferelden, his wedding ring, a rich gold necklet bearing a runed amulet. These, too, would be cleansed. Loghain would take charge of the seal. The wedding ring and the amulet would go to the Queen in due course.

She flung open the door, where Loghain and an honor guard stood waiting.

"Make way for the King!" she cried.

Slowly, careful of the turns, King Cailan's body was carried down the steps and out of the Tower. A procession fell into place: the honor guard in front, bearing the royal standard; the Revered Mother with a pair of Templars and two priests bearing censers; then the two strong Wardens, bearing the King. More priests with censers followed the litter. Then Loghain, and beside him Bronwyn, not as Warden-Commander, but representing her brother, the Teyrn of Highever. Behind them were the Arls and banns, the knights and squires-at-arms, the Senior Enchanters and the captains and sergeants and well-wishers. Their allies bore the brunt of the war today, allowing them time

to honor their fallen king.

Said scouting parties were due back before sunset, anyway, to allow them to attend the the funeral. The procession moved slowly across the wide bridge spanning Ostagar Gorge, and then descended into the valley, where the pyre had been erected. It was a fine pyre, but it was not what a King of Ferelden deserved, of course.

"But," Arl Wulffe rumbled, "at least this time we have a body!"



"We can put the horses in there," Hawke told a drained and saddle-weary Wynne. A little behind the house was a small outbuilding, not really a stable and too small to be an honest barn. Still, it would shelter the horses for the night – a night that was now coming on fast. Hunter panted happily, veering off to bark at the front door of the house. A yelp of delighted surprise answered the dog.

"That's my sister Bethany," Hawke told her, smiling, his voice low. "She's the mage."

"I see," Wynne answered politely. Actually, she did not. She had no idea what it would be like to live in a family. Long ago, she had come to the Circle from a village not very different from Lothering; but she had been a homeless orphan, a despised beggar child provoked by relentless bullying into a moment of magical retaliation. The boy whose hair she had set afire had not been badly hurt, but the entire village had been terrified to discover that there was a monster among them. Many people hated and

feared the Templars, but to Wynne they had been saviors: stern and dutiful, perhaps, but not men who would allow a child to be stoned to death or burnt alive in the barn where the villagers had locked her in. The Circle had given her shelter and meaning. It was home to her, however far she traveled.

Hawke quickly unsaddled their horses, gave them water and forked over some hay. Wynne cast a rejuvenation charm on the beasts, and a healing charm on her own abused posterior. She took up her backpack and followed Ser Adam to the little house. Women were piling out of the door: a sweet-faced woman Wynne's own age, and two attractive young girls. One had a cloud of curly brown hair; the other, shorter girl's hair was dark and softly waving. The mother's name was Leandra, Wynne remembered. The sister was Bethany, of course, and the cousin... oh dear. Perhaps the girl would say her name. Their faces shone with joy at the sight of the young man, too absorbed in him to do much more than glance in brief curiosity at Wynne.

"My darling!" Leandra cried, her arms out to embrace her son. "You're safe!" She turned to Wynne, with a puzzled smile at the woman in armor who did not look at all like a soldier.

"Inside," Adam said quietly, and the women bustled back through the door. He gestured at Wynne to precede him. Pleased at his courtesy, she nodded and entered. It was a quaint little place, though it was poor and small com-

pared with the Circle or the Tower of Ishal.

"Mother, Bethany, Charade," Adam said, gesturing to each in turn, so Wynne could follow. "This is Senior Enchanter Wynne. She is from the Circle of Magi, and has been ordered north on official business. I was ordered to escort her. We'll just be here overnight. Wynne, this is my mother, Mistress Hawke, and my sister and cousin."

"From the Circle?" Bethany asked, her curiosity increasing by the moment.

Leandra studied their guest carefully. This Senior Enchanter Wynne might be traveling on official business, but steps had been taken to disguise her identity. Thus, this official business was clearly secret business. What was Adam caught up in?

Wynne smiled at Bethany. "Indeed, I am from the Circle. I am so grateful to be a guest in your home. We rode very hard from Ostagar, and it has been a difficult few days."

"Then you should sit down," Charade said at once. "Come on, you too, Adam. Sit down. I'll get you something to eat, and you can tell us the news. How's Carver?"

"He's fine," Hawke said, lowering himself to the bench and blowing out a breath. "Thanks," he said, taking a cup of cider from his cousin.

Wynne thanked Charade quietly for her own, and said softly. "Perhaps you should give them your own, very good news first."

It was kindly thought of. Hawke reached inside his

gambeson and felt for the big seal. Here was what he wanted to show them. He pulled out the patent of knighthood, and spread it out over the worn table.

"I accompanied a scouting party into the Wilds. Actually, I was with Carver. The King led the party himself. We were attacked by darkspawn and I did the King some service —"

Wynne interposed gently, " — They said that you saved His Majesty from being crushed by an ogre —"

"Adam!" the women cried out in unison. The mother was horrified, the girls proud and elated.

"Yes... well..." Hawke shrugged, rather pleased to have someone else do the boasting for him. "It's true. I saved him... for the moment... and he noticed it. Then, in front of his companions... in front of Teyrn Loghain and Lady Bronwyn Cousland... he made me a knight of Ferelden. Ser Adam Hawke. Here's the seal and the King's signature."

Cries of wonder burst out. Bethany pounded his shoulder in excitement.

"Oh, my dearest!" Leandra nearly sobbed. "I'm so proud of you! I always knew you were destined for great things!"

"Is that the King's signature?" Charade asked, leaning over. "I'd never guess it. What horrible handwriting!"

"Charade!" Bethany giggled.

"Well... the seal is the important thing. Besides... he'd been wounded and he wasn't well. Something terrible happened. You can't go spreading the news, because you really can't let on that Wynne and I have been here... but

you'll hear the official word soon enough. The fact is..."

Leandra was still tracing the precious document, eyes shining, barely hearing him. Bethany could see that something serious was coming.

"What is it, Adam? What happened?"

"The King is dead. He died of his wounds. Giving me the knighthood was almost his last official act."

A horrified silence. Everyone stared at Adam, and then looked at Wynne for confirmation.

"It is true," she bowed her head. "Not even magic could save him, though I did my utmost. His wounds were poisoned by the darkspawn, and Blight sickness killed that fine and beautiful young man."

Leandra shook her head, deeply glad it was not her own fine and beautiful son who was dead. Bethany sat down hard on the bench beside her brother.

"Then who is King? What's going to happen?"

Charade was frightened. "Is anyone going to keep on fighting the darkspawn?"

"Yes, of course," he assured her. "The army isn't going anywhere. Teyrn Loghain is still in charge."

Hunter whined, doggy eyes on the stew warming by the fire. Charade hastily started dishing it up, while Leandra folded the precious patent and took it away from the table, lest it be soiled by food. The first bowl was set on the floor for the dog, who attacked it ravenously.

Wynne wanted to say something to reassure these

people. "The King left a will. There is to be a Landsmeet in three months. In the meanwhile, Queen Anora is to continue ruling. It will be difficult holding a Landsmeet when so many of the nobles are in the army, of course."

Bethany considered that. "Maybe they'll hold it in Ostagar. It would be easier for the Queen and the rest to come south than for the soldiers to leave their posts!"

Adam shook his head. "It's hard to imagine, but you might be right." He dug into his meal, too hungry for politics at the moment.

Wynne smiled wistfully, and dipped her spoon into the savory stew. It did smell very good...

"Risk is the price of glory, but it is a lovely thing to live with courage; and afterwards, leave behind a name of lasting renown. Let our deeds, not mere words, honor the memory of this golden lad. Let us finish this war we are in as he would have it: with unconditional victory. Hail and farewell to you, our King Cailan!"

"*King Cailan!*" The answering shouts rolled out, a funeral dirge echoing down the valley. Above on the pyre, Loghain concluded his speech, and laid his torch to the tinder and oil that would give Maric's child to the fire. He descended slowly, his face dark and closed.

Standing among the Wardens, Alistair's face was wet with tears; nor was he the only one. Bronwyn blinked away her own grief. She had not expected Loghain's speech to

move her so. He had been angry with the King, she knew; to some degree he must have regarded the young man as a traitor and a double-dealer – as a bitter disappointment. In the end, though, it seemed that he had loved him. The speech was brief but moving; the final words the kind that remained engraved on the heart. She wept for the King, yes; and then for her family, for Delilah and Thomas Howe, and all those laid waste by the unforeseen and unforeseeable storm that had swept through Ferelden.

Leliana was holding hands with Tara and Brosca, and their tears were falling freely. There were throat-clearings and snufflings. Not from Astrid, grave but composed; or from Morrigan, coolly observant. But then, Bronwyn acknowledged, Morrigan had never liked or respected Cailan.

Wait. To her surprise, she noted that Morrigan was wearing the rich gold necklace given to her by the King. That, she supposed, was all the tribute Morrigan was likely to pay him.

“...It is s lovely thing to live with courage...” Bronwyn wiped her face clean and reconsidered the speech. Those words were beautiful, but the reference to the *“golden lad”* disturbed her. Loghain was not a sentimental man himself; but he knew the power of an appeal to sentiment.

Of course one only spoke well of the dead. Still, Loghain, while he claimed to be a soldier rather than a politician, had learned his share of tricks...

Once again, she was called to play hostess among the

nobles, reluctantly leaving her Wardens, but knowing that Leliana understood all about what was proper at these times. The Wardens were being very kind to Alistair. Not all of them knew the truth, but some did, and were giving support without hesitation. There was Anders, patting his Senior Warden on the back, standing by him while the pyre blazed. Cullen was on the other side, murmuring prayers.

The pyre was burning well. Bronwyn kept the cynical smile from her face. No doubt Uldred was helping it along with his useful little spells. What the Revered Mother did not know... was simply none of her business.

Loghain glanced over at her, and she drew close to fill his cup again. There were still not many noblewoman at Ostagar. She had worn her gown to the funeral, but also her sword, and so was dressed both as warrior and as woman. She now wondered what message the nobles were inferring from it. She smiled, and spoke civilly to the representatives of the dwarves and the elves. They had withdrawn to tight little knots. Their own home customs made the immolation of a king foreign and repulsive to them. The dwarves buried their dead deep under stone; the Dalish buried theirs in the earth and planted a tree over the grave.

Well, to each his own...

Cousin Leonas clearly wanted to talk to her. She nodded to Loghain, and slipped through the mourners, still holding her silver wine pitcher.

“Yes,” Bryland agreed, holding out his cup. “Perhaps

a bit more. Look here, Bronwyn, we all need to talk. A nice, frank talk: you, Loghain, Wulffe, me, and a few of the banns. Not here, of course, but soon. We need to have everything ready to present to the Landsmeet. If we don't, the stay-at-homes in the Bannorn will get silly notions. You've written to Fergus, I trust."

"Of course."

"Well, we'll want to know how he feels about it, but maybe you have some insights. He never struck me as consumed by ambition, but I know he'd do his duty if he were called to be King."

"Fergus would never fail in his duty —"

"But maybe he's needed more as Teyrn of Highever right now," Bryland continued, pursuing his thought. "The North is a mess, I know, but maybe we need to make clear that the Blight is our first priority. Maybe the King we need is the man who's leading the fight. Of course, he'll need a proper claim to the throne..."

A chill slithered up her back, a hint of a dark future to come. "I think we really ought not to discuss this now. Someone will overhear us."

"Of course. Of course. But soon."



CHAPTER 2

HIGH
AND LOW

NOT LONG NOW!"

As he and his companion galloped into the teeth of the east wind, Adam Hawke marveled

at what a sturdy adventurer Wynne had proved herself to be. He grinned to himself, imagining his mild and refined mother in the same situation. That Wynne was a mage did not disturb Hawke in the least. With the help of her spells, they would soon be in Denerim — and after only four days. They still had to stop for food and sleep, which Hawke knew the official couriers did not. Those rough riders would change off at each post station, riding fresh horses straight through with the news, and there was no reason they could not gallop apace on the West Road all night long.

That said, it would still take two days for a courier to reach Denerim, even if everything worked in his favor: if there were no bandits or obstacles, if a horse did not throw a shoe or pick up a stone, if the post station had a fresh horse available. There were many variables at work, and of course, there were special dangers along the first

leg of the journey from Ostagar to Denerim. Nonetheless, the official message would probably be in Denerim before Hawke and Wynne. Bronwyn had told him that Loghain had written short notes to the Queen and other notables, and Bronwyn had contributed a note of condolence to the Queen and a brief message to Warden Jowan. The serious, personal, secret intelligence was being conveyed by Hawke. *Ser Adam Hawke*. He smiled again.

He was curious about this Warden Jowan, whom he had never met. Opinions among the Warden regarding Jowan seemed to be divided. Tara was clearly fond of him. Bronwyn liked him well enough; but the more devout frowned at the mention of his name. Carver had confided to him that it was rumored that Warden Jowan was a Blood Mage.

"It's true! That's how he escaped from the Circle of Magi!"

Father had abhorred Blood Magic, but would not have disapproved of a man for wanting to escape the Circle as he himself had. Thus, Hawke did not discuss Jowan with Wynne. She had mentioned him once or twice, with an expression of such disapproval that her mouth puckered at the sourness of it. Evidently the Blood Magic rumor had some substance to it.

Before they left the Hawke cottage, Wynne had changed into the fine but unobtrusive woman's gown of blue-grey wool given to her by Warden Leliana. It was a generous gift. In the gown and hooded cloak, Wynne could be any respectable merchant's wife or minor noblewoman. It was certainly better quality than anything Hawke had ever

seen his mother wear – or seen on the back of a freeholder's wife. When they walked into the Man-At-Arms Inn, a day out of Denerim, the landlord had clearly thought Wynne the person to cater to: a well-to-do lady accompanied by a decent bodyguard and a fine mabari.

Adam decided that he really must do something about his armor. Landry and Elric had been very kind and helpful; and found him a striking studded leather cuirass among the heaps of armor that the King had ordered brought to Ostagar. Hawke had later appropriated a handsome pair of silverite and leather gauntlets, too; gauntlets nobody else seemed to want. His boots, though, were only tolerable. Somehow he must find better, and a good helmet, too. Bronwyn had recommended the services of Master Wade, who was to be found in the Denerim Market. Hawke had heard of the man, but he catered to the wealthy and important. Perhaps his new title would sway the craftsman to accept Hawke's custom. And he was far more flush than usual...

As if it were nothing, he had been given gold coin for his traveling expenses, first by Bronwyn and then by Teyrn Loghain. Hawke well understood that the purpose was to get Wynne to Denerim safely and in good health. He suspected Wynne had been granted funds, too. Nonetheless, Hawke did his best to save every copper he could. His noble patrons were unlikely to ask for change, after all. Even if the Queen gave him nothing, Hawke would

finish the journey a far richer man than he had been a week ago. That coin Hawke would invest in the best helmet and finest pair of boots available. Mother always said that people judged a man by his boots.

A faint spire came into view, far ahead to the east. Hawke recognized Fort Drakon. It was the major landmark, even more recognizable that the shape of Dragon's Peak, which lay to the south of the city.

"Denerim! At last!" cried Wynne.

Hawke smiled back her. She was a feisty old lady, and deserved far better than the false accusations of an old prune of a priest.

A wagon was coming their way, and Wynne sighed. On the busy stretches of road, it was impossible for her to help them along with magic. It would attract all the wrong sorts of attention. They had passed a half-dozen Templars on patrol earlier this morning. The faceless, helmeted men granted Wynne polite nods as they rode by, and Wynne smiled warmly, as harmless as any kindly old grandmother.

They followed the road, weaving among the thickening traffic. Their horses drew attention and respect – and a few envious catcalls.

"Think you're too fine to walk like honest folk, do you?" one woman grumbled. "Orlesians, I reckon!"

A knot of people surrounded a trader's cart up ahead. Raised voices fired questions at the dwarf, who stolidly answered them, not much to anyone's liking.

"You're lying!" a man shouted. "Ought to be a law against people making up lies like that!"

"Might even be treason," another man agreed.

"It's true!" the dwarf insisted. "They've put up signs and had the criers out proclaiming it. You'll hear it for yourself when you reach Denerim. King Cailan's dead. Killed in the south by the darkspawn. Everybody's talking about this King's Mountain where it happened. They say not to panic, though, because it was a victory, other than the king getting killed. Teyrn Loghain's still in charge and the darkspawn were destroyed."

"I don't believe it!" the first man exploded, fists clenched. "You can't trust a dwarf!"

His wife, a tired woman burdened by a heavy pack, spoke up, "We're going to Denerim, anyway. We'll hear the truth there. No need to bandy words with him. Let's go!" She tugged on her husband's arm. The man scowled at the dwarf over his shoulder.

"Ought to teach that short mouth a lesson!"

Hawke caught Wynne's eye. The Queen, it seemed, would definitely have received the bad news already.

A fog of gloom and anxiety permeated the city of Denerim. In the Gate District, people gathered, heads down, talking in low, urgent voices. Hawke and Wynne rode past one such group.

"But who's *King*?" one man hissed. "That's the question!"

"There'll be a Landsmeet," another said, determinedly hopeful. "It'll all get sorted out. I hope it's Teyrn Loghain!"

"He's a *commoner*... or was!" protested a harried-looking merchant. "Not a drop of royal blood there. We need a King of the good old Theirin line."

"Well, you won't *get* one," a middle-aged woman shot back angrily. "They're all gone. King Cailan was the last, and he should have stayed at home and got an heir on the Queen and let Teyrn Loghain do the fighting. Instead, he rushes off and gets himself killed! Just like my own silly poor boy —" the woman burst into tears and ran away, down the street. The rest of the market-place politicians shook their heads.

Another woman spoke hesitantly, "*We have* a Queen already..."

"A *Queen Dowager*," a man broke in officiously, better informed or better educated than the others. "She was only Queen-Consort, and with the King dead, she's nothing but the king's widow. *Queen Dowager*. That means she's done with ruling. They're just keeping her on as a steward, like, until the Landsmeet votes. Margit was right: it's a pity the King didn't give the Queen a bellyful before he went to war."

"Say, Jorgis, aren't those Couslands the next in line? They've got Theirin blood..."

The talk faded as they rode on.

"I've never been in the Palace District," Adam said, his cheerful voice a trifle hollow. "I'm looking forward to it."

Wynne shook her head. "I suppose I am, too. It's a shame that it's at such a time. The Queen must be heartbroken."

The glass exploded with a satisfying crash. A musical tinkle of little shards shivered to the floor. Anora stared at the gout of wine, red as blood, trickling down the oak paneling. What a silly thing to do. What would the maids think of her? She clapped her hand over her mouth and bit into the heel of her hand, stifling the sobs of grief and howls of rage that bubbled up from her deepest heart. Two days since the news, and the pain of loss and new betrayal had not subsided.

Oh, Cailan! How could you do this to me, on top of everything else?

"*Queen Dowager*." Cailan was dead: killed by the dark-spawn; his dreams of glory reduced to ashes. He would never ride back to her in triumph, or tease her with silly jokes, or put his dirty boots on her embroidered footstool. He would never make love to her again. And now he had written a will, dismissing her to the role of caretaker for the next three months. After that, she would become a nothing... a has-been... someone who no longer mattered in Ferelden. She would have to move out of the Palace and find lodgings elsewhere... *Queen Dowager*. It sounded like a fat old white-haired woman with too many jewels and a mind only for Chantry, charity, and needlework.

Father had sent her a brief message by fast courier, warning her of the will. It was impossible to conceal or suppress it. Too many of Cailan's knights had seen it. The Arls of South Reach and West Hills had seen it. Everyone had talked to everyone else. Messages had been sent to friends and stew-

ards. The news was traveling the length and breadth of Ferelden: the news that King Cailan did not consider Queen Anora fit to rule Ferelden in her own right. No, worse than that: Cailan had made clear that he never even considered it. Someone else would wear the Crown. *Her Crown.*

She had urged Cailan to grant her the Crown Matrimonial so many times! It would have given her sovereignty in her own right, even if Cailan died. When they were first married, he had been close to agreeing, but then that Maker-cursed uncle of his, Arl Eamon, had advised against it, citing precedents in his prosing, pompous way. At the start of the war, she had urged it again, as a prudent, sensible move. Cailan had laughed at her, asking her if she really thought so little of him as a man and a warrior..

Well, she knew now why he had refused her. He had already been planning to end their marriage and become Empress Celene's fancy boy. She pressed her forehead to the wall, fighting back burning tears of grief and disappointment. She must not be weak, but it was so very *hard*. Jowan was doing his best, but her body was damaged, perhaps beyond repair. Perhaps she was no longer fit to be Queen, and that thought hurt worst of all...

There was a knock at the door: faint and hesitant. Anora scrubbed at her eyes and stiffened her spine.

"Enter!"

It was one of her new, human maids, Rona. Anora felt a wayward pang for the loss of Erlina. Her hair would never

look as good again. Rona simply did not have Erlina's knack. Or was it Erlina's poison that had stolen the shine from her hair? Nothing... *nothing* would ever be the same...

"Beg pardon, Your Majesty, but there's a messenger from Ostagar to see you most urgent. Two messengers. A gentleman and a lady. Captain Moorcock says they have the Teyrn's seal, all right."

Father said he would write at greater length. This must be the letter. Who was the woman? Bronwyn had hinted at finding a more experienced Healer. Hope flickered anew.

"I shall see them in the Little Audience Chamber at once. You will attend me there," she said, dismissing the girl. She went to the mirror, and set about looking like a Queen. After a few minutes, she rose, not quite satisfied, but no longer able to resist hearing Father's news, bad as it must be.

Seneschal Revere called out as she entered.

"Queen Anora of Ferelden!"

Thanks be to the Maker, he did not use that odious title "Queen Dowager," but she supposed he would have to, very soon. She crossed the short distance and took the unpretentious throne, studying her guests: a nice-looking woman in late middle-age, and a strikingly handsome young man in decent leathers and deplorable boots. A big mabari waited at the door, admirably behaved. The young man bowed very gracefully, and so was better-bred than the appearance indicated. Interesting.

"Your Majesty," the seneschal said. "Before you are Ser



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Adam Hawke and Mistress Wynne.”

Wynne! That was the name! Anora smiled at her. This must be the promised experienced Healer. She leaned over and whispered to Rona, “Fetch Warden Jowan to me at once.” She nodded gravely at the young man. Ser Adam Hawke? She had never heard of such a person. A *very* recent knighthood, then.

“I believe you have a message for me.”

“I do, Your Majesty.”

He had the good manners — or the instruction — not to try to hand her the letter himself, but to give it to Revere, who would present it to her. Yes, it was from Father. Anora broke the seal and read the letter carefully, her face schooled to reveal nothing.

So. The young man carrying the letter was a new boon companion of Cailan's, whom Father allowed was braver and more resourceful than most of them. He had done his best to save Cailan, and had very nearly succeeded, but for the poison of the Blight sickness. Cailan had knighted him on his deathbed. Father suggested some reward, but not to keep the man with her on a permanent basis. He was the brother of a Warden, and Father believed that Bronwyn was sending him north to help her own brother, which would be a very appropriate use of his skills. Ser Adam had other letters to deliver in Denerim, and then should be sent on his way north.

Anora did not disagree with Father in the slightest. The fact that the handsome Ser Adam was one of Cailan's com-



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panions was enough to make her wish never to lay eyes on him again. Let him go and be charming elsewhere. Of course, she must be reasonable, and treat him decently until he left to join Teyrn Fergus. What to give him? She would give that some thought...

Yes, this was Senior Enchanter Wynne. She had attended Cailan in his last hours, and had attempted the impossible: to cure a man of Blight sickness. Her thanks for that was to be accused of murder by the Revered Mother. Bronwyn had spirited the mage away and given her into the protection of Ser Adam, who was sympathetic to mages and could be relied on to be silent about her identity. Wynne was considered the finest Healer in the Circle: very likely in all Ferelden. It might be best not to flaunt her status as a mage, though if things became dire, Bronwyn had said she would conscript the woman into the Wardens. It would be best if it did not come to that. Anora might be able to reason with the Grand Cleric, who was not as impossible as the interfering old hag she had sent to Ostagar.

In the meantime, Bronwyn had said that the two of them were welcome to stay in the Warden's Compound as her guests, and that might indeed deflect some scrutiny.

There was more: about Cailan's death. Father gave her his condolences, for what they were worth, and spoke of his own sense of loss. Anora read quickly through those paragraphs, not wanting to feel any more grief for a man who had, in the end, prized her so very, very little.



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As to the battle everyone was now calling King's Mountain, it had indeed been a convincing victory. Despite what others said, the elves had fought extremely well and loyally. The dwarves, too, were worthy, doughty allies. Their new tactics were most effective, when impetuous young men did not ignore them. Having *Fereldan* Wardens made all the difference as well. Bronwyn had been successful in gaining them yet more Dalish allies. Their great fear now was that the darkspawn would burst out of the Deep Roads in another place, one not so well defended as Ostagar.

"So there must indeed be a Landsmeet," his letter continued, *"though that will be difficult with half the nobility in Ostagar. It might be best not to hold it in Denerim. I do not suggest Ostagar, of course, but I will discuss the matter with Bryland. Perhaps South Reach might be a more appropriate venue, given the circumstances. Lothering is perhaps too close to the perils of the darkspawn.*

"Painful as I know it is to you, it would perhaps be best to accept the title 'Queen Dowager' with good grace. The King's death in battle has softened many hearts toward him: hearts that will not like any defiance of his deathbed wishes. You rule Ferelden for the moment. It is you who will preside over the Landsmeet. It is important that all remember your rule with respect. Remember that whatever the outcome of this Landsmeet, you are still young and your day will come.

*"Your loving father,
"Loghain"*



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She must not grimace. She must think about this quietly and in private. She paused, mastering her voice.

"We thank you for your courage and good service, Ser Adam. My father tells me of your deeds. And Mistress Wynne. You are both most welcome. Warden Jowan will be with us shortly. The Warden-Commander has invited you to stay in their Compound, which is part of the Palace. You have other errands, I understand, Ser Adam. While we understand the need for haste, we hope you will rest sufficiently before joining our faithful Teyrn Fergus, whom I believe is on the road to Highever. Whether you leave tomorrow or the day after, I wish you to call upon me first, so that I may reward your loyalty."

Hawke bowed. "As Your Majesty wishes."

So. Queen Anora was *not* requiring his services. The Couslands were still his best and only option. At least she was talking about rewards. That was something.

There was a stir at the door.

The seneschal announced, "Warden Jowan, Your Majesty."

Hawke glanced over and was startled. He had understood this Jowan to be a mage. The man entering the audience chamber and bowing with practiced ease appeared to be a well-dressed nobleman. A good-looking young man, too. Certainly not a monstrous, malignant Blood Mage.

His own surprise, however, was nothing compared to Wynne's, who stared at Jowan in disbelief. The young man saw Wynne, did a shocked double-take, and then blushed



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deeply. His embarrassment was noted by the Queen, who apparently thought highly of the man.

"Come near, Warden Jowan," she said kindly. "You have served the Crown well, and you will not be forgotten. As discussed, Enchanter Wynne has come from Ostagar, accompanied by Ser Adam Hawke, the brother of a Warden. They will be staying in the Warden Compound, on the invitation of the Warden-Commander. Enchanter Wynne's stay will be of some duration, and Ser Adam's of only a day or two. I trust they can be accommodated?"

"Of course, Your Majesty," Jowan said earnestly. "It will be no trouble at all."

"Then we would have you see to their comforts. After dinner, you and Enchanter Wynne will attend me. Ser Adam, do not forget to call before you depart. In addition to your reward, I would like you to deliver my own letter to Teyrn Fergus."



Once dismissed, Adam immediately gave Bronwyn's letter to Jowan, who read it quickly, nodding over it.

"Let's not talk here," he said softly. "Follow me. I'll have the servants fetch your things."

Hawke looked about with the eyes of a delighted tourist. Not many Lothering lads were give a chance to see the byways of the royal palace in Denerim. Down the passages, out to the courtyard, in at another doorway. It was something of a hike, but it was all quite interesting and grand beyond his experience. Eventually they were



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admitted to the Wardens' Compound, and Hawke looked about with equal interest, especially since these were Carver's rightful stamping grounds. He was going to like them, and Hawke resolved to write a letter to his brother before he left for the north, telling him all about it.

Mistress Rannelly and all the servants of the Wardens' Compound were only too happy to care for the Commander's guests. Even better, they quickly understood the Commander's order that none of them were to speak of Mistress Wynne's presence.

"This is the Hall," Jowan told them, as they walked through the vaulted, echoing space. "We have our meals here. Through that door is the Wardens' council chamber and study, and I must ask you not to go there. Why don't we get you settled?"

Hawke was shown to a fine room — a private room at that — and told a bath would be ready in the laundry very soon.

"We'll set up screens for the lady in the kitchen," the housekeeper told him. "You'll feel better once you're clean. Give Nilda there any laundry you need done and she'll see to it directly. Dinner will be in two hours, but I'll have a tray of snacks brought to your room to tide you over. And water and food for your noble hound, too, of course!"

Well, this was all very fine. A bed, a bath, meals and laundry, and not a copper spent from his own purse. As soon as he was cleaned up, he would deliver the Teyrn's other letters: the one to the Commander of Fort Drakon and the other to the Arl of Denerim. Neither was far from



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the Palace. He should be done well before dinner.

His other errands could wait until tomorrow: a trip to the Market for armor, and the delivery of yet another letter: the collective letter mostly dictated by Adaia but written by Tara, to be taken to the headman of the Alienage, Hahren Valendrian. The elves had given Hawke careful directions to the Alienage and then to the man's house. Hawke had no idea how he would be received, but the girls were pretty, and there was no reason not to do them a favor since he was going to Denerim anyway. Naturally, they were worried about their friends and families, what with the repulsive crimes of Arl Howe and all.

The bath was wonderful. Hawke scrubbed body and hair with dispatch; and then, by dint of promised treats, managed to get Hunter into the tub after him. Shaved, and in clean linen, Hawke felt ready to beard the great of Denerim in their dens.

He grinned at his mabari friend. "This is the life, isn't it, old boy? Maybe we should have gone for Wardens after all!" The dog grinned back, panting, and gave himself another shake.

The walk to Fort Drakon did them both good. The housekeeper could tell them the quick way, and in short order they were there. Hawke presented the Teyrn's letter of transit, and he was ushered into the Commander's office without delay. It was all bracingly professional. The man took the letter, thanked him civilly, and Hawke was on his way to the Arl of Denerim's estate.



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This was a little trickier, for it seemed the the Arl was entertaining guests, including his bride-to-be. Hawke sensed that his title earned him a little more consideration than a mere messenger would have enjoyed. Lots of important people seemed to be there. From the anteroom where he was seated, Hawke could hear a low, urgent rumble of talk. The King's death had obviously stirred up the nobles as well as the ordinary folk. After a brief wait, the jowly Arl made his appearance, irritable and short-spoken, and took the letter.

"From Loghain, eh? Well, you've done your duty, ser." Arl Urien looked Hawke over keenly, as if wondering if he might be someone important, and then deciding he was not. "Good evening to you."

No reward. Hmm. Perhaps it was the title, working against him this time. Perhaps an Arl might not wish to wound the pride of a knight by offering him coin. Hawke snorted. Coin was not likely to wound *this* knight's pride...

But at least he and Hunter were back in time for dinner. An excellent meal was served. Hawke told Jowan the bits not in Bronwyn's letter. Wynne spoke occasionally, giving Jowan hard looks throughout. The Warden was ill at ease, but friendly enough to Hawke. He, of course, wanted to know about his friends, and even asked after Carver. Still, there was too much tension for Hawke to want to linger at table. The two mages were obviously wanting a private talk, and then they needed to see the Queen. Hawke intended to have another look around the Compound, perhaps find a good



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book, and get some rest in his comfortable room. He bade them goodnight, and Jowan and Wynne were left facing each other over the table. They waited for the knight's footsteps to fade, and the recriminations began.

"Jowan," Wynne reproved, her face pinched with disappointment. "Blood Magic! How could you do something so foolish and wicked?"

"They were going to make me Tranquil!" he shot back instantly, ready for the attack. "That's just as bad! I had a right to defend myself – to defend everything that makes me human! You all act as if I'll do it forever, but I haven't! It was only the one time. I used it to save myself and escape. I'm sorry that people were hurt. I'm really sorry that Tara suffered. I'm not sorry that I'm a free man and a Warden!"

It was true. The words had burst out of him in a flood, but as soon as they were said, he recognized their truth. He wasn't sorry. Blood Magic had bought him his freedom: being a Warden had given him a second chance at life. Wynne looked beyond shocked. He softened his voice.

"Of course the Chantry forbids Blood Magic. It levels the playing field. That's why for all their Exalted Marches, they've never been able to conquer Tevinter. No more have the Qunaris! I'd use Blood Magic again to save myself, to save other people, to fight the darkspawn. The Grey Wardens do not forbid Blood Magic, you know. They believe in fighting the darkspawn 'by any means necessary.' It's true."

Wynne shook her head in sorrow. "Listen to yourself,



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Jowan. This is contrary to everything you were ever taught..."

"Then I was taught *wrong!*"

He pushed himself up from the table, jarring cups and plates. "We can't keep the Queen waiting. Let's go. What are you going to do, Wynne? Report me to the Templars? Oh, right – if you do that, they'll find out who you are and arrest you for murdering the King!"

Hurt, she opened her mouth to protest, but he interrupted her, still fired up, "Of course you didn't! I know that! The Chantry is wrong about you. We can agree about that. Maybe someday you'll see that they're wrong about a lot of things. Anyway, let's go. The Queen's really not well, and that poison is pernicious stuff..."

Wynne pulled herself together, and took a breath. She rose, smoothing her gown, thinking hard. Instead of arguing, she decided to focus on what mattered most. "Tell me more about this poison..."



The day dawned blue and clear: a fine day for a walk to the Market District. Jowan had some business there – at Master Wade's, in fact. He was also perfectly willing to accompany Hawke and Hunter to the Alienage.

"I'll probably be the one taking the reply to Ostagar," he pointed out.

Hawke welcomed the Warden's company, though he was a little surprised at Jowan's appearance.

The fine blue doublet was gone. Instead, Jowan was

wearing the trappings of a Warden and a warrior: extremely good light leather armor and excellent boots, and over it all the griffon tabard. In addition, to Hawke's astonishment, Jowan had buckled on a weapon harness bearing a longsword and what appeared to be a very fine dagger. Was Jowan so powerful a mage that he did not require a staff at all?

They fell into step, and Jowan obligingly pointed out the landmarks along King's Way. Hunter trotted just ahead, nose to the ground.

"I hope the Queen is well," Hawke remarked.

"Better with Wynne here. Wynne's amazing," Jowan answered, and changed the subject.

Hawke filed the comment away. Clearly the poisoning had not been easily dispelled. Queen Anora looked healthy enough — to someone who did not know her well, probably — but there must have been serious aftereffects. Bronwyn had been very concerned that the Queen be able to hold the country together in the three months leading up to the Landsmeet. Hawke wished the Queen well: it would be a shame if such a young and pretty woman were to leave the world untimely.

"What do you suppose she'll do, once the Landsmeet is over?" Hawke asked. "She's Teyrn Loghain's heir, no matter what else. Maybe she'll go to Gwaren and act for him, while he's fighting the war."

"I have no idea," Jowan confessed. "It's hard to imagine

her as anything other than Queen. There hasn't been a Queen Dowager in a hundred and fifty years: not since the death of King Lochlann. His Queen, Gwennlian Voric, took vows in the Chantry and ended up as Grand Cleric after a few years. Somehow, I can't see Queen Anora doing that."

"I certainly hope not, anyway!" Hawke was impressed by Jowan's knowledge of royal genealogy. "So who's the next king, do you think?"

Jowan pursed his lips, thinking. "Well... if you go by blood relationship, the Couslands certainly have the best claim. That's one reason that the late teyrn, Bryce Cousland, was put forward as King. That, and the fact that people thought Cailan was too young... Yes, if you went just with birth, I guess people would say that Fergus Cousland should be King..."

Hawke's eyes widened, and the street gossip he had heard yesterday suddenly registered on him. *The Couslands have Theirin blood.* He felt a wave of ardent loyalty to the brother of Bronwyn Cousland. That Teyrn Cousland might be the next king was beyond his wildest hopes.

"...Of course," Jowan pursued his thought. "Bronwyn's claim is just as good, since birth order and gender don't matter much in these cases. It's mostly who can get the votes in the Landsmeet. Bronwyn's a Warden, of course, which ordinarily might disqualify her, but she's very, very popular, and we're in the midst of a Blight..."

"Some people..." Hawke ventured, "would like to see

Teyrn Loghain on the throne.”

“It could happen,” Jowan granted, after a pause. “He’s the most respected man in Ferelden, and a bonafide hero. He’s the man people are counting on to save them from the darkspawn. He hasn’t the least blood claim, but Ferelden’s never endured a Blight – not since it was a united nation, anyway. This crisis might trump custom, at that. Nobody wants a change of command. Of course, he’d do better if he were married to a noblewoman with some royal blood...”

“Like Lady Bronwyn,” Hawke guessed.

Jowan blinked, and gave him a nervous look. “I would be really, really, really careful about talk like that. Look, there are the Alienage gates...”

Suspicious stares and frightened whispers greeted them, but they met no resistance. The place seemed very thinly inhabited, and Hawke remembered Arl Howe’s vicious treachery. How many elves had been lured away to a lifetime of slavery in a distant land? Valendrian’s name and Jowan’s Warden tabard soon gained them a modicum of trust. Neither Jowan nor Hawke had visited an Alienage before, and they looked about them with discreet dismay.

“How can the elves bear to live like this?” Hawke muttered. “Why doesn’t the Arl of Denerim do something? It wouldn’t cost that much for a bit of repair!”

Jowan frowned. “I don’t think the elves are given a lot of choice. And I haven’t heard much good about the Arl anyway. At least that rotten son of his is gone. Bronwyn put

that in her letter. He’s the one who tried to use the Alienage as his personal brothel. Elves are treated as badly as mages in some ways. What it’s like for an elf mage like Tara is hard to imagine.” A quick shrug. “It’s nice to imagine that a new king would do something about all the oppression and injustice in this country, but I don’t see it happening. As far as I can see the nobility have got the people where they want them; and the Chantry doesn’t mind people being miserable, since it makes them hope for better in the next life, and keeps the prayers and tithes coming in.”

“Not all nobles are bad,” Hawke pointed out. Jowan made some good points, especially about the Chantry, but fair was fair.

“No, but I’m not sure that the good can outweigh the bad. There are always more of the bad ones, just like there are more rotten Templars than decent ones.”

Hawke hardly felt he could argue the point. The Templar Commander in Lothering, Ser Bryant, was a very decent man indeed, but in the end he was just another cog in the Chantry’s machine.

Hahren Valendrian welcomed them politely, and then with some friendliness, when he saw the griffon tabard. He invited them into his humble little house. Womenfolk retreated to an inner room, and crowded at the doorway; huge, beautiful eyes watchful. Hunter sneezed, and Hawke himself nearly sniffed at the unfamiliar, not unpleasant odor. They accepted the offer of tea and biscuits and sat quietly while the old elf read the letter. A pretty little elf



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child crept out and peered at them over the table.

"Do you know Tara?" she asked.

"She's my best friend," Jowan said, smiling at the little girl.

A woman hissed frantically, "Come back here, Amethyne!"

The child stared at the last remaining biscuit. Hawke grinned, and nudged the plate her way with a single finger. Instantly the biscuit was in her hand, then in her mouth, and she was darting back to the safety of the women's skirts.

Valendrian gave the child an indulgent, tender look, and then sighed. "What is left of their family will be glad to hear this news. I must compose an answer to them, listing the lost and the saved. Is it possible for you to wait? I will not be long."

"No trouble at all," Jowan assured him, sipping his tea. It was quite good.

The hahren sat down at a rough writing table, and carefully prepared quill, ink, and a worn piece of a parchment. Hawke eyed the parchment with curiosity. Mother had been proud that they were not so poor that they needed to scrape the words from letters received in order to reuse the parchment. Valendrian, obviously, was far more thrifty. The old elf consulted a list, and shook his head as he wrote.

Very soon they had their letter, gave thanks for the refreshments, and took their leave, going on to the other end of the Alienage, which let out to the Market District.

Jowan tucked the letter away, reasoning that he would



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be in Ostagar before long. "Maybe Tara was lucky," he said, the words troubling him. "At least at the Circle she had decent meals and a good education. I really don't know."

"Mages shouldn't be locked up. And neither should elves." Hawke was too excited by the prospect of visiting Denerim Market with gold in his purse to pursue the issue further. For the moment, the world was his.



It was still his the next bright morning, when Hawke rode out of Denerim to infinite possibilities in the north. On a horse borrowed from the Wardens – which no one had said anything about returning – in his good armor, in his magnificent new boots and shining silverite helmet, he felt a true knight at last. Wade's partner Herren had done right by him, letting him range through their stock of superb used armor, while Master Wade and Jowan had gone on about some strange new weapons the armorer was crafting for the Wardens. They had gone out in back of the shop, when Wade had demonstrated something that gruesomely involved an ox carcass. Jowan had seemed pleased, and talked about transporting the prototype to Ostagar on his return to the south. Meanwhile, Hawke had reveled in armor worthy of a noble lord – the sort of armor made for people like Mother's family.

Jowan was a good fellow, and had shown him all the best shops. Folded carefully in a saddlebag were a brocade doublet and velvet breeches, bought from a vendor of used



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clothes. A handsome cloak was his as well, for the weather would be turning cooler soon. The laundress next door to Wade had sold Hawke a pair of shirts of the very finest linen, confiscated by her when the owners had failed to pay up. Paid with gold, a shoemaker had in a few hours cobbled together a pair of splendid soft boots to wear with his finery. Then Hawke had splurged on gifts for his family, securing Jowan's promise to stop at the house in Lothering on his way back to Ostagar. He smiled, imagining his mother's delight in the Orlesian silks...

And the Queen had come through with a first-rate farewell gift: an ivory-handled silverite dagger that had been the King's; the scabbard mounted in silver and set with malachite. It was a true nobleman's weapon, and Hawke wore it on his belt with pride. He kicked his horse into a canter and called to his hound.

"Come on, Hunter! Let's not keep Teyrn Fergus waiting!"



With Rendon Howe dead, his erstwhile vassals and supporters had some serious choices to make. Fergus reflected on the matter for some days, during the long and dangerous ride through Highever.

Some, like the defenders of Vigil's Keep and the city of Amaranthine, surrendered to Teyrn Fergus and made formal obeisance. This was the easiest group to deal with. It was necessary to sort out those who had participated in the Highever massacre, but very few of these had come



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to Fergus of their own accord. Having shown no mercy themselves, they expected none. Knowing how eager others were for the favor of the new regime, they could expect to be informed in short order. Most of them had fled; across the sea to the Free Marches, or west, first to Highever, and then dispersing, changing their names and vanishing into the population.

So it happened that nearly all those who surrendered in those first busy weeks could be put to some good use or other. Seneschal Varel, Howe's long-time right-hand man at Vigil's Keep, was kept on, and made Fergus' deputy for the arling' administration. He had denounced Howe's worst excesses, and had been demoted for it. Fergus thought he could be trusted for the most part. He would have an independent auditor go over the arling's books later, of course, just to be sure...

While some of the Howe loyalists had fled with Bann Esmerelle in her ship, other landholders threw themselves on Fergus' mercy. If he could uncover no signs of collusion in Howe's worst schemes, he was inclined to let them stay, if only to minimize the chaos that mass dispossessions would cause. The rest were told to leave. The Temmerleys had been stupid enough to dig in and put up a fight. It had been brief but ugly, and children had died with their parents when the roof of the manor collapsed under bombardment by the trebuchets. Fergus pitied the children, but the bombardment meant that his own men, many of whom had

children of their own, would survive, instead of risking their lives in a bitter melee on the defender's home ground.

"The worst problem, of course," he said, thinking aloud, "are the renegades."

His squire nodded sympathetically. Seyforth had been hurt rather badly a few days ago, thrown from his horse during a nasty skirmish with a band of soldiers-turned bandits on the North Road. Certain units of Howe's men had gone into business for themselves: especially the units that had taken part in the Highever attack and occupation. That was why they were marching on Highever now.

"Bann" Norrel Haglin was the man Howe had put in charge of the town. He was an old-time Amaranthine retainer and loyal as a dog to Rendon. The title was a fraud, of course, since Howe had no right whatever to grant Highever titles. Haglin could make things unpleasant, should he choose to defy Fergus.

Farmers on either side of the road stopped and waved their hats, seeing their young Teyrn. Some even rushed up to offer their respects.

"You're a popular man, my lord," Seyforth grinned.

Fergus managed a bitter laugh. "So was my father. Much good it did him."

A band of scouts were riding their way. Fergus lifted his hand to greet Ser Naois. Bearded, gruff, and dependable, Ser Naois Gilmore knew his business. His young nephew had died in the massacre, defending the Cousland family.

Naois was not inclined to be gentle with Howe loyalists.

"My lord!" he said. "It's not looking too bad. Some of the traitors have pulled out of the city. A large band, captained by Roderick Crewe, is calling itself the White Company. They've taken ship for Cumberland to offer themselves to the Nevarrans."

"What else?" Fergus asked.

"They're pretty demoralized," Naois told him. "Even the loyalists now acknowledge that Howe is dead. Haglin is talking about his duty to 'Arl Nathaniel,' but not many are buying it. I think Haglin will pull out of Highever and go to ground to the west. Maybe he's hoping for a royal pardon. If he puts up a fight, he won't get it."

Fergus nodded, thinking about his old friend Nathaniel Howe. Nathaniel, to Fergus' relief, had not made an appearance. He was presumably still somewhere in the Free Marches. A search of Vigil's Keep had not uncovered Rendon Howe's will. It seemed bizarre that he would not have one, but perhaps he had been keeping his options open, waiting for his affairs to be more settled. He had not even set aside property or coin for Delilah's dowry. Not that it was an issue now. Fergus wondered if Nathaniel would respond to a summons from the Queen. If he did not, the Howes were officially finished in Ferelden.

"We'll move on toward Highever, but we won't exhaust the men," Fergus decided. "If Haglin pulls out, we can relieve the city at once. That's all to the good. We'll see what happens next. If Haglin and his men resort to ban-

ditry, we'll have to hunt them down. If he keeps quiet, it might be best to resolve everything peacefully."

Naois frowned at him, and Fergus grew impatient. "Ferelden is still in the grip of a Blight! That takes precedence over everything else. Howe did not survive to gloat over his victory. I've had vengeance – and all things considered, I'd rather have my family instead."

He had not had word from Denerim in several days. In the current state of unrest, it was all too easy for a courier to meet with a misadventure. He could only hope that things were under control in the rest of Ferelden. The North had to be his only concern for now.

The following afternoon, they were on the final approach from the south, where the Highever Road descended in a shallow grade toward the sea. Past the last hills, they could make out the misty towers of the castle, looming over the town.

More scouts reported back, the last galloping furiously toward them and hauling up in a cloud of dust.

"My lord!" the scout shouted, wildly excited. "The banner of Amaranthine no longer flies over the castle. There is no guerdon of any kind! I believe they are gone!" The boy caught his breath, patting his horse's neck absently. "There's a haze over the road west of here. It might be their column."

"Good riddance!" burst out Naois. The other captains agreed heartily.

"We'll see," Fergus said shortly. "We need to secure the

castle, and then take possession of the town. Maker alone knows what we'll find."

Castle Highever had seen better days.

Everything worth looting was long gone. That might have happened shortly after Howe's treachery, but some of the damage looked recent. Everything was in disorder: rubbish and ordure were scattered in the courtyard, along with torn rags and a litter of smashed crockery. The garrison had left quickly, and had not cared what the next occupants thought of them. Some of the narrow windows in the tower were broken. The place looked derelict.

A few of his knights insisted on going first through the open gate. As they clattered in, slowly, by ones and twos, frightened people emerged from the side doors and leaned cautiously from windows. Impatient, Fergus cantered into the outer courtyard, wanting to see his home for himself.

"It's Teyrn Fergus!" cried a woman. "Maker bless you, my lord!"

The few people here seemed glad enough to see him. A ragged cheer rose up. Some of these men and women Fergus recognized as Highever townsfolk. From what Bronwyn had told him, he could not hope to find any of their old servants or retainers. They were gone: dead to the last man, woman, and child. Quietly he vowed that none of Howe's men, however unstained by Highever blood, would ever be allowed to stay here.

Not that he saw any. They knew they had no right to

expect anything but bloody vengeance from him.. He set his jaw and began giving orders.

"Naois, take a scouting party and go down into the city. See if any of Howe's men are still running things there. Seyforth... we'll search the castle from top to bottom, and see what we find!"

They found little to please them. The Highever folk, many of them forced into servitude by Howe's officers, were full of indignation, and eager to show him everything.

"They came to my house, my lord, and told me I must cook and clean for them!" one merchant's wife shrilled furiously. "Took my daughters, too, telling me that they needed whores! Cowards, rapists, and thieves, the lot of them!"

The treasury was empty, of course. That was only to be expected. Bronwyn had saved the ancient sword and shield of Highever. The rest could be replaced, especially considering the immense fortune Fergus had seized from Howe's treasure chests. The clerks had taken days to count the gold. Howe's evil had been remunerative: Fergus now had over ten thousand sovereigns in his possession — blood money from the sale of Ferelden citizens. It was a vast sum. His own father had never had this kind of coin in their treasury. If he used it well and wisely, he could heal some of Highever's wounds, and assist those in need.

As to recovering the elves, Fergus was not sanguine. The Queen could put out diplomatic feelers, requesting the return of Ferelden's kidnapped citizens, but the Tevinters would probably laugh outright at that. Ferelden had no

leverage of any kind over the distant Tevinter Empire. Perhaps they could offer money, but on the Tevinter market, the elves would be worth five times what the slavers had paid Howe. And offering to pay them could have serious repercussions. Ferelden was not much afflicted with the secret gangs of slavers that permeated the cities of Antiva and the Free Marches like rot in a bin a wheat. If the Tevinters were to get the idea that they could hold Fereldans for ransom, Ferelden would find itself beset by a new crime wave that would fasten onto the country's limited wealth — and suck it dry.

He glanced in at the library. It looked like the interlopers had intended to steal some of the books and changed their minds at the last minute. Piles of them had been taken from the shelves and then dumped onto the floor. In the study, someone had been at the maps. Fergus suspected that many had been stolen. The locking drawer that held the account books was open and the accounts gone. Fergus grimaced. It would be much harder now to establish who had paid taxes, and who had not.

"Well," he muttered to himself. "Perhaps I'll give the teyrnir a tax holiday for the year... maybe next year, too. Maker knows I've gold enough."

"That would be an extremely popular measure, my lord," Seyforth agreed.

No silver was left in the cupboards: no tapestries on the walls. A woman named Velda, who was more or less acting

as housekeeper in this wreckage, showed him some things that had been thrown haphazardly into an empty room for safekeeping. It was there that he found the portraits of his mother and father. Mother's portrait was torn along the side of the canvas when it landed on a rusted iron torchiere. Father's was damaged by mold and damp. They could be repaired, after a fashion, but they were not his first priority.

The invaders had taken nearly all the food in the larder with them, but Velda showed him where she had secreted some in a dungeon cell, unknown to "that Bann Norrel, or so he fancies himself." In the cellars, wine and ale pooled on the floor, bleeding from casks stoved in out of spite. Fergus set Velda and her helpers to clean up in here, preserve what they could, and start preparing a meal for everyone. He would think over what else needed to be done in due time.

Then there were the dungeons, filled with prisoners. There was no sign of any keys. Fergus' men would need to find a locksmith, or a blacksmith with a file and a very large hammer.

"My lord," a knight explained. "That lot left them down here without food or water. Some of them are petty criminals, and others honest citizens who fell afoul of the usurpers. And there is considerable debate amongst them on the matter."

"See that they are fed and not mistreated," Fergus said instantly, "but do not release them until we can sort them out."

Before he could do that, there was still more of the castle to see: a duty that he dreaded.

Up, up the ramps and stairs he climbed, his silent men fol-

lowing. He must go upstairs and see if anything still lingered...

The guest rooms were empty, of course. Howe's officers had been quartered here, and so the walls were not carelessly defaced nor the furniture too much abused. One of the chambers was very tidy indeed. Whoever had dwelled within was a person of meticulous habits. The other rooms were not so neat.

Seyforth glanced at him, face tense with compassion, and opened the door that led to the family's private bedchambers. The two knights who insisted on preceding him in case of traps or ambushes slipped in and looked searchingly around the square stone antechamber.

Empty, indeed. Stripped bare as it was, there was nothing but the shape of the room to suggest that this was part of his family home — that people he loved had once lived here. Fergus bit his lip. Bronwyn's room, first. It was the one least likely to cause him pain. Perhaps it was cowardly, but there was only so much a man could bear...

The door was opened on cold light. The shutters were flung wide, and one banged carelessly against the stone walls. Here the inhabitants had left in a hurry. Chests and cupboards gaped open. A bookcase lay on the floor, front forward, the books carelessly scattered about. Fergus picked up one, smoothing the pages, setting it aside on a wine-stained table.

It was still Bronwyn's room, more or less. The massive bed was still the same bed that had stood in the same place for generations. Someone had obviously been living

here recently – someone who cared little for the place. A dirty plate and a litter of bones and crumbs indicated a last, hasty meal before vacating the premises. The linens were rumpled and unclean. The green velvet coverlet, lovingly quilted and embroidered by their grandmother, was torn and dirty, jammed down at the foot of the bed. Bronwyn's little personal trinkets were gone: her curious rocks and shells, her bronze jewel box bequeathed her by Great-Aunt Ada, her chess set of rock crystal and onyx...

Still, with cleaning and mending, this could be Bronwyn's room again. Fergus sighed, and turned away. Steeling himself, he gestured at the end of the hall, and within a few steps he was in his parents' private bedchamber.

Most probably, Haglin had used this room. It was decently made up, since the man had from all reports been elsewhere for the past few days. It, too, had changed.

Mother's dressing table had always been arranged with the beauty and meticulous care of an altar: lovely, costly objects laid out just so. Those treasures of silver, of amber and ivory and crystal and tortoiseshell were gone now: looted and sold; or given away to wives and mothers and sisters, women who were proud to own the plunder of Highever. Needless to say, Mother's jewelry chest was gone as well. Fergus had found some of her pieces at Vigil's Keep, and had ordered Varel to keep his eye out for more. Father's jewels were gone too, but Fergus wore the seal of Highever on his hand, and that mattered the most.

Naturally, the cupboards were empty of clothing: the silks, the velvets, the furs...

There remained now only the one room: the worst, most unbearable of them all.

The room stank of vomit and sex; of stale wine and stale piss. A girl was cowering in there, a frightened girl with tangled fair hair. She was dressed in one of his wife's gowns, now very much the worse for wear.

"Don't hurt me," she whimpered, hands out to fend off blows.

Fergus stared at her, shocked speechless at first. Oriana had worn that gown on First Day. He well remembered the pale blue bodice, the white flowers picked out with golden thread. He remembered, too, the skirt of the finest heavy turquoise silk, now sadly soiled and frayed at the hem. The girl had thrown it on over a dirty white shift. The stolen finery hung on her ungracefully, unbelted and unlaced. One of Oriana's big silk shawls lay spread out on the floor. More clothing and trinkets were heaped in the middle of it.

"What are you doing here?" Fergus grated out. "Who are you?"

The girl shrank back with a squeak.

"Answer his lordship, girl!" Seyforth snapped.

She gaped at them, terrified. "I'm Violet, my lord. Captain Fenwick brought me here with him from Amaranthine. Going to make me a lady, he was. When I woke up this morning, he was gone!"

"She's a thief and a whore," sneered a knight. "A little late

gathering your loot, aren't you?"

"This is *mine!*" she protested in a thin whine. "Fenwick gave it to me. He said I could have all the clothes and the silver jewelry. It's *mine!*"

Fergus stared dully at the things on the shawl, recognizing all too many of them. "What did Fenwick do with the other jewels?" he asked.

"Sent 'em home to his mother," Violet sulked. "She's the only reason he hasn't married me already. Afraid of what his old mum would say!"

Sickened beyond belief, Fergus turned to Seyforth. "Get her out of here. Get her out of the castle. She can't have my wife's jewelry, but let her take the clothing. I don't want to see it again."

"It's worth quite a bit, my lord."

"I don't want to see it again!"

After the girl was gone, her cries and curses fading into the stone walls, Fergus looked about him briefly. "Have the women scrub this place out. Burn the linens. Then... keep the door closed. I'll be sleeping in my parents' room."

"Your room now, my lord," Seyforth reminded him gently.

"I suppose so."

Before he could eat, there was yet another place to visit. Abruptly, he found a older manservant who seemed fairly responsible, "What did they do with the bodies?"

On his insistence, the servant took him outside to see the place. One of the old middens had been used to dispose of the waste of battle. Logs had been heaped up over the

carelessly piled corpses, and the dead of Highever were roasted like pigs, half-burned and half-buried. By now, it was unlikely that anything would now be recognizable. Fergus walked the length of the scorched, ill-smelling place, thinking of what had happened here: of the evil men could do and claim they were merely following orders; or that what they did was for the greater good.

"Are you sure *everyone* was killed? What about my mother?" he demanded of the servant. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Coyle, my lord. I believe they were all killed indeed, my lord. I am that sorry to tell you. I didn't see the bodies myself, but one of the captains who was here — name of Chase — said that the teyrn and teyrna were both there." He ducked his head, not wanting to tell the young man everything that the bastard of a captain had said about them. "The teyrna put up a brave fight, she did, he said. Wouldn't let them take her alive. Arl Howe wasn't best pleased, but so it was. And Howe was here and saw the bodies. If they hadn't been here, there would have been a hue and cry after them, and no mistake. He was already that angry that the young lady got away."

"Starting tomorrow," Fergus said slowly, "I'll give orders to the groundkeeper to build a mound here: good fresh soil for planting grass and flowers. There will be a hedge around it and a stone. I want due honor done to the dead. Has anyone from the Chantry been out here to give them the rites?"

"If they have, my lord, I never heard of it."

"Well, then perhaps I'll pay a visit to the Revered Mother, too." There had been ne'er a peep from the Chantry about the murders of their Highever patrons. Perhaps Howe or his creatures had threatened them. Perhaps they simply did not care who filled their coffers, as long as filled they were.

It was a grim, silent meal. Fergus owed it to his men not to show the degree of anguish he suffered, the horror he felt at being in the place, at what his home had become.

It would not always be like this. Since nothing could be worse than this, he reasoned that it would be better tomorrow. The falsely imprisoned would be freed. They would be given work rebuilding and restoring the castle. The guilty would be punished, and not rewarded for wickedness. The castle would be cleansed, and the dead given due dignity.

"My lord," a soldier entered the hall, face filled with urgency. "I bring word from Ser Naois. There's trouble in Highever town. Quite a few of the invaders have dug in at the old Alienage, and seemed loath to leave or surrender. They're led by one Captain Lowan, and they say if you want Highever, you'll have to fight them for it."

There would be an ugly street battle, after all. Not much remained of the old Alienage. The shantytown was gone, and in its place was a half-finished foundation. Presumably Renden Howe had planned a palatial new residence with a splendid view of the sea. Low stone walls gave the enemy cover from which to shoot arrows and crossbow

bolts. It would not, however, protect them from the missiles being loaded into the trebuchets Fergus was preparing to use against them.

"I don't care if nothing is left of that eyesore," he told his dwarven engineers. "Knock the whole bloody thing down, if you like. I want those bastards dead or flushed out. It's all the same to me. Kenyon, ready your archers. When they make a break for it, shoot them down. I've done with treating with rats."

This was not the only hotspot in Highever Town. Naois was leading an attack on another band; a strong, drunken, and furious one holed up inside the High Dragon Tavern. A pity. It was a good place for a drink, and it likely would be a total loss. There were other little skirmishes all over the city: a few Amaranthine men here and there doing murder, robbery, and rape on their own account — too stupid to run, and too satisfied with their comfortable life as tyrants and parasites to give it over without a fight. Fergus had sent out a crier, telling the men they could lay down their weapons and surrender immediately if they wished to be shown mercy. A mere handful had done so. Fergus felt perfectly within his rights to kill the rest.

The trebuchets were brought up and assembled, as the sun moved across the sky. Archers shot up at a steep angle, letting their arrows fall on the other side of the wall. Another group was moving around to the north dock, where they would be able to target the renegades from behind. Fergus



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wanted these men dealt with before nightfall gave them a chance to escape. Eventually, one of the machines was ready and loaded. It creaked and thumped, and a heavy stone projectile slammed into the top of the wall, smashing it in, dropping a rain of stone shards on the men behind it. Fergus smiled grimly at the muffled screams.

"Again!" he shouted.

The other two trebuchets were nearly ready when there was a scuffle and a noise behind the wall. Suddenly, two dozen men burst out from cover, making a break for the street leading up out of the Alienage to the east. The clever ones overlapped their shields. The others were shot down, and fell screaming and thrashing on the cobbles of the empty Alienage square. A savage melee followed. Fergus led his men in a counterattack, but some the fugitives were already well ahead. More of them fell to arrows and blades, but a half-dozen reached a twisting alley, where they could cling to the sides, their shields still protecting them from missiles. In the lead was a big man in good armor, shouting orders, whom Fergus guessed must be Lowan himself.

"After them!" Fergus roared. "They're heading for the Chantry!" He waved at Seyforth. "You! Take your men and finish off whoever's left behind the wall there! I'm going after Lowan!"

He pounded after the men, craving the relief that the physical act of revenge promised. His eyes were fixed Lowan's gleaming silverite armor. The enemy was on the run now. Two had thrown their shields aside and one howled, "Sanctuary!"



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Fergus swore. The bloody Chantry would probably grant it, and shake pious fingers at him if he dared to drag those murderers out to be hanged. He pushed himself to his limits, gritting his teeth. Up ahead, the street opened out to the square facing Highever Chantry. A pair of Templars stood on duty by the doors. One of them seemed to be moving to open them.

"No!" bellowed Fergus. "You are *not* letting those murdering bastards hide from me!"

He was so close. One of Lowan's men was out of breath and flagging. "Get him!" Fergus ordered. and a pair of knights crashed into the man, spitting him on their swords. Shrieks of agony tore the air, but Fergus ran on. An arrow hissed past him and brought down another. The man rolled, screaming, arching his back, trying to claw at the arrow lodged behind his knee.

Two turned to fight, and were quickly cut down. Lowan and another soldier were making a last desperate dash for the safety of the Chantry. The doors gaped open, held by faceless Templars.

"I'm the Teyrn of Highever!" shouted Fergus. "And I order you to shut those bloody doors!"

"Sanctuary!" howled Lowan. "Sanctuary!"

A clatter of hooves, a horse's scream, a mabari's fearsome growl, and a huge dark body knocked Lowan sideways. His companion stumbled back, clutching his head protectively. Fergus ignored horse and horseman and went for Lowan,



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his sword a blade of Justice. He caught Lowan across the left arm, cutting deep. The man howled again and scrambled away on all fours, trying to climb the steps of the Chantry. Fergus tore off the man's helmet and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, dragging him back. He was angry, very angry, and if those Templars said one word to him, he would probably kill them, too. Lowan right hand reached out frantically for the base of the steps.

And Fergus cut it off.

He could never remember too much of what happened afterward, other than the fact that Lowan was clearly and thoroughly dead, inches from the Chantry steps. Fergus threw a burning look at the Templars, who had come half-way down, preparing to interfere; and at the gaggle of priests and sisters at the wide doorway, looking variously shocked, excited, disapproving, and sick. He looked for Lowan's companion. That man, too, was dead; sprawled on the cobbles, blood trickling from his mouth. A handsome young warrior Fergus did not know was wiping his blade. Nearby a big mabari was licking his chops, grinning doggily. The man's horse had trotted off a few yards, but seemed all too accustomed to battle.

"Thanks," Fergus said briefly. "The bastard was getting away."

"Well, we couldn't have that," grinned the handsome newcomer. "Happy to help. You're Teyrn Fergus, I take it. I have letters for you from your sister and Queen Anora."

"About bloody time," Fergus said, wiping his own sword



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on the ruins of Lowan's leggings. "That's a good dog you've got. What's his name? And what's yours, for that matter?"

"This fine fellow is Hunter," the warrior bowed. "I am Hawke. Ser Adam Hawke. Don't know the horse's name, even though he did most of the work. Sorry."

Fergus laughed, further scandalizing the Chantry faithful. "Let's have a drink, and you can show me those letters."



SER ADAM HAWKE

CHAPTER 3

MATTERS OF HONOR

SHOULD HE BE KING?"

That was the theme of his restless thoughts, the matter of his anxious dreams. Loghain worked

and fought and gave commands as was his duty and custom. Underneath it all simmered the unspoken words:

"Should he be King?"

He was becoming more and more unalterably convinced that he should.

Who could cope with the current crisis better? No — looking at it with eyes unclouded by tradition or fear, who could guide Ferelden though the Blight better than he?

Cailan's will had cut Anora out of the succession with cavalier ruthlessness. Anora was a fine Queen, but no warleader: hers were the gifts of peace. And with her questionable health, too...

Loghain experienced the usual pang of anxiety and distress when thinking about Anora and the vile thing the Orlesian spy had done to her. Could Wynne make her right? Could anyone?

Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to stop worrying about Anora for the moment. She must get through the next three months and get herself well. Then, in the future...

If they had a future. Thousands of darkspawn had erupted here at Ostagar, and still no sign of the Archdemon. Bronwyn told him that the Old God plagued her dreams. The thing was there, behind the scenes, gathering strength. Its defeats had confused and angered it. It would soon be seeking revenge.

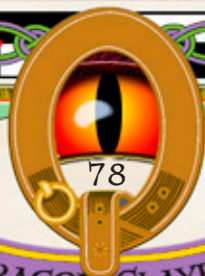
He must consider the matter of the succession. Cailan, predictably, had been no help at all.

Many Fereldan nobles had a drop or two of the blood of Calenhad. No doubt each one of the swaggering, vainglorious fellows fancied himself a King in waiting. Very likely the Landsmeet would explode: cousin against cousin, brother against brother, in a series of angry squabbles and bloody duels. That could not be allowed to happen.

But how to prevent it? The only way to silence controversy was to present the Landsmeet with a King that all could support. The commoners of Ferelden would support Loghain himself. Of that, vanity aside, he had no doubt.

The nobles of the Landsmeet, however, were another matter. They had never forgiven him his ascension to the nobility. It would gall them like bleeding saddle sores to see him on the throne. Unless...

Well, who had the best claim by blood? If one went strictly by the bloodline, the next candidates were Alistair,



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the bastard son; and then the children of Bryce Cousland – Fergus and Bronwyn.

Alistair was a fine lad. Loghain had come to like him very much, seeing some of the best of Maric in him; but Alistair would not do as king. Maric had not acknowledged him, and there was not a shred of real proof that Alistair was Maric's son: or at least, not the sort of proof that would pass the Landsmeet's jealous examination. And then too, the boy's mother made it impossible. Her status as a Grey Warden one could set aside. But an Orlesian, an elf, and a mage? No. And it was foolish to imagine it could be kept secret. How many people had the elven woman "confided" in? If Loghain declared for Alistair, the Orlesians would blab the truth to the world. Ferelden would be a laughing-stock, right or wrong; and support for the boy would be cut out from under him. No. Alistair would not do.

Fergus had real potential to be a fine king, Loghain believed. He was a brave and intelligent man. Bryce had trained him well. He knew how to lead and he knew how to be patient. Could he deal with the Blight?

As long as there was the least question in his mind on the subject, Loghain felt he must say "no." Fergus would do his best, but it might not be good enough. Once the Blight was defeated, Loghain was willing to grant that Fergus might be a very good king indeed.

And Loghain admitted, in his secret heart, that he was tired of deferring to some young upstart. It was beyond tedious to



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submit his views to be pawed at by someone unqualified to judge them. He probably could get on well enough with a King Fergus, but there would be the same delay, waiting for acknowledgement and approval. Why not remove that step, and hold the supreme power in his hands?

There was one way to do it: Bronwyn's claim was equal in blood to that of her brother. She was the Girl Warden; the Dragonslayer of Ferelden. The nobles might be easily swayed to accept her as Queen. It was possible that her brother, embroiled in the North as he was, might agree that his sister was a better choice in the current circumstances.

Why not? Why not join their courses and seize the Crown? Between them, they were the best hope for the country's survival...



Must she be Queen?

Bronwyn tossed restlessly on her cot, plagued by the idea. Many seemed to think that she must. That look in Cousin Leonas' eye vexed her beyond words. He and Arl Wulffe talked in low voices, always looking, looking, *looking* at her, waiting for her to do what they had decided would be best.

They were sensible, pragmatic men: men who prided themselves on being free of foolish prejudices. They had made clear that they wanted what was best for the kingdom. They had also made clear what they thought that was.

Like most of the army, they wanted Loghain to be King. The army was big and powerful enough to force its will on

Ferelden, but at a cost: the precedent of an army forcibly setting the strongest on the throne.

Cousin Leonas had couched his thoughts in a history lesson, speaking of the royal house of Antiva.

"Once the royal house was gone... once that golden thread of legitimacy was broken... it became a battle of all against all, the survival of the fittest. Once the army knew they had the power to make kings, they wanted to make them all the time, greedy for the bribes of gold and power and women each successful general would throw their way. Even the ones on the throne there now are in a pretty precarious position. They owe their thrones to the Crows or the nobles or the army: sometimes all of them at once, and everybody knows it. There's nothing to hold the people to the monarchy by the call of tradition. Tradition is a powerful thing, and must not be tossed aside recklessly."

He was right, she knew: horribly, infuriatingly right. It would be madness to defeat the Blight, only for Ferelden to fall into chaos. And there was another danger, too: if the line of Calenhad was broken, their foreign enemies would pounce, smelling the dissension as far away as Val Royeaux...

Father had wanted her to be Queen. It was true that he wanted her to be Cailan's queen, but he would be the first to grasp the needs of the time. Mother had not wanted her to marry Loghain, but if she had to choose between Loghain ruling alone, and Loghain ruling as the husband of a Cousland Queen — well, Bronwyn knew that there would have been no choice. Mother would have told her

that it was her duty to be the Queen of royal blood who would bind together the ancient loyalties of the Landsmeet and the nation to the Crown in time of peril.

But what of Fergus? She had told him of the situation. Would he feel it best to take the throne himself? It was hard to guess. If he wished it, and felt it his duty, then she must do everything in her power to help her brother. But was he the best choice for Ferelden? If he were not, then was her loyalty simply the selfish grasping of a powerful noble family?

She was already so busy as Warden-Commander, and that was not a duty she felt she could palm off on anyone else. The Wardens here in Ferelden were key — nay, essential — to victory over the Blight. They had one more to their number now. Somewhat to Bronwyn's surprise, Adaia had survived the Joining.

That was something to ponder. Cailan, the big, muscular, sword-wielding king of Ferelden, had failed the Joining, but a half-starved, illiterate little elf, with the most cursory of arms training, had succeeded. Adaia was Warden Adaia now, with a new Warden's tabard on her back and a new spring in her step. Whatever the Taint was seeking out, it was not mere size and strength; and it clearly cared nothing for class, or birth, or titles, or even species. Adaia would never be a melee fighter, but perhaps that was not necessary. In a large enough force of Wardens, there was need for support personnel as well as fighters. Adaia's bombs and poisons gave them an extra edge in battle, and she herself

was no coward; though Bronwyn preferred that she stay behind the fighters and move in on disabled enemies as opportunity permitted. The girl certainly enjoyed being able to loot and plunder at will, now that the darkspawn Taint was no longer a threat to her.

All that said, Bronwyn felt that as long as the Blight raged, she must remain Warden-Commander, even if she was... yes, she must make herself dare to think the words... even if she was crowned Queen.

Must she be? It certainly seemed so. She must marry Loghain, and the two of them must bear the weight of the crown together. *A Warden Queen?* Perhaps that was the kind of Queen a Blighted land needed most...

Did he have to be King?

Fergus spooned up more stew, eating dutifully in the close silence of his private chamber. It saddened him, but also gave him strength to feel the presence of his parents here. Bronwyn's letter lay to his right hand. He would read it again when he was done eating. There was much there to think about.

The King was dead. Bronwyn was polite about it, but it was clear that she thought Cailan had been foolish, and let the country down badly.

How could he argue with that? Between the outrageous plot to ally himself with Orlais — to marry the Empress! — and his poor treatment of his admirable Queen... between his palpable contempt for Loghain's general strategy

and his reckless conduct in putting himself in danger... between his disregard for Fereldan tradition and the feckless, heedless will he had left behind... well, Cailan had not done well by his family or his country. The will was an outrage, and had not even cited a preferred heir...

Things were bad. He had not yet made the public announcement about the King's death, because he had not decided what to do about it.

The Queen would be the interim ruler for the next three months, but Bronwyn had informed him about the Queen's condition. She had been slowly poisoned by that treacherous little bitch of a maid, under orders from Orlais. It was still a question whether Anora would ever fully recover. It made Fergus sick with anger to think of it. That brave, beautiful woman...

Fergus stabbed at his stew, outraged at the brazen viciousness of their old enemies. And there had been an attempt on Loghain as well. No one was safe, between the Orlesians and the bloody Crows...

"Dear brother," Bronwyn had written in their code. *"It comes to this: either you or I must take the Crown. If you feel that assuming the kingship is your duty, I shall support you in every way possible."*

"However, consider the alternative. If I wed Loghain, and we rule jointly, he will have the power of the throne to deal with the Blight. That I am a Warden I consider a lesser matter. I have the word of Wulffe and Bryland that it will be no bar to

me. The Blight must be vanquished, and I see little evidence of help coming to us from the rest of Thedas. The Orlesians are hoping for our destruction, and as to the rest — well, it is merely an exciting spectacle. The First Warden has not indicated his intention of sending aid. Instead, he has ordered me to leave Ferelden and put myself under the command of the Orlesian Warden-Commander at Montsimmard. As you may imagine, I have ignored his order, and scorn it for the wicked foolishness it is. Perhaps there is some political understanding between the Wardens and the Orlesians to allow Ferelden to be destroyed. I set myself against it: it shall not stand.

“The following is a Warden secret, so do not share this with anyone. The fact that I am a Warden may mean that my chances of producing an heir are compromised. Obviously, with the Blight raging, it would be madness for me to try to bear a child anyway. If I assume the throne, you are my heir. That will be declared outright, and Loghain must accept it as a condition...

Fergus sighed, admitting that this proposal was a relief to him. Painful as it was, he wanted to be in Highever, among his own people. He wanted to put his home right. He wanted to give due honor to his parents. Dealing with the Blight and dealing with all the contentious nobles in Ferelden was a prospect that turned his stomach. He had plenty of contentious nobles already, here in the North. Just as galling was the condescending message from the Revered Mother of Highever Chantry, full of advice about forgiveness and accepting the Will of the Maker. He

had rogue mercenaries to put down, and a good part of Highever to rebuild. He had Amaranthine to keep under watch. He had the coast to guard, for who knew what a foreign power might attempt, while Ferelden's army was engaged against the darkspawn?

In short, he did not want to leave. If he took the throne, what of Highever? If Bronwyn married Loghain, and Fergus were king, it would be very difficult to make the Landsmeet accept Bronwyn as Teyrna of Highever, when she would already be Teyrna of Gwaren. There would be tremendous pressure to appoint a new teyrn, and Highever would be lost to the Couslands. Fergus found the thought unbearable.

Let Bronwyn have her throne. And her hero.

How incalculable Fate was! All unexpected, both Father's dreams and Bronwyn's ardent wishes were likely to be achieved through the agency of Thedas' greatest menace. With the malice of the Archdemon ranged against her, Fergus hoped Bronwyn's prize would not prove a disappointment.

“My lord Teyrn!”

Fergus looked up and smiled at the man in the doorway. “Come in, Hawke! I was just thinking over my sister's letter. I'll have to make the announcement of the King's death today. In fact, come with me to the Chantry. I'll notify the Revered Mother, which should stop her pontificating about the 'expressed intent to claim Sanctuary.’”

Hawke laughed. “True. She'll be much too busy planning the memorial service for King Cailan to give more

thought to a few dead scoundrels."

Fergus was already striding out of the room, gesturing at Hawke to follow him. Useful man, this Hawke. Good company, too. He could see why Bronwyn thought well of him. Fergus needed all the good men he could get, and Hawke had no family ties in the North. His judgment would not be clouded by a desire for vengeance, which might make him a good choice to send to Amaranthine. He'd keep an eye on the man for the next few days and see.

He also had the letter from the Queen to think over. That poor woman. The next three months were likely to be a terrible trial for her, as she prepared to preside over the Landsmeet and hand over power. She must take care of herself.

What would Queen Anora do, when she was only Queen Dowager? Did Loghain plan to turn Gwaren over to her? That would be some consolation to her perhaps, though it would be a lonely life, isolated in the far south. It was scandalous that the King had not provided for her more honorably, though that was all of a piece with Cailan's general treatment of his queen. What could one say of a man who had such a treasure of a wife – beautiful, wise, virtuous – and did not prize her?

Could she be Queen?

Plots and schemes whirled in her mind. She grasped at political straws in her imagination and they slipped from her grasp. Anora had considered herself a resource-

ful woman, but she could think of no way to persuade the Landsmeet to give her supreme power for life. She had never felt more alone.

She found that she missed Jowan. Wynne was soothing and pleasant company, but there was something about the unspoken admiration and loyalty of a man that gave a certain zest to life.

Wynne was an amazing Healer, of course. Anora could feel the difference. It was only very late in the afternoon that the fatigue and nausea set in; only in the early morning that it was so very hard to leave her bed. Wynne could not cure her, but she could make Anora capable of ruling, for the shortening number of days left to her as Queen.

And what then? Rustication in Gwaren, to mediate charcoal burners' disputes? Oh, how that hurt! There was no much yet unachieved!

How could she persuade the Landsmeet to give her the crown? More to the point... who else was in contention?

Her father, of course. Anora was not deaf to the mutterings in the palace and in the capital. They were threatened, and many looked to the Hero of River Dane to deliver them. He had not a drop of royal blood, and the only noble relations of the MacTirs were a long extinct family of cousins who had held the bannorn of Long Grove.

Of course, if one thought about it properly... Calenhad the Great had not had any royal or noble blood when he made himself the first king of Ferelden...

Was that it? Was he planning to found a new dynasty, born from the terror of the darkspawn horde?

Anora pounded the arm of her chair, as things became clearer in her mind.

Of course! Of course! That was exactly what he was planning. And he was not going to do it alone. Bronwyn Cousland had sunk her claws into Father, and would use him to win a crown. With a Cousland as his Queen... the next in line to the throne... She should have foreseen it. Father needed Bronwyn's blood claim, and Bronwyn needed Father to help her escape the Grey Wardens.

Anora told herself that she was not angry. She could not hate Bronwyn. In fact, she liked her very much. Bronwyn had been loyal and kind to her. She was something in the nature of a friend, and Anora had had few enough of those in her life. Bronwyn had left Jowan with her, without whom Anora knew she would very likely be dead by now. She had treated her with perfect respect. Anora had to accept that Bronwyn was not doing what she was doing to spite Anora, but because she genuinely thought Anora had no claim to the throne. If there was no longer to be a queen in Ferelden, why should Bronwyn *not* seek the title?

Fair was fair. Was there any way to compete with Father and Bronwyn? The other claimant would be Bronwyn's brother. Teyrn Fergus, of course...

Fergus...

Her eyes strayed to the charming little music box he had

given her. What a fine, fine man... and how considerate. He had done wonders in the North with few resources. Fergus Cousland had the makings of an excellent king. He would need a queen, naturally, after the tragic loss of his wife and son. Teyrn Fergus Cousland and Queen Anora Mac Tir might be a match even for the Hero of River Dane and the Girl Warden. Even were Fergus not king, he needed a wife... a teyrna... someone to stand beside him and help him. Fergus Cousland was the only man in Ferelden whom Anora could marry without a great loss of prestige. He was not just the premier noble of Ferelden, but a comely, brave, and sensible man. He was considerate of the feelings of others. He was as different from Cailan as a man could be. She would marry him gladly. Wynne would stay with her and keep her healthy. And perhaps someday... Father would not live forever... Bronwyn's life was dangerous... not that she wished harm to either of them, but...

Anora walked to her dressing table and took a long look in the mirror. *Am I still pretty enough to win him?*

She pulled out a piece of parchment and was soon engrossed in her letter to Highever.

Keeper Lanaya arrived with her Dalish clansmen and received a formal welcome. After taking a look at the exquisite blonde elf woman, Loghain was somewhat relieved that Cailan was gone. He had made a fool of himself over Keeper Merrill: he probably would have wanted to *marry* Lanaya.

The Dalish at Ostagar greeted their fellow elves with great joy, listening in wonder to the tale of how Warden-Commander Bronwyn had saved the newcomers from a lethal curse. They had always thought well of the shemlen commander, but this was more proof of her good faith. There was a great celebration in the Dalish camp as the new landships were added to the great circle. Within was a pleasant fire, at which the Dalish leaders took counsel.

"Loghain and his young woman Bronwyn are not as other shemlens," Thanovir said. "I have known Loghain since we were young men together. He respects the elvhen, though without patronizing speeches. Bronwyn, too, has proved a good friend. There are whispers that they may soon rule in Ferelden. If that is so, perhaps we shall see new days for the Dalish."

"Bronwyn is honorable," Merrill agreed staunchly. "She will see that the young king's words are not forgotten." She explained to Lanaya, and to their hahren Sarel. "King Cailan – the nice young man who fell to the darkspawn – has promised land to the Dalish. It is written in his will and witnessed by his nobles. Land to the southwest of Ostagar, to be granted to the Dalish 'in perpetuity.' That means for always."

This announcement was met with wonder and excitement by some, and with skepticism by others.

Sarel pointed out, "The woman Andraste was a good and honorable friend of Thane Shartan. Those that came

after her, however, were no friends of the elvhen."

Maynriel steepled his fingers, thinking deeply. "Much of the trouble that led to the loss of the Dales," he said, "began with disputes stemming from the Blight of those days. The shemlens felt that the elves had abandoned them. That, as we know, was not the whole truth, but it was the truth as the shemlens knew it. We, however, are here: side by side with our shemlen and durgen'len allies. Some of the shemlens grieve over their king's death and some blame us for not defending them, but as Loghain has put down such mutterings, I do not fear them. If we are true, and stand with the other free peoples of Ferelden, I predict good of this alliance."

"What of the other shemlen nations?" Lanaya asked. "Will they not come to help?"

Thanovir smiled cynically. "They will not. For now, they watch and wait, perhaps hoping to gain something by their neighbor's ruin. I remember the war against the Orlesian shemlens well. They used elves most cruelly during their occupation. You do not want Orlesian chevaliers here in Ostagar, I assure you. Loghain told me that their Empress has forbidden the Grey Wardens of her country to come to fight, unless her army – chevaliers and all – is also permitted to cross the borders. He believes it is a mere ploy to seize control of what they regard as a lost province. I think he is very likely right."

Another elf spoke up: a young mage woman. "That is not

to say that all these shemlens are our friends. One of their nobles has sold city elves into slavery. Granted, Bronwyn's brother defeated him, and the man is dead, but the elves are still lost, gone to Tevinter. There was a great stir about it."

The newcomers were shocked at the revelations, and whispered among each other. Annoyed, Merrill said, her sweet voice sharp, "There was a great stir indeed, because the shemlens were horrified and ashamed that one of their number would commit so vile a deed. It is perhaps because of that wickedness that the young king wished to make reparation by way of granting elves their own land."

Sarel considered it. "It would be a great thing, if the elvhen had a home again – even if it were small, and a mere place for gathering and ceremony."

"One of the Wardens," said Merrill, "has even suggested that the poor city elves could build a village there. They are accustomed to living in one place, and it would be better for them to rule themselves than to live in the shemlen cities."

"Was that Danith?" asked Lanaya. "I know Danith. She is a fine elf. Or perhaps Tara? She is a powerful mage."

"Danith is a very fine elf," Merrill agreed, "and a splendid archer and a Warden beside, but it was not she. Nor was it Tara, who is also my friend. It was Warden Adaia, the newest Warden. She is a city elf of Denerim, but she was eager to learn the *Vir Tanadahl*. I am glad that the elvhen are so well represented among the Wardens. Bronwyn appointed Tara the commander of the Warden mages,

over shemlens, so I think that is also a proof of her respect for us. I think that some of us should talk to Bronwyn and find out what is planned about this land grant."

Maynriel, amused at the impatience of youth, shook his head. "Nothing will be done while we are fighting. We do not know which lands will be polluted by the darkspawn. Nor could we ask the poor flat ears to join us in the south now, while there is so much danger. This is hardly the time to found a city!"

A silence greeted his words, but not of anger or denial, but of wonder, as the idea began to sink in.

"A city of elves," breathed Lanaya. "A city of our own once more. Even if it were but the poorest village, what a joy it would be."

"We will do it right, this time," Merrill declared. "We shall hide it from the shemlen with magic. We shall keep it secret and safe. There we shall teach our ways. There we shall recover the wisdom lost to us."

She added, "But I still want to talk to Bronwyn about it. Just to remind her."

Jowan was welcomed back to Ostagar by his friends... and received nods from those who did not approve of him. He brought a thick epistle from the Queen to Loghain, a polite note of thanks to Bronwyn, and a long letter to Tara and Adaia from the Alienage, along with assorted parcels and messages.

Obviously, he must first find Teyrn Loghain, but on his

arrival, he was told that the Teyrn, the Dragonslayer Bronwyn, and some of the other Wardens were out on patrol. They were not expected back until the following morning. He went up to the Wardens' quarters and unpacked.

Things had happened in his absence. Everyone seemed dying to tell him the gossip. He could not miss Tara's changed sleeping arrangements.

"But is he kind to you, Tara?" he asked his friend anxiously, glancing over at the smirking Zevran across the room, who was busily honing his dagger. Jowan remembered Lily with a quick, urgent pang. He had loved the girl – or thought he loved her – but it had been a terrible, nearly fatal mistake. "He's not a mage. He doesn't understand us."

Tara gave him a hug. "He understands about being a prisoner. He understands about having no choices. He's good for me. He doesn't try to pressure me into anything. He's incredibly handsome. And he's a fellow elf. I'm sort of rediscovering my elvishness."

"Good luck with that," Jowan said doubtfully. He glanced at the letter from the headman of the Alienage in his friend's hands. In Jowan's opinion, being an elf in Thedas was simply not a good thing at all. He saw no advantage to Tara in identifying herself with elves and their sufferings. Tara and he were better off with the Wardens. Mages and elves were equal to everyone else in this fellowship – at least under a leader like Bronwyn. They had decent quarters here in Ostagar and luxurious digs in Denerim. They had purpose and an oppor-

tunity to use their gifts. They had respect.

He leaned over and whispered, "If he lets you down, I'll freeze his balls off!"

Tara laughed. "You'll be right behind me!"

Adaia was hovering, wild for Tara to read Valendrian's letter to her. Jowan moved on to give Carver the messages from his family.

"You stopped to see them in Lothing?" the young man asked, surprised. "That was very decent of you!"

"You have a wonderful family," Jowan said sincerely. He had admired the gentle, gifted Bethany very much. Personally, he thought she should join the Wardens, too. "Adam was fine when I saw him off on his way north. He sends his best to you. I think the Queen must have given him a pretty good reward, because he bought presents for your family in Lothing, and I delivered them on my way through with the supply train. Here are the notes from your mother and sister. And here," he said, pulling out a parcel from his scattered baggage, "are some treats from your cousin. She stayed up all night baking so I could bring them to you."

Carver sniffed at the parcel.

"Fruitcake!"

He tore off the wrapping, thumped the liquor-drenched delicacy on the big table, and cut himself a big, fragrant slab with his dagger.

"Anybody who wants some fruitcake better get some soon, or I'll eat it all!"

There was a sniff from the window, and anxious murmurs. Carver looked up and realized that Adaia's letter from the Alienage could be nothing good. He lowered his voice.

"Uh... guys? There's cake..." He took himself off, deciding to read his letters outside.

Alistair passed through the outer room, talking with Cullen, when he, too, saw the group of elves, a tearful Adaia in the middle. There was no kind way to pretend ignorance.

The two men walked over. Alistair said, "The news is bad, I guess. I'm sorry."

Adaia wiped at her nose with the back of her hand. "Could be worse, I suppose," her voice even thicker than usual. "We've lost more than half the Alienage. More like two-thirds, the hahren said, and the only people Teyrn Fergus could save were the old ones that the slavers didn't want, and the sickly, and Maia and Kirri's little baby. The hahren says that Teyrn Fergus sent them home in a wagon, and gave a goat — outright gave a *goat!* — to Gammer Deranni so the baby would have milk. The only other good thing," she said bitterly, "is that there's plenty of housing in the Alienage now, and the slumlords had to lower their rents!"

Jowan reported to his superiors as soon as the patrol returned to camp the next morning. Everyone was dirty and tired, but it appeared to have gone well. Bronwyn saw Jowan waiting outside the Tower of Ishal, and pointed him out to Loghain. Scout recognized the pack member, and

granted him a brisk wag of his stubby tail.

"Look!" Bronwyn exclaimed. "Jowan's back! Good day to you, Jowan! You look well."

"Commander... Teyrn Loghain..." Jowan muttered, preferring to look at his friendly and attractive commander rather than the fearsome general. "I bring new weapons from Master Wade and letters from Denerim."

The teyrn gave him a suspicious glance, but took the proffered letter at once.

"Come to my quarters, Warden," he ordered. "I'll want your impressions of the Queen and Denerim. The weapons we will see demonstrated later."

That should have made him thoroughly nervous, but Bronwyn gave him a wink, and he smiled back weakly. And after all, what did he have to fear? The Queen approved of him, and he had done his best for her.

She must have said as much in her letter, too, for Loghain, after reading through the letter, sat for a moment in thought, and then said, "I thank you for your good service to my daughter, Warden."

"It was my honor, my lord. I am proud to serve the Queen in any way."

That earned more approval from Bronwyn. She glanced quickly at Loghain and then gave Jowan a small nod.

Loghain went on, "She is impressed by the abilities of Senior Enchanter Wynne, but I gather that a cure is not likely. You must have conferred with the woman. What is her honest opinion?"

Jowan hated giving people bad news, but there was no escape. "No, my lord. I am very sorry, but there is no cure. The damage is done. A powerful Healer like Wynne can ameliorate the symptoms and restore the Queen's energy, but she cannot undo the essential harm. With regular care, the Queen can expect a fairly normal life..."

"But not a long one," Loghain said, the words bitter on his tongue.

"With Wynne there, she may live much longer than I could manage..." Jowan admitted. He hated the truth of what he must say. The Queen deserved so much better... "But it is unlikely the Queen will grow old."

Loghain got up and paced to the window, looking out at the hills to the south. "And without magical Healing?"

Jowan hesitated, and looked to Bronwyn to support. He said quietly, "She could not live more than a month or two."

"But she *does* have Wynne," Bronwyn pointed out. "We shall see to it that she continues to have the best care Ferelden can afford."

Loghain blew out a long breath and turned briskly to Jowan. "You have done well, Warden. I am grateful to you, and I trust in your continued discretion."

"Always, my lord."

"Find the Glavonaks, Jowan," Bronwyn told him. "Have the weapons ready for a demonstration by mid-afternoon."

After he was dismissed, Loghain turned to Bronwyn.

"There is more to the fellow than I saw in him at first."

He brought himself up short, remembering that Bronwyn did not know of his first dealings with Jowan — of the underhanded poisoning of Eamon Guerrin. Loghain felt a brief superstitious dread, wondering if Anora's fate might be some sort of divine judgment. He put the thought aside, and saw that he need not have worried. Bronwyn thought he meant Jowan's first, uncertain days as a Warden.

"He's grown into his duties a great deal. Conscripting him turned out well."

"Anora cannot continue as Queen beyond the Landsmeet," he declared, his voice harsh. "I would fight for it were it the right thing to do, but her health is too questionable. There is only one thing to do, and you know we must do it."

Bronwyn was silent, her eyes searching his face. In the morning light, he looked haggard and hard-edged; a far cry from the cheerful springtime king who had ruled Ferelden days before. And what was she? A vulture, swooping in to seize the crown from a woman who had been used cruelly and treacherously. If this was victory, it tasted of ashes.

She said, "I must know Fergus' mind in this. I cannot set myself against him. And there is another thing I must do to clear my way before I can be Queen with honor."

Briefly, she informed him where she would be journeying, and why. The Ashes of Andraste were Anora's only hope for life, and Bronwyn's only chance to salve her conscience.

Bronwyn was excited about the new dragon spears. They



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were reluctant to kill a valuable ox to show some of the new features, but the demonstration was still effective. The heads were razor sharp and of the hardest forged silverite, runed for penetration. The shafts were unbreakable by any tests Wade had been able to conduct on them. They were light enough to be thrown. Included was yet another prototype, spring-loaded. When the head was jammed with sufficient impact against a target, the spring was released, and the head on the telescoping shaft shot forward with great force. On an ox carcass, the head penetrated another two feet – in fact, entirely through the ox's carcass.

"I saw it done," Jowan told them. "It was impressive. You can fill the spear heads with poison or explosives. I've also done a lot of reading about dragon-hunting. I think the Nevarrans wanted to keep their secrets, but some of it slipped out. They worked in large teams and used traps quite a bit –"

"What kind of traps?" Loghain asked instantly, his eyes drinking in the new weapons greedily.

"Pit traps, mostly," Jowan said. "If they were just narrow enough, the dragon couldn't unfurl its wings to fly out. They also baited ambushes and used nets on the smaller specimens. Spider silk nets, I believe. for the big ones, they still used bait to lure them in. Dragons like blood, certain types more than others..."

"Well?" Bronwyn asked, seeing the man blush.

"They're very excited by..." Jowan grimaced "...er, menstrual blood. It's the prospect of maybe getting a virgin sacrifice, I think..."



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either elf or human will do. They smell it and they'll attack."

"Jowan..." Bronwyn tried not to laugh. "Are you implying that the Archdemon is likely to be influenced into attacking me based on my time of the month?"

Loghain was staring at him, eyes icy chips of doom.

Jowan gurgled weakly. "Er... yes... maybe. Not sure about the Archdemon. Other dragons... probably. The Nevarrans always brought a girl along on their hunts, and the songs have a lot of references to the moon..."

"They didn't feed those girls to the dragons, did they?" Bronwyn asked, eyes wide.

"No... not intentionally... but sometimes things went wrong..."

He had lots more lore to share, and gained a bit more courage as they listened. He was a good researcher, and always had been. He had uncovered many secrets in the libraries of Denerim.

Loghain was nodding, taking in the information, but still focused on the weapons.

"We'll find an ogre carcass," he muttered. "And you and your Wardens can try the springloaded spear..."

"I may have to leave that you," Bronwyn said quietly. "Don't forget that I plan to leave tomorrow."

Loghain grunted irritably, not pleased at the reminder.



Merrill stopped her on the way to the Tower of Ishal, wanting to discuss the future of the Dalish land grant. Bronwyn told her that she was going on a long patrol the

following day, but she also knew she could not simply brush off the Keeper. Cailan had pledged the honor of the Crown, and if everything went as she and Loghain planned, it would be left to them to fulfill Cailan's promises, one way or another.

"I know the King promised land to the west, but we're not sure what shape it's in." She thought about it. "Our patrol is going westward tomorrow, and perhaps we'll know more after that. Personally, I wondered if a grant in the Breciliiian Forest, encompassing that amazing elven temple, might not be better. Perhaps you should talk more to Danith about that building and its significance to the elves... I promise to think more on the matter, but I must speak to my Wardens right now..."

They were no better pleased than Loghain with her plans. Nearly all of them were there, cleaning up, preparing for the evening meal. She made her announcement, and Alistair's jaw dropped.

"You want to go where?"

"It will not take all that long," Bronwyn said impatiently. She took a deep breath, looking at the faces of her companions: faces doubtful and concerned, or curious and eager, or outright disapproving.

Sten was of the latter group. "I do not see," he rumbled, "what searching for an ancient shrine has to do with your mission against the Blight."

Bronwyn was prepared for that. "We cannot pursue our

mission if the country falls apart. The Queen must rule until the Landsmeet. If her health fails, we'll have nobles kicking her aside and taking the interim rule into their own hands, because that would give them an advantage in claiming the throne." She saw the Qunari was not convinced, and added, "And it is a matter of my personal honor. I cannot simply allow her to die, when I have had word of a possible cure. She is still the Queen of Ferelden, and it is my duty to serve her."

Leliana moved to Bronwyn's side, blue eyes afire with the glory of it. "To seek out the actual resting place of the Prophet! I shall go with you, no matter how great the danger. Such a place would bring comfort to all the world!"

"It's true," Cullen said, his voice soft. "I'll go with you, Bronwyn. We must save the Queen. And it would be an act of worship to reveal the shrine of Andraste to the faithful."

Morrigan glanced at Anders, and he back at her. The witch spoke up, exasperated. "I have never heard such rubbish! You wish to follow the long-cold trail of that credulous dreamer Genetivi, who is undoubtedly by now only a pile of rotting bones! All he had was a map — "

"— a map of dubious provenance," added Anders. "Besides which, the map only shows a village where you might hear about the shrine. It isn't even a map to the shrine itself!"

"If it is a false lead," Bronwyn allowed, "I shall return immediately. Look," she went on, her voice urgent, "I'll only be gone a few weeks at most. We can give out that

there were rumors of darkspawn in the Frostbacks, and that I'm going to check them out."

"No!" Leliana broke in. "We mustn't let anyone know where we are actually going. Let us say that we are simply going west."

The dwarves muttered among themselves, very uneasy about the adventure's prospects.

Brosca, happily devouring a whole roasted rabbit, swallowed a bite, and then spoke up. "Boss, I'm with you whatever you decide. You *know* that. It's just... are you sure you want to go wandering off into the mountains right now?"

"You know," Astrid agreed, "that you might really come across darkspawn. Then what would you do, with such a small party? I also thought, that with the Fereldan succession unsettled, you would need to be close at hand..."

Oghren looked up from a tankard, and squinted at her. "Does Loghain know about this? What does *he* say?"

Should she tell them about her planned marriage? Should she tell them that she intended to be Queen? Bronwyn paused, her heart sinking at the prospect, and then she prevaricated. "Obviously, Teyrn Loghain is concerned for his daughter. As to the succession, I have already let the nobles know my views about it. A few weeks will not change things. If I am to go, however, I must go immediately, and get back before the Landsmeet."

Jowan was ready to volunteer, the words on his lips, when his eyes met Cullen's. The former Templar glared at him, and Jowan imagined an extended camping trip, and

meeting that glare over the campfire every night...

And Tara had already stepped up. "I'll go. You need a mage. We're a good team."

"And if either of the ladies whom I serve wishes to take a restful holiday in the mountains," smirked Zevran, "then I must go too, if only to keep them out of trouble."

Leliana, Cullen, Tara, Zevran. With Scout it was quite enough. Bronwyn took heart at their support.

"Thank you. You four will come with me. Alistair, you're in charge while I'm gone. Anders, you're acting Senior Mage."

"My dream comes true at last," Anders snarked. Tara thumped him on the head. "Ow!"

Bronwyn swept crumbs from the table and pulled out her map. Unrolling it, she showed them her proposed route. There was pushing and shoving as everyone crowded around to see.

"We are leaving at first light. Here we are at Ostagar," said Bronwyn, her finger on the tiny painted castle. "I plan to travel to Redcliffe along the hunters' trails... like so."

"That's the way they went when the King relieved Redcliffe," Alistair said, nodding. "Loghain showed me. It's still probably pretty clear."

"At Redcliffe," Bronwyn said, tracing a voyage across a painted lake. "I hope to find a boat that will take our party to the mouth of the River Sulcher. It is not far through the secret pass Genetvi marked to the village of —" her fingernail tapped on a scribbled 'X' — "Haven. That is our goal."

"Haven," murmured Leliana. "Such a pretty name."

Adaia's croaking voice was raised, the greatest contrast possible to Leliana's. "If you're leaving, maybe we'd better have a story tonight. Otherwise we won't have one for weeks!"

Bronwyn was pleased with her. A good idea to distract people from their discontent about her plans. "Yes, let's all fill our cups and have a story. Jowan, it's your turn."

"My turn!" the mage gasped. "But..."

Danith shook her head, smirking. "I was called upon by the King himself, while you were idling in the fleshpots of Denerim!"

Jowan ran his hand through his black hair, trying to come up with an idea. The only stories he could remember at the moment were gruesome tales of dragon hunting; or the story associated with a little trinket belonging to Queen Anora... something he saw every day at the Palace...

"All right," he said, and tried to remember his favorite version. "I've got a story. Queen Anora has a music box that plays an old tune. I can't sing to save my life, but I can tell the story in words."



JOWAN'S TALE OF THE PRINCESS ON THE GLASS HILL

There was once, in a land far away, a great hill of glittering glass. At the top of the hill stood a castle made of pure gold, and in front of the castle there grew an enchanted tree on which there were golden apples.

Anyone who picked an apple gained admittance into the golden castle, and there in a silver room sat a princess of surpassing fairness and beauty. Locked in the castle, she had been awaiting a lover for a long, long, time. She was as rich as she was beautiful, for the cellars of the castle were full of precious stones, and great chests of the finest gold stood round the walls of all the rooms. Whoever could climb the glass hill would win the hand of the princess in marriage and half the kingdom besides.

Many knights had come from afar to try their luck, but none had succeeded. In spite of having their horses shod with sharp nails, no one managed to get more than half-way up, and then they all fell back right down to the bottom of the steep slippery hill. Many were maimed. Many more had died in the attempt. A heap of corpses, both of riders and horses, lay round the foot of the hill, and carrion crows had picked their bones clean.

The beautiful princess sat at her window and watched the bold knights trying to reach her on their splendid horses. The sight of her always gave men fresh courage, and they flocked from all over Thedas to attempt the work of rescuing her. But all had failed, and for seven years the Princess had sat and waited for someone to scale the Glass Hill.

One knight, cleverer than the rest, came to take up the challenge. He had heard of the beautiful Princess who sat in the golden castle at the top of the Glass Mountain. He listened to all he heard, and determined that he too would try his luck.

He came, and saw that many had died in vain, leaving their bones to rattle in their rusted armor like dried peas in a pod. He

did not spur his horse up the hill straightaway, but instead walked all the way around it, looking and thinking. He stepped onto the side of the hill, and his foot could find no purchase on the slippery surface. The princess saw him, far below, and was disappointed when he rode away.

"He did not look like a coward," she sighed.

However, the knight had not given up the attempt. Instead, he rode to the closest village and spoke to a blacksmith.

Now the knight was poor, and had only his horse, his armor, and his sword. He was fond of his horse, and needed his sword if any enemy were to attack, and so he traded his knightly armor for iron claws that could be strapped to his hands and feet. With these, he rode back to his camp.

The next morning, he arrayed himself for the challenge. Leaving his horse tied below, he boldly started up the Glass Hill.

It was much harder than he had expected. The claws worked well enough, but only with great effort. Shards of glass broke off every time he dug in the claws. Some of the bits flew back and cut his face, and others became enmeshed in the claws themselves, tearing at his fingers and working their way into his boots.

All day he climbed, one hand after the other; one foot after the other. He could hardly draw breath he was so worn out, and his mouth was parched by thirst. The sun blazed hotly, and the light reflecting off the glass was so bright it hurt his eyes. He dared not move a hand to his water flask, for fear of falling to his death. He could not see the castle of gold above him, nor the pit under his feet. All there was in the world was the Glass Hill.

Evening closed in, and he was only halfway up. Exhausted, he sagged against the claw straps, but the claws, stuck in deeply, supported his weight. The stars came out and were reflected in the glass like tiny jewels. The knight awaited death calmly, and fell into a peaceful slumber. He slept thus all night long, suspended between life and death.

Just before dawn, a huge black cloud gathered over the hill. Thunder rolled, and lightning split the sky. Rain poured down in a torrent, and the knight awoke, gratefully drinking in the blessed water. The storm passed, and the knight took new courage and strength, and resumed his climb.

The hill was no more merciful to him than it had been the day before. Soon the wounds on his face and hands and feet reopened and bled freely, the blood trickling down the hard glass, coloring it like a great ruby. On the knight went, slower and slower, panting and in pain.

The princess had awakened and looked out from the tower. To her amazement, she saw the knight clinging to the Glass Hill only a short distance from the summit! With horror, she saw the blood running from his wounds, and she feared that he would perish before his reached his goal.

"Ser Knight!" she called out. "Ser Knight! You are almost to the enchanted tree! I cannot come to you, but if you take a bite of one of the golden apples, you will be healed and can enter the castle!"

Nearly dead of exhaustion and loss of blood, the knight heard her as through deep water. He struggled to move a hand, a foot; moving with painful slowness, inch by inch. He was at the

summit now, crawling along, digging in the claws, for the hill was still slippery, even at the top. He reached the tree's trunk, and stopped, too weak to rise.

Terrified that her rescuer would die right then and there, the Princess hurled her silver cup at the tree with all her strength. An apple fell from a bough and rolled to the knight

The knight looked up and saw the glittering palace, lit by the early morning light. He saw the high window, and framed in it the Princess, her beautiful face full of hope and fear. He saw the apple, a hands-breadth away. With a great effort, he pulled his right hand claw from the glass and reached for the apple, catching it on the claw's sharp points.

Never was fruit sweeter or more juicy; never was food more welcome. The knight ate the apple and was restored. He got carefully to his feet and removed his iron claws, one by one. Then he plucked two apples, one in each hand, and approached the gate of the castle.

As he stepped onto the path leading to the gate, a great dragon flew down and roared, but the knight knew what he must do. He threw an apple at the dragon, and the beast vanished in a puff of cloud.

Instantly the gate opened before him, and the knight perceived a courtyard full of flowers and beautiful trees, and standing, her arms out, the beautiful princess.

"Have you come at last, my rescuer? All that I have is yours!"

The knight drew his dagger, and divided the golden apple in two parts. When the princess and knight ate the apple, their hearts were filled with love for each other.

"Let us leave this place!" cried the princess. "I wish to go out into the world with you and share your fortunes."

Now that the gate was open, nothing prevented her escape. Together, the princess and the knight knotted a long rope together. They gathered the treasures of the castle and let them down, down the Glass Hill to the ground. Then they climbed down together, and the princess and the knight rejoiced to feel the good earth and grass beneath their feet once more.

The horse awaited them, and together they rode to the palace of the king, that the knight might claim the promised reward: the hand of the princess and half the kingdom. Together they ruled wisely and well, and they lived happily to the end of their days.

"It's nice that the princess helped him," Adaia said. "I like that part best. I don't like stories where the princess sits around waiting to be saved. In real life, nobody ever comes to save you. Except for Teyrn Fergus," she amended, remembering that night. "He saves people."

"Bronwyn saved me!" Tara declared. "She saved Anders, too."

"She saved me!" Brosca declared, waving at Bronwyn. "But I agree about princesses. They ought to do something to save themselves."

"They certainly should," agreed Astrid.

Brosca laughed. "Knocked a apple off the tree with her drinking cup! Hey, Oghren! I challenge you! I bet I can knock more apples down than you!"

The red-hair dwarf chuckled, fingering his axe. "I'd win,

Cutie! I'd cut down the whole sodding tree!"

Carver grunted, "I wish we could kill dragons by throwing apples at them!"

"We can throw bombs," Adaia shot back bravely. "They look sort of like apples..."

"It is a charming story," Leliana said. "You say there's a song, Jowan?"

Tara said hastily, "You don't want Jowan to sing. Really. Or me. I can tell you the song, but maybe somewhere private. When we're in the mountains and nobody can hear us."

Leliana laughed. "I shall hold you to that!"

"A curious way to choose a ruler," mused Sten, "but I suppose that resourcefulness and perseverance are not without value. Those, and the ability to endure pain."

"I'm just glad they didn't forget to take the treasure with them," Carver said. Adaia nodded back at him, very seriously.

The council broke up in general talk and drinking. Brosca lurked by the fire, casting hungry looks at the oblivious Cullen. Astrid whispered to her, and then punched her lightly on the shoulder. Brosca nodded, and swaggered over to the ex-Templar.

"Cullen..." She cleared her throat. "I need to talk to you!" She glared at the faint smiles on too many of her companion's faces. "*Privately.*"

"All right," said the mystified Cullen, following her out the door.

Alistair laughed, and then turned to Bronwyn, the

smile on his handsome face fading. "I need to talk to you, too. And privately."

"Fine," Bronwyn agreed. "And I can tell you more about Master Wade's experiments. We have only the sample weapons, but he'll make more if we approve of them."

"Let's go outside."

They walked down the stairs, through the Great Hall, past the bustling servants putting dinner on the table. Bronwyn chatted about springloaded spears while Alistair nodded dutifully. No sooner had they stepped out of doors than he pulled her over to a low wall.

"You're going to Redcliffe."

"Yes, we're going to Redcliffe. Would you like me to take Arl Teagan a letter? I know you're fond of him."

He looked at her blankly for a moment, and then sputtered. "A letter? Wait. Yeah. I suppose I should write him a letter. I know he's probably having a hard time... Sure. I'll write him a letter. And I suppose I should write some things about myself."

She bit back a smile. "That does make for a better letter."

He managed a self-deprecating laugh. "I've never really had reason to write letters. There was nobody... well, actually, that's not what I wanted to talk about. It's the whole succession thing."

Bronwyn looked at him in astonishment. Was he going to say what she thought he was going to say?

"I mean," he blundered on. "I'm Maric's son and all that,

but nobody's going to try to make me be king, are they? Are they?" He saw her face and was genuinely alarmed. "Or are they?"

"Do you *want* to be king?" she asked.

"Maker, no!" he nearly shouted. He saw people looking their way, and lowered his voice. "I'd hate it! Loghain isn't thinking about putting me forward at the Landsmeet, is he?"

"Loghain," Bronwyn answered carefully, "got the impression from you that you did not *want* to be king. That is why he has not pressed you on the matter. He thinks you're doing a splendid job as a Warden. It seems to be what you prefer. If you don't want to be king, no one will force you."

He sagged against the rough stones with relief. "Thank the Maker! And when you see Teagan, don't let him talk you into making me king, either!"

They had discussed Alistair, of course. Loghain did like him, and thought that with more training, Alistair would be an excellent Warden-Commander. That was a position of responsibility worthy of a son of Maric. It would give the lad the public notice and respect he deserved. Loghain had also, in more veiled terms, broached the idea of giving Alistair the teyrnir of Gwaren, if something too terrible to speak of plainly were to happen to Anora. Bronwyn decided not to mention that. She would prefer that Anora live, and that her own conscience be clear.

Alistair had moved on to his next thought. "So who is Loghain going to propose as king? Fergus?"

"I'm waiting to hear from Fergus," she said honestly. "I don't know if he wants to be king, either. There is so much to do in Highever, and he loves the teyrnir. Fergus certainly never planned on being king."

"Then *who*?" he pressed. "You don't think... Anora? But she's not well enough is she? Or is that why you're trying to find the Ashes for her?"

"No, Loghain isn't thinking of proposing Anora, either, though of course he wants her to live. Look here, Alistair, it all may be coming out soon, and I want you to think it over. Don't talk about it to anyone, all right?"

His face was already changing, as he leaped to the next possible conclusion.

"*Loghain?* He's going for the crown? Wow... I mean... *Really?* He's not a descendant of Calenhad, you know. People won't like that."

"No, he's not a descendant of Calenhad," Bronwyn agreed. "But I am."



CHAPTER 4

ARL TEAGAN
OF REDCLIFFE

RONWYN FOUND IT A RELIEF TO BE RIDING THROUGH THE HINTERLANDS, FAR FROM OSTAGAR. If nothing else, her

mission to the Frostbacks would give her time to clear her head.

Alistair was deeply scandalized by her political scheming. Her good friend was not a schemer himself, and had swallowed his Grey Warden indoctrination in its entirety—even the most absurd, unpalatable bits.

“But you can’t be Queen! Grey Wardens can’t hold titles!” he burst out, looking in her eyes as if trying to make her understand. *“We renounce everything about our former lives when we Join.”*

“Alistair,” she replied, *“what exactly has the order done for us since Ostagar? Have they come to help? We know that the Orlesians are playing games with us, but where are the Marcher Wardens? The Nevarran Wardens? The Anti-van Wardens? Only two Wardens have attempted to help us: Riordan and your mother Fiona; and they had to do it in secrecy and stealth.”* She took a breath and then came out

with it. *“When I was at the compound, I found a letter waiting for me. It was from the First Warden.”*

Alistair straightened, waiting intently.

Bronwyn thought about it, looked away, and then decided simply to tell him the truth. *“It was an order for you and me to leave Ferelden and go to Montsimmard, putting ourselves under the command of the Orlesian Warden-Commander. The First Warden obviously did not know that we had been able to recruit.”*

“And then do what?” Alistair asked, brown eyes warm and innocent. *Could he really not see?*

“And then watch Ferelden die!” she bit out angrily. *“I burned the letter. I am not deserting my country. I am going to do everything in my power to save it, in spite of Orlesians and assassins and an ancient order with a secret agenda they do not care to share with me.”*

“But being Queen — ” He shook his head, trying to understand. *“What about your brother?”*

“I don’t know,” she admitted. *“I’ve written to Fergus. If he feels that he should be King, I will support him. I don’t think that’s what he wants, though. If he really doesn’t want the crown, I don’t see that I have any choice. I will marry Loghain, and we will rule jointly. I’ll stay with the Wardens, of course, because the one thing this country needs is to defeat the Blight. If we can do that... ”* she tried to imagine something beyond briefly, but failed.

“...if we can do that,” she finally said, *“I will have been*

Queen long enough.”

“What if you can’t... you know... have a baby?”

“Then Fergus will inherit!” she said impatiently. “I’m hardly in any position to have a child anyway, with an Archdemon to fight. Alistair, I didn’t ask for Duncan to conscript me. He took advantage of a dying man and made a bargain I had no part in. I don’t know what he had in mind. He isn’t here to speak for himself. I have to do the best I can, and what we must do is save Ferelden, whatever it takes.”

Whatever it takes.

They were moving fast along the old trails. Bronwyn had a copy of Loghain’s map. A few months had not erased the tracks of hundreds of men marching to Redcliffe.

While her party was strong, she had felt some misgivings, considering Cullen’s attraction to Tara, which the girl had manifestly rejected by her relationship with Zevran. Cullen was behaving well, though he clearly despised the Antivan assassin. Bronwyn knew he would have despised the elf anyway, but she thought Cullen was disciplined enough to work with someone he disliked. He must have had to do that often enough, when he was a Templar.

And he and Leliana, being very devout, were quite excited about the expedition for its own sake. They spent some time talking about it by the fire in soft voices. Bronwyn caught phrases from the Chant of Light exchanged. She was not a particularly pious person herself, but if it comforted those two, then she saw no harm in it. Zevran

seemed to be a believer, in his own odd way. Tara, she knew, had reservations – unsurprising in someone forced to listen to endless sermons about her own corruption.

Bronwyn found the prosings of old priests tiresome, but Andraste herself was worth revering. A great leader... a great woman... a beacon of freedom and one who upheld the dignity of all races. It had always struck her as very odd that the center of the Chantry was in Orlais, when Andraste herself had been from the lands that would later become Ferelden. Orlais, in fact, had no part in Andraste’s story at all. And Orlais, she thought sourly, with its chevaliers and their privileges, was hardly an exemplar of the kind of freedom Andraste had fought for.

She had certainly lived – a real, living woman. Having been real, she must have real remains. It was not impossible that her faithful disciples would have guarded her remains and placed them in an appropriate shrine. The real questions were: what would that be? Was it still there? How to identify it?

At their next camp, she took out Brother Genetivi’s cryptic notes, and tried once again to make sense of them. The good brother certainly had not made it easy for her. Some of the notes were in a curious shorthand that was as impenetrable as code. Some of the maps were not to scale.

Zevran was on watch. Leliana plumped down beside Bronwyn, sorting through the confusion of notebooks, scrolls, and codices.



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"So this is what you found in his house?"

"Yes," Bronwyn laughed ruefully. "And it was as chaotic as you see here. Tara and I took everything, since we did not know what was important and what was not."

Cullen squatted down beside her and frowned at the title of a book.

"FLAME AND SCALE: THE SECRETS OF DRAGON CULTS," he read. "What does that have to do with Andraste?"

"No idea," Tara admitted. "But it was there, and full of book-marks... see... we left them in. He might have been studying something else at the same time, I suppose. I've been known to read more than one book at the same time, switching off between the two... but I don't think that's the case here. It was important for some reason. He was really obsessed."

"And who was that young imposter you fought?" Leliana wondered. "How does he fit in to the story? Was he an agent of another country? Did he have an accent?"

Bronwyn shook her head. "He sounded completely Fereldan to me. It was clear that he was there to collect Genitivi's papers and make sure no one else ever saw them. As he did make a point of piling that Dragon Cult book in with the notebooks and the rest, I have to assume it was important to him."

She took the book, and read aloud:

"CHAPTER TEN: ON THE WORSHIP OF DRAGONS..."

"Ugh!" Leliana made a face, disgusted. "What wicked heresy!"

Bronwyn smiled at her, and kept reading. "Let us sug-



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gest, for the moment, that a high dragon is simply an animal. A cunning animal, to be sure, but in possession of no true self-awareness or sentience. There has not, after all, been a single recorded case of a dragon attempting to communicate or performing any act that could not likewise be attributed to a clever beast."

Cullen broke in. "There's something in that. Remember Flemeth? When she transformed, she didn't fight with anything I would call cunning."

"Morrigan says that when she's in animal form, it's hard to think like a human," Tara agreed. "She has to really concentrate. Maybe just holding the dragon form took so much concentration, Flemeth couldn't think about being clever."

"But we're talking about real dragons," Cullen said, shaking his head. "Not mage's tricks. You saw a dragon when you were among the Dalish. Did it seem like anything more than a beast to you?"

Bronwyn thought about it. "No. A powerful beast, but only that."

"Read on," Leliana urged her, interested.

Bronwyn read, "How, then, does one explain the existence of so-called 'dragon cults' throughout history? It might be explained in light of the reverence of the Old Gods in the ancient Tevinter Imperium. In the wake of the first Blight, many desperate imperial citizens turned to the worship of real dragons to replace the Old Gods who had failed them. A dragon, after all, was a god-figure that they could see: It was there, as real as

the archdemon itself, and, as evidence makes clear, did offer a degree of protection to its cultists."

Overhearing them, Zevran said, "Animals are wiser than people credit, sometimes. Our friend Scout here," he waved his hand at the dozing dog, who awakened briefly and wagged his tail. "Yes, our friend Scout understands human language and can follow commands. He even expresses displeasure and disagreement. Perhaps your Chantry scholars do not know much about beasts, to lump them all together as beings without cunning or understanding."

"That's an extremely good point," Bronwyn said slowly, thinking it over. Scout was a sentient being, in her opinion, whatever this Chantry brother thought of beasts. "Scout certainly communicates in his own way. It's said that the Tevinter mages first bred the mabaris for intelligence and cunning as well as strength, and set them on the Alamarri tribes. But the mabaris hated the cruel Tevinters. They defected to the tribesfolk, and have been our friends ever since." She reached down with her free hand to scratch Scout's twitching ear. He uttered a doggy snore. Bronwyn took up the book again.

"Other dragon cults could be explained in light of the first. Some cult members might have survived and spread the word. The worship of the Old Gods was as widespread as the Imperium itself—certainly such secrets could have made their way into many hands. But there have been reports of dragon cults even in places where the Imperium never ruled, among folks

who had never heard of the Old Gods or had any reason to. How does one explain them?"

"Dragons are impressive," said Tara. "And if they can be trained to protect people, it's not surprising that the people would care for them. So is it actual worship, or a kind of symbiotic relationship?"

Cullen frowned briefly, and opened his mouth to speak. Thinking again, he was silent. It was a very intriguing possibility.

Bronwyn read, "*Members of a dragon cult live in the same lair as a high dragon, nurturing and protecting its defenseless young. In exchange, the high dragon permits those cultists to kill a small number of those young in order to feast on draconic blood. That blood is said to have a number of strange long-term effects, including bestowing greater strength and endurance, as well as an increased desire to kill. It may breed insanity as well. Nevarran dragon-hunters have said these cultists are incredibly powerful opponents. The changes in the cultists are a form of blood magic, surely, but how did the relationship between the cult and the high dragon form in the first place? How did the cultists know to drink the dragon's blood? How did the high dragon convince them to care for its young, or know that they would?"*

"Drinking dragon's blood?" Tara said eagerly. "But that's like—"

Leliana pinched her hard on the upper arm. Cullen gave Tara an exasperated look and jerked his toward Zevran, who was not a Grey Warden. Tara blushed, rubbing her arm.

"Sorry," she muttered. Zevran watched the exchange, his brows nearly rising to the top of his head.

Leliana repressed her smile, and said, "The legions of Tevinter were the most powerful armies in the world, yes? Perhaps the magister who commanded them used such magic. Then, when the dragons seem to become extinct, those legions no longer had access to dragon's blood."

"Thank the Maker they don't anymore!" Cullen agreed fervently. He caught Bronwyn's eye, sensing that they were thinking the same thing. The first Grey Wardens might have known this sinister lore. It might have given them the idea for the Joining formula...

Tara said, "Anyway, you see what I mean about a symbiotic relationship. Just because they live with a dragon, that doesn't mean the cultists really think it's a god. It protects them, and they care for the offspring and use some of them for a kind of blood magic. They might not even have to kill the dragonlings."

Zevran asked, "And how would the author know all this, unless he had lived among such people? Who wrote this book?"

Bronwyn turned to the title page. "Brother Florian. Never heard of him. But," she said, looking at the date. "This is a really recent book. *FLAME AND SCALE*. It was published only two years ago."

"Where *did* Brother Florian learn all this about dragons?" Cullen asked suspiciously.

Tara laughed. "Very likely it's all collated and translated

from some old Tevinter books in Arcanum, and he's passing it off as his own research! We see that a lot in the Circle library. Some 'Chantry Scholar' comes out with a new book, and those of us who know Arcanum can see where big chunks of it are lifted from old books we've already studied. Not that many people in Ferelden know Arcanum, after all. Just the mages and a few Chantry specialists who come to use our library. You don't know Arcanum, do you, Bronwyn?"

"Hardly a word, other than a few old sayings," Bronwyn admitted. "*Na via lerno victoria...*"

"Ha!" shouted Tara, "I know that one. *Only the living know victory.*"

"Too true!" Zevran chuckled.

"There's a bit more here," Bronwyn said. "*Is there more to draconic intelligence than we have heretofore guessed at? No member of a dragon cult has ever been taken alive, and what accounts exist from the days of the Nevarran hunters record only mad rants and impossible tales of godhood. With dragons only recently reappearing and still incredibly rare, we may never know the truth, but the question remains.*"

She set the book aside. "Obviously the Nevarran dragon-hunters must have fought these cultists in the old days. I wish we had access to the Nevarran Royal Library!"

"Interesting," agreed Zevran. "It sounds like some of the hunters must not have fought merely the dragons themselves, but whole villages devoted to the dragons."

Tara sniffed disapprovingly. "They probably slaughtered all the people to get their hands on the valuable dragon-bone. That's not heroic. That's greedy and cruel."

"That is the way of the world," Zevran agreed, prepared to be philosophical about it. "At least it sounds like the dragon cultists made them earn their gold."



They arrived at Redcliffe late the following afternoon. Bronwyn had never been there before. None of them had.

"It's scenic," Tara said cheerfully. "Very scenic."

"It's very nearly vertical!" Zevran pointed out.

"A *dramatic landscape*," Bronwyn quoted from some half-forgotten geography tome. It was, too: Redcliffe Village was on a series of hills, descending toward Lake Calenhad. The famed Red Cliffs were punctuated by waterfalls, creating a spectacular climax at the mouth of the quick-flowing Rock River. The dirt path leading down the hills to the heart of the village and the docks was steep and precarious, and she noted with a certain contempt, not improved by any paving or even wooden stepping. In the distance, the battlements of Castle Redcliffe beckoned. It was clear where the Arls of Redcliffe had chosen to spend their coin.

They should go to the castle first anyway, and pay their respects to Arl Teagan. He was not officially Arl until the Landsmeet confirmed it, but as there was no other heir, it was not premature to call him such. It would be rude not to call on him and give him news. And then, too, there was Alistair's letter.

He had written a fairly long one, in the end. Astrid had helped him, as she often did. Bronwyn wondered if the dwarven princess was interested in Alistair – personally interested. She was a very fine woman, and very intelligent. Bronwyn thought her friend could do far worse. King's by-blow or not, he had made clear that his life was with the Grey Wardens. As Astrid was also a Warden, who would care how they organized their private lives, other than those who wished them well?

There was more than one reason to visit the Arl, anyway. With luck, Teagan would be moved to offer them the hospitality of his castle, which certainly be preferable to that of the rather shabby inn Bronwyn had spotted, perched dizzily on a steep slope. Better for her companions, and certainly better for the horses.

The sentry on duty was daydreaming, but Scout uttered a loud bark, and brought the man to his feet, in a ridiculous pretense of military efficiency.

"I am Warden-Commander Bronwyn," she told the gaping man crisply, "here to see the Arl. Is he at the Castle?" "You're the Girl Warden!" the guard blurted out.

Patiently, she agreed. "Yes, I am the Girl Warden. Is the Arl at home? I wish to see him."

The guard thought he might be. Or he might be out in the desmesne fields or orchards. Or nearby.

"I'll find him," Bronwyn finally said, ready to move on, if only to stop Zevran from smirking.

Another hill, and then a long, long stone bridge that connected the dirt road with the entrance to the Castle. They trotted over it, too accustomed to Ostagar Gorge to be uncomfortable at the sight of the depths yawning below.

The guards at the courtyard gate were not quite such imbeciles as the sentry, and welcomed the Wardens properly, though with obvious curiosity. Both they and the seneschal who showed them into the Great Hall had a certain inexperienced air. That, of course, was only to be expected, since the demon infestation that Loghain and his troops had cleared away a few months ago had killed nearly all the servants in Redcliffe Castle, and many of the villagers as well.

Redcliffe, in fact, had been so damaged by that disaster that the arling was almost unrepresented in the army. Arl Teagan, of course, was needed to restore order to the place. Nonetheless, Bronwyn wondered that the Arl could spare none of his knights for the struggle with the darkspawn. Perhaps, if she came through on her way back, she might discover a likely candidate or two for the Wardens...

"Warden-Commander!"

Teagan had always been an attractive man; well barbered and well dressed almost to the point of being a dandy. Now he emerged from a door beyond, clearly having come straight from the harvest, dressed in a rough leather jerkin, heavy work breeches and even heavier boots. His hair was disordered, and there was mud on his gloves and a smudge

on his nose. He looked harassed and exhausted.

There were lines and shadows in his face she had never before seen there. It had been a bad year for the Guerrins, all around: Arl Eamon was dead; his son and heir revealed as a mage and slain. The unfortunate Arlessa Isolde was dead as well. The King, royal nephew of the Guerrins, had perished only a few days since. Loghain had sent word, she knew. What a painful loss for Arl Teagan Cailan's death must be.

He made a good show of welcome, but she sensed that he was not particularly glad to be burdened with visitors at such a time.

Except...

"You were with the King in his last hours, I understand," said Teagan. "It would mean a great deal to me to hear of them from you. Parchment and ink can only say so much."

No, he probably had not found Loghain's letter a great comfort.

"My lord Arl, I am at your service. If we might trouble you for a night's lodging, I shall tell you everything I know."

A courteous lie. She would certainly not tell him *everything*, but she would tell him the truth as far as she could.

"Of course..." He paused, eyes widening, as he noticed her strange green eyes and scarred face. Politely looking away, he addressed his seneschal instead. "Laurey, see that the Wardens have the best we can offer." He composed himself and turned back to Bronwyn. "When you are refreshed, Warden-Commander, I hope you will join me

in my study to talk over these sad times.”

The guest rooms at Castle Redcliffe were very fine. Her own bedchamber was large and luxurious, with an immense fireplace and a wide and inviting bed. The maids were clumsy and talked too much; but they brought the necessary hot water, and resigned themselves to serving Tara and Zevran after Bronwyn gave them a short, sharp word or two. Tara was a Warden. *A Warden!* What did these yokels not understand about that?’

She had not brought her gown, of course, but she had clean shirt, breeches, and griffon tabard to change into after her wash. She set off to find Teagan, glancing in at her people as she went downstairs. Cullen was being harassed by admiring maidservants. Leliana was ordering hers about, demanding a bath. Both of them had fine quarters. Zevran and Tara had been given the smallest and darkest of the guestrooms, but at least it had a good bed. That was all they were likely to care about.

The study was a noble place, clearly a room intended for one man only, and that the master of the castle. Perhaps it was the way the desk was positioned, facing the door, with no other place for readers. It could not have been more different from the library at Castle Highever, that inviting, cluttered room packed with books and furnished with various tables and benches for the scholar or casual visitor. Father’s study had been just off it, but even there, entrance

was not forbidden. What was private was under lock and key, but people were in and out all day, with the books free to all in the castle to enjoy – as long as they were noted down in the librarian’s lending register.

This room, however, opulent and well-lit, was the Arl’s private retreat. Across from the elaborate Orlesian-style desk, a comfortable chair had been placed, evidently for her, or others deemed worthy of entrance.

Teagan had changed into a brocade doublet and brushed his hair. He was leaning on the mantel, staring into the fire, when the seneschal announced her.

“Come in, come in, Warden-Commander.” He smiled handsomely, showing her to the comfortable chair and dismissing the servant. “I have mulled wine for you. Dinner will be ready fairly soon.”

“You are a hero amongst hosts, my lord Arl,” she laughed. “It has been a hard and chilly few days on the road.”

“Too true. The nights are turning cold.” He gave her a fine silver cup of the spicy liquor, steaming and fragrant.

Bronwyn breathed it in, warming her hands. She took a cautious sip. “This is perfect.”

He poured for himself, and took the elaborate chair behind the desk, his smile turning melancholy. “You are the first visitor of note to come since the disaster here. I am well aware of the scale of the struggles at Ostagar, but the last few months have been difficult. And we get few travelers nowadays. Many fear trouble on the roads. We

have have been left ourselves to ourselves."

It had not occurred to her that he might have felt deserted, with the King and his captains departing after destroying the demons, leaving Teagan to put Redcliffe to rights with no help.

She said, "It is appalling what you and your people have suffered, and at such a time. They say disasters come in threes. Indeed, I hope no more befall this country. There is the tragedy here in Redcliffe, and Arl Howe's treason in the north, which is occupying all my brother's attention. And then in the south we are holding the darkspawn back, but nearly nothing is left left over for troubles unforeseen."

Teagan did not know much of the events at Highever, other than the bare facts of the massacre. Bronwyn could tell him what she knew: that Arl Howe and two of his children were dead at the hands of the Crows, sent by the rather sinister Antivan noblewoman who was the mother of Fergus' late wife. Teagan spared some sympathy for Lady Delilah Howe, the unhappy innocent caught up in her father's treachery. Bronwyn wondered briefly if Rendon Howe had sent out some marriage feelers there. He had always wanted Fergus to marry Delilah, and the collapse of those plans would have angered him, certainly, but he would still have wanted Delilah married to his advantage. Teagan was only a bann at the time, but the brother of the Arl of Redcliffe, whose only child was very young.

"But Teyrn Fergus was victorious, you say," Teagan said, taking

another long draught of the delicious wine. "That is good news. Surely with their leader gone, the rebels will surrender."

"So I hope. And those who do not are welcome to go to the Void," Bronwyn said feelingly. "Fergus must secure the North, lest our neighbors see us as ripe for the picking."

"That is a consideration, indeed. I heard a rumor from a trader.. " Teagan hesitated. " ...that there had been an attempt on Teyrn Loghain's life."

"A pair of assassins," Bronwyn nodded. "They were killed before they could be made to speak, but we have every reason to believe they were in Orlesian pay. We will never know, of course."

"But the Teyrn was not badly hurt, I trust."

"I was not there at the time, but our excellent Warden Healer was, and he can work miracles. The Teyrn was in perfect health when last I saw him." Bronwyn felt her face heat, just a little, and hoped her blush was not apparent. In fact, Loghain had proved himself in very robust health indeed, the night before she left on her quest. Luckily, Teagan's thoughts were elsewhere. He gazed into the fire for a moment, and then changed the subject.

"I am surprised to see you so far from the conflict with the darkpsawn. You have been doing good work in the south. They call you Dragonslayer now, and not without cause, as I understand."

"I did not fight the dragon alone. Hard as the fight was, we were glad of the chance to practice and learn more

about how to kill such a huge creature. Without griffons to take the battle to the skies, the Grey Wardens must develop new tactics."

"Very sensible of you." He set down his cup, and leaned forward. "So, if I may ask, why are you here?"

She must tell him something, and so told him the previously arranged lie, feeling a little sorry that she must alarm this decent man.

"We have had reports of darkspawn west of Lake Calenhad. I am concerned that they may be coming to the surface in a less defended place. I hoped to catch a boat here that would take me to the mouth of the Sulcher River."

She was right: he was *very* alarmed.

"I shall send my men to arrange a boat for you at once!" He was up and striding to the door, calling urgently for a guardsman. A brief conference, and the soldier was hurrying away. Bronwyn was ashamed of the lie, but also pleased that she would not have to track down a boat herself. Threatening people with darkspawn was frighteningly effective.

"There!" Teagan said, taking his seat again. "It's all arranged. THE LADY OF THE LAKE can take you where you wish to go in the morning. I pray you, let me know as soon as possible what you discover!"

"I do intend to come through Redcliffe on my journey back to Ostagar," she promised. "You'll be the first to know. It may be nothing. I certainly hope so!" Her wine was gone. Teagan obligingly filled her cup again. "Thank you.

Ferelden needs no more troubles than the ones we are already facing. I wish that Fergus was not forced to leave us, with all that has happened."

He gave her a fleeting, intense look, and then settled back casually.

"Amaranthine will need an arl, of course. Is there any word of Lord Nathaniel?"

"Not as far as I know. Rendon Howe sent him to the Free Marches years ago. I do not even know if he is alive. If he wishes to claim Amaranthine, he must come to the Landsmeet."

"Yes... the Landsmeet. It was in Loghain's letter. I must go to that myself, of course. Travel in the month of Haring will not be easy or pleasant for anyone. However, it will be the most important Landsmeet in many a year."

There was a long silence. Bronwyn decided to let the man ask his questions in his own time.

"Did you see the King's will?" he said, rather surprising her. It was not the question she had expected.

"I did. As you know, he declared that there was to be a Landmeet, to be held three months after his death. That took place on the sixth of Kingsway, which would make the sixth of Haring the date the Landsmeet begins. In the interim, Queen Anora is to rule. King Cailan also indicated that the Dalish elves were to be given a land grant as a reward for their loyal service."

"He truly did not name a successor?"

"He did not. Not a single name was mentioned in the

document. I don't think that the King really believed that he was going to die, and so he did not take the making of his will as seriously as he otherwise might have."

"You were with him? You are certain it was the Blight sickness?"

"It was, without doubt. He rushed forward to personally engage an ogre in the battle that day and was grabbed by the creature. He must have been infected then. It progressed very rapidly, and there was nothing even the best Healer could do, in the end."

He was quiet for some time. Then he wanted to know every detail of Cailan's death, however painful. Bronwyn gave him an edited version, telling him nothing of the attempt to make the king a Grey Warden. She included Cailan's rewards to the Wardens who had fought by his side, and the knighting of Ser Adam Hawke, who had saved the king — at least in the short term. Then she described the scene as the King began showing signs of rapidly advancing Blight sickness, the quick writing of his will, the brief farewells, and his death. She told him of the funeral the next day, and recited as much of Loghain's funeral address as she could remember.

"I am very sorry for your loss," she concluded gently. "He was not only your king, but a dear kinsman."

Teagan's voice thickened. "Cailan... such a scamp he was as a boy. Everyone loved him."

Bronwyn had never loved King Cailan, but said, "He

had a gift for winning people to him. He was very like his father in that way."

"He was." His face contracted, and for a moment Bronwyn thought he would weep. "The thought of the ancient line of Calenhad coming to end like that... It grieves me more than I can say. The Theirins have meant so much to Ferelden. For that matter, there would be no Ferelden without them." He paused, and then said abruptly. "How is Alistair?"

Ah, here it comes... she thought.

She did not allow her thoughts to appear on her face. She laid the folded parchment on the desk. Smoothly, she said, "He's very well, and here is his letter. I could not have a better Senior Warden. Now that he's had a chance to prove his worth and become known, he's gained a great deal of respect. Teyrn Loghain thinks very highly of him."

That made Teagan smile. "Does he? That's good hearing. Like fa—"

He broke off. Bronwyn knew what he had nearly said. *Like father, like son.*

"And who," Teagan asked, "is Loghain backing for King?"

"He has made no public announcement," Bronwyn said. "I think we're all in shock at the moment." She watched him, eyes carefully limpid, to see if he would accept that.

He did, not evidently conversant with Ostagar gossip, which would put Bronwyn so close in Loghain's counsels as to practically be sitting in his lap. "We'll see, I suppose. I daresay you have hopes for your brother."

"Couslands always do their duty, my lord. If Fergus is given the crown, I know that he will serve this country with diligence, courage, and good sense. Our family is the next in line to inherit, as you know." She also knew that Teagan, like Eamon, had voted against her father and for their nephew Cailan. Understandable but wrong-headed. The country would not be in the fix it was in if wisdom and experience had carried the day, and King Bryce ruled in Ferelden.

"Well..." he paused. "It could be that there is another heir, closer in blood than your brother..."

Bronwyn raised her brows in polite inquiry.

"He's such a modest lad," Teagan said. "I'm sure he hasn't confided in you, but if people knew..." He saw that she was still waiting, and then bit his lip and came out with it. "I'm speaking of our mutual friend Alistair. I wonder that Loghain hasn't marked the resemblance to Maric. Alistair is King Maric's son. On the wrong side of the blanket, unfortunately." He managed a melancholy chuckle.

"Yes, I do know," Bronwyn told him. "Alistair is a very good friend and confided to me what Arl Eamon had told him of his birth. It is a great pity King Maric did not choose to acknowledge him."

"He is a Theirin, and the nearest heir."

Bronwyn set down her cup. "Tell me, my lord: did King Maric tell you this personally?"

Teagan took a breath, and the corners of his mouth turned down. "No. My brother told me what the king told

him when Alistair was given into his care."

"Well then, you see the difficulty," Bronwyn said mildly. "There is no one left in the world who can take oath that King Maric told him personally that Alistair was his son. Is there anything in writing? Did Arl Eamon," she pressed, "mention Alistair in his will?" She saw the look on his face and raised a hand in a peaceful gesture. "I am not doubting Alistair's word, my lord. Not in the least. I *believe* him. However, think of how the Landsmeet will receive this claim. They will demand proof, and there is none – or at least none that will satisfy Arl Wulffe and his sons, or Arl Bryland, or Arl Urien, or even Nathaniel Howe, if he is present. Every one of them has Theirin blood to some degree or other. Do you think that any of them will stand aside for an unacknowledged bastard?"

"Eamon did not mention Alistair in his will, but that was written after Alistair became a Warden. He took Alistair into his household..." His words faded in the face of the expression Bronwyn turned on him.

"If we put Alistair before the Landsmeet, people will look into his years at Redcliffe. I do not wish to speak against your brother, but we must consider the matter rationally. They will discover that Alistair was not raised as Arl Eamon's ward, but slept in the stables, and worked as a dogboy and stablehand until he was sent to the Chantry. He was not given a bed or taught his letters or given the kind of training due a noble – not to mention royal – fosterling.

When the Landsmeet learns of the treatment your brother thought appropriate, Alistair's claim will fall to pieces."

"Eamon feared that people would think Alistair his own bastard." Teagan winced, and put his head in his hands. "That doesn't sound any better, does it?"

"I'm afraid not. And there is another possible difficulty. Alistair knows nothing of his mother, other than that she was a Redcliffe serving maid. Was she, in fact, human? Or not?"

Teagan, his head still in his hands, groaned aloud.

Bronwyn had more to say about that. "I bring it up, my lord, because King Maric's penchant for elven beauties was very well known. The Landsmeet will never support a claimant of half-elven blood, no matter who the father."

She decided not to get into the whole matter of the Orlesians apparently knowing who Alistair was. Arlessa Isolde must have let slip that bit of gossip, but a claim supported only by the Orlesians would be laughed out of the Landsmeet. Loghain, too, seemed to know all about Alistair, but Bronwyn had never asked him how he had come to learn about her friend. Possibly Maric had confided in him eventually, or Loghain had an agent in Redcliffe with his ear to closed doors. Loghain was certainly not going to support Alistair before the Landsmeet, so the point was moot anyway.

"Furthermore," she said. "Alistair does not *want* to be King."

He sat straight up and stared at her. "And how would you know that?"

"Because, my lord," she said, with some asperity, "I *asked* him. No doubt Alistair found it rather startling — being asked for once what he would like to do. I don't think anyone ever had before. I talked to him about his claim to the throne, and asked him outright if he wished to pursue it. He actually shouted at me, which believe me has not often happened before. He was horrified at the idea. He hates being put in a position of authority. I have been trying to encourage leadership in him — with no small amount of difficulty, I may add. Somehow, it was ingrained in Alistair that he was nothing and nobody, and that terrible things would happen if he took command. Furthermore, he loves being a Grey Warden and does not want to leave the order."

Teagan rose from his chair and walked to the window, clearly upset. He turned on Bronwyn and said, "You do not consider him disqualified because he is a Grey Warden?"

He was no fool, certainly. She only said, "I think that would be absurd, as we are in a Blight. The Grey Wardens are going to be involved to some degree in Fereldan politics while the Blight lasts. No, I would not disqualify Alistair because he is a Warden, but because his claim cannot be substantiated to the degree that the Landsmeet will demand. It would be putting him through a hideous experience for nothing. No, my lord Arl: the Couslands have the closest, legitimate, *proven* claim to the throne."

Teagan chose his words carefully. "I may not know who

Teyrn Loghain intends to support, but it is clear you prefer your brother's claim to Alistair's. I suppose it is only natural."

"Alistair is my dear friend, and we have saved one another's lives any number of times. My brother, however, is my brother. Not only is my support for a Cousland claim natural: I consider it rational, honorable, and having a good chance of success." She pushed Alistair's letter in the Arl's direction, smiling sympathetically. "Alistair made a point of telling me not to let you talk me into pushing his claim. Read his letter for yourself: it may be that he touches on the subject."

The seneschal reappeared, making enough noise for them to notice him. "Dinner is served, my lord."

"Very well, Laurey," Teagan told the man. "We shall be there directly." To Bronwyn he bowed courteously. "We can agree to disagree, I hope. I cannot let go of the Theirin line so easily. I will read Alistair's letter, and then make my case to him. In the meantime, let us enjoy the finest dinner Castle Redcliffe can offer the Warden-Commander of Ferelden!"



It was a very fine dinner indeed. Redcliffe, Bronwyn was told, was enjoying a most successful harvest; and because of the casualties months before, there were far fewer mouths to feed. People from smaller villages to the south had come to the arl's seat, and moved into the empty cottages, into the shops and the smithy. Some of the

new folk had found work in the castle itself. It certainly explained the inexperience of some of the staff. Fortunately, the cook was sound.

Mother Hannah, the superior of Redcliffe Chantry, was among the guests, and proved a very pleasant and kindly old woman. One of her priests accompanied her, and her senior Templar, by name Ser Henric. As Tara was not carrying or wearing anything that screamed "mage," there were no suspicious or frightened stares. A remarkably pretty young woman and a small boy were with the Chantry folk, dressed very simply. Introductions were made, and the girl's name was Kaitlyn Merton, a poor relation of the Bann of Whitewood Hills and a distant cousin of the Guerrins themselves. Her little brother Bevin was thrilled to dine in the Arl's Great Hall – and also to meet the famous Grey Wardens.

"Dear Kaitlyn is not taking vows in the Chantry, though I think it would be best for her," Mother Hannah whispered to Bronwyn. "She and her little brother are quite alone in the world, and have nothing but their little cottage and a small pension our good Arl has kindly granted them. He would have them move into the Castle itself, but I told him it would ruin the poor child's reputation, as there is no chaperone for her there. If Kaitlyn were to enter the religious life, then Bevin could be taken on by Arl Teagan as a page, and trained up to be a knight some day. As it is, the children cannot bear to be separated."



DRAGON SLAYER

"I would hate to be separated from my brother, were I in similar circumstances," Bronwyn said. Young Kaitlyn seemed nice, and was certainly *very* pretty. Teagan had avoided marriage for years and years, but as the last Guerrin, he could avoid it no longer. If he disliked the company of the proud and highborn, perhaps he need look no farther than this appealing young orphan, who had at least had good looks and a bit of noble blood to commend her. At any rate, she could hardly be a worse Arlessa than the late Isolde, whose only child had brought ruin and death to the arling.

Cullen spoke up. "I wonder if Mother Hannah or her priests know Brother Genetivi?"

As it happened, none of them did. The only person present who knew even the name was Teagan himself, who recognized it from the same biography of the Rebel Queen that Bronwyn had read.

"What is your interest in him?" the arl asked.

"I met him on my way to Orzammar," Bronwyn said lightly. "He was an old friend of my late tutor. I thought it a risky time to go traveling, and told him so; but of course he was unconvinced, having already traveled so widely around Thedas. I have been wondering what happened to him."

There was some grave discussion of the dangers of the roads. The most senior of the knights, Ser Perth, predicted dire consequences for any lone traveler.

For that matter, all of Teagan's surviving knights were well-bred men, and capable of being polite even to elven



DRAGON SLAYER

Grey Wardens and their companions. They were particularly gracious to Bronwyn, Cullen, and above all to Leliana, whose bright red hair and lovely face attracted a great deal of attention. She loved to dress up, and had talked the maids into finding her a gown from the cupboards. The late Arlessa had possessed so many gowns that Teagan did not recognize the expensive confection of blue and lavender silk Leliana wore to dinner. She had also brought her lute, which caused a stir of pleasurable excitement.

The general pleasure was even greater when she sang for them: **BLACK FOX AND THE BOUNTY HUNTER; CHILDE BRIONY; THE BATTLE OF RIVER DANE.**

Servants gathered at the back of the Great Hall to listen. The knights and Wardens grew mellow with good drink and the beauty of the music. Bronwyn felt herself relaxing a little; for the moment not having to deal with politics or war.

"A Warden Minstrel!" Teagan's pleasant voice rose above the cheers and applause that followed the last rippling chord. He lifted his cup in salute. "I did not know there could be anything so charming. Warden-Commander, you certainly run the Wardens on pleasanter lines than others have! Look here, Warden Leliana... I hope you won't take offense at a gift, but we've had so little cheer in Redcliffe these past months. Permit me to give you something as a keepsake of a memorable evening."

Leliana dimpled at him. "My lord, would it possible... to keep this gown?"

Light laughter and more applause. Teagan bowed graciously. "As you wish, Warden! It becomes you far better than it would me!"

"How about a story?" an over-excited young Bevin shouted. His sister blushed and silenced him, but there was support for the suggestion.

"Yes! A story!" A knight urged, and then others echoed him.

Leliana smiled and seemed willing. There was a pleasant air of expectation.

"An *improving* story," Mother Hannah prompted.

The expectant air deflated somewhat, but Leliana was not unwilling to oblige a priest. "I shall tell my favorite story. All of you know this... some of you very well... but I love to recite it and to think about it. I have heard many versions of it and put them all together for this. I shall speak of our beloved Prophet and her deeds."

Quite a few people actually looked pleased. It was a famously devout Court, after all. Bronwyn forbore to sigh, and took solace in the music of Leliana's voice.

LELIANA'S STORY OF ANDRASTE, BRIDE OF THE MAKER

There is a great rock near the palace in the city of Denerim. That is the Birth Rock, where it is said that the Prophet Andraste first saw the light of day. In those days, long ago, the city was no more than a little fishing village. One day, a ship dropped anchor, and Tevinter soldiers stormed ashore. They

captured and enslaved the villagers, leaving behind only the old and infirm. The prisoners were chained in the dark and filthy hold of the ship, and were taken far away, to be sold in the markets of the great city of Minrathous. One of the captives was the child Andraste.

She was raised in slavery in a foreign land. After some years, she escaped, then made the long and treacherous journey back to her homeland alone. She rose from nothing to be the wife of an Alamarri warlord, the mighty Maferath.

Andraste's face was a shining light of beauty, and her voice the sweetest that ever has been heard in the world, from that day to this. Each day she sang to the gods, asking them to help her people in bondage. The ancient tribal gods of the mountains and the winds did not answer her, but the true god did.

The Maker spoke. He showed her all the works of His hands: the Fade, the world, and all the creatures therein. He showed her how men had forgotten Him, lavishing devotion upon mute idols and demons and dragons; and how in disgust He had left them to their fate. But her voice had reached Him, and so captivated Him that He offered her a place at His side, that she might rule all of creation.

But Andraste would not forsake her people.

She begged the Maker to return, to save His children from the cruelty of the Imperium. Reluctantly, the Maker agreed to give mankind another chance.

Andraste went back to her husband Maferath, and told him all that the Maker had revealed to her. Together, they rallied the Alamarri and marched forth against the mage-lords of the Imperium; and the Maker was with them.

The Maker's sword was creation itself: fire and flood, famine and earthquake. The Blight, the judgement of the Maker for the wickedness of the magisters, had ravaged Thedas. Everywhere they went, Andraste sang to the people of the Maker, and they heard her. This was Andraste's March: the first and greatest of all Exalted Marches. The ranks of Andraste's followers grew until they were a vast tide washing over the Imperium. And when Maferath saw that the people loved Andraste and not him, and that she loved the Maker more than she did Maferath, a worm grew within his heart, gnawing upon it.

At last, the armies of Andraste and Maferath stood before the very gates of Minrathous, but Andraste was not with them.

For Maferath had schemed in secret to hand Andraste over to the Tevinters. For this, Archon Hessarian would give Maferath all the lands to the south of the Waking Sea.

And so, before all the armies of the Alamarri and of Tevinter, Andraste was tied to a stake and burned while her earthly husband turned his armies aside and did nothing; for his heart had been hardened by jealousy. But as the archon watched the pyre, he was seized with sudden, overwhelming compassion. He took pity on Andraste, and drew his sword, granting her the mercy of a quick death.

The Maker wept for His Beloved, cursed Maferath, cursed mankind for their betrayal, and turned once again from His creation, taking only Andraste with him. And Our Lady sits still at his side, where still, ceaselessly, she urges Him to take pity on His children.



"My dear child!" cried Mother Hannah. "How beautifully you tell that greatest of stories! It is a blessing to hear it!"

Cullen leaned over, brown eyes warm, to whisper praise in Leliana's ear. She smiled back him, clearly in sympathy.

There was a great deal of applause, even a great deal from the back of the Hall. It occurred to Bronwyn that poor folk from the Hinterlands might never have heard the story told as a coherent whole. Even little Bevin liked it, but then it was full of fighting and Swords of Mercy and heroic adventure.

And since it was Redcliffe, and a famously devout Court, Mother Hannah blessed them, and they trooped upstairs to the chapel for evening prayers.

It was quite the chapel: far bigger and more elaborate than the chapel at Castle Highever. Bronwyn tried to keep her face a mask of bland piety, but after seeing the poverty of the little village nearby, it was difficult to approve of the luxury and opulence of Redcliffe Castle. Bronwyn sat, and knelt, and made the proper responses; but her mind was already on the journey ahead, and what they might find on the other side of the lake.



It was a two-day journey, north-northwest, from Redcliffe to Sulcher. THE LADY OF THE LAKE was not a particularly comfortable vessel, but at least they were safe from dark-spawn when aboard her. The shoreline slipped past with dream-like slowness; while Bronwyn and her companions used the forced inactivity to further study the maps, books,

and notes left behind by Brother Genetivi, trying to draw out every possible bit of information from them.

The shoreline itself told them nothing. In time, the forbidding red cliffs of the south gave way to low-lying forests, dark green almost to black. Hills rose up behind the forests, and beyond them, in the far west, were the distant Frostback Mountains, misty grey and forbidding.

As day faded to twilight, they arrived at the the village of Sulcher, and docked.

They had thought Redcliffe a poor village, but Sulcher was even smaller. A few cottages, a merchant's little shop, a smithy, a mill, and a tumble-down tavern: that was the village in its entirety. There was no Chantry there, nor even the smallest chapel.

Of course they stopped at the tavern, and there they had a curious encounter.

"Brother Genetivi?" the innkeeper asked, eyes wide and blinking. "Never heard of him. Haven't seen any strangers around here but you lot and that trader Felix."

Leliana cleared her throat and caught Bronwyn's eye. Even without the bard's help, Bronwyn had no trouble seeing that the man was lying... and rather frightened.

"How odd," Bronwyn said smoothly. "For I saw the good brother when he took ship to come here some months ago. He was traveling to a village called Haven. Is it far from here?"

The man froze, knuckles whitening as he gripped a half-filled tankard like a shield. His lips moved, struggling to

find words. He stuttered, "H-H-Haven? Never heard of it!"

Tara gazed up at him with her big elven eyes. "That's really peculiar, since our map shows it's only a half-day's journey from here as the crow flies. It's your closest neighbor, in fact."

The innkeeper slammed the tankard down, foamy ale slopping onto the bar. "I've never heard of it! And I'll thank you to leave my inn!"

"I don't think so," Bronwyn told him kindly. "We're staying the night, and our horses will remain in the shanty you call a stable. I don't know what it is about the name of Haven that frightens you, but I assure you that you are in no danger with a force of Wardens here to protect you."

Her companions crowded up to the bar. Cullen loomed over the innkeeper, his shadow falling across the man's face. For a moment Bronwyn thought the man would burst into tears.

"Please," he whispered, mouth barely moving. "Please. Don't talk about Haven."

No one else wanted to talk to them about Haven either. Faces folded closed at the questions, stubborn as locked doors.

At a table far from the rest of the regulars, Zevran expressed his opinion. "We must be very cautious here. These people are afraid. They are so afraid they will not even confide to us what it is they fear. That means that we cannot know what it is and guard against it."

Only one man approached them: another traveler. This individual was a trader with the improbably pretentious name of Felix de Grosbois. He sidled up to their table, oozed on to a bench,

and began hawking his goods with impressive effrontery.

"An Ontraprenyure such as myself finds many a rarity. I can see that you're all the sort who can appreciate the finer things – " he leered at Leliana, who was amused rather than offended. " – so I must tell you straight out that this your lucky day. I have an Objay Dee Art in my possession which is far too extraordinary to show to lesser folk. I couldn't think of letting it go, 'cept to Grey Wardens and members of the nobility."

He showed them a curious short stick of metal: about the width of a finger, incised with dwarven runes, and gleaming dully in his dirty palm.

"Very nice," said Bronwyn patiently. "What is it?"

"Well might you ask!" replied the eager merchant. "Something which even a highborn lady like yourself has never seen! This, my friends, is a golem's control rod."

Bronwyn scowled, remembering the golems in Orzammar. If this charlatan had a control rod, did that mean that some golem was on a rampage somewhere else?

Tara was entertained, however, and gave the man the silver he wanted. Bronwyn got rid of him with a promise to look over his other goods the following morning, and the young mage was left to gloat over her curio.

"I suppose I can thump someone over the head with it," she laughed.

Bronwyn hefted it in her right hand, considering the weight. "If you held it in your hand and punched someone,

it would probably hurt quite a lot."

It was a brief, bright moment in a gloomy place. In the end, they decided to stay in the same room and to take turns keeping watch that night. The inn was an edgy place.

But the night passed without incident. Bronwyn quietly paid off the innkeeper, and they left early, after a some quick purchases from amongst Trader Felix's foodstuffs. The villagers watched them silently as they rode west from the village, but shrank away when looked at directly. The sensation of being watched did not fade, even after the village was long out of sight.





THE VILLAGE OF HAVEN



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CHAPTER 5



"ARRIVED TODAYE AT THE VILLAGE OF HAVENE..."

CHILLY WIND WHIPPED THE BROWN LEAVES FROM THE TREES. Ravens croaked out warnings as Bronwyn and her

companions rode up the steep and narrow path into the mountains toward Haven.

"At least the water is good!" Zevran called out, trying to be heard over the rushing water of the River Sulcher.

Bronwyn nodded absently, munching dried apples, while Zevran refilled their canteens. They let the horses rest and drink their fill. Cullen knelt by the muddy bank and splashed his face. Water down in the village of Sulcher had a flat taste and a muddy odor. The last thing they needed was to get sick bellies from bad water. Up here air and water were infinitely purer and clearer.

Cullen determinedly looked away from Tara and Zevran flirting together, and came over to speak to Bronwyn.

"I was wondering..." he began. "When we were at Redcliffe, some of the knights spoke to me. Arl Teagan..." He grimaced then spoke forthrightly. "Alistair is King Maric's son, isn't he?"

"There doesn't seem to be any written evidence," Bronwyn temporized, "but that is what Arl Eamon told Alistair, and it would seem that King Cailan believed it."

"I know that Alistair is a Grey Warden, but would that make it impossible for him to be king?"

"No," Bronwyn said. She could hardly say otherwise, after all. "In my opinion, it would not. However, Alistair has made it very plain to me that he does not *want* to be king. I told Arl Teagan as much, and I could see he was disappointed, but really, I can't imagine what he expects. Alistair was not acknowledged by King Maric, which I believe would be necessary before his claim could even be considered. Arl Eamon did not raise Alistair as a prince, but as a servant — a stable boy. I don't know if King Maric ordered that or simply did not care. However, were Alistair put his claim before the Landsmeet, all sorts of unpleasant things would be said. Speculation would be rife. And Cullen, you *know* who his mother is. The moment that got out, it would all be over. An Orlesian? An elf? A *mage*?"

He nodded, his face falling into melancholy. "It seems so cruel... so unfair... Just because his mother... Our world is very unjust to elves."

Bronwyn studied him a moment, wondering if he, as a former Templar, was willing to grant the same for mages. "I agree, but realistically, Cullen, even if Alistair's mother were human and the Redcliffe serving girl she was given out to be, many in the Landsmeet would sneer at him. If

King Maric had acknowledged him and educated him, it would still have been difficult. I believe he would have been given a bannorn of his own, and that would have been that. Or he would have been used to make a diplomatic marriage abroad. Our world is unjust, and sometimes it seems to me that it is unjust to *everyone*."

He sighed deeply. "That's true enough. Arl Teagan was not pleased with what you had to say, I suppose."

Bronwyn had been thinking about that herself. "Arl Teagan is a very loyal man: loyal to Ferelden and to the ancient Theirin line. It is a great wrench for him to let go of it, and of course he is grieving for the king... and for his whole family. Also," she added, more carefully, "I believe he feels very guilty about Alistair, though I don't see how any of that is his fault."

Cullen agreed. "He was his brother's vassal, after all. The old arl would never have allowed him to take the boy in after he himself had kept him in the stables. There would have been a lot of talk. It's sad though. And Alistair's mother is a fine woman. It's not right that having an elven mother would set so many people against him."

"As you say, the world is unjust to elves."

"Tara's suffered so much, too. I worry about her."

Bronwyn blinked, startled at the change of subject. Was this what all the talk about elves and injustice was really about? "Tara is more protected now as a Grey Warden. As to her personal life, she has made her choice, and as her

friends we must support her."

"I just wish... I don't want Tara to be hurt again."

Bronwyn groaned inwardly. Why did people think she wanted them to confide in her about their love lives? She could barely keep her own in order. She said, "I know you're disappointed, but there are lots of other apples in the barrel, as my old Nan used to say. Brosca is very fond of you..."

He smiled briefly. "Brosca... she's such a good comrade. But..." A sheepish glance. "Yes, I know she's interested in me that way. She made herself very plain. I was a coward, and I told her that I needed time to get over Tara."

"A coward?" Bronwyn felt she was not going to like what she would hear next.

"Yes. I was a coward, giving her false hope. I like Brosca very much. She's a brave, cheerful girl. I just could never feel about her the way she does about me. I don't find her attractive. I couldn't think of any kind way to tell her that, so... I let her kiss me instead."

"Then that was badly done of you," Bronwyn said sharply. "That was wrong. She's practically thrown herself at you for months. You don't want *Tara* to be hurt? I don't either, but I also don't want Brosca hurt. You think because she's tough-talking and full of bravado that she doesn't have a heart to be broken?"

He turned very red. "No! Maker, of course not! I know it was wrong. I'm hoping that by the time we're back she'll have found someone else. There are thousands of dwarves

in Ostagar. I thought it was a good idea to get away for while."

"Yes, it probably was," she said shortly, irritated with him and his bloody lady-like ways. Was he a grown man or a baby? "I want you to be rear guard for the next stretch," she said, swinging onto her horse. "Keep your eyes open. I'll take point. Come on, everyone! Time to go!"

The shallow streambed was rocky, and with the water so white and foamy, trying to ford it would be a serious risk. Instead, they followed along the river's edge, and when the path diverged from the river, they stayed on the path, and did not venture into the water.

Scout was restless and uneasy, sniffing the air now and then, lowering his head as he glared into the underbrush. Bronwyn took another look at the map. The bend in the river was not far now. From due west, their trail would turn more toward the north, and climb higher into the mountains.

The air was still, filled only with the arrhythmic clop-clop of the horses' hooves on the stony path. Up ahead the earth leveled off briefly, a little green meadow filling the river's arc.

"I hope Haven has a inn!" Tara remarked. "It's getting too cold to camp outside at night..."

A beating of scores of dark wings, and the sky suddenly darkened as a flock of crows took flight. They swept down, just above the riders' heads. Horses shied and whinnied, shaking their manes in fright. Tara's horse reared and tugged the reins out of her grasp. She jolted back and forth, and then screamed as her chin slammed against

the horse's neck. She grabbed at the pommel of her saddle. Cullen reached out to help her calm her mount. Leliana shrilled out a warning.

"In the trees! They are coming!"

With her right hand, Bronwyn drew her sword. With her left, she was hauling her horse's head around to face the big men bursting out of the woods, branches crackling and falling in their wake. There were a half-dozen of them. A gut-deep roar heralded them, a wordless howl of bloodlust.

Leliana's bow hummed. An arrow struck one of the men in the lead, a tall man wearing a horned helmet of an ancient style. The fellow seemed not even to feel it, and kept on charging.

"Maker!" Leliana cried, and loosed again.

Zevran leaped from his horse and threw a dagger in the same smooth move. With a meaty thunk, it buried itself in a man's eye. There was a whoop and a tumble. Zevran stared in brief surprise as the man actually tried to get up, even with several inches of steel in his brain. Another enemy rushed past, headed toward him. Zevran was only half aware that the first man eventually crumpled, scrabbling furiously at the dying grass until he lay still.

Bronwyn tugged on her reins and Posy reared, brandishing her hooves in a surprised man's face. Clearly he had never faced a warhorse before. He stumbled back, off balance, and Scout leaped on him with a fearsome snarl, knocking him down, and ripping at his throat. Posy

stepped on him with one hoof and flinched back.

Arrows whizzed past, thudding into the tree trunks. One glanced off Bronwyn's helmet, ringing it like a bell. With a snarl she brought Posy to order and bore down on the leader, who was charging at Cullen, battleaxe swinging.

Cullen side-stepped a blow that would have felled an ox, and smoothly brought Yusaris down, the blade cleaving through the enemy's collarbone. Another attacker shoved forward, and slammed the flat of his axe against Cullen's chest, staggering him.

It was all Tara could do to stay on her horse, when Cullen's attacker barked a shout of laughter and swung his axe. Her horse screamed, a shocking, shrilling deathcry, as the blade missed Tara and cut through the horse's spine.

There was a shuddering fall, and Tara went with it, dropping to earth and crying out in pain as flesh met stone. She scrambled on all fours, groping for the sword-staff in her shoulder harness, while Cullen rallied and dealt the axe man a buffet with the pommel of his sword.

Leliana had brought down an archer, not quite hidden well enough in the autumn-thinned forest. Another arrow struck a thin man with a pair of daggers, who had thought it would be clever to jump up behind Bronwyn. He stumbled and fell before he could leave the ground.

Bronwyn trampled yet another underfoot and followed up with a sweeping cut from her sword. Another bow-string twanged, and she followed the sound. Posy picked

up speed, jumping easily over a fallen log. The archer saw them coming, threw down his bow, and reached for his sword. Not quite in time. Bronwyn's sword tip cut open the side of his throat.

There was another man she hadn't seen. Maker! He jumped at her from the left, trying to pull her off her horse. His gauntlets were tipped with claws, and one finger scratched painfully across her neck.

Scout ran after her, worrying at the man's flailing legs, and yipped as the man landed a hard kick. The man clung to Bronwyn, growling like a beast. She thrust her sword at him awkwardly, point first across her own chest, slashing his face open. The blade slipped and grated against the mail covering her upper left arm. Her attacker got to his feet, spitting blood, and then suddenly froze and fell backwards, an arrow in his eye.

Bronwyn galloped back to the fight to see Zevran wrestling with a burly man with a pair of hatchets. One was lost already, sticking in a tree stump. The other was still in contention. The man grunted, and a slash opened redly on Zevran's arm. The assassin showed no pain, but simply brought up his knee with a sharp jerk. The burly man howled with pain. Zevran rolled away, drew another dagger, reversed the grip, and drove it into the man's heart.

Tara tugged herself free of the dead horse. She screamed with rage, at last able to unsheath her staff. Shortly thereafter, the fight ended in an eldritch blast of bitter cold.

There was no helping Tara's horse, which was long past healing. It lay dead where it had fallen. Tara looked down at the lifeless bulk, eyes misting.

"How could they kill a poor dumb beast?" she protested. "That was rotten! That was cruel!" She kicked the nearest dead enemy, hard. "And we were getting along together really well now! I had really learned how to ride! It's not fair!"

Zevran came up, and squeezed her shoulder sympathetically. Her eyes widened at his wound. Immediately, she pursed her lips with effort and set about healing him. Leliana moved about the little battlefield, retrieving her arrows, while Cullen calmed the surviving horses.

The nearest dead man lay sprawled on his back, his broken teeth grinning up at the sky. Bronwyn wiped at her neck and succeeded only in smearing blood on her armor.

"Hold still," Tara turned to her. "I'm not a great healer, but I can heal a scratch like that."

Bronwyn waited for the flicker of blue, and winced at the sudden throb as her skin knitted itself back into place.

"Thanks. Now I think I'll have a look at our new acquaintances. See to Scout. I think he got a bad bruise."

Zevran moved Tara's bags from the dead horse to his. Bronwyn scowled at the loss of a horse. Bastards. Not that they were moving fast anyway, but if they had to make a quick retreat back to Sulcher, they would be handicapped from the start.

Cullen moved up beside her. "Are these Avvar tribes-

men?" he wondered. "Look at those helmets."

They were an ancient, primitive design, covering the face down to the nose, the crest decorated with ox horns.

"The horns of power," Bronwyn muttered, half-remembering some old history. There were woodcuts of old chiefs wearing such helmets. The thanes of the Chasind wore them still. And now these people, whoever they were...

Leliana shook her head, stepping over another dead man. "I have traveled through these mountains before and met the Avvar. I see no tattoos. If they are Avvar, they are a tribe I have never heard of. The helmets could be loot, you know."

Bronwyn hunkered down by the leader, and traced the scales of his elaborate armor. Over his shoulders he wore a rich fur cape that crawled with vermin. Mastering her distaste at the feel of the dead man's skin, she tugged at the thong of a gold amulet tied around his neck.

"A dragon?"

A very fine dragon it was: richly detailed in soft, pure gold.

"Maybe it's the tribe's totem," Cullen remarked. "I still think they could be Avvar. They favor the battleaxe, too."

"At the moment it matters little," said Zevran. "They are enemies."

"It's possible they followed us from Sulcher, waiting for their chance." Bronwyn stood up, pocketing the amulet. "We should move on."

"I'm not done yet!" Tara protested, tucking one of the dead men's daggers into her belt. "I can't get this one's ring off!"

Cullen made a face. Zevran, however, came gallantly to her rescue.

"Here," he said. With a quick stroke, he severed the finger and retrieved the ring. "This is very nice. You have a good eye for value, *bella mia*." With a bow, he presented it to her, to Cullen's great disgust.

"Their weapons, too, are of good quality," Leliana said, fingering a blade. "Look Cullen, it is well-forged. These are not savages." She yanked an arrow out of the ground and studied the head. "Good steel tips. I have never seen barbs like these, though."

They moved on, ever watchful. Tara rode behind Zevran, clinging to his waist and giggling. The assassin laughed.

"A more pleasant way to travel, yes?"

"Yes!" Tara laughed, kissing the back of his neck.

The river branched off, and the trail with it; but Bronwyn followed the southerly stream, as the map indicated. She stopped briefly, baffled, as it seemed to end, but Scout sniffed around some boulders, and the broken twigs behind were evidence that men had passed this way. Once past a dense bracken, the trail opened up again.

"Not much longer now. We'd best watch out. They may be waiting for us."

"Well, those men certainly were," Leliana agreed.

The trail grew steeper yet, and the pines closed in around them. Scout seemed to have no trouble following it, but people had gone to a great deal of trouble to keep

this trail unnoticeable to the casual eye.

"We're going to have to dismount here," Bronwyn said. "Let's lead the horses for a bit."

Further on, the side of the trail opened up into another little path. Bronwyn stopped, puzzled at which one to follow, and turned off to the left. After a few dozen yards it led to a broad, hidden meadow, where sheep placidly grazed. A young boy with a shepherd's crook saw them and froze briefly in alarm. Then he ran in the opposite direction, and vanished into the trees.

"This clearly isn't the way to the village," Bronwyn said. "We'd best retrace our steps."

The other path turned steep, but soon, looking up, they could see the end of it: a pair of posts at the top of the path that generally indicated the entry to a town of some sort. And, like most towns, there was a watchman there.

"Only one of them," Tara muttered. "That's good, isn't it? And he's not dressed like those others."

"He doesn't look very friendly," Leliana said softly.

He was not at all friendly. He did not appear fearful, and did not immediately go for his sword, but he glared at them with a mixture of suspicion and dislike.

"Is this Haven?" Bronwyn called out.

"We do not welcome intruders!" the guard shouted back. "Go back the way you came!"

Zevran moved carefully to the side, keeping his eyes open for an ambush. He smirked.

"That was a 'yes,' I believe!"

The guardsman shot him a quick, puzzled look, taking in the large eyes, short stature, and delicately pointed ears. His eyes slid to Tara, and betrayed equal curiosity there. It was clear that the man had never before in his life seen elves.

Tara noticed his stare, and narrowed her eyes at him.

Bronwyn took a quick look about her. The view through the gateway revealed a broad expanse of level ground. The path widened out to a kind of town commons, and led on to a dock on the far side. As the map indicated, there was a small lake feeding the river here: probably the reason for the town's location. Another path branched off, and led on up the hill, presumably to the rest of the village. To the west, towering over all, loomed the mountains.

Leliana distracted the man with her most charming smile, while Cullen, simultaneously, gave the guardsman glare for glare.

Bronwyn kept her tone pleasant. "We've come a long way to find Haven, and to find a friend of ours: Brother Genetivi. Is he here?"

"Never heard of him," the guard said instantly. "We keep to ourselves, here in Haven."

A watchful atmosphere clung to the village. The dark little windows of the cottages gazed on them like unfriendly eyes.

"Ah," Bronwyn said, still pleasant. "So this *is* Haven. Good. Could you direct us to an inn?"

The guardsman sneered at the visitors, and said, "There

is no inn in Haven. There is no place for you here. If you must trade for supplies, there is a general store further up, but it's not likely you'll find what you're looking for."

"We're looking for the Urn of the Sacred Ashes," Leliana said, with disarming candor. "What do you know about it?"

"The Urn is a myth!" the man shot back. "Father Eirik could tell you better than I, if you are foolish enough to insist on staying where you are not wanted."

"*Father Eirik?*" Cullen said, frowning in surprise. "Your priest... is a man? That is... strange."

"It has always been thus in Haven," the guard replied stolidly. "We do not question tradition."

Bronwyn gave him a hard look. "It would seem not."

Some of the inhabitants of the little cottages had come outside, watching the scene in hostile silence. Children clung to their mothers, whispering.

"Come on, We'll try the store first." She led her horse past the man without further pleasantries. The path to the shop led up another steep hill. Bronwyn pressed her lips together, wondering if she should have left the horses in Redcliffe.

"It's a pretty village, in its way," Leliana said. "The cottages are so neat and the gardens very well tended. What a pity they are heretics and doomed to the Void."

Tara cleared her throat and caught Zevran's eye. He only grinned.

They reached the top of the hill and once again found themselves on a flat clearing, surrounded by cottages. Nearby,

a small and sallow boy was playing in the dirt with what looked like a knucklebone, murmuring a rhyme to himself.

"Come, come, bonny Lynne; we've a bed to put you in.

It is soft, it is warm,

It will shelter from the storm.

Come, come, bonny Lynne; we've a bed to put you in.

Dear, dear bonny Lynne sleeps the peaceful crib within.

"A mossy stone, a finger bone,

No one knows but Lynne alone.

Dear, dear bonny Lynne sleeps the peaceful crib within..."

"Hello, my lad!" Bronwyn called. "Can you point me in the direction of the shop?"

He looked up at them, his eyes wide, and pointed at yet another neat wooden cottage. "It's there, but you should go away," he told Bronwyn. "We don't like strangers in Haven."

"Why not?" Bronwyn asked him.

That seemed to puzzle him. "We just don't, that's all. I like your horses, though. I wonder if Father will let me have one."

"If you'll answer some questions," Bronwyn said, smiling. "I'll let you sit on my horse."

He was tempted, and drew closer. "You wouldn't carry me off, would you? Evil witches in the stories are always doing that."

"I'm certainly not a witch," Bronwyn laughed. "Come on! You can pet Posy, if you like. She's quite gentle."

Zevran smothered a laugh. Bronwyn glared at him.

"Quite gentle," she muttered, "when people aren't waving axes in her direction." She smiled again at the boy. "My name is Bronwyn. What's yours?"

"Not supposed to talk to strangers," he said, almost to himself, coming a little closer, eyes full of the horses. "Your dog is really big," he quavered uncertainly.

"Scout, sit!" Bronwyn ordered. "Come on, lad! He won't hurt you."

The boy crept closer, detouring around the fearsome Scout. His hand, small and grubby, reached out tentatively to the horse's shoulder. Posy turned her head, soft nose nuzzling at him. "She's soft," was the wondering whisper.

Bronwyn's glance fell on the object in the boy's left hand. "What's that you've got there?"

Entranced by Posy, he did not look at her. "Something of mine," he answered. "Want to see it?"

He opened his left hand, and Bronwyn leaned over to examine the slender object. Tara's breath was a quick, startled intake of breath. Zevran raised a brow.

It was the shriveled remains of a human finger, the dried skin dark brown, the nail a worn stub. Scout sniffed at it and whined.

Leliana saw it, and said, "Maker have mercy!"

"Where did you get that?" Cullen demanded, his brow a thundercloud.

Bronwyn frowned at him and shook her head. "So you don't see a lot of strangers?" she asked the boy "Did you see

a man called Brother Genetivi a few months ago?"

The boy shrugged, and stroked down the horse's forehead. "If I had a horse, I'd brush him every day!"

"Horses like that," Bronwyn agreed. "He was an older man, not very tall, in brown clothes with a checked shirt. He was looking for the Urn of the Sacred Ashes."

"If I tell you, can I sit on the horse? Can I ride him?"

"If you tell me, I'll put you in the saddle myself, and lead you all the way to the store."

He cocked his head, considering, and then said, "All right. There was a man I didn't know last summer. I don't know his name. The Reavers found him and took him up to the Chantry."

"Did he leave afterwards?" Bronwyn asked, wondering what "reavers" might be.

The boy bit his lip. "I never saw him leave. They took him to Father Eirik. He was asking too many questions."

A grim silence followed.

"Never let it be said that I don't keep my word," Bronwyn said quietly. She boosted the boy into the saddle and took the reins, walking slowly toward the store.

The boy seemed to like being up high, and sat straight and proud in the saddle, the master of all he surveyed. He noticed Tara, and asked, "What's wrong with you? What happened to your ears?"

"I'm an elf," she replied, trying not to be angry at a small, ignorant boy.

"And so am I," Zevran added, briefly doffing his helmet. "The ears are natural for elves."

"They look funny," the boy told him. "Your eyes, too. They're too big. Are elves bad?"

"Not as a rule."

Blessedly, they reached the store at that moment. It was a cottage, like the rest of the them, probably with the downstairs devoted to the wares and their storage. With such a small village with few visitors meant that the storekeeper must have some craft or skill to fill up his time. He certainly could not spend all day idling behind a counter. He might be a weaver or a joiner. With any luck, he would be a brewer. It would make sense for the local store to double as the local tavern.

There was a garden in back, golden with ripening pumpkins. Bronwyn remembered Nan's pumpkin soup, and wondered if she could replicate it. Probably not, unless she had chickens, onions, and celery, and a day to simmer them into a proper stock. She sighed, thinking of Satalia at Castle Highever in days gone by.

In front of the store was a hanging ring of iron with a stick on a string. It was very likely the town alarm, used to rouse the citizenry, or at least summon the folk to the store.

Leliana had mastered her distaste and walked on the other side of the boy. With a dimpling smile, she asked, "Have you heard of the Urn of the Sacred Ashes? Is it spoken of around here?"

"It's old," the boy said, bored. "Andraste doesn't need it



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anymore."

"But you do honor Andraste here," Cullen broke in. "You know about her."

The boy clearly thought he was an idiot. "Of course I know about Andraste. Everybody knows about her. Here in Haven we know more about her than anywhere else. Did you come to see her?"

"Yes," Bronwyn answered, very surprised. "Yes, you could say that we've come to see her. Perhaps after we're done at the shop, we'll go up to the Chantry and talk to Father Eirik. Is that where people go to see her? To see her image in the Chantry?"

"She's not in the Chantry," the boy said, amazed at her ignorance. He broke off, looking past her. "Oh no!"

A woman had flung open the door of a house and screeched at the boy. "Trevin! Come here *right now!*"

"I have to go!" the boy said, trying to scramble down from the saddle. Cullen grabbed him and set him on the ground. The boy shrugged free of his grasp and ran to his mother.

The woman hugged him tight, her furious, terrified eyes never leaving the strangers; then she pushed him through the cottage door and shut it behind him.

"Go away!" she shouted. "Go away! We don't want outsiders here!"

"We're on our way to the shop," Bronwyn said soothingly. To her companions, she muttered, "Come on. Cullen, I want you to stay outside and guard the horses."



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"Bronwyn—"

"That's an order. We're just going into the store," Bronwyn insisted. "How much trouble can we get into in a store?"



The shopkeeper was not happy to see them. No... that wasn't quite right. He had looked up from a tally, a smile on his pleasant face, at the sound of the door opening. At the sight of unknown faces, unknown armor, unknown weapons — and a large wardog — he froze, as if not believing the unwelcome sight. The smile evaporated, and was replaced by wary tension. He was clearly relieved to have the counter between him and the unexpected visitors.

"What do you want?"

"This is the village store, isn't it?" Bronwyn replied gently. "We're just stocking up."

"And as you might have noticed," Tara added pertly, "we are not from these parts." Leliana nudged her in mock reproof.

The storekeeper stared at Tara as if she were a mythical beast, and then frowned. "I don't have much... probably nothing you'd want, but look if you like." He blinked, after his eyes found Zevran. He looked as much bewildered as horrified.

The place looked and smelled much like any other general store: dusty with flour, with a strange blend of sharp cheese and dyed wool in the air. There was little in the way of luxury goods here — in such stores one usually saw a bolt of bright, cheap silk, or a painted teapot, or something of that sort. Haven was such an insular community that

Bronwyn suspected they bartered among themselves a great deal, and used this place for storage as much as anything else. The shopkeeper might act less as an entrepreneur and more as a middleman in such dealings. Smears of clay on his smock indicated that he was almost certainly the village potter. The workshop must be in back.

The companions strolled around the shop, fingering the merchandise. Against the wall opposite the counter was a large chest. Zevran flipped open the lid and whistled.

"Now *that* is where he keeps the good stuff, so to speak!"

"Look here —" the storekeeper protested.

Bronwyn did look. There were some very nice items in the trunk: among them a jeweled locket, which when opened revealed a miniature portrait encircled with seed pearls; a pair of rather small but first quality leather boots; two good daggers; a monogrammed canteen; religious amulets; a half-dozen books on various subjects.

"*Creatore!*" Zevran exclaimed. "Those boots! They are Antivan leather! And my size — or near enough! They are for sale, yes?" He snatched them from the chest, and breathed in the scent. "Ah! How I have missed that smell!"

"You like to sniff leather?" Tara laughed. "Has anyone ever told you that you're totally warped?"

"I am!" Zevran declared. "and proud of it!" He sat down on the floor and tugged his old boots off. Handling the Antivan leather with reverence, he murmured, "Let us hope these fit!"

Bronwyn smiled indulgently, and began putting

together enough odds and ends to justify pumping the storekeeper for information.

"...Does that cheese keep well? I'd like a round of it, and a half-weight of the dried berries. That jerky looks good... a half-weight of that too... what's this in the bottles?"

"Perry," the storekeeper answered sullenly.

"I love perry! I'll take two bottles. It will be a treat for my friends."

Leliana poked through the contents of the chest herself, admiring the pretty locket, and then sorting through the books. When Bronwyn had finished collecting her supplies and had shoved them at the merchant for a tally, Leliana interrupted.

"Bronwyn, come here. This book is very interesting. Perhaps you will want this as well."

"I really think —"

"You really *want* to see this," Leliana insisted, her voice full of meaning.

Bronwyn wanted to pay for the goods and question the storekeeper, who looked ready to jump out of his skin. Still, she walked over to look at the little green colume Leliana was holding out. It was not the title of the book — which Bronwyn saw at a glance was *EDIBLE PLANTS OF THE FROSTBACKS* — that Leliana wanted to draw attention to, as much as the name inscribed on the inside of the front cover.

FROM THE LIBRARY OF BROTHER FERDINAND GENETIVI

Her eyes met Leliana's, and she blew out a long, long

breath.

"You're right. EDIBLE PLANTS? That's a very practical book. We'll take that, too. What are the others? We might want them."

While Zevran bounded to his feet, rejoicing in his splendid new boots, Bronwyn and Leliana quickly thumbed through the books in the chest. Two others were Genetivi's: his own *IN PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE: THE TRAVELS OF A CHANTRY SCHOLAR*, scribbled over with corrections for a new edition, and a monograph on social customs of the Avvars. The other books were a miscellany, some very old. One was a traveler's manuscript diary, the crumbling yellowed pages of which were blank after the words "... Arrived todaye at the Village of Havene..."

Bronwyn set the book aside, and walked back to the counter, a smile fixed on her face. "How much altogether? Would this..." she dropped a generous handful of silver onto the counter... "cover it all? No doubt you're wondering why we're here. Actually, we've come looking for the Urn of the Sacred Ashes, which some say is a myth..." she waved her hand in mild deprecation, forestalling the storekeeper's protests. "...and we're also looking for a friend of ours. Brother Genetivi? He told us he was traveling to Haven. Have you seen him?"

The man stared at her, mouth working. He stammered a denial.

"Never heard of him!"

"Yes, you have," Bronwyn growled, opening the green book. "For here's his name, right in a book of his for sale in your own shop! Now *where is he?*"

He was shaking with fear, his eyes almost wobbling. Bronwyn clicked her tongue impatiently, and the man croaked, "Father Eirik can tell you. I don't know anything!"

"Where is he? In the Chantry? Where's that?"

"At the top of the hill. That's all there is up there. Father Eirik. I can show you..." He walked quickly to the door, and opened it, nearly walking into Cullen. He jumped back in almost comical surprise at the sight of the big stranger. A briefly widening of his eyes, and then he darted to the side of the porch and began banging on the iron ring, clanging out an alarm.

"We're under attack!" he bellowed. "Call the Reavers! Reavers!"

"Stop him!" Bronwyn shouted, bursting out of the doorway. Cullen felled the man with his fist, but it was too late. People were rushing out of their homes, armed with anything that came to hand: hatchets, pruning hooks, hunting bows, gutting knives.

"Get back!" Bronwyn shouted. "We have not attacked this village. We are here —"

An arrow glanced off her pauldron. Another buried itself in the porch support next to her. More arrows followed. The shopkeeper staggered up and pulled a knife on Zevran, who promptly cut his throat. A shriek rose from the villagers... a woman's shriek of grief and horror.

Tara flinched back from another arrow and cast a fireball into the gathering mob. It exploded in red gold light. Villagers screamed, knocked off their feet. Children ran shrieking, their clothes on fire. A girl rushed away, and ran up to the uphill path, crying for help.

"I didn't mean to *hit* them!" Tara wailed. "I just meant to scare them away!"

"Well, they're pretty scared now!" Bronwyn snapped.

While the villagers surged away in panic, dragging the wounded with them, three armored men came rushing down the hill, axes whirling. A swordsman followed them, running up from the lower slope of the village. Bronwyn recognized him as the gate guard.

"Nothing to do now but fight!" Zevran shrugged. "Now, *bella mia!* Now shoot your pretty fireworks!"

Tara, instead, froze one of the men in his tracks. Leilana shot one in the throat, and another in the eye. The arrows barely slowed them down. Whatever "Reavers" were, they were tough and took quite a bit of killing. Not even the toughest opponent, however could keep on fighting when his skull was split open, or he was stabbed in an artery and bleeding out. A few villagers ran forward to try to help their warriors and were shot down for their pains.

It was soon over. Some of the people fled down the path to the river, and hid themselves there. Some ran into their houses and slammed the doors and shutters closed. A few lingered, fearful but defiant, shouting curses. Some were

on their knees, arms open to the careless skies, beseeching divine intervention.

"— Andraste strike them down!"

"— Murderers! Bandits!"

"— Save us, Andraste!"

"Get back!" Bronwyn shouted, waving her bloody sword at them. "Get away from us! The next fool who attacks will get the same as the rest! Tara!" she ordered in a whisper. "Throw another fireball, but try not to hit anyone!"

Tara gulped, her eyes on the sprawled bodies littering the commons. "All right..."

A small fireball exploded a few yards from the villagers. A pandemonium of shrieks and wails followed.

"Get back!" Bronwyn shouted again. "The next one will be bigger! Back off or we'll set every house in the village afire!"

There was an ominous murmur. With sick disappointment, she saw that a lot of people in this little village were brave: the sort willing to die for their beliefs. Luckily, however, they also had children to protect, and it was late in the year and cold at night. The villagers backed away; hatred and venomous outrage in some faces, blank terror in others.

When they were far enough away, Bronwyn snapped, "Let's mount up! We'll find the Chantry. We're most likely to get answers there." She swung onto Posy, not liking to see what they were leaving behind.

A pair of small children rushed out, crying, and begged their dead mother to get up. An old man ran after at the

riders, cursing, and shook a fist at them. A boy threw a rock. Bronwyn gritted her teeth, wondering in what particular she differed from Rendon Howe, and led her companions up the steep hill, leaving the villagers to their dead and wounded.

"They may follow us," Cullen pointed out.

Bronwyn knew they might. "Do you really want to systematically hunt down and kill every man, woman, and child in the village? That's our only alternative at the moment. Would you call down the Right of Annulment, so to speak, on people who are not even mages? They are defending their homes from invaders, for Maker's sake!"

More resistance meet them on the hill: another pair of axemen. Tara cursed them both into paralysis, and Bronwyn was tempted to leave them. But no, it would be foolish. Ordinary villagers were one thing, trained warriors another. These men could be dangerous: creeping up on them or lying in wait as they made their way down the hill. She beheaded one as she rode past. The other fell to Zevran's sword.

"We're making no friends here," Bronwyn muttered bitterly.

It was not far to the Chantry, perched on the hill's summit. No people were outside. Nothing impeded the magnificent view of the mountains surrounding them on two sides. To the south, the slope dropped off, and the river glittered up at them like a bright ribbon.

The Chantry was small, but well built of grey Frostback granite, with colored glass in the windows. It was

old, and incomparably the best building in the village; but so Chantries often were. Bronwyn looked for a place to leave the horses. She sighed. In back of the Chantry was a fenced garden — the priest's garden, no doubt. There was a tub of water there for the plants.

"We'll leave the horses there," she pointed.

A little scandalized, Leliana whispered, "They will eat the priest's cabbages!"

"Come on."

Inside, it was something like a Chantry, certainly, if not a Chantry any of them had ever seen. At the far end of the long chamber was a broad wooden platform, but there was no statue of Andraste, and no sacred fire.

"Do you suppose the Urn is here?" Leliana murmured wistfully.

Before a small group of worshipers stood a man, acting as priest. No, he was their priest. Only in faraway Tevinter were men priests. To Bronwyn and her companions a male priest was as bizarre and unnatural as a talking dog. It was so contrary to the normal order of things that it was hard to credit their eyes.

"Those are Tevinter robes the priest is wearing, or something like them," Tara whispered softly. "And he has a staff..."

"Wonderful," murmured Bronwyn. "A priest who is not only a man, but a mage. No one is going to believe this. Let's go meet the revered... *father*."

Cullen made a soft sound of disgust.

To the sides of the platform were stationed four armored warriors. None of them wore the ceremonial armor and horned helmets the companions had seen recently. Bronwyn felt faintly relieved at that. If it came to fighting, perhaps these would be only ordinary warriors and not the fearsome Reavers.

Kneeling before the priest was the young woman who had run ahead to give warning. She was shaking, not entirely calmed by the priest's hand laid reassuringly on her head. The priest was exhorting his flock.

"...We are blessed beyond measure. We are chosen by the Holy and Beloved to be Her guardians. This sacred duty is given to us alone. Rejoice, my children, and prepare your hearts to receive Her. Lift up your voices and despair not, for She will raise Her faithful servants to glory when —"

His eyes narrowed as Bronwyn and those behind her strode out of the shadows.

"Ah. Welcome. Lydilla told me that we had visitors in the village. Have you found your time in Haven interesting?"

"I think Haven has found it rather interesting, too," Bronwyn said grimly. "We did not come to fight, but we are certainly not going to allow ourselves to be murdered. Perhaps you should calm your people, *Father*. We have come for the Urn of the Sacred Ashes, and to find Brother Genetivi, our friend. Produce the man and send us on our way, and your people need not suffer. If they attack us

again, we will stop them."

Angry looks and words were the response. The priest quieted his people, and stood forth, eyes blazing with anger and contempt.

"And what right have you to force your way in here, full of your demands and your importance? Is this your village? Did we ask you to come to Haven? This is what always happens when outsiders invade our village. You have no respect for us: for our privacy, for our traditions. You do not understand our ways. You have brought war to Haven in your ignorance and greed. You will tell others about us, and then what?"

Leliana burst out, "The Urn would bring hope to all the world! It belongs to all who love and worship Andraste!"

The priest flicked a glance at her and frowned.

"You are devout but misguided. The Urn is irrelevant. We, who know the deepest mysteries of Andraste, know better than to worship Her mere ashes. Our duty is a higher one than that."

Cullen was looking very uneasy, and spoke up.

"Your people have tried to kill us since we left Sulcher! It's hardly an act of devotion to kill travelers simply to keep your village hidden!"

"You know nothing of us," the priest countered. "Staying hidden means staying protected; and we must protect Haven and our charges at all costs!. We don't owe you any explanations for our actions. We have a sacred duty: failure to protect Her would be a greater sin. All will be forgiven."

"Where is Genetivi?" Bronwyn asked quietly, not wanting to involve herself in crack-brained theology. "We know he was here. We found some of his possessions for sale in the village. Was he alive or dead when you took them from him?"

"He is not far from here," Father Eirik answered calmly. With a look of contempt at Bronwyn, he murmured to the kneeling girl and pressed something into her hand. She rose and backed away from the strangers, trying to circle around and get to the door.

"Cullen, stop her!" Bronwyn ordered. "I don't want her —"

The priest roared, "Run to the temple, Lydilla! Warn them!" With that he raised his staff and a wave of pure energy knocked Tara, Bronwyn, and Leliana off their feet. The guardsmen leaped past the wooden platform, swords drawn, and attacked.

Most of the women fled, their cries shrilling out in the open air. Cullen swore, caught up with Lydilla, and knocked her senseless with a blow. He pounded back to the fight and summoned a Holy Smite, hoping Tara would forgive him. The air around him coalesced, and then he could feel them, the wisps of magic; and he drew them in like a fishing line. Magic filled him, cleansed and ecstatic, and then faded in a warm glow of victory.

Father Eirik abruptly collapsed, eyes wide in disbelief. His staff dropped from nerveless fingers and rolled away. Cullen swung Yusaris and ended him there, on the stones

of his Chantry.

Scout bowled a shocked guardsman over, tearing him apart. Zevran tripped another guardsman and cut his throat. Leliana bounded to her feet and parried another man's blade while Bronwyn stabbed him in the back. One by one, the enemy fell. Some of the worshippers tried to help their priest, but were soon cut down.

Tara staggered to her feet, furious and nauseated.

"Cullen!" she shrieked. "I'm going to kill you!"

"Don't kill him!" Bronwyn shouted over the noise. "He just saved us all!"

The girl, Lydilla, stirred and shook her head. She tried to crawl away from the massacre, but Zevran pounced on her.

"You there! What's your name... Lydilla!" Bronwyn shouted. She strode up and yanked the girl to her feet. "Where is Genetivi? Tell me or I'll burn the whole damned village to the ground. I'm done with playing games with you crazy people! Where is he?"

"Dead!" The girl glared back at her defiantly, rubbing her purpling jaw. "He was given to Andraste, and that is more honor than *you* deserve." Her gaze wandered to the bodies on the floor, and she moaned with grief. Bronwyn gave her a shake.

"Given to Andraste?" Leliana wondered. "What do you mean?"

Lydilla flinched back a little from Bronwyn's strange green eyes and Zevran's smirk. "He was taken to the Temple and given to Her," she repeated slowly, as if to half-

witted children.

Leliana picked up something from a the floor: a strange amulet of bronze: round, with curving points like a star... or like the emblem of the Holy Fire. It was large and heavy, and looked more like a device than an adornment.

"This is what the priest gave her."

The girl tried to snatch at it, but Zevran held her back.

"I know what that is," Tara spoke up. "I've seen illustrations in the Circle library. That's a Tevinter key. They still use those, and a stylized version of the design is often embroidered on Tevinter clothing."

"Hang on to it," Bronwyn said to Leliana. "If it's a key, there must be a lock or two it fits." She turned to their captive. " So where is the Temple?"

The girl looked away, and Bronwyn briefly cuffed her. "It's either the Temple or we go back and finish the village. Your choice."

Lydilla stared at her in loathing. "You're monsters. Savages from the outer world. You're everything Father Eirik warned us about."

"Temple... or village?" Bronwyn asked, with cool menace.

The girl was shoved outside and after some persuasion showed them the other path that curved around the hill's summit, and then up the nearby mountain that loomed over the village. "It is there," she said bitterly. "But they will be waiting."

"So be it," Bronwyn said grimly. "And now, I suggest that

you return to the village. If you raise a hand to us again, you will be killed. In fact, I promise you that if your village offers us any violence, it will be destroyed. End of story. Stay in your houses and keep quiet, and we have no reason to do you further harm. Go home, and don't be stupid."

The girl twisted away, and spat on the ground at Bronwyn's feet. She ran down the path to the village, giving them one last backward look of scorn and hatred.

"Cullen, are you all right?" Leliana caught him by the arm. The ex-Templar was pasty-faced and disoriented.

"Sorry... " he managed. "Bronwyn, I really, really need some lyrium. I'm sorry... "

"Me too," agreed Tara. She fumbled in her belt pouch for vials. "Here." She passed one to Cullen, who uncorked it and drank thirstily. Tara downed hers and took a deep breath. "Wow. Go easy on the Smite, Cullen. I thought I was going to die. What's a mage without her magic?"

"Why don't you rest a bit?" Bronwyn said to Cullen, patting him on the shoulder. "You did good work today. Sit out here at the doorstep and give a yell if you see anyone coming. Eat something. We need to search the Chantry, and then get some rest ourselves, if we're going to have to fight whoever is in this Temple."

"We can't rest too long," Zevran shook his head. "We'll just give the village time to regroup."

"We can't fight in the shape we're in. Besides, I think they're more afraid of us than we are of them at the

moment. We'll do a quick search. We don't know that that girl wasn't lying. As soon as you feel better, Tara, cast some rejuvenation spells on all of us. Then we'll be fit to go."

To the left of the Chantry nave was a door that led to the sacristy and the priest's personal quarters. It was large and well-furnished. Large chests stood at the foot of the bed.

"A bed!" Tara sighed. "Can I lie down for a minute?" She curled up on the neatly spread blanket and moaned with relief. "Good bed. I wish I could take it with me."

Zevran grinned at her, and opened one of the chests. "See this! Their Chantry is well-endowed!"

Inside were coins of various ages and nations, small ingots of gold and silver, rings and amulets and brooches. Zevran immediately pocketed some of the smaller items.

"We don't have time for treasure-hunting!" Bronwyn said sharply. "Look for anything pertaining to Brother Genetivi. From the shape of the Chantry there is another room. Come on, Tara! Don't fall asleep!"

The other room proved harder to access. An arched doorway appeared to be walled up, but it was clear that the other room lay beyond. Leliana found a hidden recess with a curious bronze shape built into it.

"The very place for our key!" she said, triumphant, and pressed it into the opening. A loud click, and a panel of wood faced with a thin layer of stone slid away almost noiselessly.

At first glance, the room appeared to be filled with tall bookshelves. The place smelled of old parchment and

leather bindings.

Bronwyn looked to her left, around the corner, and said, "Was this a library... or a prison?"

Many books. A writing table and chair. A bed – with manacles to chain the occupant down. The bedding bore ominous dark-brown stains. Scout sniffed at them and looked up at Bronwyn, whining.

"They kept someone here for a time, I suspect," Leliana said solemnly. "We know that Brother Genetivi was in the village. Perhaps they wanted fresh knowledge of the outside world..."

That made dreadfully good sense to Bronwyn. To this fearful, isolated community, a widely traveled scholar like Genetivi would have been a gift from the Maker: knowledgeable about all the nations of Thedas; current with the politics and culture of the day. He might have lived for weeks, hoping for help and rescue. Hoping, Bronwyn feared, in vain.

"And when they thought they knew enough..." Zevran shrugged. "I hope it was fast."

Leliana sorted through bits of parchment on the writing table. "Some of the writing... it does look like Brother Genetivi's..."

"I think we can be fairly certain he was here," Bronwyn agreed. "Everyone eat something, and then we'd better get going."

They had a choice: they could spend the night in the Chantry and face the Temple in the morning, or they could forge ahead, though the sun was dipping behind the Frostbacks.

Bronwyn gave thoughtful, prudent orders, but was sick

at heart. Whatever faced them at the Temple, it was clear to her that there she would have no opportunity for mercy. Once committed, they very likely would have to kill everyone they faced. Already she had lost count of the people whose lives she had ended today.

For what? So that one woman could live? Was Anora, Queen of Ferelden or not, really worth this slaughter? Was she worth the lives of the children killed by accident in the village, or the children who would die because Bronwyn had killed their parents? Yes, the people of Haven were heretics, but Bronwyn was not a Templar or a priest, who was given authority to execute those whose theology was insufficiently pure. Considering some of her own secret thoughts, she knew herself to be the worst sort of hypocrite in that regard.

Were the Ashes even in the Temple? The little boy had not thought much of them, nor the man-priest, for that matter. They talked as if Andraste was alive and walked among them. At that idea, a trickle of fear shivered through her. What if she was wrong, and these people were right? Mere numbers did not make right, or Ferelden should have meekly bowed to the Orlesian yoke.

She shook her head, fighting such dark thoughts. She must not fall prey to foolish superstition. A woman named Andraste had certainly lived: a brave, charismatic woman who rallied the subject peoples of Thedas behind her and fought for the freedom of all. Andraste, however, was dead

and gone, many ages ago. If anything remained of her, it was mere dust and ashes; the ashes they were here to find.

Still, if She were here today, what would She think of the powerful institution that advised and sometimes commanded emperors and peasants, nobles and freeholders, all in Her name? What would She think of that institution, if She knew that its holy warriors were addicted to lyrium to keep them obedient? What would She think of Tevinter, a place that claimed to worship Her while its capital city contained a slave market that was bigger than all of Highever town? What would She think of the Alienages in the rest of Thedas, where elves were treated as little better than slaves? What would She think of the Circles, where mages were imprisoned for life?

Not much, Bronwyn suspected. She wouldn't think much of any of them, Bronwyn herself included. Andraste had loved freedom and fought for it, and there was precious little freedom to be found anywhere in Thedas.

"You're brooding," Leliana said, sitting down by her on the Chantry doorstep. "You brood very well, but sometimes a little too much for your own good."

"I was thinking of all the people we've killed today, and the others we will kill. I'm hoping that the Urn is not a myth and that the Ashes will be all they are supposed to be; because otherwise all these people were murdered in vain, and we are no better than bandits."

Leliana stared at her, pretty mouth open, and then

sighed deeply. "That is a heavy thought indeed! We must trust in the Maker. He knows that we mean well... that our intentions are pure..."

Bronwyn glanced over at Zevran who was presenting Tara with a looted trinket. She blushed, and touched his cheek. Leliana looked too, and squeezed Bronwyn's hand.

"We are sad, imperfect creatures. The Maker knows that. Those people would have killed us, if they had the chance. It is no sin to defend one's life."

"They wouldn't have attacked us if we hadn't barged in here. They haven't killed as many of us as we have of them."

Leliana put an arm around her shoulders. "Remember why we are here: to keep Ferelden stable and as peaceful as possible. To do that, its Queen must rule. To rule, she must be healthy. If there were civil war, many more would die than died here today. As for the Temple..." Leliana bit her lip. "That is in the hands of the Maker. I shall pray that the false priests and heretics see the error of their ways and let us pass in peace. Prayer can accomplish great things." She smiled ruefully. "And even if my prayer is not answered in the way I wish, the act of prayer will give me the strength to accept what cannot be changed, and the courage to do what must be done."

Cullen called out to Zevran, and the assassin gave Tara a quick kiss before he walked over to join the former Templar.

Leliana rose. "I had better help them."

They were laying traps for any villagers brave or fool-

ish enough to climb the hill to the Chantry. Bronwyn did not want to be attacked from behind, and also wanted to protect the horses, which must be left corralled behind the Chantry. A largest set of traps were at the top of the hill. The entry to the Chantry would be likewise rigged, as well as the garden gate.

The dead bodies had been hauled out of the Chantry and tumbled down the hill. In time, the villagers would find them and give them whatever disposal was customary here.

Bronwyn got up and tended to the horses, making sure they would have sufficient water and food for a day or two. If they were not back by then... well... the villagers would probably like having a few horses. Then she hauled their extra gear and any loot they wanted into the Chantry's secret room, and locked it away.

By the time everything was done, a blood-red sunset peered over the Frostbacks. Bronwyn hoped it was not an omen.

"To the Temple, then."

It was not terribly far, but uphill all the way: a long, well-worn mountain path that took them around to the south side of the mountain. As they went higher, it grew colder and darker. Snow whitened the path, and their boots crunched loudly, the noise echoing back from the towering slopes. Cold mist curled up from the deep valleys below. Icy patches lay in wait to trip them. The snow grew deeper as they climbed. Bronwyn was relieved to see no recent tracks in it.

At first, the path appeared to end at the frozen south face



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of the mountain. Even as they drew closer, there was little to indicate the presence of any man-made structure, other than some long, low steps that led to an arched bronze door. It was decorated with low reliefs and inscribed, Tara told them, in Old Arcanum. Cullen tried to open the door, and found it locked.

In the middle of the door, however, was a recess: round, with curving points that made it resemble the Holy Fire...

Bronwyn pressed the ancient key into the recess, and turned. A heavy clanking noise vibrated through the door, and she pushed it open easily on its well-oiled hinges.

"Oh..." Leliana gasped.

She was not the only one. The companions, silent in awe, moved forward into a vast vaulted interior shrouded in ice. Pillars, painted and carved and glittering with frost, held up the dim and distant roof. Cracks in the roof let in the fading twilight. Doors led off the immense hall on either side, and in the center a huge fire blazed in a round pit as large as a bedchamber. At the far end was a grand double staircase leading up toward a smoky and mysterious vista. The chamber was truly enormous: bigger than any hall in the ancient elven tombs, easily as big as the mighty caverns of the Dead Trenches. And it was beautiful.

"I don't know if this is the funeral temple of Andraste," Bronwyn said, "but it's the most amazing place I've ever seen, and at this point, I've seen quite a few!"

"If it is not the temple of Andraste," Leliana declared solemnly,



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"then it ought to be, for nothing could be more magnificent than this. Not even the Grand Cathedral can compare!"

Prudently, the door was shut and locked behind them.

"We'll work our way through systematically," Bronwyn whispered. "We don't want people to sneak up on us from behind."

The place was certainly inhabited: all the side corridors were well illuminated by torches. They turned first to the right, and found no guards, but a rich treasury. The sight of gold was always pleasing, and Tara took in a quick, excited breath at the shine of it; but Bronwyn was weary of wonders, and simply shut the lids and relocked the chamber.

"We can't carry anymore than we're carrying. If we come back this way, we'll take what we can. No more treasure-hunting! I want to get through this alive."

Wise words, for the corridor to the left of the great hall was not deserted, and the first shout of alarm brought battle to them, and warriors charging...



CHAPTER 6

THE AIR IS
FULL OF GODS

BRONWYN!"

Tara's voice drew her out of her evil dreams: a blessed release. Her eyes opened to see a stone ceiling above her and stone walls around her. The stone floor she lay on was no softer than when she had first arranged herself on it.

Tara knelt down by her, and whispered, "I finished my watch. I guess it's time to go."

Zevran was already awake, grinning in the dim torchlight, setting out breakfast for them.

Leliana stirred. "What dreams! If only it were not all so ugly..." She rolled over and shook Cullen. "Time to rise, my friend."

Bronwyn sat up, aware of every bruise on her body. "Where's Scout? Scout!"

The mabari trotted into the little stone room: the choke-point for the rest of the temple.

Bronwyn now regretted not getting a full night's sleep before tackling the temple. It was far larger than she had imagined, and had been contested nearly every step of the

way. The dormitories, the chapels, the libraries, the private sleeping rooms of the mages: all of it had required endless fighting through a maze of traps. Even after healing and rejuvenation and hours of sleep, Bronwyn's whole body ached. They would need more spells before they could go on.

The temple, they had found, had another long hall, and after that diverged into two branches, both of which eventually rejoined at this choke point. As she had feared, getting this far had required the death of every inhabitant they met. None, thank the Maker, were children, at least. As of now, the bodies lay where they had fallen. They had cleared this one place, and nearly collapsed with exhaustion.

Cullen sat up, groaning, and groped for his canteen. At least they would neither thirst nor starve in this place: it was packed with supplies and had fountain-style wells for water. The best of everything Haven had to offer was kept here: grain in abundance as well as many different kinds of bread; fruit preserves and wildflower honey; meats both salted and smoked; barrels of ale and kegs of cider and perry. Nothing had been stinted where the temple was concerned.

"You know," Zevran laughed, "if we did not have to worry about whatever lurks beyond this door, we could live here very well."

"I know!" Tara agreed. "Those mages had really good beds. It's too bad we couldn't sleep in them!"

"I'm just glad nothing came through that door," Bron-

wyn grunted, rearranging her armor.

"Come! Eat!" Zevran urged her. "There is some of that perry you say you like. Very agreeable at breakfast. There is good bread and cheese. These heretics know how to provision a stronghold."

"And there's butter!" Tara lavished some on her bread, and bit into it blissfully. "I haven't had such good butter since we were at the Warden Compound!"

"Leliana and Cullen have never been there," Zevran remarked. "They have much to look forward to."

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed, helping herself to the remarkably good bread. Heretics or not, Haven bakers knew their business. "Let's see: Alistair has been there, of course, before the Blight, but not Anders or Cullen, nor Leliana or Morrigan, or Broasca, Adaia, Oghren, Sten, or Carver. Someday, though... someday we'll all be there together in the Warden's Hall, and we'll have the celebratory dinner to end them all. The housekeeper loves to spoil her Wardens and all their friends!"

Scout wanted his breakfast too. He wheedled Bronwyn into giving him some of her buttered bread and a chunk of good smoked ham. Bronwyn rubbed his ears affectionately, amazed at her dog's courage and resilience.

"I wish we had a few more of him," Cullen remarked. "The Wardens would conquer the world!"

"Maybe someday," Bronwyn said. "It's not a bad idea. The griffons of old are gone, but they were useless in the Deep

Roads anyway. Not like Scout!"

The dog looked up from his breakfast, grinning and licking his chops.

No one hurried. The big closed door might lead anywhere, though Bronwyn hoped fervently that it would lead them to the Urn. They packed up with great care. Bronwyn fastened some grenades to her belt, thinking of Adaia. That thought made her mind turn to Ostagar, and she wondered what was happening there.

And she thought of Loghain, of course. He had been displeased with her, haring off on what he thought a fool's errand. If the person afflicted had been anyone other than his daughter, her departure very likely would have meant the end of their alliance.

But Anora was his daughter, and he loved her deeply, though undemonstratively. To him, her life was no doubt worth all the blood shed for her yesterday – and all that might be shed today. If Bronwyn could bring the Ashes back to Anora, and if they did all that legend suggested, then Bronwyn would need no other dowry to take to her husband. Not that Loghain had ever said anything about expecting a dowry. If anything, Bronwyn hoped for a bridal gift that would include a gown or two... And definitely more hairpins. She struggled with her tangles, braiding them away a little more securely.

"Here," Tara said, handing Cullen another vial of lyrium. "Keep this on you. I have a feeling the next few hours are going to be rough."



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They gathered at the doorway and Bronwyn nodded to Zevran. Cautiously, he pushed open the door. Like much of the temple, the next room was well-illuminated with torches and wall sconces filled with oil.

This, however, was not like the temple they had seen. What they saw now was a large chamber of half-finished stone and rough edges. Stalactites hung perilously from the ceiling. Of course the entire temple was essentially a cavern, but labor and art had smoothed and polished it like a jewel. This portion was left in a more... natural... state. More supplies were stored here, but mostly... it was full of rubbish. Trash. Even human waste.

"Well," Bronwyn said quietly. She hoped she would not do something appalling, like burst into tears. "This is disappointing."

Was this the end of the journey? They had not found the Urn in the temple, though they had approached each new doorway with high hopes. They had found treasure, and some admirable statuary, and precious, ancient texts by the score, but not the Urn, nor anything that could be construed to be an Urn.

"Look! There is a doorway leading off it. Perhaps there is a passage that connects with the rest of the temple," Leliana said, with forced cheer. "There must be something remarkable here... somewhere, for the people of Haven to defend it with such fervor."

Cullen nodded. "They spoke of seeing Andraste. Well,



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we haven't seen her so far. There must be more. I'm sure we didn't miss any other exits. Whatever is important must be further on."

Bronwyn turned to the others. "Zevran? Tara? Go on or go back?"

Zevran shrugged. "I am your sworn man. I go where you go, Noble One."

"Oh, let's go at least a little farther," Tara urged. "Maybe the temple was really more like a school... Yes, really. It had that big classroom place and those libraries. Maybe the real secrets are beyond the caves. We've got to try, anyway. We'd look stupid if we turned back now!"

Hoping for the best, Bronwyn slipped through the door quietly, and the rest followed.

They explored the chamber in silence. Aside from the one cave-like opening, they discovered no other hidden exits. It was not much more than a midden. There was nothing to be done but enter the tunnel.

It was a cave, but some work had been done over the years to make it easily passable. It was much darker than the temple. Oil lamps were set into the wall, but at long intervals. Bronwyn moved along, alert for any sound ahead of them. At her side, Zevran checked for traps.

After a short time, Bronwyn put up her hand. Just ahead, someone was... whistling. Whistling quite cheerfully, as they drew closer. There was a bend in the cave, and Bronwyn gestured everyone up against the stone, while they waited.

The young man was alone, and drew his blade as soon as he saw them. He was down and dead in seconds, and Cullen dragged the body out of sight. No one said anything. They simply moved on, deeper and deeper into the tunnels.

"At least," Tara whispered softly, "they're nothing like the Deep Roads."

That was true. That was something. Bronwyn felt a little cheered at Tara's words. The Deep Roads had been incomparably more horrible. Today they were moving down a rather clean cave tunnel, with a floor that someone had taken the trouble to smooth enough for easy travel. And whatever they found, it was impossible that it could be as bad as the Broodmother that had nearly blinded her.

They clung to the sides of the tunnel, moving along fairly quickly. The air changed, and up ahead they could see the sides of the cave open out to a chamber. Faint noise filtered back to them. This would be the first test.

"What it is?" Leliana whispered. "Some sort of work room?"

"Maybe."

A wide and high cavern, the roof supported by a single, massive, natural pillar. The pillar obscured the opposite side of the chamber. They could hear human voices, conversing in normal tones, and an odd squeaking and chittering.

"Some sort of machine?" Cullen guessed.

Scout sniffed the air, and then sniffed it again and growled, hackles rising.

"Shh!" Bronwyn gestured for silence, and the growl

became inaudible, but Scout was no less alert. "All right... come on. Let's see what it is."

The faint squeaks exploded into high, horrible squeals, and around the pillar appeared a half dozen tiny dragons, running directly at them.

"Maker!" Cullen burst out. Everyone else said very much the same thing at the same time, with the occasional obscenity added.

Scout, who already had smelled what they were, was the first to know what to do. He barreled at the baby dragon in the lead and fastened his jaws at its throat, giving it a mighty shake.

"Come on!" Bronwyn shouted. "Tara! Watch out for —"

She stumbled, hit by a sickening green bolt of energy.

"— mages..."

Leliana was loosing arrows with astonishing speed at a pair of outraged warriors. Tara caught the opposing mage in a web of paralysis. Scout released the first dragonling, its neck broken, and leaped for another. More of the repulsive little monsters rushed at them, squeaking furiously. They were dangerous too: too young to flame, but big enough to kill with fangs and claws. Scout uttered an anguished yip as one of them raked him across the side. Bronwyn cut the dragonling's head off, and devoted herself to killing the rest of them, while the rest of the party killed the humans. Tara thumped her staff against the floor, satisfied, as the mage collapsed, frozen to death.

One warrior tried to run, but Leliana's arrows brought him... her?... down.

Her, it appeared, on further inspection. The chamber proved to be quite interesting. There were many books, and various kinds of strange equipment, as well as some small flasks of blood, arranged on a very elegant set of shelves.

"No wonder Genetivi was interested in dragon cults," Tara whispered. "He must have figured out about these people. They really do live with dragons!" She reached for the book, but Bronwyn stopped her.

"Heal Scout first."

"Of course. Sorry, you good boy. You knew before we did, didn't you? You are so smart..."

Everyone's cuts and bruises were healed as well, and Bronwyn agreed that they needed to reassess their situation. She drew out the book on dragon cults and had another look.

"All right... *'cultists... kill a small number of those young in order to feast on draconic blood. That blood is said to have a number of strange long-term effects, including bestowing greater strength and endurance... Nevarran dragon-hunters have said these cultists are incredibly powerful opponents.'* Yes," she said wryly. "That certainly sounds like those Reavers."

"So they live with dragons," Cullen said thoughtfully, "but they don't worship them. They worship Andraste, however warped and confused their notions of her are."

Zevran thought they were missing the point. "They

live with the *dragons*, my friend. They raise *dragons*. That means that somewhere soon we will come across *dragons* bigger than those little ones. Maybe *very big*."

"True." Bronwyn patted the grenades on her belt. "If they have young, then there is likely a mature female dragon and some drakes somewhere near Haven. These cultists bring the eggs here and care for them." She added slowly, "If the caverns contain a large enough chamber, some of the mature dragonkind might even live here. We had better be very careful."

"That dragon we killed in the elven temple wasn't so terrible," Tara recalled. "as long as you didn't let yourself get flamed. I've never seen a drake. They're the males that can't fly, right?"

"Right. But books say they can flame, so they're still dangerous." She patted the mabari's head. "If you smell dragon, Scout, let me know."

The dog yipped, nosing at the dragonling corpses. Dragons had a very strong, interesting smell. There might be a good snack here later, when he was hungry.

"I wish Jowan were here," Tara said. "He'd be fascinated by all the new books."

"And the blood magic," Cullen muttered.

Tara made a face at him, and stuffed a thin volume into a pouch. "We don't know if we'll be coming back this way," she said earnestly, trying to excuse herself to Bronwyn.

"No more baggage," Bronwyn insisted. "I'm willing to

bet everything I possess that we'll need to fight again — and soon."

Tara sighed to herself. There was so much here. Jowan would go wild for the books, of course, but so would Anders. Morrigan would pretend to be above it all, but she'd be cramming ancient tomes into her pack like everybody else. This was a treasure-house of knowledge, and no one but a handful of crazy dragon-fanciers had seen it. She played with the idea of mages hiding out here. If those Haven folk could conceal themselves, why not mages? Niall, now — he was an Isolationist. He'd love the idea of a society of mages, living free and independent lives in this amazing temple, studying and researching whatever they pleased. Of course, someone would have to cook the dinners... and raise the food... and make the beds. Tara was not sure that the Isolationists had quite figured out the minutiae of daily life. How would they get by, when there were only mages about, who knew next to nothing about anything practical?

The cave branched eventually. Bronwyn stood at the juncture, with no idea which way to go. Scout liked the right hand tunnel.

"It's a bit...smelly," Leliana said, making a face.

"If it's whiffy, that's probably why he likes it," Bronwyn agreed. Scout panted innocently, brown eyes guileless. "All right, we'll try it."

It got very whiffy indeed as they moved further, but they

met no resistance — in fact no sign or sound of any humans. They heard, instead, the distant, distinctive bleat of goats.

"Perhaps this leads outside," Tara whispered.

Zevran did not think so. "There would be a breeze. We shall see."

It was well lit, and the tunnel bent in several places. They came to a widening of the path, and the way opened into a moderate-sized cavern.

A cavern that reeked of goat. Scout liked it very much, and trotted to a heap of dung, shoveled neatly into a corner. "Well done, boy," Bronwyn snarked.

It was a cul-de-sac. It was evidently a place to store live food for the dragonlings. Other odds and ends were piled here and there, but mostly there were cages filled with wretched, frightened goats and filthy straw smelling of goat. The large pile of dung in the corner of the room, however, did *not* smell like goat...

Scout barked, and dashed to the tunnel entrance, growling.

Zevran grinned fiercely. "Someone's looking for breakfast, perhaps?"

Not human footsteps. They were heavier, and somehow scratchier — an unfamiliar gait.

"Dragons!" Cullen shouted.

Three of them appeared around the nearest bend, moving fast, the biggest nearly as tall as a man at the shoulder. The long necks undulated, and the fanged mouths gaped, ready to inhale deeply.

Tara leaped forward and cast a freezing spell. "They're drakes, actually!" she yelled, pleased as the creatures slowed and whitened with frost. "No wings!"

Wings would have meant nothing under that low ceiling anyway. What mattered were the creatures' agility, their damnably hard scales, and their sharp edges. They were vulnerable where other dragons were vulnerable, though, and easier to reach than the bigger ones. One drake reared, lashing out with its formidable claws, but in doing so exposed a soft belly that Yusaris sliced open. Eyes and throats were pierced, and magic drained life from the hulking bodies.

The last drake standing, almost with its dying breath, loosed a blast of fire. Bronwyn and Zevran rolled out of the way, but only Tara's armor spared her a bad burn. The drake thrashed wildly, and then subsided. Scout trotted over to the one whose guts were spilled out, curious about what might be good.

"Watch out for the second stomach," Bronwyn warned. She pointed her booted toe at a black and glistening sac. "I think that's it. It's where their fire comes from and I think it would taste *really* bad."

So Scout snacked on a kidney instead, or what they thought was probably a kidney, though the size made it hard to tell. Scout liked it, anyway.

"It's so bloody," Leliana remarked. "Are you sure you want Scout licking up dragon blood? It might make him... well..."

"Like himself, only more so?" laughed Zevran.

"Come on, everyone," Bronwyn ordered. "And no, you can't bring the kidney with you, Scout. Drop it, ser! You've had plenty. I don't know," she said to Leliana. "The blood doesn't seem to be doing him any harm, and he hasn't had fresh meat in several days."

So it was back down the tunnel they way they came, Up ahead, they heard a man calling.

"Here, boy! Scorcher, where did you go this time? You are such a bad boy!"

"Oh, no!" Tara whispered. "We've killed someone's pet!"

The dragon wrangler had a pair of assistants, and all of them had maces, but they were ambushed and killed. As the companions followed the left hand tunnel, they came upon more and more people. They were always recognized as intruders, and all the confrontations ended in a final, lethal fashion. Further on was yet another branch in the tunnel, and once again Scout was interested in turning right.

"Oh, why not?" muttered Bronwyn. "We'll have to fight them all in the end, anyhow."

The right hand path led to a very large cavern, and they paused, looking it over carefully. Steam rose from the far wall, and it reeked of the now familiar scent of dragons. Scout's soft growl warned them in time to annihilate another mob of hungry, aggressive little dragonlings. A drake attacked, attracted by the smell of blood and strange humans.

And as they dealt with one danger, they moved on to

another. A pair of Reaver guards came running, axes awhirl. They never reached the companions, between Tara's spells and Leliana's arrows.

"I am using a much heavier arrow for these men," Leliana informed them. "And poisoning my arrows, too. It is the safest way."

They all agreed that it was a very prudent practice; even more so when another drake came thundering out of a side chamber, and they were simultaneously hit with a burst of magical energy. Up some steps, a mage was casting from an observation platform.

"Deal with the mage, Tara!" Bronwyn shouted. "We'll take care of the drake!"

A good plan, if the mage Tara faced had been of the garden variety. Alas, this one was extremely powerful, with a long, long range. They hacked the drake apart with savage energy and then ran to support Tara against the this new danger.

Cullen did not dare summon a smite, for fear the enemy would finish Tara off before his own power was drained. Instead, he rushed up, and was promptly caught in a leg trap. Bronwyn swore, leaped past him, and found herself crossing swords with the mage.

"Andraste's Nightgown!" she shouted, fearfully startled. The mage was casting with the sword. And it was a real sword – in fact, a splendid silverite sword – and what was more, the mage knew how to use it.

He was a powerful mage, but no more than a competent

swordsman. In moments, Bronwyn's point had found its way past his guard, and he was spitted on her blade. He fell slowly, face filled with astonishment, hands grasping desperately for the jeweled hilt of his weapon.

Tara puffed up the stairs, exhausted and indignant. "He was tough! I didn't know that a little backwater like this could train a mage that well. Or maybe he was just really, really powerful! Ooo! He had a sword!"

"You *have* a sword, Tara," Leliana said kindly.

"It's not really real. It's a staff disguised as a fake sword. His sword is real, and he could cast with it!"

"This is quite the weapon," Zevran agreed, eyes alight at the beauty of it. He bent down and reached for it, and then dropped it with a pained curse.

"*Braska!* What kind of sword is this?"

Tara knelt down to examine it. Unlike most things in life, it looked even better close to than from a distance: the jewels rich, the setting finely worked, the chasing exquisitely detailed. She touched the hilt lightly, and then gripped it with growing confidence. "My kind of sword," she whispered.

"A magical sword?" Leliana wondered, feeling a ballad in there somewhere.

"Why not?" Bronwyn shrugged. "Magic is everywhere."

"I know you said we weren't supposed to take loot," Tara said, "but can't I take this? Please, Bronwyn? It's a magic sword. I can cast with it and skewer people, too!"

"If you're going to use a real sword," Bronwyn said, "you'd best learn to use it properly. Zevran, see to it."

"With pleasure!" The assassin unbuckled the scabbard from the mage's corpse and slipped it over Tara's shoulder. Tara triumphantly sheathed the sword, feeling already that it was hers indeed.

"It will be extra weight," Bronwyn pointed out. "If it gets in the way of your casting, just drop it, and perhaps we can come back for it later."

"It's going to be fine," Tara promised. "I'll take off the fake and just wear this." With Zevran's help, she rearranged her weapons, and dropped the inferior weapon to the ground without another thought. "The sword's scabbard is gorgeous, too. Look! it even has a name! Yes, it does. It's written here in Arcanum: 'Spellweaver!' I like that!"

When in the ancient elven tombs she had communed with the spirit of a long-dead arcane warrior. The visions they had shared rushed back, fueled by the touch of the sword. Tara suspected she would need little teaching. Flashes of physical memory came to her: the clash of sword on sword, the edges charged with magic and purpose. She was stronger, and she would be stronger still...

Beyond this cavern they came upon what appeared to be a kind of hatchery of dragon eggs. Two mages and their assistants were working there, and put up a brief resistance. This was a strange place indeed: the huge eggs were set into beautifully made stands, and lamps were set up illuminate

the long stone tables and the eggs. The companions shook their heads. The elaborate organization and tools were like nothing any of them had ever seen.

"They've been at this for ages," Cullen said in wonder. "Ages. They have devoted themselves to this horrible endeavor with all their hearts and souls. What a tragic waste."

"Leave it, Cullen," Bronwyn said. "There will be few enough of them left by the time this day is over."

They had to backtrack once again, and eventually found where the tunnel branched off.

"How long *are* these tunnels?" Tara complained.

Bronwyn wondered that herself. If they continued on and on like this, they would eventually have to camp, which was not a pleasant prospect. They had been making noise, too, and anyone else in the caverns must know that enemies were here.

Though how many more people could there be? The village of Haven, though it seemed prosperous enough, was not large. They could not hope to support many more warriors.

But a few more, certainly. There was noise up ahead: shouts and orders.

"They know we're coming," Cullen said.

Bronwyn smiled grimly. "They know *someone's* coming. They know nothing about us."

"Well said," Zevran agreed.

"Right!" said Tara. "They don't know about us being big damned heroes!"

An ambush materialized from behind a corner. Only two

very strong opponents. A mistake, since they were facing six stronger attackers. The companions moved on, perceptibly higher and higher, and then Leliana exclaimed with relief.

"Look! Right ahead, the caverns connect with a finished corridor!" She whispered. "Perhaps that is the real temple!"

"If they know we're coming," Bronwyn whispered back, "we'll need to be wary for traps. Keep your eyes open."

So they saw the trip line, and Zevran disarmed it. A mage was waiting in a dilapidated chamber, along with some guards. They were dealt with, and the companions left only bloody corpses behind.

Bronwyn was wondering if they really would have stop and rest again. Not knowing what was ahead, she was not sure if she should let herself be tempted to see one more tunnel; one more chamber. Still, the longer they waited, the more advantage they gave to the defenders.

"Come on."

A chamber was up ahead. Bronwyn peered around the corner and at first thought it was obscured by steam, but then saw the fire burning in a big pit. A group of warriors were gathered around it, warming their hands. Others stood alert, waiting. Most interesting, however, was the shaft of sunlight breaking through an opening in the stone. Here was the exit to the surface!

Everyone had a look, and then they moved back to confer.

"I think these must be the last," Cullen said. "There's at least one mage there."

"I'm surprised they haven't laid any more traps," Bronwyn said. "They seem to be simply... waiting."

"Maybe they want to talk," Zevran suggested. "Considering what has happened to everyone else in the caverns, I would want to call a parley, were I in their shoes."

"All right." Bronwyn thought quickly. "We'll confront them. If they want to talk, we'll hear what they have to say. I may have to think on my feet. Tara, keep your eyes on that mage."

It was not the mage who stepped forward to speak to them, however, but a very impressive man with an axe.

"Stop! You will go no further! Who are you?" he demanded, bristling with anger, his voice booming in the enclosed space. He was tall: as tall as Loghain, with the same dark hair, but with a heavy beard and a darker complexion. Under black brows, dark eyes burned with rage. He glared at her furiously, taking in every detail of her appearance. "You have defiled our temple, spilled the blood of the faithful, and slaughtered our young! You will tell me now, intruder, why you have done all this!"

Bronwyn glanced around the chamber quickly, taking in the number of men and their weapons. She and her companions had been fighting all day, and these men were fresh. Perhaps a soft answer was best – at least to start with.

"I am Bronwyn Cousland, Commander of the Grey in Ferelden. We did not come to attack you. We did not come to kill anyone. We came for the Urn of the Sacred Ashes,

and we will not leave until we have set eyes upon it."

The man was incredulous. "You have done all this for a worthless relic? The Urn has no value to us. It contains only the remains of Andraste's former manifestation. We, who are privileged to serve the living Andraste, have no time for such trifles."

"The living Andraste?" Cullen said, shocked and disbelieving. "You cannot mean that!"

"Andraste died many ages ago," Leliana said earnestly.

A scornful laugh. "You know nothing! So know this, strangers: the Prophetess Andraste has overcome death itself and has returned to Her faithful in a form more radiant than you can imagine. We are Her chosen."

"That's..." Bronwyn managed, trying not to gape like a fool. "That's... an *extraordinary* claim."

The dark man seemed gratified by her astonishment. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Father Kolgrim, leader and guide to the Disciples of Andraste. She is no long-dead myth, but a living being of immeasurable power. Long ago we were chosen to serve Her, and so we have for these ages past."

"And yet you have kept her secret," Bronwyn said, "Why? All Thedas reveres Andraste and would welcome her return. Why does she not reveal herself?"

Kolgrim studied her, dark eyes considering. He smiled faintly.

"She is not yet ready to make Her power known. None but the Disciples may approach Andraste. When the time

is right, She will descend upon the nations in fiery splendor, and all will know Her. I warn you: kill us, and you will face Her. She will smell our blood upon you and Her wrath will be great."

"I *told* you," Bronwyn said, an edge to her voice, "We are not here to kill, but to find the Ashes. What has become of them?"

Kolgrim scoffed, with a quick, strong gesture of dismissal. "They are still within the funerary temple, but we care nothing for them. Why would we need them, when Andraste in all Her glory walks and breathes among us? But you, who want the Ashes... Many have come here, but only you have had the skill and fortitude to pass the temple. Perhaps there is a way to atone for your recent transgressions..."

Bronwyn held up her hand to silence her own people. "What do you mean? Why would you wish to cooperate with one you consider an enemy?"

"Perhaps..." Kolgrim said, eyes intent on Bronwyn's fair face, "Perhaps I believe in second chances. All of us stumble through the darkness before being found and shown the light. Perhaps... through Andraste's mercy, Her greatest enemy could become Her greatest Champion."

Bronwyn frowned at him, waiting.

Kolgrim said, "The Ashes you seek are not a half-mile away, up through the cavern and in the midst of the next mountain to the east. An immortal guardian protects the shrine, but the being rejects us and refuses to recognize the truth of the Risen Lady. The Ashes are the merest rem-

nant of a dead woman, but they prevent the holy Andraste from fully realizing Her new form. The Beloved needs to reclaim the Ashes, to make them Her own again. With a few drops of the Risen Andraste's blood, the link to Her old incarnation would be severed. Blood carries power, strength, knowledge. Through it, all the power that is held in the Ashes will be returned to our Lady. Take a vial of Our Lady's Blood, and empty it into the dead Ashes."

Mutiny boiling behind her, Bronwyn shook her head. "I cannot promise such a thing. I need the Ashes to heal a sick woman."

"You need only a pinch for that," Kolgrim quickly assured her. "Take that pinch for yourself, then complete your quest, and release Andraste!"

"Why would this guardian admit me to the shrine?" Bronwyn asked. "You have... disciples... you have warriors. Why not go yourself?"

"The guardian knows us. We cannot overcome him, for he draws his strength from the Ashes. We cannot so much as enter the precinct. But you — you are unknown to him. He would take you for a pilgrim. You could deliver to Our Lady what is rightfully Hers. You could enter the shrine, perform this service, and then Andraste would be revealed to all the nations of Thedas. The rewards for performing such a service would be great indeed."

"Rewards are always good," Zevran observed softly. Bronwyn shot him a quelling look.

"What rewards do you offer?" she asked Kolgrim bluntly.

"There is great power in the Our Lady's blood. As Andraste's True Champion, you would be admitted to our ranks as an honored sister, sharing in the power of Her Blood. Through Andraste's guidance we have learned to harness that power. All these secrets would be yours."

"Bronwyn!" Cullen burst out, "You can't consider this!"

Bronwyn lowered her voice, and spoke to Kolgrim in a show of agreement. "I think we can work together, but it will be difficult to convince my people. I must speak to them and make them understand."

"Be quick!"

Bronwyn turned her back to the man and walked away, gesturing her friends close. Cullen was bright pink, and Bronwyn thought he was about to pop a blood vessel. Leliana's eyes were wide with horror.

"Shhh!" Bronwyn hushed them, hardly moving her lips. "Play along. The odds aren't with us. Let him think we agree, and he'll show us the way to the shrine. Make a show of unwillingness if you like, but follow my lead." She spoke louder. "But would you really defy the will of Andraste?"

Leliana, as a bard, caught on immediately. "Wouldn't it be wonderful," she said distinctly, "to see Andraste with our own eyes!"

Zevran, too, played his part. "I am your sworn man. It matters little to me. If this is your path, I shall follow, as always."

"I don't know..." Tara's pretense of uncertainty was

almost overdone. "We really need the Ashes!"

"As long as we get a pinch first, that's all we need!" Bronwyn said, with more conviction than she felt. How did this Kolgrim know that only a pinch would do?

Cullen's acting was better. He bit his lip and said reluctantly, "If you're sure this is the right thing, Bronwyn..."

"I'm absolutely sure," Bronwyn said confidently, her voice pitched carefully for Kolgrim's ears. "We can save the Queen and serve Andraste at the same time. The power Kolgrim speaks of could be a new advantage against the darkspawn. Every weapon is permissible to a Grey Warden." She turned, her face a mask of calm intent.

"We agree. Give me the vial of blood. As long as I can secure a pinch of the Ashes, it seems that our purposes are not at odds."

The Disciples muttered, glaring balefully at Bronwyn. Kolgrim, however, seemed pleased. "Very well. Take this," he said. He pressed a golden vial into her hands, his touch lingering longer than was entirely necessary. "Now I shall go before you, and beseech the Holy Andraste to let you pass safely into the inner sanctum. Follow me, but at a distance."



Outside the caverns, they found themselves in a barren no man's land, flat and burnt off, separating the two mountain peaks. A long stone road connected them, with bluffs rising up along either side at the far end. Kolgrim strode quickly away, with barely a glance behind to

assure him that Bronwyn was coming. Further off to the right were the ruins of an ancient pavilion — possibly yet another shrine. The air was cold and unbelievably clear, hinting at things undreamed of.

"At last we see the sun again!" Leliana said in relief. "Those caverns suck all joy and beauty from life."

"They still weren't as bad as the Deep Roads," Tara insisted. "If it weren't for the people who tried to kill us, exploring them could even be fun!"

"We don't know that others won't try it... and very soon," Cullen pointed out.

"They won't — not if Bronwyn plays on 'Father' Kolgrim's manly feelings," Tara smirked. "I think he fancies her."

"He does *not*," Bronwyn growled.

"Don't, Tara," Cullen said, thoroughly annoyed. "That's a horrible thing to say."

"But he does!" laughed Zevran. "Tara is absolutely right. You, Noble One, are irresistible to irascible black-haired, black-hearted men."

Leliana touched Cullen on the arm. "I saw him looking at Bronwyn, too. He was curious about her helmet, but like Tara, I think he was softened by her appearance. It is not so surprising, after all, is it?"

"He's disgusting," Cullen insisted. "He and his heretics. What vile people, to plot to sully the sacred Ashes in such way."

"Whatever his motives," Bronwyn said, tired of the discussion, "we are here to find the Ashes, not to fight heretics. If we

succeed in finding the Ashes, I hope we can find another exit from this place, and avoid these madmen entirely."

Cullen grumbled, but did not disagree. "But someday," he said darkly, "we'll be back..."

Further out, the wind picked up, clean and bracing. Feathery clouds wreathed the peaks in white, and shadows were already lengthening across the valleys. In this golden light, spellbound and lowering, anything might be possible.

"A fine place to meet Andraste!" Zevran grinned. "The air is full of gods!"

"I'm quite sure they're not *our* sort of gods," Cullen muttered.

"Father Kolgrim says he's going to show us Andraste," Leliana said, with a hint of hope. "I for one would like that very much."

"It's not going to be Andraste," Cullen said wearily. "It's going to be some sort of ridiculous idol, and we're going to have to pretend to be impressed, to keep up this imposture."

Kolgrim was waiting for them under a sheer bluff, accompanied by two of his Reavers. A pair of archers were off to the side. Bronwyn considered a surprise assault then and there, but was held back by a certain curiosity. Would it be a mere silly puppet-show, impressive only to inbred yokels, or would it be a true wonder?

The man himself was looking back at her with... well, not exactly a smirk, but an expression of satisfaction, as of one who held the winning cards. In his hands was an ornate horn, magnificent with gold mountings. The horn was a curious

shade of rich lavender. Bronwyn wondered how they had dyed an ox horn such a beautiful color, until she realized...

"That is the tip of a dragon horn," she said.

"Blessed Andraste! You're right!" Cullen gasped. Then he calmed himself. "We know they raise dragons here. It is hardly surprising that they have some of their remains."

Kolgrim lifted the horn and blew into the golden mouth-piece. A terrible music rang up to the cloud-capped mountain peaks. An even more terrible roar woke the echoes in reply. A huge shadow detached itself from the top of the bluff, and with a deafening thunder of wings, descended upon them.

"Maker!" Bronwyn gasped. Running would do no good. No good at all.

The dragon soared lazily over their heads and settled onto the path before them, shaking the earth. It was a healthy High Dragon, considerably larger than the form Flemeth had assumed. Kolgrim did not flinch or retreat, but adopted a servile demeanor. He crossed his arms before him, and bowed low.

Bronwyn, sword in hand, looked at her friends with a wild surmise. In their eyes she saw reflected her own sudden, utter comprehension.

This, then, was Andraste.

"You see now?" Kolgrim demanded, eyes riveted on the monstrous beast confronting them. "She has risen, and is more glorious than all the Old Gods combined. Not even

the Tevinter Imperium could hope to slay Her now!"

Personally, Bronwyn thought the dragon-hunting expedition that had faced Flemeth could handle this creature quite well. Perhaps with more archers, and more bombs... but no, they could take her. Her own small party, however, was neither armed nor armored nor prepared to survive a battle with this creature. Tactful lies seemed the best weapon at the moment.

Kolgrim walked forward, straight toward the slavering jaws of the dragon. Bronwyn thought he deserved points for that, dragon-worshipping zealot or not.

"O Beloved Andraste! Most Holy Andraste! We praise Your name! I bring before You Your true Champion. Permit her to pass, Beloved One! Let her pave the way for Your glory!"

Andraste appeared to be thinking about it. If the dragon decided instead that they all looked tasty, Bronwyn wondered if Kolgrim would put up a fight. Probably not. He would probably think being eaten by the "Beloved" was some sort of honor. And then she remembered the girl's words about poor Brother Genetivi.

"He was given to Andraste..."

Maker! These bastards had fed Genetivi to this monster! It was all she could do to keep a moderately worshipful look on her face. She supposed it was quite all right if she looked rather frightened, as well. She was, in fact, fairly terrified. Beside her Scout growled and backed away slightly, clearly thinking that it was time to leave. Bron-

wyn took a quick glance at her party.

Tara and Zevran looked as scared as she felt herself. Cullen was afraid, but filled with righteous wrath. Leliana looked frightened, too, but also bitterly disappointed. There was no holy mystery here, after all: just a pack of inbred lunatics who had backslid into Tevinter-style dragon worship, with the added fillip of naming their 'god' Andraste. It was horrifying and ugly and pitiable; not a vision of the Divine. This dragon was not Bronwyn's sort of god at all—or Leliana's, or Cullen's, or of anyone else who possessed a shred of sanity. The creature's strength, however, deserved the respect accorded any supremely dangerous enemy.

"You are right," she choked out to Kolgrim through numbed lips. "Andraste' is glorious."

An endless, endless wait. Bronwyn momentarily expected a mighty inhalation that would signal a blast of flame, and readied herself to leap aside. Instead, the beast looked them over, and then suddenly flapped its wings, staggering them with the force of the downdraft. It took to the skies with a triumphant bellow, and flew back to its lair at the top of the bluffs. Kolgrim watched its every move, eyes glittering in rapture. After a deep, reverential sigh, he turned to Bronwyn.

"The Beloved Andraste will let you pass. Go, and may Her strength uphold you. You know what you must do."

"That was smart, Bronwyn," Tara babbled, as they walked

quickly and rather unsteadily toward the door to the inner shrine, trying to ignore the ominous rumbling above their heads. "That was really smart to make them think we were going to do what they wanted. If we'd just killed those crazy men in the caves, the dragon would have come down right on us in the open, and we would have been roasted. Just roasted and eaten up like crispy bacon —"

Zevran put his arm around her shoulder. "Hush, *carina*. We will survive this, as always. Right now the big dragon is our friend."

Cullen wiped his mouth. "It is no dishonor to use guile when dealing with infidels. You were right to find a way past the dragon, but we must cleanse the world of this ghastly cult. Who knows how many innocent people have been murdered in the name of their false god?"

"Dragon cults," sighed Leliana. "Poor Brother Genetivi knew what waited for him in Haven. I wish he had made his notes clearer. I wish he had told us. He knew what he was walking into —"

"— Or thought he did," Bronwyn said shortly, not liking to ponder Genetivi's last moments. When the fanatics were done with him, he had been fed to a dragon. A dragon. What a cruel end for that mild-mannered, decent scholar.

"And I'm sure that Kolgrim is interested in you," Leliana went on, the words tumbling over each other, "and in your helmet. He looked at it again, as if he recognized it. Perhaps there have been Grey Wardens here before..."

That was not a pleasant thought, either.

They desperately needed rest and food, but they could hardly take either here, out in the open, with a dragon sitting atop the bluffs, and Kolgrim and his fellow maniacs staring at them at a distance. They would have to try to enter the shrine, and Bronwyn hoped they would not have to fight for their lives the moment the door was opened.



TARA SURANA, GREY WARDEN MAGE

CHAPTER 7

A PINCH
OF ASHES

THE ARCHITECTURE

WAS THE SAME, THE DECORATION THE SAME, BUT THIS SHRINE WAS IN OTHER ESSENTIALS VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE TEMPLE BRONWYN AND HER COMPANIONS HAD GONE THROUGH FROM END TO END.

Other than a few footprints in the dust just inside the door, there was no hint that anyone had walked here in many years — perhaps ages. Dust lay heavy on the stone floor, trickling down from the joints in the roof. Light slanted in dimly from narrow openings in the wall. A perfect silence held the place spellbound, making it almost indecent to speak aloud. They had been warned of an angry spirit that guarded this place from the depredations of the dragon cultists. No sign of the spirit manifested, even after they had shut the door behind them. They waited in silence for an attack.

No attack came, however. Bronwyn thought about it, and then said, careful of the smothering quiet. "We must rest. I shall guard. The rest of you, get something to eat, and try to sleep."

"Er, Bronwyn?" Tara whispered, looking past her. "Some-

thing about that seem strange to you?"

She turned. Fire burned in sconces in the next hall, illuminating. Torches were lit, too. The light was blue-white, unwavering, and burned without consuming the torches or any substance in the sconces.

"That's beyond me," Tara said. "I can make magical fire, but it doesn't last like that."

"No one lit those fires recently," agreed Leliana, "There are no footprints in the hall."

"Well," Zevran said pragmatically, "it means that we shall not be stumbling in the dark. It is gracious of the Guardian of the Shrine to give us this light. I for one am weary, so I shall follow our leader's commands to eat and rest. Come, *carina*."

"It's pretty amazing," Tara said, turning away.

Bronwyn patted Scout's furry head. "Is there anything here, Scout? Anything I should be worried about?"

Scout did not seem to think so. Cullen poured out some water in a bowl for him, and the dog drank thirstily, then eagerly chewed on a hambone. After he had begged a few treats, he curled up and went promptly to sleep.

Leliana took note of the dog's complacency. "Our mabari Warden senses no evil here. If the Guardian of this Shrine rejects the dragon worshipers, it could be that he is good — a defender of the true Andraste. We should have nothing to fear from him."

Zevran, snacking on fruit bread, laughed quietly. "Ah,

my dear, virtuous beings are sometimes the most dangerous! I could tell you a tale about an incorruptible judge in my beautiful Antiva, and of all those frailer folk whom he sent to be hanged on the gallows or broken on the wheel..."

"Maybe tomorrow," Tara said sleepily, leaning against him. "After seeing that dragon, I'm exhausted, though personally I think we're all pretty heroic not to have fainted dead away."

Cullen ignored the conversation, eating hungrily in silence. Afterward, he found a corner, and fell on his knees in prayer, lips moving soundlessly.

"He is right," Leliana agreed. "That is the best thing right now." She slipped away and knelt at his side.

Bronwyn accepted some bread and water, keeping her eyes on the hall past the vestibule. She did not feel particularly like praying herself. What was the use? The Chantry itself taught that the Maker had turned his face from the world in disgust. Why pray to a being who had manifestly declared his disinterest? As far as she could see, the Maker had cut them loose, to live or die as they would. Some preached that deeds, good and bad, would have justice in the afterlife, but Bronwyn found that hard to believe. If the Maker cared nothing about the world, why would he care what was done there? It would be pleasant to believe that cruelty and wickedness would be called to account before the Maker's throne, but Bronwyn did not believe it. Souls left their bodies, and what hap-

pened to them afterward, not even the Chantry knew, for all their claims.

Standing guard was very dull, and caused one's mind to drift along dark paths. Bronwyn roused herself and focused on listening to the silence. There was nothing to hear but the soft breathing and occasional snores of her companions. They looked very young and vulnerable, lying their asleep. She felt a surge of tenderness toward them all: all of them who had put themselves in her hands.

The hours wore on. In time she woke Leliana and settled down to a restless sleep, plagued by gibbering darkspawn. The Archdemon was there, too, but a silent presence. Bronwyn woke from time to time, and tried to put those familiar terrors out of her mind.

By the time light was penetrating into the cold little chamber, they were all stirring, rather curious about what the day would bring them.

"They can't have another High Dragon hidden away," Tara said, managing a smile.

They ate, and Bronwyn cracked the door open to see what lay outside. They would all prefer to go outside for their ablutions, if possible. Scout squeezed past her, but did not stray far.

Bronwyn could barely see the somnolent bulk of the dragon, high up on the bluff — the merest wing joint, folded in sleep, but it was, alas, there. There was a handfu of cultists, but they were far away, down the stone path. If they were all quick, no one should notice them. She

scrubbed at her face with a handful of fresh snow.

Refreshed and breakfasted, Bronwyn thought she should say a word before they went on.

"This is the shrine of Andraste. Whether the Ashes are really here or not, I don't want to see any looting. I don't think looting could be considered respectful by any measure, so just don't."

No one argued, perhaps because they all carried as much as they could manage, and still fight. Tara was still purring over her new sword, and trying to get everyone else to touch it, just to see their expressions. Spellweaver had a way of expressing strong dislike for anyone not a mage.

"All right," Bronwyn said, cutting off the byplay. "Follow me."

They stepped out immediately into a long and quiet corridor, which extended only to the right. At the end of it was a large, arched door.

As they moved down, they saw that it was guarded by a solitary warrior.

"Is that... ? Tara whispered.

Cullen said, "Who else?"

Zevran murmured, "He looks very like our friend Kolgrim, only... paler..."

Leliana, bright and noticing, said, "And he has a helmet just like yours, Bronwyn!"

All of the observations were true. The man's ancient, gleaming armor was of a style not seen in ages, but his helmet, griffon-winged and shining, was indeed exactly

like a Grey Warden helmet. No wonder that Kolgrim had found it interesting. Perhaps the man had come this far and seen the Guardian for himself. Bronwyn wondered if he noticed his own resemblance.

She took a deep breath and walked forward. The warrior's eyes gleamed at their approach, and he spoke, his voice at once mellow and unearthly, as different as possible from Kolgrim's incessant hectoring bellow.

Bronwyn said, "We were told that an immortal Guardian protects this place..."

"Yes, I am the Guardian of the Ashes. I have waited years for this."

Leliana asked, uncertainly, "For us?"

"You are the first to arrive in a very long time. It has been my duty – my life – to protect the Urn and prepare the way for the faithful come to revere Andraste. For ages I have waited and still shall wait, until my task is done, and the Tevinter Imperium has crumbled into the sea."

"We hate the Tevinters, too," Tara muttered, thinking bitterly of the family she would never know.

"And who are these madmen who have taken over the rest of the temple?" Bronwyn asked. "Where did they come from?"

"When my brethren and I carried Andraste's ashes from Tevinter to this sanctuary, we vowed to forever revere her memory and guard her. I have watched generations take up the mantle of their fathers. For ages they did this, unwavering, joyful in their appointed task. But now they

have lost their way. They have forgotten Andraste, and their promise. They have forgotten that Andraste was just a messenger. They speak no more of the Maker, but only of their false Andraste: an even greater sin."

Cullen asked softly, "And who were you – are you?"

"I am all that remains of the first disciples. I swore I would protect the Urn as long as I lived: and I have lived a very, very long time."

"The first disciples?" Leliana asked in wonder. With a shiver of excitement, she blurted out, "Did you know Andraste?"

"Did anyone really know her, save the Maker? She would sometimes spend weeks alone in meditation – often without food or water. I cannot express in words my love for Andraste. You must seek her out for yourself. Everyone must."

Bronwyn glanced at the rapt faces of her friends, and said, "But what about the dragon cultists? Obviously that dragon of theirs isn't Andraste!"

"No. Our Andraste has gone to the Maker's side; she will not return. The dragon is a fearsome creature, and they must have seen her as an alternative to the absent Maker and his silent Andraste. A true believer would not require such audacious displays of power."

"How did the worship of the dragon come to be?"

"It began with an ancestor of the one you know as Kolgrim. He saw himself as a new prophet, preaching Andraste's rebirth. Some disagreed with him. I heard their cries of pain and death."

Red with anger, Cullen clenched his fists. "We shall put an end to this heresy!"

The Guardian gently reproved him. "The Maker will sit in judgment of them, when the time comes."

Cullen subsided, thinking that the time could not come too soon.

Bronwyn laid a calming hand on Cullen's arm, and decided truth was best. "We have come to see the Urn."

"You have come to honor Andraste, and you shall... if you prove yourself worthy."

Leliana asked eagerly, "How can you tell if we are worthy?"

The Guardian, with unruffled serenity, said, "It is not my place to judge your worthiness: the Gauntlet does that. The Gauntlet tells the true pilgrims from the false. If you are proved worthy, you will see the Urn, and be allowed to take a small pinch of the Ashes for yourself. If not..."

This all sounded very ominous. Bronwyn began imagining all the ways that this could go wrong. Being tested was fair enough, but she was not going to sacrifice her companions to satisfy some ages-old relic. Before she could decide what to do, the Guardian spoke again.

"Before you go, there is something I must ask you," he said to Bronwyn, his eyes glittering oddly as they seemed to read her soul. "Your path here was not easy. There is suffering in your past: your suffering and the suffering of others. Bronwyn Cousland..."

Bronwyn stiffened in shock. "How do you know –"

"Bronwyn Cousland," the Guardian continued calmly. "you abandoned your parents to the mercy of Rendon Howe. Do you think you failed your parents?"

It was a body-blow. It was falling from the Cliffs of Conobar without a safety line. The raw pain of her family's loss was new again, and tore at her, leaving her incoherent. Bronwyn gaped at the Guardian, struck dumb at the blunt question that no one had ever dared to ask her. While she gasped for breath, her companions had plenty to say. Leliana and Tara were in the Guardian's face, and Cullen and Zevran had their weapons half drawn. Scout lowered his head, growling menacingly.

"— How dare you!"

"— How could you be so cruel?"

"I repeat the question," the Guardian said, unmoved by the tumult. "Do you think you failed your parents?"

"Wait!" Bronwyn said thickly, her hand up for silence. Quieting the guilt and rage and doubt with a fierce act of will, she forced herself to speak rationally.

"No. I did not fail them. I obeyed my parents, and my actions ultimately led to the rescue of my brother and the overthrow of the murderer of my family. I could have stayed and died with them, and my death would have been painful, prolonged, pointless... and stupid. Do you imagine that I have never thought about this? You think I did not relive that night a thousand times, wondering what I could have done — might have done? I have come to the conclusion that

I did the best I could, even if others did not. It was not I who killed my parents, but Rendon Howe. It is not I who extorted an agreement from my dying father that I would be a Warden, but Duncan. No. I did not fail my parents. Others did, but I had no control over their actions."

The Guardian seemed satisfied. "Then you do not dwell on past mistakes. Neither yours or those of others. And what of those that follow you?"

Zevran broke in, sarcastic with anger. "And now the self-flagellation! That is what comes next in these things, no?"

Impassive, relentless, the Guardian turned to Tara. "You, Senior Warden Tara Surana, once mage of the Circle... Jowan planned to escape the Circle with his sweetheart. You helped him, and all of you were discovered by the Templars. Tell me, do you regret your actions? Do you think you failed Jowan?"

Tara glared at him, already roused at the way he had hurt Bronwyn. "No! I don't regret what I did for a minute... except... yes! I regret I wasn't quicker and sharper. I regret I didn't run out the door with him. But that's not what happened, and there's no use worrying about it. I regret more what *other* people did to *me*. And by the way, I did not fail Jowan! I am his good friend and conscripting him was the best thing that ever happened to him, so there!"

"Thank you," the Guardian answered calmly. "That is all." Then he turned to Cullen, who scowled back, a little nervous.

"Cullen, knight and Warden, you have permitted blood

images to live. You have kept the secret of rites that contravene the teachings of the Chantry. Do you feel you have betrayed your vows and defied the will of the Maker?"

Red with mortification, Cullen choked for moment. "It's complicated..." he protested, trying to find words. "When you swear oaths, and they contradict each other, it's complicated... I've thought about this a lot. Blood magic is evil, but the darkspawn are worse. They'll kill everything and everyone, so we have to fight them, and even ally with people who do wrong things. Sometimes you have to do things that are questionable in a good cause. Killing is wrong, but not if you do it to protect people. So Blood Magic is wrong, but saving lives is more important." His voice trailed off, and he gestured helplessly. "I've just had to use my own best judgment."

Leliana squeezed his arm, smiling up at him. "Well said," she whispered. But the Guardian had a question for her, too.

"Warden Leliana, Bard and one-time Lay Sister: the Maker spoke only to Andraste, yet you claimed to have revelations from him. Do you believe yourself to be Andraste's equal?"

Flustered, Leliana blushed and stammered. "No! no! I never said that!"

"In Orlais you were someone. In the little world of the Lothering chantry, did you fear that you would lose yourself? Did you seek to make yourself seem important?"

Distressed, Leliana denied it all. "You do not understand

that when I make stories, I make them from bits of reality... No. Think what you like, but my visions were real. Is there not a Blight? Was I not called to fight against it? I never claimed to be like Andraste! You are trying to make me doubt... to make me fearful..."

"That is all," said the Guardian. "And the Antivan Elf..."

Zevran sneered, "Oh? Is it my turn now? Hurrah! I'm so excited."

"Many have died at your hand," said the Guardian. "But are there any deaths that you regret? Perhaps a woman by the name of —"

Zevran but him off, deeply disturbed. "How do you know about that?"

"I know much. It is allowed to me. The question stands, however. Do you regret?"

Tara put her arm around him, and Zevran stood straight and looked the Guardian in the eye.

"Yes. The answer is yes. If that's what you wish to know. I do. Now move on."

Inscrutable, the Guardian stood aside from the slowly opening door behind him. "The way is open. Good luck, and may you find what you seek."

He faded from view. Each one of the companions was startled when the others promptly vanished as well.

"Hello?" Tara called. "Bronwyn? Zevran? Anybody? Ser Guardian?"

She walked into the chamber beyond, complaining. "If we had to be tested, why couldn't we be tested *together*?"

Another figure was waiting at the end of the hall, not pale but corporeal like the Guardian, but pale and ghostly. It was just a nice-looking human woman in peasant clothing. She looked mild and sad, and not at all dangerous.

Tara walked forward, and gave the spirit a tight smile.

"You must be the first test." Tara hoped this pleasant looking woman would not turn into a disgusting monster and attack her, but it would be just her luck. She waited.

The spirit looked at her appraisingly, and then spoke in a sweet and ethereal voice.

"Echoes from a shadow realm, whispers of things yet to come. Thought's strange sister dwells in night, is swept away by dawning light. Of what do I speak?"

"This is a riddle, isn't it? I hate riddles! I had to answer riddles when I was in the Fade during my Harrowing! I'm terrible at them. Let me think... *Shadow realm... swept away by dawning light...* The Fade is the shadow realm... Oh, this isn't hard at all! I've got it! Dreams! The answer is Dreams!"

The briefest of smiles flickered on the spirit's lips.

"Yes. Dreams. I am Brona, mother of Andraste. A dream came upon me, as my daughter slumbered beneath my heart. It told of her life and her betrayal and death. I am sorrow and regret. I am a mother weeping bitter tears for a daughter she could not save. You may pass."

The spirit vanished. Tara frowned, displeased to be

reminded of her own mother once again... a lost mother she could not remember. She swallowed tears and grief, and stalked toward the next door...

Cullen was alert at once, and drew Yusaris, easing into the chamber ahead. What strange magic was this? A tall shape awaited, ghostly, armored, but it did not draw weapon on him, nor did it seem hostile. Taking in the horned helmet, Cullen wondered if it was the spirit of a Reaver. Cullen drew near to the phantom, and it spoke in a deep, sonorous voice.

"A Poison of the soul, a passion's cruel counterpart; From love she grows, till love lies slain. Of what do I speak?"

Cullen stopped, at first not understanding what the phantom was talking about. "*Poison of the soul...*" Was this some sort of riddle game? "*Poison of the soul... love lives slain...*" And the phantom was a man in old-fashioned armor. That was the clue that gave Cullen the answer, and a very uncomfortable one it was.

"Jealousy?"

The tall phantom bowed his head. "Yes, jealousy drove me to betrayal. I was Maferath, the greatest general of the Alamarri... but beside her, I was nothing. Hundreds fell before her on bended knee. They loved her, as did the Maker. I loved her too, but what man can compare with a god?"

The phantom dissipated, leaving Cullen to mull over the lesson to be learned here. Whatever dwelt in this place

knew entirely too much about him, but it was only to be expected. The Maker knew the secrets of every heart, and had seen his foolish jealousy of a girl he could not hope to win. To be compared to the arch-betrayer Maferath, however... that was profoundly shaming. He must try harder to overcome these feelings. He sighed deeply, and moved on to the next door.



Leliana smiled down at the transparent little girl. Riddles were easy. She repeated the spirit's words.

"The smallest lark could carry it, while a strong man might not... A tune, of course."

A fragile, ghostly smile. "Yes. I was Ealisay, Andraste's dearest friend in childhood, and always we would sing, She celebrated the beauty of life, and all who heard her would be filled with joy. They say the Maker himself was moved by Andraste's song, and then she sang no more of simple things."

The child faded away, and Leliana was left, feeling uneasy and rebuked; once more reminded that it was not for her to imitate Andraste. She left the room quickly.



Zevran found himself face to face with the spirit of an elf in armor: an elf not unlike himself. The spirit acknowledged Zevran, and spoke.

"I'd neither a guest nor a trespasser be; in this place I belong, that belongs also to me. Of what do I speak?"

"A riddle? You're asking me a riddle?" Feeling rather

ridiculous, he considered his answer at some length.

"A home. Not that I have experience of such a thing. Crows have no homes."

Softly, the spirit replied. "Yes. A Home. I am Thane Shartan. It was my dream for the People to have a home of their own, where we would have no masters but ourselves. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, and thus we followed Andraste against the Imperium. But she was betrayed, and so were we."

The elf-spirit faded away. Zevran shrugged. Obviously this place was trying to tell him something. A home? Personally, Zevran thought such considerations were ridiculous in such a place and at such a time.

I will take what comes. If I am permitted to stay at the Wardens' Compound now and then, so much the better. But a home of my own? Unlikely.



The phantom was a handsome and aristocratic man, dressed richly in Tevinter fashion and holding an impressive longsword. Bronwyn readied herself for a duel. Instead, the phantom spoke.

"She wields the broken sword, and separates true kings from tyrants. Of what do I speak?"

Storybooks were full of such situations. The hero or heroine was challenged in a riddle game. Bronwyn had always found the idea silly. Faced with the actual situation, she still found it silly, but found herself, in such a situation, even

more so. All right, a Tevinter nobleman with a sword could only be one man, the notorious Archon Hessarian, and the Sword was clearly the famed Sword of Mercy: a larger version of the little necklace she wore. The Guardian of this place must be giving her a warning about being a tyrant. Bronwyn felt very strongly that she was nothing of the sort, and would continue to be nothing of the sort, even if she became Queen of Ferelden, but she was not on her own territory, and this was the Guardian's game.

"The answer is "Mercy," she said flatly.

"Yes, Mercy," agreed the phantom. "I could not bear the sight of Andraste's suffering, and Mercy bade me end Her life. I am the penitent sinner, who shows compassion as he hopes compassion may be shown to him."

The phantom faded from view. Very well. A warning against abusing one's power. An adjuration to be merciful. All very proper, she supposed. Still, she had never considered herself a cruel person. Uneasily, she wondered if the Guardian was predicting some challenging situation in her future. She walked past, wondering what the next chamber would bring...

At her side, Scout uttered a loud bark of joy and ran eagerly toward the richly clad figure in the doorway.

Bronwyn stopped dead. "No. This is wrong. Guardian, how can you *do* this to me?"

Scout sat down in front of his Bronwyn's sire, wagging his tail. He remembered how much he liked this man.

"My dearest child." Bryce Cousland, in the doublet he had wore on his last day of life, greeted Bronwyn, his face grave and unsmiling.

"This is cruel..." Bronwyn sputtered. "You cannot be... real..." In her heart, she hoped he was.

He looked real. He looked like her real father. It was a painful joy to see him again. Whether his real spirit or an illusion, the being spoke with her father's voice.

"You know that I am gone, and that all your prayers and wishes will not bring me back. Pup, I know you miss me, but my death and my life must no longer have a hold on you. This is how it should be." The spirit paused, and then went on. "I was very nearly a King. I dreamed of greatness for you. But I must warn you, my child: you reach for an earthly crown, but the kingdom you must conquer is the kingdom within. That is the one realm that will be yours in eternity."

He reached out, a glittering amulet in his hand. "Take this, and remember me."

And he was gone.

Tara was startled to come face to face with Jowan: a cheerful, playful Jowan.

"Have fun with the riddle game?"

"Jowan, it's not you really, is it? You're not dead, are you? I'll kill you if you're dead!"

"I didn't think I'd fool you.. Am I a spirit? Are you in the Fade? Honestly, I don't know myself. I am part of the

Gauntlet. I am Jowan. I am you."

"Why are you here?"

"To speak to you, and to offer advice.. You have often wondered what would have happened if you had not helped me. I think you know yourself that everything that happened, the horrible and the wonderful, were all part of the fabric of your destiny. You're a mighty mage, Tara. Sometimes you've made me jealous, but you've always made me proud. Be brave, but be happy, too." He put an amulet in her hand. "I have something for you. Use it well."

He vanished.

"Jowan!" She slipped the chain of the amulet over her head, muttering angrily. "All right, but you had better not be dead..."

"Zevran! It's been too long!"

"Rinna," Zevran said tonelessly. The name was bitter in his mouth, but the girl's face was as lovely as ever — or rather, far lovelier than he had last seen it, smeared with blood and mouth open in silent protest.

The girl he had loved ran a hand through her dark curls and gave him a wink. "You should be careful who you listen to, Zevran. You should be sorry you killed me. They played you and Taliesin for fools, and you let them. So here you are, wandering the barbarian south, trying to commit suicide by Grey Warden. That didn't go so well either, did it?"

"Better than I could have known."

"Yes... well, you were lucky there. I admit." She leaned

closer, and he found himself recalling a honey-sweet scent. "I know you are haunted by shame and regret. Let the past stay in the past. Set it aside and be happy with your clever little mage. Take this amulet as a keepsake... But..."

"But?"

"...Perhaps you could persuade her to make a little more effort with her hair?"

"Knight-Commander?" Cullen gasped, astonished to see the old Templar.

Greagoir smiled ruefully. "Greetings, my boy. Don't think I have forgotten you. I think of you every day, with some shame, I must confess. I thought to make a pawn of you — to place someone among the Grey Wardens I could control. An act of pride, but one that proved wiser than I could have known. I have heard good reports of you. You have done well. You have kept your honor and made a new place for yourself among people who call you friend. Forgive a foolish old man. I give you this..." An amulet was laid in Cullen's hand "...and my blessing."

It was only a spirit, Cullen told himself. *Only a vision.* Nonetheless, he kept the amulet.

"Marjolaine."

"Leliana, my dear! Here you are, saving the world. I confess than when I plucked you from the gutter, I could not have foreseen such heroics."

"I am no heroine. I am only playing a very small part."

"But playing it so well. That, at least, is no surprise. You think of me often, do you not? I have warned you, again and again, against allowing nonessentials to distract you. I am part of your colorful past. As such, you really must learn to set me aside and concentrate the mission."

"Are you really Marjolaine?"

The handsome brunette cocked her head in thought. "I am Marjolaine, and yet I am not. I am the Gauntlet and I am part of you that will never let you go. Those who survive must go on living, after all. Take this, as a last little... token. It will serve you well, whether you deserve it or not."



In the next chamber, they found... themselves.

Each was faced by a phantom double, and it embodied the worst their natures had to offer. Each wondered, "do I really look like that?" Each resolved never to let another person see the face that double wore.

Zevran considered his twin, gratifyingly handsome and debonair, yes... but bloodthirsty, smirking, malicious, lusting for the kill. On reflection, he had no doubt that many of his victims had seen that face. It might be intimidating – which was rather the point – but it was remarkably unattractive. He resolved to spend some time before a mirror and develop a new look. Then he settled in for a hard fight. He was the best, after all.

Leliana felt some distress at her sly and self-satisfied

face – if partly because it was a little fuller than she pictured herself. It was very unpleasant to see herself draw bow... on herself. She dashed in, relying on speed, and knocked the first arrow aside with a gauntlet. Then she buried her daggers in her own kidneys, wincing.

Had he ever looked so cold? So merciless? Cullen was almost sure that he had never been as smug in his own righteousness as this disturbing phantom. The surprise of the powerful attack – with a double of Ysaris – nearly finished him before the duel could properly begin. He got a grip on himself, and focused on defeating this unpleasant enemy. It could be treated like just another demon. This one was trying to shake him by wearing his own face, but it was *not* Cullen, knight and Warden, and so it would discover.

Tara shook off the blast of cold and concentrated power, letting the memories guide her. This phantom with her face was a powerful mage, but that was all she was. Whatever had created her had not dug deep enough inside the real Tara to find the ancient lore of the arcane warrior. Spellweaver was in her hand, and felt good there. Her body was moving, twisting, lunging of its own accord. The misty image of her past was no match for the new Tara. Without a glance behind, she walked away from the dead doppelganger, charged with a new confidence.

Bronwyn knew that this was not a face she wanted to show the Landsmeet... nor anyone else who knew her. Was she really that arrogant? Phantom Bronwyn was a formidable

opponent, knowing every trick of swordsmanship she did herself. Perhaps the phantom was a little better... a little more focused... and far more indifferent to the pain and suffering of anyone who happened to be in her way. Beside her, Scout quickly finished off the weak double the power of the Shrine had created. They might penetrate the hearts of men and women, but they clearly knew nothing about mabaris. Scout growled fearsomely and charged in at the wicked stranger who wore his Bronwyn's face. It was not his Bronwyn, of course. He could never be wrong about that...



Their duels won, each found a door. Each opened it and walked through, uniformly reluctant to talk about what they had seen.

" – Bronwyn! Where were you?"

" – *Carina!* You are well?"

" – That was... strange... "

" – Will we never be done with this place?"

Bronwyn felt unutterable relief to see her friends again. "Everyone all right? Anyone need healing?"

The wounds were dealt with, and they all had time to look around. Behind them, through a single door, lay the empty chamber where it seemed each had fought a double. The chamber they were in now was something new, for an abyss gaped before them.

This was not a bridge broken by time, no longer spanning a pit. This was deliberate. The chamber was nearly

filled with a circular hole, cutting off access to the next room beyond. In diameter it was a good fifty feet, and the edge was paved with decorative stones, incised with strange runes. The walls around the gap were round as well, adorned with carved pillars. Temptingly, the companions could see enough of the next chamber to guess that it was the one they sought.

Bronwyn walked to the edge and looked over. A long way down, and water at the bottom. Maybe a natural well, and probably deep. They could not simply climb down, walk across and climb up. In fact, climbing was not an option for them all. Scout could not climb, and Bronwyn was not going to leave him behind.

"There must be some way to get across," said Tara.

Leliana laughed. "We'll have to work together, and join hands, and sing a happy song to get across!"

"Very funny," Cullen growled.

Bronwyn said nothing, and walked around the curve of the pit. A ghostly span arced out from the path as she stepped on one of the runic pavers.

"This is a puzzle!" Leliana exclaimed. "There is probably a combination of stones we can stand on that will cause the bridge to appear."

"You're welcome to try that," Bronwyn said agreeably. "I'm terrible at puzzles. Nor am I too excited about trusting myself to a 'magical bridge.' Possibly the Powers That Be would get a good laugh if it disappeared just as we

were in the middle. They might consider it suitable punishment for overconfidence." She set down her pack and began rummaging through it. "As for me, I think a physical solution is called for."

"I have some tent rope in my pack," Cullen offered, "but not fifty feet of it. The pit is at least that wide."

"We don't have to cross fifty feet," Bronwyn said briskly, collecting her own thin, strong rope, and judging the length. "Anybody else have rope? Twine?"

"Not me, Bronwyn. Sorry," Tara apologized, "It's with the gear I left in the Chantry."

Neither Leliana nor Zevran had any either.

"Let's see what you've got, Cullen." It was narrow twine, but there was over fifteen feet of it. Not much, but enough to tie from tree to tree and support a piece of canvas. Bronwyn had a little more.

"All right. We may need belts, too. In fact, I'm certain we will. Leliana, give me a hand with my armor."

She stripped down to her long linen underdrawers and shirt, removing even her boots and gloves. Cullen walked along the curving wall, and began to grasp what she intended. There was a gap of less than ten feet between the end of the pavers and the wide and jutting doorstep of the next room.

"You're going to jump it?" he asked. "It's possible, I suppose, for you. I believe I could do it, too, but I'm not sure the others..."

"You could fall!" Tara protested.

"I'll have a safety line around me," Bronwyn assured her.

"If I can't make it, I'll have Cullen swing me out on the rope and climb up. I know you can't all make the jump, and Scout certainly can't, so we're going to make a bridge you can slide down to the other side. We'll put together a sling for Scout, and do our best to persuade him to get into it."

"A sliding bridge?" Leliana said eagerly. "That sounds like fun!"

"Yes," Bronwyn said, with growing confidence. "We can do this. We tie the rope tightly around the top of that pillar there. See? Around the narrow middle of the capital, so it won't slip down. These pillars are about fifteen feet tall, and we'll tie the rope around the narrow bit that's about twelve feet up. Even if I tie the end to the far pillar at the doorway, we should have a steep enough angle that we'll slide down the rope. We'll oil up some of the belts and throw them over the rope. Hang on tight, and we'll all be fine."

With a plan to follow, everyone dumped out their packs and looked for things that could be used. Cullen's spare shirt was the biggest, and that would go to make the sling for Scout, tied to Bronwyn's weapon harness.

"How do you know how much rope you'll need?" Zevran asked.

"I have to estimate, but I can guess the distance to that far pillar and the height of this pillar, and then use the Crotonian Theorem." She clarified, "the square of the distance plus the square of the height equals the square of the length of rope. I find the square root of that, and there you are."

"I have no idea what you just said," Zevran said, staring at her blankly, "but I trust you."

"That's mathematics," Tara said, impressed. "We don't learn that at the Circle. That's what the dwarves use for their engineering."

Exasperated, Bronwyn said, "Not *just* dwarves."

Leliana, whose education was exclusively in the fine arts – music, dance, and espionage – smiled sweetly. "You are so well-educated, Bronwyn!"

Cullen was staring at her in honest admiration.

Amused and vexed, and once again very much aware of her privileged upbringing, Bronwyn went back to work fashioning Scout's sling. While she twisted and knotted the torn shirt, she spoke in a low, comforting voice to her mabari.

"I'm going to need you to be brave, Scout. You're going to have to do what we tell you. It's going to all right."

Finished with her work, she tied the two ropes together and then knotted one end to the base of a pillar, and the other end around herself.

"Cullen, hold on to Scout's collar. Stay, Scout! You stay right there with the others!"

The area was cleared and she stood still, visualizing exacting where her feet would need to be at the end of the run to make the jump successfully. It looked seductively close, but the curved approach might throw her off. Then she took two deep breaths, and ran, bare feet slapping on stone. She picked up speed, the curving walls flying past her... there were two last steps, launching her into empty air... the pit gaped below her...

And she came down gracefully on the other side, with several feet to spare. A clumsy landing, but she was across and unhurt. Her friends cheered. Bronwyn gave them an ironic salute, getting to her feet.

"All right! This much is done. The length is a bit short, just as I thought. Throw some belts over that I can buckle together."

The belts were thrown over, and some of Bronwyn's gear, too. She tied the end of the rope to a sturdy dragonbone buckle, and looped the length of belts around the base of the pillar.

"Now fasten the rope to the top of the pillar!"

Leliana tied the best knots, so Zevran gave her a boost up to Cullen's broad shoulders. With some huffing and puffing, she tied the end snugly, pulling hard on it to make sure. Then Bronwyn, on her end, took the slack out of the line, buckling the belts tighter.

Scout thought the sling a very bad idea. He wuffed and resisted, and then growled at Zevran, trying to shake free. Tara distracted him with a bit of smoked pork, and the sling was strapped and tightened. Then came the task of lifting a sling full of massive, squirming war hound up to the line. Zevran caught the end of the harness and buckled it securely.

"Be good, Scout," Tara ordered, "Or I'll put you to sleep!" She stumbled, and in the confusion, they let go of the sling. Scout was suddenly sent down the line, ears back, eyes white and rolling, a howl rising high and indignant. The whole process lasted only seconds, and then Scout was scrabbling furiously

on the doorstep, chewing at the hated harness.

"Good boy!" Bronwyn praised him, hugging him tightly. "Good boy!" She unbuckled him and helped him put his legs over the ruins of Cullen's spare shirt. The mabari shook himself, wondering if his pride was wounded.

"I'll go next!" Leliana cried eagerly. Without much ado, she threw a belt over the rope and flew across the gap, landing with a dancer's grace. They applauded, and she gave them a little bow.

"What about the rope, Bronwyn?" Cullen called.

"Leave it for now!" she answered. "We may need to do this again going back. We can fix it then. Come on, throw me the rest of the gear and then come on over."

Cullen was the heaviest of them, and had thought it wise to remove his armor before trusting himself to a thin rope. In due course, the gear was bundled and tossed across the gap, and then first Tara, then Zevran, and finally Cullen slid down the rope to the other side. They rearmed as far as possible, leaving several belts, and advanced down a narrow hallway, draped with spiderwebs, into a high and broad... sanctuary, for that was what it was.

Light poured in from high clerestory windows. A high vaulted ceiling soared above. At the distant end of the chamber, up a grand marble staircase, a great statue of Andraste watched their every move.

Barring the approach to the staircase was a sheet of pale fire, cutting across the chamber from side to side.

"I think this is it," whispered Leliana.

Bronwyn thought so, too.

The wall of flame was fairly intimidating. Obviously it was a last challenge before approaching the holy of holies. A little in front of it stood a small altar. Perhaps an offering was required?

Dust had collected at the top of the altar. Bronwyn brushed it away carefully and found an inscription.

CAST OFF THE TRAPPINGS OF WORLDLY LIFE, AND CLOAK YOURSELF IN THE GOODNESS OF SPIRIT. KING AND SLAVE, LORD AND BEGGAR; BE BORN ANEW IN THE MAKER'S SIGHT.

"Well," Zevran said briskly. "That is clear enough. We are commanded to get naked."

"Zevran!" Cullen hushed him.

"Actually," Bronwyn said slowly. "I think Zevran is right. 'Born anew?' That sounds unclothed to me. Anybody else have a better interpretation?"

"Maybe it's a – what-do-you-call-it? A metaphor!" Tara suggested, looking hopeful.

"'Trappings' certainly sounds like armor and weapons," Leliana pointed out.

"– and clothing, boots, and smallclothes," Zevran added. "Anyone here willing to die for their smallclothes?"

Bronwyn sighed. "It's yet another a warning against pride and vanity. It would be a piece with everything else I've been told here. Better to do more than they require, than not enough. Ladies and gentlemen, unarm and undress."

"I won't peek," Zevran assured them all gallantly.

"And Scout shouldn't wear his collar," Tara pointed out. "A collar counts as trappings."

It was very uncomfortable, but there was nothing else to be done. Feeling terribly raw and vulnerable, Bronwyn piled her armor and weapon together and then laid her shabby shirt and underdrawers on the top, avoiding everyone else's eyes.

"Follow me."

"Gladly," Zevran said instantly. Tara elbowed him.

Bronwyn was actually quite frightened. The spirits here knew entirely too much about her. Still, there was no way she could refuse to face the fire. A leader had to lead, and some of her people had a good chance of survival. Even if she perished, surely Leliana and Cullen would be left to take the Ashes back to Ostagar. Another wave of anxiety sapped her spirit. Surely an innocent dog like Scout would not be hurt? He did not seem to be afraid of the flames, as he would be of ordinary fire.

She was taking too long: her people might have second thoughts. She wondered if it would hurt very much. Better to walk quickly, and get it over with at once...

Flames roared up around her ears, enveloping her. There was nothing to do but keep walking as long as she could.

Abruptly, the flames hissed away, vanishing, leaving not a trace behind. The Guardian appeared, approving their success.

"And so, pilgrims, you have been found worthy," proclaimed the Guardian in his eerie, soothing tones. "You

have endured the trials of the Gauntlet. You have walked the path of Andraste, and like her, you have been cleansed. Approach the Sacred Ashes."

Bronwyn, hardly believing herself alive, could still feel the tingle of magic fire on her skin. Refreshed, rejuvenated, strengthened, she took a deep breath, and went back to find her gear. Fumbling back into clothing and armor, she could not bear to look at the Guardian right away. The entire adventure had been replete with warnings against arrogance and pride, and she felt rather ashamed of how appropriate they were. Why had the fire not killed her? She was no faithful Andrastean, but a secret questioner.

"Perhaps," the Guardian said quietly, reading her mind in a most disturbing way, "you mistake Andraste for the institutions that claim to worship her. What do you think Andraste values? Rigid adherence to a dogma, or a brave heart and loyalty to one's friends?"

She still did not look at him, and was grateful for the distraction of Cullen's shout.

"Leliana! Come back here and put your clothes on!"

"I want to see the Urn now!"

"Put your clothes on first! It's disrespectful!"

"I feel wonderful!" Tara declared. "Zevran, don't you feel wonderful?"

"I do!"

Bronwyn forced herself to speak to the Guardian. "So I can take a pinch of the Ashes now? It's all right?"

"Yes, you have all proven yourselves, and are entitled."

"What?" Tara nearly tripped on her boots. "All of us are entitled? As in each of us gets a pinch of Sacred Ashes?"

"You are all worthy pilgrims," the Guardian agreed calmly.

"That's... astonishing!" Zevran spoke out involuntarily, amazed to be anything but a henchman. It was an honor... a memorable honor, to be recognized as an equal among equals, and to be rewarded equally with them. A pinch of the Sacred Ashes! Someday, in some dark alley or bloody battlefield, he suspected he would be very, very glad he had sworn his loyalty to the Warden Commander.

They were not alone in the great chamber. Piles of scorched bones and old armor were scattered here and there, relics of the unworthy. Bronwyn shivered, and then her eyes were drawn to where everyone else was looking: the tall staircase of white marble leading up to the extraordinary statue of Andraste. The Prophet's eyes were raised to heaven. One hand rested gently on her heart, pledging faith with all the world. From the palm of the other hand, upraised in prayer, eternal flames flickered, needing no fuel. On a plinth at the foot of the statue stood a large and wondrous urn of purest white alabaster, the rarest of stones. Deeply chiseled into the stone were the words they had most hoped for.

THESE ARE THE EARTHLY REMAINS OF ANDRASTE,

PROPHET AND BRIDE OF THE MAKER

Leliana glanced at Bronwyn, joy illuminating her face,

and she squeezed her friend's hand. "I am... dizzy. I cannot believe that we are here at last. To be in Her presence! I have no words to express it."

Cullen looked very young. "I shall remember this until the day I die."

"It is indeed impressive," Zevran said, with a brave attempt at his usual suavity. "And the Urn is an object of true beauty."

"It is, isn't it?" Tara murmured. "I'm glad it's gorgeous, and not just big and gaudy. "I feel like I could always be a good person here."

Bronwyn was feeling unusually humble, a novel sensation: rebuked by the honest devotion of some of her companions, and the loyalty and trust of the others. Perhaps they had survived simply because they had the deepest faith that Bronwyn could lead them here. Anyway, Andraste had seen something worthwhile in all of them. And in Scout, too, of course, who was as brave as any of them. He panted happily, ready to go wherever Bronwyn went.

"Are we all decent?" Another thought struck her. "The Guardian says we can each take a pinch of the Ashes. Does everyone have a pouch ready?"

"Oh!"

"Wait!"

There was an embarrassed bustle as they groped in pockets and belt pouches, looking for small pouches or purses. Coins were dumped in other places, and pouches carefully emptied and wiped.

"A pinch of the Ashes," Tara said. "That's... almost scary. I'd almost be afraid to use it."

Bronwyn already knew where her pinch was going, but she was glad her companions would have such a splendid reward. Later, away from this holy place, she would probably have to speak of ugly, worldly things: why they must not tell anyone about the Ashes, which were priceless, and which could easily cost them their lives; why they might not want to discuss what had happened with more hard-line officials of the Chantry, who, without proof, would call them frauds and heretics. This was not the place to speak of such things, or even to let her heart be troubled by them.

Instead, together, they walked up the marble steps and stood before the Urn of the Sacred Ashes.

"Maker," Tara whispered. "Don't let me sneeze." Zevran patted her arm. Scout sat down on a wide step and innocently scratched his ear.

Bronwyn lifted the surprisingly heavy lid. The Ashes were not the usual amalgam of soot, particles and bony lumps she was accustomed to from her experience of funeral pyres. Time, or long travel, or deliberate effort had pulverized the Ashes to a soft grey dust.

Cullen took the lid. "I'll hold it, Bronwyn," he said. "You go ahead."

"They're warm!" Bronwyn exclaimed, surprised at the sensation. Velvet soft, the ashes felt as if they had come only recently from the fire.

Solemnly, surreally, they took turns. Ashes were carefully packed away in various small pouches and then the pouches were carefully fastened and sealed. Bronwyn had brought a little waterproof Dalish pouch of bear gut with her, but everyone had something. Fingers were carefully dusted off into the Urn, and the lid was replaced.

They stood there a little longer, hardly knowing what to do. The Guardian had vanished, to Bronwyn's distress. She had meant to ask him for more advice about the dragon worshipers outside, and if there was another exit from the shrine. There were doors, at least, leading out from either side of the grand staircase.

Slowly, they walked down the steps, leaving a life-changing moment behind. Tara shook herself, and took a look about the Urn chamber.

"Do you think we should... clean it up? We shouldn't just leave these bodies here, should we?"

Once she mentioned it, the condition of the chamber troubled others as well. Zevran was indifferent, having left many a corpse to rot, but he was willing to follow the will of the majority.

Leliana was particularly compassionate. "They tried to find their way, even if they failed. We should dispose of their remains with dignity." Tara vocally agreed.

Bronwyn wondered if Tara was simply looking for a chance to loot the bodies, but leaving skeletal remains did seem rather indecent.

"Let's take a look outside, and see what's feasible. Cullen, hold the door open so I'm not locked out. I don't want to do this again!"

The shrine was not very big, after all. The door to the side opened out on the no man's land they had seen before. Bronwyn searched the landscape in vain for a way to avoid passing back under the bluffs. It did not look good. She did see a way southwest to the Temple that might allow them to avoid going back through the caverns, but with the sheer face of the mountain behind and to the side of them, a confrontation with Kolgrim seemed inescapable.

Well, they would be ready. They had had a good look at Kolgrim and the men he commanded. He would get no reinforcements. That meant... what? Eight men or so, at the most. Refreshed and strengthened as they felt now, Bronwyn knew they were more than a match for the cultists. The serious problem was the dragon. They needed to prevent Kolgrim from summoning it, if they could. Very likely though, the moment he spotted them, he would know that Bronwyn had not done as he wished.

They would worry about that later. They would show some respect to Andraste by clearing out the urn chamber. Bronwyn found a heavy rock and used it to prop the door open. Then they began gathering the remains.

"There's a good place over there to burn them," she said, pointing.

Inevitably, they found valuables: coin, fine armor, jew-

elry – including a sapphire ring and a remarkable gold necklace with a demon-headed pendant – some good weapons, and a traveler's journal scorched by the fire that had killed its owner. It was too blackened to read, and Bronwyn added it to the pile of remains to be incinerated. The plunder was arranged in a pile, and after Tara set the skeletal remains alight, they shared out what was worth taking. Tara got the necklace, Leliana took the ring.

Since they did not need to go back the way they came, there was the makeshift bridge to disassemble. With a stern command to Scout to stay, Bronwyn jumped over, followed by Cullen. The rope was untied from the top of the pillar and the two of them made the jump again. Tara took apart Scout's sling, and Cullen mournfully regarded the remains of his shirt. The belts were claimed and buckled on, the tent ropes untied from each other and stowed away, and they were ready to leave, though Leliana, at least, seemed loath to depart.

"I wish I could draw," she sighed. "I wish I were an artist who could paint this. I shall have to think about it every day, so my memory does not fade."

Then, they shut the door behind them and made ready to face the last of the Disciples of Andraste.

"They'll probably attack us on sight," Bronwyn warned. "We must stop Kolgrim from sounding the horn. Aside from the dragon, he looks to be the most formidable enemy. Tara, freeze him solid. Leliana, shoot him in the throat,

shoot him in the hand. Whatever. Then we'll have to hope that the fight won't make enough noise to attract the dragon's attention. If it smells blood, it might be attracted anyway, so let's finish it as quickly as possible."

"Give me a moment," Leliana said calmly. "I must freshen the poison on my arrows a little."

"Fine idea," Bronwyn approved. "Anything you can do to stop that insupportable ranting before it starts is a fine idea."



CHAPTER 8



DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON

KOLGRIM WAS INDEED WAITING, AND HE WAS VERY, VERY ANGRY. Bronwyn saw no point in listening to his insufferable

ranting, and she owed him no explanations, anyway.

The moment his black-bearded mouth opened to denounce them, Bronwyn shouted, "Now!" and charged.

Tara threw her all into her freezing and paralysis spells, and Leliana began loosing arrows with incredible speed and precision. The two Reaver henchmen at Kolgrim's side were down, thrashing and screaming, before Bronwyn, Cullen, and Zevran could cross blades with them. Scout was on one of them already, ripping at his face.

More rushed up to support their leader, and a rat-faced mage cast spells from behind. Bronwyn shuddered as a bolt of lightning crackled down her arm, almost making her lose her sword. Kolgrim was quickly shaking off Tara's spells, and Bronwyn had to duck to avoid the first whistling blow of his huge axe. Cullen slammed him from the side with the pommel of Yusaris, staggering the big man.

Zevran peeled off to engage the other dragon cultists.

Bronwyn darted at Kolgrim and swung up, hand on his shoulder for leverage. She came down, slashing the side of his neck open. Blood bloomed over his chest. The big man roared and lunged at her, knocking her to the ground. Eyes filled with madness, immeasurably strong, he threw himself on her like a beast. Cullen wrenched at Kolgrim's axe handle and went down himself, wrestling for the weapon. The axe dropped to the ground, missing Bronwyn's face by inches.

She flinched, hissing in pain as Kolgrim's weight pressed down her. She tried to roll away, but his huge hands were groping for her throat. The big white teeth were bared in a rictus of bloodlust: even the whites of the man's eyes were suffused with blood. More blood, sticky and copper-smelling, dripped onto Bronwyn's face, and slickened her gauntlets as she tried to pry the irresistible, questing hands away. Above her, Cullen slammed the hilt of his sword into Kolgrim's head, again and again. Scout barked and growled, leaping at Kolgrim, teeth buried in his shoulder, worrying at him.

The meaty thumbs had slipped under her armor. Bronwyn pressed her chin to her chest to thwart them. Slowly, she was choking, choking: bright lights popped behind her eyes. A sudden blast of bitter cold took her breath away entirely.

It stopped Kolgrim for the moment, but did not kill him. Bronwyn, bespelled frozen, knew everything that was hap-

pening to her, though she was unable to move. Kolgrim was frozen to her, in a bizarre parody of love. Her friends hauled at the leader of the Disciples, struggling to budge him. Bronwyn felt the spell dissipating, and tried to slide out from under, but the massive man was simply too heavy. Cullen crouched low, and managed to lift Kolgrim's left side.

It was all she needed. Bronwyn groped in the man's belt for his dagger, and when he grabbed at her throat again, she whipped her right arm out and stabbed him in the ear. He jerked back enough that Zevran could get his forearm around the bull-like neck. The moment it was exposed. Bronwyn stabbed again into the pulsing throat. Blood exploded into her face, blinding her. Kolgrim screamed, a horrible wet bellow.

"Get him off me!" Bronwyn sputtered, her mouth full of the man's blood. Grunts and shouts answered her, as the bulk was dragged away. She wiped frantically at her stinging eyes, until Leliana ran up with her canteen and splashed water into them.

"It's over," Cullen said. Bronwyn blinked, and looked about her. Bodies littered the landscape, including a drake that Bronwyn had been too occupied to notice.

"Your throat's a mess," Tara told her. "Here, Leliana! I can't tell how bad it is with all that blood. Wash her off a bit more."

"M'all right," Bronwyn croaked, and then spat out a mouthful of blood. "Just let me breathe." A healing spell made that a lot easier. Her heart was pounding as if she had a high fever..

She felt curiously light-headed... oddly invigorated. There was no time to puzzle over it. Zevran had a burn from the drake, and Cullen a bloody lip. It was harder to tell how hurt Tara and Leliana were: they were black with soot.

She found her own canteen and took a long, long drink. She would have some pretty impressive bruises, Tara's useful spells notwithstanding.

A deep, rasping groan startled her. Kolgrim was moving, fingers inching toward her, muscles knotting and flexing as he picked himself up from the ground. Blood bubbled from the ruined neck, but he was unbelievably up and rushing them again, mouth open in a thick, wordless howl. Without his axe, he had only his Reaver strength, but that was still formidable.

"Andraste's nightgown!" Bronwyn rasped. "Just die already!"

Leliana nimbly avoided the rush and plunged her daggers into his back. Kolgrim, crazed eyes blind to everything but Bronwyn, did not appear to feel them. Scout leaped on him, powerful jaws clamping onto his left arm. The Reaver dragged the dog along, not even bothering to give him a kick. Tara's spells slowed him only a little.

But he was not immune to swords. Bronwyn pulled back and Zevran dropped to the ground as Cullen swung Yusaris down in a mighty blow, biting into Kolgrim's collar bone. Zevran sliced through the back of the man's boots, hamstringing his right leg and damaging the other. Kolgrim staggered, and toppled to the ground. Bronwyn

thrust her sword up through the red, open mouth.

Tara remembered she had a sword, too. There was no time to summon up her arcane warrior skills, but she drew Spellweaver, and rather tentatively stabbed Kolgrim in his bloody throat. A shocking thrill ran up the grateful, responsive blade all the way to Tara's hand.

"Whoa!" she gasped. "That's... *interesting*."

Everyone else was too busy to see the look on her face. Bronwyn was twisting her blade, stabbing into the brain. Incredibly, Kolgrim was still alive, jerking spasmodically.

"Stand back!" Cullen roared. He dropped Yusaris, and grabbed up Kolgrim's huge axe. "I'm going to cut his bloody head off. That should make an impression on him!"

Zevran yanked Tara away.

"Cullen!" She giggled madly. "You said 'bloody!'"

Bronwyn laughed, too, and withdrew her sword with a bit of effort.

"He's all yours! Scout! Drop it! Heel!"

She grabbed the dog's collar and they stood aside. Kolgrim raised his head from the ground just as the axe swung down. Blood fountained once, twice... three times, and the spurts grew weaker, dying away into a pool spreading out from the body. The head rolled away, an unrecognizable ball of blood and dust.

"Well done!" Zevran nodded gravely. "That will indeed teach him a lesson!"

"Good axe," Cullen muttered. "Maybe I'll keep it." None-

theless, he staggered back from the body and found Yusaris. wiping the blade conscientiously on the clothing of one of the dead Reavers.

Bronwyn stared down at the mutilated corpse, and automatically cleaned and sheathed her own sword with a emphatic clank of silverite. "Nobody should be that hard to kill..."

"Dragon blood," Tara said instantly, feeling like the head of the class back at the Circle. "He said it made them strong, just like in that book. I bet he's been drinking it for years!" She gathered her magic and cast another general healing spell on all of them.

Dragon blood. Still weary and a bit confused, Bronwyn laid a hand on her breastplate, thinking of the gold vial of blood the man had given her, put aside in her clothes. His words came to her, delivered in a ghost of that awful bellow.

"Blood carries power, strength, knowledge..."

Yes. It was still there, sealed for preservation. Perhaps someday...

"Blood magic!" Cullen burst out, scattering her thoughts. "Just another form of it! Disgusting."

Tara made a face and carefully wiped Spellweaver too, copying Cullen, trying not to cut off her thumb.

"Perhaps," Zevran suggested, his weapons already clean and sheathed, "we should move on soon, yes?"

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed. They had not been very quiet, though Kolgrim had not had a chance to sound his horn. They had to get back through the Temple and to the defiled

chantry: back to their horses and back down the path and away from this place with their precious Ashes.

Kolgrim's horn was still slung over the man's shoulder. It was quite a trophy. She tugged it free and took another look at it. The gold on it was pure and wonderfully fashioned, the dragon horn polished and gleaming, a rich opalescent lavender. The belt itself was studded with gold and jewels and spotted with blood. She wiped the blood away, and said, "You struck the final blow, Cullen. Do you want this?"

"Certainly not!" Cullen sheathed Yusaris. "I might keep the axe, though it's quite heavy. I want no part of dragons!"

"Well, for that matter," Zevran said pragmatically, rifling through the bodies, "neither do I. Of live dragons, certainly."

"Fine." Bronwyn ran her fingertips lightly over the horn, entranced by the play of light deep within it. Flashes of green and blue, gold and purple luminesced as she turned it slowly in her hands. Once, long ago, in her other life at Castle Highever, she had had a hunting horn of her own. It had been nothing as splendid as this. "I'll keep it," she said, slinging it across her own shoulders. "One day I might need to rally the Wardens."

"Well, don't sound it now!" urged Leliana, slipping coins into her pouch. "Oh! What a *pretty* chain! I think —"

"Zevran's right," Tara interrupted her, very softly. "We need to go now."

Something in her tone caught Bronwyn's attention. She glanced at Tara, whose eyes were turned up, looking into

the distance. Scout growled, backing slowly away.

"Go now," Tara whispered.

The dragon had evidently been watching them for some time.



Its massive head hung over the bluff. Eyes like vast, burning jewels stared into Bronwyn's, studying her as a scholar might study a bug – if he had absolutely nothing more interesting to do.

There was certainly an intelligence in those eyes, but it was an intelligence alien to human nature. It was ancient, arrogant, and cruel. It was an intelligence that saw no profit in diplomacy or compromise. This was not a being who would bother ask her riddles. It understood power, and put no limits on its own.

She thought all this in an instant, frozen with horror. Did the dragon care that they had slain its worshipers? Did it know they were strangers? They had, after all, been properly introduced. Or did all humans look alike to it? Kolgrim had not sounded the horn to summon it. Would it bother with them?

There was almost no cover to be had. About them was a flat landscape between the mountains, dotted with rocks and the odd heap of dragon dung. The entrance to the shrine was under the dragon's own bluffs. The arched door seemed a thousand miles away. No use to make the attempt. Behind them beckoned the caverns. The path

was marked with broken pillars, rising out of the earth like rotten teeth. Beyond those, the arches and low side walls of the little bridge would not shield them long. To her right was the ruined circular colonnade. It was roofless, and offered little protection, either. Besides, once there, they might well be trapped.

The caverns, then. They were not far. How fast could a dragon fly? So far the creature had not moved, and was merely content to watch them. Uneasily, Bronwyn recalled something else that Kolgrim had said:

"I warn you: kill us, and you will face Her. She will smell our blood upon you and Her wrath will be great."

She licked her lips, afraid to break eye contact with the dragon. Hoarsely, she whispered, "Everyone start walking toward the caverns. Now. Walk like you belong here. The thing is still lounging up on the heights. Scout, that means you, too. Just trot along back the way we came. Go." No one was moving. "Go!"

Bronwyn did not turn, but walked backwards, her eyes still on the dragon. Her companions walked slowly and stiffly away, as if their legs had grown unaccountably heavy.

Maker, what to do? What to do? What to do? They had no ballistae, no ranks of archers, none of Master Wade's fine new dragon-hunting spears. They had their swords and daggers. Leliana had a bow and some heavy arrows. They had poisons. They had a few bombs.

They had Tara.

Leliana whispered. "If it flies after us, we should run."
 "We don't know how fast it is," Cullen ground out. "We might have to stand and fight."

"All right," Bronwyn said. "If we can't make it to the caverns, then Cullen's right. We'll have to fight. We mustn't bunch up. It just gives the thing a single target. Leliana, poison your heaviest arrows with the nastiest stuff you've got. Everybody else: poison your weapons. Get your bombs ready."

Zevran was already slicking his sword down with a nasty greenish-brown paste. "It would be useless to throw bombs at the dragon's feet. Remember Flemeth? They are well armored. Its eyes are better. If it opens its mouth, then there. Perhaps its nostrils. They are big."

"Its brain is vulnerable, too; just behind the skull," Bronwyn added. "If someone can get there." She stumbled a little, still watching the motionless dragon. No, not motionless. The tail was waving idly, back and forth. It reminded her horribly of a cat waiting to pounce.

"And we can try to damage the wings," Leliana whispered. "Maybe we can immobilize it, or even make it fall."

Bronwyn grunted agreement. She rubbed poison on her sword with a rag, as if she were only cleaning the blade. Her hand shook a little. Some of the poison in the flask spilled, hissing on the cold stones. "But don't bother with fire bombs. It's well armored against that."

"Bronwyn?" Tara asked urgently, trying to look over her shoulder. "Is it moving?"

Abruptly, the wind shifted. The breeze from the south stilled, and warmer air blew in from the east, to where the dragon lay, sprawled in the sun. Bronwyn, her back to the wind, did not feel it at first, but she could see it ruffle the ends of Leliana's hair... could see the bard's face tense in fear...

Up on the bluff, the dragon's nostrils twitched. Vast muscles flexed, and the bulk shifted quickly, ominously...

"Run!" Bronwyn shouted. She turned and ran herself, sprinting for the black hole of the caverns. Behind her, the light changed; the air was shattered by the first mighty downstroke of the dragon's wings. Bronwyn's boots pounded the stones underfoot in what seemed like baby steps. And then a shadow fell over them, and was past, and the dragon dropped...

...Squarely in front of the the bridge to the caverns. Bronwyn could swear it was smirking. It inhaled languorously through its nostrils, in no hurry whatever.

"Scatter!" Bronwyn shouted. Scout, of course, stayed right at her side, and her heart bled for him. How could any dog, however brave, challenge a dragon?

Tara ran left and forced herself to concentrate like never before. She summoned every memory, every bit of power in herself and in the sword Spellweaver, and *pushed*.

The dragon froze. Literally. In the space of one breath and another, it glittered with a light frost. Tara swayed and staggered, and then groped for a vial of lyrium.

It gave the rest of them a chance to attack. The wings

were extended up and behind, far beyond their reach, but Leliana shot an arrow into one open, staring eye. The swordswielders dashed forward, forcing sharp points in between the interlocking scales, breaking the skin. Zevran hissed with effort, prying scales apart, and smashed a vial of poison into the exposed flesh.

Cullen stabbed all the way to Yusaris' hilt, seeking the monster's heart. Where was a dragon's heart, anyway? Pulling it out was yet another trial. He put his boot up on the dragon to brace himself, pushing against it to free his blade.

Bronwyn tried to climb up on the creature, but the frost-slick scales offered her boots no purchase. She slid back to the ground, swearing in frustration.

And then the dragon shook off the spell and all its attackers at once. The furious tail lashed at them, scattering stones like trebuchet shot. The companions scrambled away from the stamping, taloned feet. The dragon choked and then roared, interrupted in the middle of inhaling before engaging its second stomach. The serpentine neck twisted here and there, as the dragon searched for the annoyances that had dared to set blade to its flesh.

Yusaris was still stuck in the dragon's breast, infuriating the creature. Dagger-like teeth snapped futilely at the hilt, seeking to withdraw the splinter of pain. The dragon bit into its own flesh, raging, doing itself more harm than the sword had. Its right eye was bleeding, blinded.

Disarmed, Cullen ran in front of the creature, shouting

to distract it. Leliana cursed as her arrows bounced off dragon scale.

Tara, crouched low to the ground, summoned up power for another spell. She felt Spellweaver twitch in her hands, eager for battle. She cast again, sucking life from the dragon. Only a fraction of the vast whole, but it filled her with renewed strength.

Attack and counterattack. Again and again, they closed in on the dragon: wounding it, irritating it; and the dragon fought back with talon and fang and the power of its deadly tail. A section of the bridge and its soaring arches was reduced to rubble, partially blocking the way to the caverns. Scout was knocked flying. He fell with a meaty thud into a little hollow beside the bridge. Tara hastily shot a healing spell his way, but the dog did not move. Bronwyn looked at him despairingly, but he was on the other side of the dragon.

They were simply not doing enough damage. Bronwyn groped for a shock bomb. "Freeze the wings down!" she screamed over the unearthly clamor of a roaring dragon.

Tara succeeded, just long enough. While Leliana loosed arrow after arrow and Zevran stabbed at it, Cullen ducked under the long neck and fought to free Yusaris, twisting the blade, cursing.

The left wing was down just far enough. Bronwyn made a wild dash, nailed the shock bomb to the wing joint with her eating knife, and hammered at the hilt with her fist.

Tara thought she understood what Bronwyn was doing. "You want me to set it off with a fireball?"

"Not now!" Bronwyn shouted back. "When it's in the air. Preferably over something that will hurt to fall on. The higher the better!"

She rolled away just in time. The dragon shook off the spell and bellowed its fury, snapping at its puny attackers, raging at the pain in its eye, its breast, its wing. Cullen fell back, Yusaris clutched to his heart. Zevran gave a shout to distract it, but the dragon had chosen its victim. The monstrous head struck, and the jaws closed over Cullen with a hideous crunch.

Every one of them screamed in horror. Tara dropped Spellweaver, clutching at her ears. Cullen's muffled, dying cries seemed more than she could hear and live. One of his legs twitched, and the other hung by a bloody sinew. Then he went limp. The dragon tossed the dead man aside, exulting. There would be leisure for feasting later. Now it was time to reveal its true power. It launched itself skyward: up, up, into the burning blue sky of a Frostback autumn. The surviving companions stood there, shocked stupid. Bronwyn ran to Cullen, but he was gone, beyond help, beyond even the Ashes' power to heal. His eyes were open, staring in pain and disbelief. Leliana ran up behind her, her face anguished.

"You bitch!" Tara screamed at the triumphant dragon. "Come back here! I'm going to kill you!"

"Come! Come!" Zevran urged her, pulling her away. He looked desperately at the piles of rubble blocking their way. "Perhaps we can..." But they could not, not fast enough.

Bronwyn blinked away tears, forcing down her horror. She clutched Zevran's arm, eyes on the dragon. It had reached the top of its climb and was falling away gracefully into a swift and smooth descent, bearing down on them.

"Stop!" she shouted to them all. "We're going to finish this. Stay here where the wall is crumbling. At the last minute, get down behind whichever side of the bridge looks good for giving cover from the flames. Tara, hit that left wing joint with whatever will set off the bomb. Make sure Andraste lands *hard*."

She waved her sword at the dragon. It glared at her, its mouth gaping to flame them. A stream of yellow hell issued forth, crackling and roaring up the bridge.

Tara shrieked out a word of power, loosing a burst of raw energy. Zevran grabbed her, diving off the bridge and wrapping his arms around her. Leliana screamed and followed. Bronwyn looked only long enough to see the curse slam into the dragon's wing.

The spell alone would have staggered the dragon, but the detonation of the shock bomb tore the wing joint apart. With an unholy screech, the dragon lost control, the damaged wing flapping uselessly. It came in too fast and too low. With a shriek, it crashed into a broken pillar, and then plowed into the bridge's stone foundations. Bronwyn

threw herself down, dragonfire sweeping just above her.

Earth and stone flew to heaven. The ground shook, toppling pillars and arches. The companions, battered by debris, huddled under their precarious shelter. Rocks banged out harsh music on their helmets and backplates.

An awful silence followed. Bronwyn gritted her teeth against the pain of her bruises, and got her legs under her. She forced herself into a staggering run, and took a look at the dragon.

It was stunned, but still breathing. The pillar it had hit had caved in its chest. The ruined wing drooped awkwardly to the ground. Bronwyn guessed it might die in time. But why give it another moment?

"Come on!" she shouted. "It's down!"

The others ran after her: angry, vengeful, drawing their swords. They scrambled up on the heaving, comatose hulk and devoted themselves to the painstaking, complicated task of killing it. Leliana stabbed at its eyes. Zevran ran for Kolgrim's axe and devoted himself to chopping through the spine. Tara was about to stab it with Spellweaver, when Bronwyn pushed her away.

"No! Find Scout! See if you can do anything for him!"

Tara ran to where the dog had fallen. He was half-buried in dirt, but alive and whimpering. Tara choked back a sob. At least one of their number could be saved.

Bronwyn hacked away at the scales protecting the back of the dragon's skull. She slathered her sword with Adaia's

vilest toxin, and then pressed the point downwards, carefully, lovingly; at the precise, necessary angle.

The dragon shifted under her feet. The tip of the tail twitched. A rumbling, agonized groan issued from deep in the bloody throat.

Bronwyn searched for something to say: something witty and contemptuous, something memorable. Useless. Misery and grief swelled painfully in her throat. She pressed down hard, and shortly thereafter all twitchings and groans stopped forever.



Scout was a battered, sore, and tired dog, but he was in good enough shape to be a presence at Cullen's funeral.

A Grey Warden's possessions were the property of his surviving brothers and sisters. That had been nearly the first lesson Bronwyn had learned about this secretive order. Cullen was laid out under the sky as decently as possible, his linen garments drenched crimson with his blood. His armor and other gear were removed to prepare for his burning. The armor was damaged beyond repair. Bronwyn did not like the idea of simply throwing it aside like trash, and decided to put it away behind the wall of the little round shrine. Someday they might be able to come back for it, and display it at the Wardens' compound. Cullen must not be forgotten.

Behind the little circular wall, she discovered the dragon's hoard. She sighed, too weary and sad to feel pleasure

in it. She walked away without taking another look.

Her other companions sat in a circle, solemnly dividing Cullen's earthly goods. Tara scrubbed at her eyes, weeping silently in a kind of dull wretchedness, wishing she had been nicer to Cullen, who had always been nice to her — who, in fact, had been in love with her.

"We should take Yusaris with us," she said. "It's an important sword. Somebody can use it, I'd think."

"You're right," Bronwyn said, joining them. "It's certainly too big for me, but it's a splendid weapon. Maybe Carver..." Her voice trailed off. How was she going to tell the others that they had lost Cullen?

Coin and trinkets were shared out: the coin for practical use, the trinkets for keepsakes. They discovered that Cullen had an amulet exactly like the one they all wore.

"We'll never know, now, who he spoke to or what he saw," Leliana mourned. "May I keep his Templar medallion? It would mean so much to me. That one. Yes, thank you..."

"Noble one," Zevran said seriously to Bronwyn, a little pouch in his hand. "Here is his share of the Ashes. I think you should have it. We all know that you intend your own for the Queen. Why not take this for yourself?"

"I think that's a very good idea," Tara agreed thickly. "Cullen thought a lot of you, Bronwyn. He'd want you to have it."

"It's too bad there was no way to help him with it," Leliana said softly.

Bronwyn agreed entirely. She felt rather sick at profit-

ing in any way from the death of a friend and comrade, but it would be idiocy to leave it behind — disrespectful, too. Cullen had given his life for it.

They stood back to set the body afire. Bronwyn steeled herself to watch the strong young body withering in flame; trying to take comfort in the words Leliana recited:

*Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadow.
In their blood the Maker's will is written.*

*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.*

Scout laid back his ears and howled. It was too much. Bronwyn began to cry in earnest.

"Let's take him home with us," Tara said, when the fire had utterly consumed their friend. "I've got this."

She held out a little silver trinket box. The ashes were cooled, and amongst them they packed the silver box with what it would hold. The breeze rose, and the rest began drifting away. Tara put the silver box in her pack, and Zevran helped her heft it onto her shoulders.

Bronwyn knew she must tell them about the treasure, and said, "The dragon's hoard is over there in that ruined colonnade. We must get back to the village, but if we can be quick about it, you can have a look."

They went and looked, because not to do so would be

stupid. It was quite the impressive hoard, but no one was in the mood, and they already had all they could manage. There was treasure enough back at the chantry, where they could pack it onto the horses.

Bronwyn closed the chests and said, "If we come back some day, we can claim this for the Wardens."

"And look... over there," Leliana said, pointing. Attached to the marble wall was a rusted chain and a set of manacles. "Perhaps that is where..."

Bronwyn winced, thinking of poor Genetivi. "Very likely."

They hardly spared a look at the other bodies: Kolgrim and his minions.

"Let them rot," Bronwyn said bitterly. "Let the ravens pick their bones. Crazy bastards."

There were the bones of the High Dragon and the drake to consider, too; but there was no way they could tan the hide or take the massive bones with them. Every part of a dragon was priceless these days, but the bones and horn, at least, would be going nowhere. Like the dragon's hoard, they could await other, happier pilgrims.

They marched away, and agreed to try the more distant door. This one, they soon discovered, led not through the caverns, but directly into the Temple itself. It had been hidden behind a large bookcase, and gave them a much quicker route out to the mountain path.

The great entry hall of the Temple surrounded them with glory, but they had no eyes for it. The Temple door

was closed and locked in silence. It was growing dark by the time they limped back to the chantry, weary with battle and grief.

"Scout!" Bronwyn murmured. "Any strangers up here?"

The dog, still not fully recovered, sniffed about, favoring his right side. Sometime that day, the big trap at the top of the path had been set off, leaving a gaping hole in the ground and various debris scattered about. It had apparently scared off any more prying guests.

"Good boy! Go inside and lie down," Bronwyn ordered. She muttered to herself, "I'd better take care of the horses."

"I will help you, Noble One," Zevran volunteered. "There is no need for you to do everything yourself."

Tara spoke up. "I'll stand here where I can look down the hill, so I can watch for the crazies."

"And I shall make us something good for dinner," promised Leliana. "Even Brona ate when Andraste was taken."

Bronwyn only sighed deeply, wishing that Andraste had stirred herself a little when they were doing battle with the dragon. Zevran smiled at her, guessing her thoughts.

"But it was ever thus," he agreed. "Come, the horses need water."

The horses had made a hash of the neat little garden, and Bronwyn felt meanly glad of it. After seeing to Posy, she took extra time with Dax, Cullen's big Destrier/Traveler mix. She ran her hand over the smooth grey flank. Dax was too big for Tara to manage. Bronwyn would ride Dax herself and put Tara on Posy, whose smooth gait

would be easy on the elf girl.

Zevran chirruped in a pleasant way to his horse, and remarked, "We should not leave the gold and silver in the chantry."

"Some of it should go into the Wardens' treasury, but I agree. We will talk it over after we eat. We cannot take everything of value, but we certainly won't leave the best for these lunatics."

They went into the chantry, promising to bring some dinner out to Tara. She waved them off, shivering a little in the chilly air, wanting to be alone in her thoughts. Involuntarily, her hand slipped down into her pocket and briefly touched the little pouch of Sacred Ashes, reminding her that this day had really happened. Cullen was gone, and with him a piece of her past.

The dinner was wonderful. The chantry's larder was full of good things, and Leliana had put together a delicious stew, rich with sausage, squash, onions, turnips, and greens. In the corner of the hearth, she had baked little round bannocks of barley. On the table she set out honey and cheese and butter, cider and perry: all served in the gold and silver sacramental bowls and cups of the chantry. Wax candles burned brightly in big gold candlesticks.

Leliana tilted her chin proudly. "It is no sin to use the regalia of this mockery of Andraste. *'They are sinners, who have given their love to false gods.'* They do not deserve our consideration. This is Cullen's funeral feast. It is he I care about!"

She added, "I washed all the dragon blood away first. It was so sticky!" She filled a silver bowl with water and another with the stew, and set them on the floor for Scout. The dog blinked an eye and rose lazily, shaking himself, and then began devouring his meal with gusto.

"It's wonderful, Leliana," Bronwyn said softly. "Zevran, go get Tara. I want her to see this. She can eat a bite, and then go back to standing watch." She changed her mind. "Or maybe we all need our sleep. Let's set another damned trap for the Havenites. If it explodes in the night, we'll know they're trying to visit!"

Tara came in and exclaimed over the beauty of it all. She pulled the silver trinket box from her pack and plumped it on the middle of the table. "So he can be with us," she said softly.

Silver chalices were filled. Bronwyn lifted her goblet in salute. "*Hail the victorious dead!*" She smiled into her cup ruefully, and did not add the rest of the saying.

Tara held her cup high. "Our brother, Cullen!"

"*Someday we will Join you.*" Leliana said, tears in her eyes.

"— but not today," murmured Zevran. "Not today."

Then they fell to.

Zevran and Tara shared the priest's bed; and after stripping it down and covering it with clean blankets, Bronwyn and Leliana shared the bed in the secret room. Another blanket was spread on the floor for Scout; and the night fell dark and silent. Leliana cried a little in her sleep.

Bronwyn curled up at her back, and held her.

The bard stirred, and laid a hand over Bronwyn's. She whispered, "Just think! Our Cullen is with the Maker now! He was cleansed and purified by the fire of Andraste, and he never sinned after, so he would have gone straight to the Maker's side. What a welcome he must have had! That is something at which we can rejoice, yes?"

"Yes," Bronwyn sighed. She could hope, but she was not sure she could believe. "But he did say the word 'bloody' when he was fighting."

"Andraste would not care about that," Leliana assured her sleepily. "I think she would laugh!"

Just before dawn, Bronwyn awakened and went to the front door, looking out warily at the pale glow in the east. She made up the fire, poured water and oats into a pot for porridge, and then while it simmered, began packing for their journey.

"Bronwyn?" Leliana asked, pale and sleepy in the doorway. "You are up already? Oh! The porridge must not boil!" She moved it away from the fire a little. "There are some common bowls we can use this morning. And I shall leave them dirty for the heretics, too!" she declared.

When the porridge looked close to being ready, Bronwyn knocked quietly on the door to the priest's quarters. Unintelligible noises answered, but she was fairly sure they were awake.

They all ate quickly and quietly, and then arranged the heavy packs. Anything they could not take, Bronwyn put

in the secret room and locked away. They took enough. The Wardens would be eating off silver and gold in their quarters at Ostagar. Deliberately, they left the door to the ransacked chantry open.

It seemed a good idea to do a bit of scouting and see if the Havenites had rigged traps in their turn. Quietly, clinging to cover, the five of them walked down the hill and found a line tied across the path, at just the height of a rider's neck. Zevran sliced it deftly. "They might have more, lower down," he whispered.

Bronwyn nodded, rubbing her neck. It still hurt where Kolgrim had tried to strangle her. "Then we'll have to go down slowly. Anyway, I have something to say to them before we leave."

Scout, much recovered, nosed around, but sensed no lurking enemies. They went back to saddle and load the horses. Their packs were heavy with hard-won treasure. Bronwyn felt they deserved every silver cup and every piece of gold. She tied Yusaris to the saddle and slung Kolgrim's horn across her chest.

"Let's go."

At the base of the hill, Bronwyn sounded the horn. The powerful music woke the sunrise and the sleepers in their beds. The survivors of Haven crept outside to find their invaders mounted, armed, and ready for any threat. Some of the villagers ducked back inside instantly and peered out of their windows.

"Now listen to me!" Bronwyn shouted. "Your disciples are dead and your false god is slain!"

A moan of horror surged from the terrified people. Bronwyn shouted over it ruthlessly. "There won't be any more killing of travelers here! There won't be any more worshiping of dragons! I won't have it! If you try any more of your murdering ways, I'll come back. If you threaten me or anyone else, I'll kill every one of you, and all your friends, and I'll burn the village to the ground!"

She kicked Dax into motion, and went her way. Behind her, Leliana helpfully added, "You should beg forgiveness of the Maker and the true Andraste! Even yet she might forgive..."

"Oh, come *on*, Leliana," Tara called.

Scout sniffed out a leg trap on the lower hill, and Zevran quickly dismounted to disarm it. The lower cottages were shuttered tight. Bronwyn sneered, and put Haven behind her.

A group of terrified children, hiding in the woods from the monsters that had killed their parents, saw them last. When the hoofbeats faded, they made their way slowly back to the village, feeling that their world had come to an end.



It was a nasty journey back to Sulcher. They caught the stink of decay long before they saw the ravaged corpse of Tara's lovely Antivan barb. A black cloud of impudent crows rose up from their feast, cawing scornfully.

Tara sighed. "She was so beautiful..."

The bodies of the men who had attacked them were

gone, presumably dragged off by beasts of prey. Bronwyn scowled briefly, and then dismissed the memory of them. They could rot too, for all she cared.

After an hour of thickening clouds, the rain came, cold and penetrating as needles. If there were bandits or wolves in the forest, they were even more demoralized by the rain than Bronwyn and her friends. The path was turning to mud, but they were anxious to move on. There was no decent place to camp here, and the rain and cold could make a lethal combination if they risked them overnight.

Instead, they pushed ahead, and at length were rewarded by the dull silver line in the distance that was Lake Calenhad. Sometime later, drenched to the skin, they descended the low hill below which Sulcher was spread out before them: grubby, impoverished, and unlovely.

But there was one beautiful sight. THE LADY OF THE LAKE was still docked there.

"Just got in the cargo of wool we was waitin' for," the skipper told Bronwyn. "We'll be headin' north in the mornin'."

"No," Bronwyn disagreed gently. "We are leaving for Redcliffe *today*." Before the man could protest, she thumped a thin ingot of gold, long as her hand, onto the ship's rail. The boatman stared at it, mouth open.

He licked his lips. "— to Redcliffe. Right you are."

"Is that *gold*?" asked his mate, eyes bugging in awe. "Never saw a piece of *gold* that big."

"We'll just be getting our horses aboard *right now*, shall

we?" Bronwyn hinted.

The crude canvas shelters were erected on deck, and in a short time, the boat set out, sails heavy with rain. The horses were carefully unsaddled and unburdened, bestowed in the poor stalls the ship afforded, and curried thoroughly. The horses had been faithful friends and needed the very best care. At least there was hay in plenty, and no end of water.

Afterwards, the companions huddled dismally around a little fire on a tripod, wolfing down thin oat gruel. Cullen's death seemed more real than before, somehow: more a settled, inescapable fact. Scout crowded close between Bronwyn and Leliana, and the two women were grateful for the warmth.

The rain eased off at nightfall. The skies cleared, and Lake Calenhad reflected a dome of stars. Bronwyn lay out on deck, staring up at darkness, not looking forward to much of anything. She had lost a Warden and a friend. She had led him into a danger that had little to do with the immediate, pressing threat of darkspawn, and he had suffered a horrible death in consequence. Their friends at Ostagar would take it hard. And what of the Templars? Ought Bronwyn to write a letter to the Knight-Commander at Kinloch Hold? That courtesy would probably be appropriate. Cullen had once told her he was a child of the Chantry, and as such, he had no known family to contact. That was a sad thing to contemplate.

But he would be mourned. Bronwyn missed him keenly. Tara missed him too: and was quieter than usual, perhaps weighed upon by grief mixed with guilt at being free of an unwanted suitor. Carver and Alistair had liked Cullen very much, and Broasca had been mad for him. And of late, it had crossed her mind that Leliana might have begun to fancy him. Was she imagining things?

Bronwyn's mind drifted to others she cared for. What was happening to Fergus? Was Highever pacified yet? Were Howe's henchmen still causing trouble? Had Carver's brother found his way to Fergus, and delivered her letters? Was Fergus going to hold fast to his rights to the succession?

And Loghain. Bronwyn felt exhausted just thinking of him. Yes, she had the Ashes for Anora. They must see if they did any good. Perhaps she would have to go to Denerim again. Maker help her! Perhaps Loghain could take them, and go himself, but Bronwyn doubted he would. He thought no one as cunning as himself, and probably could not bear to relinquish control of the army for that long. And then too, once she was back, would come the soul-sucking weariness of preparing for the Landsmeet, of smiling and campaigning for votes and approval. At the moment it seemed easier just to let the darkspawn *have* bloody Ferelden.

Leliana strummed her lute idly, a sweet accompaniment to the sounds of water rushing past the bow and the gently sougning of the wind. Then she began humming, and then singing a melancholy song Bronwyn had never heard.

DRAGON SLAYER

My young love said to me,
 "My mother won't mind
 And my father won't slight you
 For your lack of kine."
 And she laid her hand on me
 And this she did say:
 "It will not be long, Love,
 Till our wedding day."

—

As she stepped away from me
 And she moved through the fair
 And fondly I watched her
 Move here and move there.
 And then she made her way homeward,
 With one star awake,
 As the swan in the evening
 Moved over the lake.

—

Last night she came to me,
 My dead love came in.
 So softly she came
 That her feet made no din.
 As she laid her hand on me,
 And this she did say:
 "It will not be long, love,
 'Til our wedding day."



DRAGON SLAYER

"It's sad," Tara murmured sleepily. "Why do people make such sad songs?"

"It's beautiful," Bronwyn thought she said, as she fell into the beckoning Fade.



GREY WARDEN CULLEN

CHAPTER 9

QUEEN ROWAN'S BLOOD-RED GOWN



ENTLY ROLLING WAVES
LULLED THEM TO SLEEP FOR MOST
OF THE VOYAGE TO REDCLIFFE.
The rest was a welcome one,

especially for poor Scout, whose injuries were still mending. Bronwyn had some remarkable bruises on her throat, handprints in vivid browns and yellows. The companions mourned and rested, and prepared themselves for the long ride through the Hinterlands.

They also did quite a bit of reading. Genetivi's TRAVELS was passed around and proved quite the find. Bronwyn learned a very great deal from it. Genetivi had traveled as a common man, not as a noble nor even as a Chantry official, and learned much about Thedas that its rulers never saw.

All of them studied FLAME AND SCALE to some degree. The mere mention of dragons was painful, but they must know all they could if they meant to survive another such encounter. When that subject grew too depressing, there was always the smutty novel they had found among the other books in the storekeeper's chest: an implausible romance in which a

woman sell-sword won the heart of the Prince of Starkhaven. Zevran enjoyed critiquing the naughty bits.

Tara had filched DISCOVERING DRAGON'S BLOOD from the temple: only one of many treasures that were moldering on the bookshelves there. Yes, Blood Magic was forbidden, but this was not the blood of men or elves, but of dragons; and Bronwyn's eyes widened at some of the possible uses for the contents of her little gold vial. Truth be told, she now wished they had taken more. Some of the potions and tinctures were risky, but so was the Joining, after all.

They were not far from Redcliffe when Bronwyn called them together for a council.

"We've had an extraordinary adventure, and seen things no one has seen for long ages. However, I must ask you that they remain secret, at least for now."

"But — " Leliana protested instantly. Bronwyn held up a hand. She had expected this.

"We are in a Blight. The country is in chaos. To spread the news about the Temple and Shrine might incite people to go there, but how many would survive? They need no longer need fear being fed to a dragon, but the villagers of Haven will likely attack without warning."

"I see," Leliana nodded. "You think we should wait until the the Chantry can mount a proper expedition."

Bronwyn intensely disliked the idea of turning the place over to the Chantry at all, but Leliana would not understand. "I think we need to defeat the darkspawn before

that happens. We may need the swords of the Chantry before this is over. I think it would be a very bad thing for them to be distracted at this time. Also..." a brilliant excuse came to her. "It would be very wrong to gossip about this, instead of informing the Grand Cleric first. Surely the honor is hers."

To her relief, Leliana fell for it. "Oh! You are right! What an insult it would be, not to reveal this wonder to her first of all! But how to do it?"

Bronwyn said soothingly, "We must wait until the Blight is under control. Then, when I am in Denerim, I will arrange an appointment, and lay our proofs before her. She will know best what to do." Bronwyn devoutly hoped the Grand Cleric would think her mad or drunk, and have her escorted from her office at once.

Zevran only smiled, seeing through her, and Tara shrugged, displeased. Bronwyn wondered exactly what bothered the elf girl about this, as Tara was certainly not a devout Andrastean. Was she, like Bronwyn, not comfortable with the idea of telling the Chantry anything? Perhaps, as a mage, she would prefer to study the libraries and artifacts there at her leisure, without Templars in control.

Bronwyn loathed the idea of the Chantry turning that place of wonder into some grubby, money-making scheme. The Guardian would not tolerate the Chantry levying a fee for entering the Gauntlet, of course. More likely, they would keep the true shrine hidden, and put up a huge

statue of Andraste in the outer Temple, with a copy of the Urn and charge for pinches of some common wood ash. Perhaps she was too cynical, or too selfish, but the thought of exploiting the shrine sickened her.

And the people of Haven would submit or perish. They were unpleasant folk, to be sure, but it was, after all, *their* village, and it was not as if Bronwyn had been invited there. How many more would die if Bronwyn set the Templars on them?

At least she had gained her point for now. Leliana agreed to be silent about the Urn until the proper time. There was another thing to be addressed.

"You each have a pinch of the Sacred Ashes, the rarest and most precious remedy in all Thedas. I urge you, just as we are saying nothing about the shrine, to say nothing openly about your own pinch of Ashes. In fact, say nothing about them to our other companions. I must tell Loghain about the pinch we obtained for the Queen. I must tell him in brief of our adventures and the shrine, but I shall ask him, too, to keep those secret. I think he would agree with my reasoning."

Loghain would, she was sure. He would not want the Chantry claiming any part of Fereldan territory for their own purposes. They would have to talk in confidence about Haven, because Loghain would probably think that the villagers ought to be paying taxes and answering to a proper bann. But relinquish control of it to the Chantry? Highly unlikely!

"Are you going to tell him about the other Ashes we got?" Tara asked, pert and direct.

Bronwyn thought about it, and then replied. "No. He was not there. He did not see what we saw. He did not face the Gauntlet with us. You must realize that once the secret is out, people would come from far and wide for the Ashes. A wealthy ruler would hire armies, pay any amount of coin to possess them. The secret of where they came from will be dangerous enough. Loghain can know about the pinch we obtained for the Queen. They will be administered to the Queen, and we shall pray that they are all we hope for. We do not need to boast of this, surely."

"If it becomes known that the Queen was healed by the Ashes," Zevran pointed out, "there will be a wild rush to track them down and seize them."

"Then we must keep the secret," Leliana said firmly. "No one must know before Her Grace the Grand Cleric can take the proper measures to safeguard them. Teyrn Loghain and the Queen will have to know, of course, but no one else!" Her eyes were very wide. "We must swear our friends at Ostagar to secrecy, too!"

After two days of inactivity, it was good to be back on dry land. Before they could present themselves to the Arl, there were errands to be run in the village. Two of the horses needed to be re-shod, so as soon as they stepped off the boat, they sought out the village blacksmith. There was probably a farrier at the Castle, but Bronwyn was uncomfortable with putting herself too much in Arl Tea-

gan's debt. While they waited for the horses, they stopped at the shops to restock their provisions. Afterward, they decided to while away some time at the tavern. Bronwyn hoped to pick up a little local gossip, not filtered through the Arl's own people.

They made the steep hike up to the tavern and found the door open to the mild autumn air. The pleasant scent of good ale drifted to them, luring them inside.

"The King's Pint!" Leliana smiled, pointing at the crudely painted portrait of a blond and grinning King Cailan quaffing from a foaming mug. "What a quaint name!"

"And as true and honest a name as ever a tavern owned!" A striking red-haired woman behind the bar smiled at them. The innkeeper, they guessed, or his wife. "The sweet young king himself was so good as to quench his thirst here, the day after we were delivered from the monsters. Drank his pint down like a man, and had another!" She noticed their tabards, and her smile widened. "Grey Wardens! Just fancy! What will you have?"

They had the ale, of course, and it was very good. The innkeeper's name was Bella, and she was glad to tell them all the news of this part of the world.

"Had business with the smith, did you? Fine fellow, that. He's new to the village, but who isn't, save me and the priests? The walking dead thinned Redcliffe out, and no mistake!"

"It must have been terrible for you," Leliana sympathized. That was all Bella needed to sit down with them and

give them the whole gruesome story.

"...and I'm lucky to be alive. None of us would have got through another night if the King – Maker rest his sweet soul! – and Teyrn Loghain hadn't come marching to save us. The old Arl's son was a mage! A mage! And a bad one, too! Raised his father from the dead and turned him into a monster! Killed his own mother! They said he was born disfigured, with a crooked back and eyes like fire... They should have guessed something was wrong with him from the first. Mind you, I never laid eyes on the lad. His mother held herself and her own too high for that. Orlesian, you know. Arl Eamon ought never to have married her. Nothing good ever came from that lot."

Tara shifted on the bench, but could hardly argue. The arl's son *had* been a mage, and he *had* slaughtered the village and killed his mother. "But you were saved," she said, "and now you have Arl Teagan. He seems very nice."

"No finer man alive," Bella agreed. "He's put good people in the cottages and seen they had work. Helped get the harvest in with his own hands, and not too proud to come here afterwards and stand the lads a drink. You never saw old Arl Eamon doing the like for his folk." She lowered her voice to give them the best gossip. "There's talk he'll be taking a wife soon... Arl Teagan I mean... and a proper Fereldan girl, too. When he does, we'll all be that pleased to wish him joy!"

"Naturally," said Bronwyn. "Everyone likes a good wed-

ding. Any idea who the happy bride will be?"

"Well..." Bella's fine eyes glittered with satisfaction. "A girl right here in the village! No high-born Lady Muck for our good Arl. That little girl Kaitlyn Merton, and a sweet thing she is! But don't spread the word. It's a secret!"

"Of course not," Bronwyn assured the innkeeper, musing over the term 'high-born Lady Muck.' She supposed that was exactly how some people would describe her. "And what other news have you heard?"

Bella had heard plenty. Everyone was sorry about King Cailan, of course; and no one knew who was to be king. It was sad that the King and Queen had no children, and some said either blood mages or Orlesian trickery was to blame. Hard to say. There had been a rumor a month or two ago that the Queen was with child, but it didn't seem so. Anyway, there was that northern lord, Fergus Cousland, but nobody in Redcliffe knew him. Some were saying that Queen Anora should keep the throne, but others said that Teyrn Loghain should wear the crown outright, since he'd had the running of the country since the Rebellion.

"And with him and the Girl Warden," Bella said with satisfaction, "it's likely we'll be done with the darkspawn soon! They killed the Archdemon's chief captain, you know... a great dragon hiding in the Wilds. The Girl Warden killed him herself, and now they call her the Dragonslayer. It's an Age of Heroes we live in, right enough!"

Bronwyn was slightly puzzled that the woman had not

guessed that Bronwyn was in fact the Girl Warden herself. Perhaps Bella did not expect the Girl Warden to walk into her tavern. Perhaps Bronwyn was not tall and glamorous enough to live up to the legend. In fact, she knew she was dirty, smelly, and looked like she had lost her last fight. Her armor was good chainmail but not gleaming plate. And perhaps, too, the last few months had taken their toll. Perhaps she was not so obviously the "Girl" Warden anymore, but more a weary, battle-scarred woman warrior.

Then Bella took note of Zevran and Tara. "At least *you* were saved from that wicked Arl Howe! He sold elves to the Tevinters just like in the bad old days! They say the Alienage of Denerim is empty as a drained wineskin now. The Wicked Arl got a great chest of gold for them — blood money, I call it — and was struck down by the Maker for his sins."

"I hope that's true," Tara said fiercely. "I hope the Maker gives him what for!"

There was talk — strange talk — that King Maric had had another son, and that he had been kept in the dungeons under the palace from boyhood, fed on cakes and honeygrass tea. He was King Cailan's twin, and had been hidden away because two princes would have led to trouble.

"Mind you," whispered Bella. "I don't put much stock in that. I don't like to think that Good King Maric would have done that to his own son. If there were another boy, it stands to reason that he would have been raised up as a prince, just like his brother!"

"Yes," Bronwyn said quietly. "You'd think so."

They were greeted kindly at the castle, and the absence of Cullen was noted. The appropriate words of sympathy were expressed and acknowledged. Bronwyn could briefly assure Bann Teagan that they had found no darkspawn west of Lake Calenhad, and then there were blessed, blessed hot baths in the handsome bedchambers they had stayed in before.

"My lady!" a maid cried, aghast at Bronwyn's cuts and bruises. "You look like someone tried to strangle you!"

"Someone did try to strangle me," Bronwyn said evenly, soaking pleasantly in the perfumed and steamy bathwater. "He's dead, though, and there's an end."

A shocked, sympathetic murmur, and the girls went about their work. Bronwyn nearly fell asleep in the bath, hardly noticing as one of them cleaned and trimmed her battered nails. The door opened a little, and another serving girl slipped in, a wealth of scarlet silk fluttering from her arms.

"You're too tall for any of Arlessa Isolde's things, my lady," giggled the maid. "So the Arl said we were to look through the trunk Queen Rowan left here years ago. She was a warrior, too, like you. We found this. It's old-fashioned, but very fine." Bronwyn managed a slight smile. It was blood red, and cut off the shoulders. The color disturbed her a little, reminding her of Cullen's blood-soaked body, the last time she saw him. It smelled of the herbs it had been kept in: rosemary and rue.

Remembrance and regret, she thought, in the language of flowers. An old-fashioned gown, yes, but in a soft, soft silk. She should not complain of the ominous color. No one here would understand.

"It's splendid," she agreed. It was kindly thought of, and she should be grateful to have something other than her Grey Warden garb to wear to dinner. It would be a pleasure to feel like a noblewoman again, and not so unworthy to be Eleanor Cousland's daughter. She dug through her looted jewels and resolved to wear as many as she dared: her emerald ring and some big gold earrings, certainly. Her ruby necklace was with her things at Ostagar. Pity. Well, she would wear it when she returned. As for her bruises, they were the marks of honorable combat, and she was not ashamed of them.

The maid combing out her hair whispered — in her very countrified way — "His lordship said you was to keep the gown 'an it please you, m'lady. No use in it sitting in an old chest 'til the next age, says he!"

"I shall remember to thank him. Such a bright, cheerful color."

Zevran and Tara had been quicker with their baths—which were only basins of hot water brought to their little room, after all. The maids also brought some fine clothes for them, assured them that they were theirs to keep, and then left, making stiff, uncertain little curtseys. Neverthe-

less, Tara liked the chestnut brown velvet dress, embroidered in sea-green, and liked even more Zevran's doublet of dark yellow satin.

"We look splendid, *carina*," Zevran said, helping her fasten the heavy demon-headed necklace. He turned her around, smiling, and gave her a long, sweet kiss. Then he offered his arm to her with great gallantry. "Come. We shall go down to the Hall, and see what entertainment there is to be had!"

There was entertainment there, of a sort. The knights and the Chantry contingent were there already, including a young sister who was Mother Hannah's new clerk. The young Mertons were here again, too. Perhaps presenting the Wardens with some of his vast store of rich garments had given Teagan the precedent to be likewise generous with his distant cousin. Kaitlyn looked very pretty in her sky-blue gown: a noblewoman rather than a mere poor relation. Zevran and Tara smirked at each other, remembering the innkeeper's gossip.

Little Bevin was insatiable in his hunger for stories. To while away the time before the Arl and the Girl Warden would make their appearance, the young chantry sister had agreed to tell them all a thrilling tale of wickedness punished. Tara and Zevran drew near to hear it, and found it... not at all what they would have chosen as entertainment.

THE CHANTRY SISTER'S TALE

In the city of Val Royeaux there was once a school, whose teacher was a wise and learned sister. In front of this school was a beautiful image of Andraste. Many children of the prosperous went there to study their lessons and learn to sing the Chant of Light, as little children do. Among these children was a little boy seven years old, the son of the widow of a chevalier. On his way to and from school, day by day, wherever he saw the image of Andraste, he would sing a verse. Thus had the widow taught her little son to honor Our Lady, for *"a learned child is a blessing upon his parents and unto the Maker."*

But in that very street, in a dark and crooked house, lived an apostate: a wicked maleficar. His evil heart was so filled with hatred when he heard the little voice singing the Chant that nothing would do but he should drive the child from the world. The mage had an ugly, squint-eyed daughter — young, but already tainted by the evil of magic. The mage told his daughter to lure the child to the house, where they could work their will on him. And so the girl did. She held out a sweet red apple to the child as he was passing on his way homeward, and said, "Come into my house, little boy, and I shall share this apple with you."

Thinking no harm, the child walked in, but never did the sun shine on his departure. Instead, the maleficarum used him for their monstrous rites. The child, crying for his mother, was stripped naked, shamefully abused, and locked in a cage of iron. This cage was suspended over a cauldron.

The child still sang the Chant, praying to our Lady that She would take him up to Her, and the singing so enraged the evil maleficar that he took a great knife, and cut the child's throat to the bone. The blood flowed thick and red into the cauldron.

"Make sure you get every drop!" cried the maleficar's squint-eyed daughter. They drained the body for purposes of their vile blood magic, and then threw it into a public midden.

The widow waited all that night for her little child, but he did not come. Therefore, as soon as it was day, with her face pale from fear and anxiety she searched for him, until finally she learned that he was last seen in the street near the school. The good sister there called on the Templars, and the child's body was found later that morning, stabbed dead and gnawed upon by rats.

There was a great hue and cry throughout the city, and a good man who lived in the same street thought much on the matter. He watched the dark little house for some days, and then he went to the Templars and reported that those in the house were apostates, and probably maleficar. Who else would have killed an innocent child?

So it proved. The Templars boldly broke down the door and dragged the evil mage and his ugly daughter into the light of day. They were revealed to be mages, drained of their mana, and taken before the magistrates, where they were put to the question. At first the maleficar denied that he was a blood mage, and claimed to know nothing of the child's death, but in the end he and his daughter confessed that they had killed the child just as described before, and then used the innocent blood for their evil rites. In time, after much close questioning, they gave the names of other apostates,

and they too were captured and confessed to blood magic.

Every one of the foul coven was sentenced to further torment and a shameful death before the whole city. He who deserves evil shall have evil. Therefore, they were broken on the wheel, disemboweled, and after that hanged, according to the law.

The poor mother gave all her possessions to the chantry, and then herself as well; for she took vows as a sister. As to the good man who discovered the maleficar, he was richly rewarded on earth, as he will surely be in Heaven. Praise be to the Maker, whose gaze sees all!



Tara listened in growing horror and distress. While the rest murmured and applauded, Zevran took her firmly by the elbow and walked her away before she struck Redcliffe Castle and everyone in it with lightning.

"That's... disgusting..." she hissed in Zevran's ear. "Disgusting! What a horrible story to tell a child! It could give him nightmares! Who are they calling 'vile?'"

"Yes," Zevran agreed patiently, "Very foolish, too, since it is obvious to me that it was most probably the informer who killed the child, and then denounced the apostates to cover his crime. The mages confessed, of course, because in the end everybody does."

Tara considered this. "You really think so?"

"Yes. It is implicit in the narrative. But the people by the fire," he jerked his head toward the devout group, "are not ones to hear that which would not please them."

"That's a *horrible* story," Tara repeated, almost shaking with anger. "The only reason I'm not making a fuss is because I'm a guest, and I'm eating Arl Teagan's food, and wearing clothes he gave me. I hope you understand that. I don't want to ever hear that story again." She frowned, pondering it. "Or maybe I'll tell it the way *you* interpret it..."

Leliana floated in, clad in her lovely gown, intricate gold chain, and rich sapphire ring. Her bright red hair was neatly trimmed, and a single braid was bound by a gold ornament. She beamed at the sight of her friends in their grand garb, and came over to talk to them.

"What is wrong? Is Tara upset?" she asked.

Zevran murmured, "An objectionable story about the evils of magic. They do not know that Tara is magical herself."

"I don't want to make a scene, but it was *really* insulting," Tara said firmly. "And knowing that it's their honest opinion doesn't make it any better!"

Once again, Tara imagined the mages retreating to their own, hidden world, known only to them and a few trusted friends. Only the Grey Wardens valued mages, anyway. Finding a way to truly keep themselves secret and safe would not be depriving the rest of the world of anything it wanted. Except for Tevinter, and Tara felt nothing but hatred for them. There were ways for mages to create magical barriers to hide themselves, but those enchantments were frowned on as being inconvenient to the Templars. And there were the phylacteries. Perhaps

Jowan had glimpsed a dusty corner of the truth. Maybe the first step really was the phylacteries...

Leliana's curiosity was roused about the story, but she was properly tactful. "Then we shall speak of other things. Come. We must pay our respects to the Revered Mother."

Bows and curtseys came first, then idle chatter followed: mostly about the wedding of the daughter of the Arl of South Reach to the Arl of Denerim, which was to be held in ten days' time.

"Is Lady Bronwyn going to the wedding?" Kaitlyn asked, dreamy-eyed. "It will be ever so elegant, I'm sure. Arl Teagan has sent a wedding gift of the loveliest silks and velvets!"

Bevin was disgusted. "The Girl Warden fights monsters! She doesn't have time for a stupid *wedding!*"

Leliana smiled winningly at the little boy, and sympathetically at his sister. "Probably the Warden-Commander *will* be too busy, even though Lady Habren is her cousin. I know that she visited her when she was in Denerim recently."

"Oh," Kaitlyn sighed, disappointed. Then she brightened. "Maybe she saw her wedding gown then! I wish I were brave enough to ask her about it!"

Tara made bold to speak up. "I didn't meet Lady Habren, but we met her little brothers. They came to dine with us at the Wardens' Hall."

Bevin looked ready to burst with envy. The conversation was broken off with the entrance of the Arl and the Warden-Commander.

Altogether, they made a brave show at dinner, and Teagan seemed to relish the sight. He smiled and bowed deeply to Bronwyn, stunning in her new finery. She returned the courtesy, enjoying the sensation of silk against her skin, rather than that of leather and mail. Looking down the table, she noticed that Zevran and Tara were well-dressed, and that each wore a matching jeweled earring. As love tokens went, it was no sillier than others she had seen. And sure enough, there was the little Merton girl. She would make a very pretty Arlessa...

"So there were no darkspawn to the west?" Teagan asked Bronwyn again, visibly glad of the news.

"None that we discovered, my lord," Bronwyn assured him. "A violent gang of bandits, but all too human."

"I am sorry for the loss of your companion. He seemed a most gentleman-like man."

"He was." Bronwyn did not want to discuss Cullen with someone who knew nothing about him, and changed the subject. "Do you have a letter for Alistair, my lord? Or for anyone else at Ostagar, for that matter?"

Teagan smiled. "I already sent my own courier, but I thank you. Ah! It appears dinner is served..." He offered her his arm.

Bronwyn smiled back, and with some ceremony they took their places at the great table. Toasts were exchanged, and a delicate broth of seethed mussels was set before them. Bronwyn spooned it up thoughtfully, glad for a chance

not to talk. She was not much surprised that Teagan had already written to Alistair. She hoped that Teagan did not think her low enough to open his private correspondence, or even to "lose" it in transit; but perhaps it was best that he had taken the matter into his own hands. Possibly his letter had reached Alistair by now. Knowing Alistair, he would share it with friends — most likely Astrid. Possibly he would take it straight to Loghain. The two of them really had been getting on well lately. She could imagine pretty clearly what advice Alistair would get there.

She had considered openly raising the possibility of her own claim to the Crown — allied with Loghain — with the Arl, but had decided against it. He had already made it clear that he would not even support Fergus. How much less, then, would he wish to support Bronwyn and a common-born consort. Let him think her duplicitous, if he liked, but she saw no profit in tipping her hand to him. If Teagan clung to Alistair as a candidate, he was in for a disappointment. Who was his second choice? Surely not himself! Other than the handful of banns sworn to Redcliffe, he would have little support either for himself or for a previously unknown bastard son of Maric.

Thinking of Alistair made her think of Cullen, and she sighed to herself. They would miss him. They would miss his sword and his courage and his company. Bronwyn was really going to have to bestir herself to recruit more Wardens. There were some decent men here. Many had

been killed when during the attacks by the walking dead, but more had come to the village to replace them. That red-haired knight... Ser Perth? Bronwyn sipped her wine thoughtfully, mulling it over.

"Excellent! Rainbow fish in cream!" Teagan interrupted her thoughts. "Try this dish, Commander, I pray you..."

She savored every bite, her mind ticking through possibilities.

Not Perth, she decided. Too devout. He might well have problems dealing with the mages among us. Look at how hard Cullen struggled...

And bringing a replacement back to Ostagar might cause undue pain to those would mourn Cullen's loss. She finally decided that Teagan had too few men already. It would be best to go back to Ostagar, let her people mourn their brother, and then talk over the recruitment issue with them. Perhaps they would even suggest names of likely candidates.

Then, too, the Landsmeet was less than two months away. She needed to see that the darkspawn were kept at bay long enough to settle the matter of the Crown. She could not do it here, in a gown of blood-red silk.

On the first day of Harvestmere, they saw the Tower of Ishal once more.

Only eleven days had passed since their departure, but the landscape had changed: already autumnal and cooler, the leaves turning yellow and brown, beginning to drift

down onto the Imperial Highway. The snow line on the surrounding mountains seemed to swoop lower, misty-grey and forbidding. As they rode closer, the wind brought them the midden-stink of the camp.

They were seen, too. Little was hidden from the windows at the top. Some of their friends and comrades were there and waiting when they cantered up and dismounted. The greetings were broken by Tara's raised voice.

"Where's Jowan?" she cried, distressed at his absence. "Where's Jowan?"

"He's fine, elfkins," Anders assured her, giving her a hug. "We're all pretty much all right. He's off with Brozca and Sten on a patrol to the northeast."

"Where's Cullen?" Carver said, coming forward, scanning their number with concerned blue eyes.

A very brief silence. Bronwyn forced herself to speak. It would be easier in Brozca's absence.

"We lost Cullen."

A longer silence. Carver was distressed, Danith grave, Oghren curious, and Anders and Morrigan expressionless. Bronwyn was relieved that they decently refrained from smirking. There was no love lost there.

More needed to be said. "We found what we were looking for, and we have it; but it was guarded by a High Dragon."

"Nasty," Anders said, now more concerned. "How is everybody?"

"You should look all of us over, Anders," Tara said, "Scout,

too. It was bad."

"Six of you against a High Dragon!" Oghren said, slapping his chest. "That's a fight for the songs. Lucky you only lost one!"

"We do not feel lucky in losing Cullen," Leliana replied, "but I confess I was surprised I survived. We fought madmen as well, and found —

"Let's take it inside," Bronwyn said, more tired than she wanted to admit. "And find something to eat. We'll tell you about it, but not here. Where's Alistair?"

"In council with the Teyrn," Morrigan said, "both he and Astrid. Loghain will wish to see you at once, you know."

Bronwyn called to a passing soldier. "Tell Teyrn Loghain that the Warden-Commander has returned and will report to him soon." She muttered, "As soon as I have dinner and a wash."

Morrigan did smirk this time. Bronwyn smirked back, happy to see her.

"Help us unload the horses," she said, "We've got enough loot to finance the Wardens for some time."

Alistair and Astrid with Loghain... Adaia at her workshop... Jowan, Sten, and Brozca in the field. She would have to repeat her tale of woe, again and again, but she was not going to make these friends wait. Bowls of unappealing mystery stew were put in front of the travelers, and other than Leliana they ate without taking much notice of it.

"We found Haven," Bronwyn said, in between bites. "We found Haven, and we found the shrine, and the Urn, and

the Ashes. Genetivi is dead – just as you guessed, Morri-gan, only worse. The village is hidden away because they worship dragons there in the old Tevinter way – only they called their dragon Andraste. They chained Genetivi up, pumped him for information, and then they fed him to their 'god.' The villagers told us all about it: they were proud of it, too."

"They tried to kill us," Leliana said indignantly, her voice cutting over the shocked, bewildered response. "They attacked first. Their Chantry priest was a man and a mage! It was he who locked up the poor brother. Their warriors fought like madmen."

Tara cut in eagerly. "They called them Reavers, and they were pumped up on dragon's blood. It makes people red-handed killers, and awfully hard to put down."

Zevran pointed out, " – but there was much beauty there as well. The great temple was immense and glorious, though much dilapidated."

" – they had libraries you would not *believe*, Anders!" Tara told him, waving her spoon. "Maybe more books altogether than the Circle!"

Bronwyn swallowed, took a long drink of cider, and continued the story. "Behind the temple was a system of caverns. That's where the cultists raised the dragon young. I didn't keep count of all the dragonkind we faced there... heaps of dragonlings and at least four drakes..."

"Don't forget that other drake outside!" Tara reminded her.

"Wait!" Oghren protested. "They were *raising* dragons? For what? Food?"

"I'm getting to that," Bronwyn said. "Anyway, we were confronted by the leader of the cultists: a complete madman. He had drunk dragon's blood too, and it makes people very aggressive... He thought we could be of use to him. He and his lot couldn't get to the Ashes. They were in a shrine across a barren plain and protected by a... well... sort of spirit. Kolgrim thought we could get past this spirit and reach the Ashes."

"And then," Leliana burst out, "he wanted Bronwyn to defile the Ashes by pouring dragon's blood on them!"

Bronwyn tried to calm them all. "That was because they thought that Andraste had been reborn and that the Ashes were holding her back from her full reincarnation. I pretended to agree, and we went out to meet their Andraste –"

" – and that's when we found out it was a dragon!" Tara declared. "The man sounded his horn and the dragon flapped down right in front of us. I have never been so scared, but the crazy man introduced Bronwyn to it and it didn't attack us then."

"Kolgrim gave our leader the title, 'Andraste's True Champion,'" said Zevran, with a graceful gesture of respect. "Unfortunately for him, it was more true than he could have guessed."

"So we went to the Shrine and met the Guardian," Leliana said, in a more subdued way. "And we were tested.

Only the worthy pilgrims could see the Ashes."

"Stop!" cried Morrigan. "It is too complicated and improbable to take in so quickly." There were nods of agreement. Carver was visibly confused and distressed.

"I agree. What sorts of tests?" asked Anders, very curious. He moved from one traveler to another; examining them, targeting recent wounds with healing spells.

No one wanted to tell much about them in detail. "They were very painful and unpleasant," Bronwyn said. "The Guardian knew everything about us."

"Everything?" Danith raised a brow, clearly skeptical.

Bronwyn considered, "He knew more than any spy could know. He knew things that none of you know. At any rate, there were, indeed, tests."

"I don't think we should tell you any more about it," Leliana said. "Possibly the tests are different for everybody."

"Can't we tell them about having to walk through fire? Naked?" protested Zevran.

"My kind of people!" cackled Oghren. "All of you? Bare-arsed *naked*?"

Bronwyn waved that away, unamused. "Being naked was uncomfortable. The fire was far more alarming. At any rate, we survived the tests and saw the Urn. I was permitted to take a pinch for the Queen. We have it. Then we had to go back and face Kolgrim and his henchmen. We had a very hard fight of it, and then the dragon..."

"It was really big, and really hateful," Tara said softly. "It

caught Cullen in its jaws and killed him."

"It ate him?" Danith asked, horrified.

"No!" Leliana shook her head, distressed at the idea. "We did not allow that. Bronwyn and Tara damaged its wing as it flew at us, and made it fall. Then, when it was stunned, we finished it off. But poor Cullen was... killed."

Eyes filled with tears. Anders had disliked Cullen quite intensely, but he was sorry for his friends' grief. He patted Leliana's shoulder, and then squeezed Tara's. Morrigan pursed her lips, impatient with the display of sentiment for someone she had despised. Of course the man had been a useful sword, but all the other baggage that came with him had been extremely tiresome. He had never figured in her own private plans...

"He died bravely, I am sure," Danith said, feeling awkward.

"Very bravely," Bronwyn agreed. "We brought back Yusaris. He would have wanted you to carry it, Carver."

"Me?" the boy asked. "I mean... it's an amazing sword. Are you sure?"

"Absolutely sure. The possessions of a Grey Warden are the property of his brothers and sisters. You use a great sword. You should have the best."

"Thanks!" Carver burst out. He picked up the sword and cradled it in his arms. "I won't let you down... or him."

"Brosca's going to take it hard," Oghren predicted. "She was crazy about that big nug-humper."

"I know," Bronwyn said wearily. "I'll tell her privately when

they come back. Let's try to keep all this to ourselves, anyway."

Leliana declared, "We have decided that it would be best not to reveal the existence of Haven, the Ashes, or the Temple until a proper expedition can be mounted. The Grand Cleric must be informed."

Bronwyn saw the rolled eyes: Morrigan, Anders... Danith, too. "It's a distraction right now. And we don't want to give the Orlesians any reason to cross the border to claim Ferelden territory, even for the Chantry. Besides, Haven is dangerous." She pushed her bowl aside.

"Now... tell me what's happened while I've been gone, and make it quick, since Loghain will be impatient to find out about the Ashes!"

"You have a letter," Morrigan said instantly. "From your brother. It came three days ago."

"Really!" Bronwyn got up to look for it. It was lying on her cot, along with some other papers. She wanted desperately to read it at once, but listened to the others first.

There had been fighting, of course. The darkspawn had made an attempt to tunnel beneath them again, only into the southern camp. The dwarves had detected it and there had been a vicious underground battle.

"Nearly got shortened by a head," Oghren admitted.

"A good thing you were not, dwarf," Morrigan sneered, "else you would have been too small to notice, and I should have stepped upon you!"

"Alistair got cut up pretty bad," Anders told Bronwyn. "He's

still recovering." He noticed the sword strapped to Tara's back. It was not the fake she had been wearing. This was jeweled, and runed with magic, and *real*. "And what's this?"

"It's my sword!" Tara told him, glowing with satisfaction. "Look at it! You too, Morrigan! It's for mages. Let's see if you can touch it. It stings everybody else!"

"Have fun with that," Bronwyn said, "I must really look at Fergus' letter."

While the mages played with Spellweaver, and Zevran showed the others the golden plunder of the dragon worshipers, Bronwyn broke the seal of Highever, and her eyes devoured Fergus' words, written in their private code.

Dearest sister —

Take all the thrones of Thedas and welcome, as long as you leave me Highever!

Yes, I am smiling, but not in jest. I considered your words and your schemes. I think it would be best at this time if I were your tanist, rather than leaving the North to be King. That is, until the Blight is over, and you and Loghain can make some fierce baby warriors to continue your line. Perhaps the Grey Warden lore is nonsense. Couslands do their duty, and never fail to breed. I would back Cousland fecundity over Warden superstition any day! But have it as you will: name me your heir at the Landsmeet. It will satisfy the fears of some.

Marrying Loghain may help you win a throne, but I wonder if it will make you a happy woman. That reservation aside, I am not going to tell you how to feel, nor how to give your heart. I

caution you only to guard yourself and hold your honor high, as always. It is you who will be Queen by right of blood. Loghain and his sworn men in the Landsmeet may well insist on granting him the Crown Matrimonial, but you will always be the Queen. Father and Mother would be so proud.

I thank you for the gift of Ser Adam Hawke. He has done good service here, and from our first meeting. Someday I shall tell you about that, and we shall laugh. A fine fellow, and a pleasant companion.

The last of Howe's men fled west. Word is that they will sue the Crown for pardon. They may receive such a pardon, but they will not travel through this teyrnir. I shall insist that they be shipped south to take part in the fight against the darkspawn, as they should have months ago.

Other Howe henchmen rioted in the town, and were slain. The North belongs to the Couslands once more. Howe left a great treasure of gold behind. That is the good news.

The bad news is that the gold will be sorely needed. Highever itself and the villages of the teyrnir were ruthlessly looted, as was the castle itself. The unhappy elves were sold and their Alienage leveled. Only a handful remain, hidden by kindly townsfolk. Howe was building some sort of pleasure palace for himself on the site of the Alienage. I will not be continuing that work, and am still considering what is best to do with the half-finished foundations. Perhaps I shall have some stone houses built there, or sell off the house lots. We may be getting a great many new people in town, with the end of fighting

and so many coming north to avoid the darkspawn.

Your room will be ready for you whenever it pleases Your Majesty to visit. Much was lost, but not everything. I am erecting a marker at the mass grave where our dear ones and our good friends and servants lie together.

I will endeavor to put Highever and Amaranthine in such good order that it will be possible for me to come to the Landsmeet to support you. In fact, I would like to go to Denerim earlier than that. The Queen will need help as her rule comes to an end; and perhaps it would be best to petition her in person and settle the matter of Howe's men before the Landsmeet gets its grubby collective hands on it. Some of the Howe's officers have kinsmen among the nobles.

So let us say that we shall meet again in Haring, and perhaps even sooner. I seem to recall that our Cousin Habren is marrying Urien Kendellss in Harvestmere. I do not see how I can manage to attend the wedding, but I have sent a gift to the happy couple from the treasury of Rendon Howe: a great platter of enameled silver, patterned with the night stars. I wish them joy of it. You must send them something handsome yourself, or they will remember the lapse and hate you until the day they die.

All this talk of marriages wearies me. Do not say it. I know my duty and will do it, but I shall not marry only for power and influence. Love is the greatest adventure of all; and having known true happiness, and having seen it in our parents' marriage, I will settle for nothing less. Nor should you.

*Your loving brother,
Fergus*

"Dear, dear Fergus!" Bronwyn burst out. No one could have a better, kinder, wiser brother. Her friends were coming over, looking concerned, intensely curious about the letter. Bronwyn mastered her face, and looked up with a smile. "He's well. Highever is his. Carver! Your brother is safe with mine, and Fergus is very pleased with him."

"Of course he is," muttered Carver. "Everybody loves Adam."

Bronwyn knew better than to talk Carver out of his resentment, and splashed her face with cold water and tried to organize her ghastly hair. She had Fergus' leave to pursue the crown. She had the Ashes, her debt of honor to Anora; paid for with the blood of her faithful Warden Cullen and the people of Haven. She would lay it all before Loghain, and they would take this kingdom for their own.



CHAPTER 10

WINTER IS
COMINGSTAGAR STANK.

The crumbling fortress was two thousand years old, but there was hard use in it yet.

Tevinter legions had kept watch on the restless south here, holding back the barbarian tribes. Now Ostagar held back the darkspawn.

The valley floor below the bridge was filled with log barracks and ringed with defensive works. Ballistae were positioned up on the heights and down on the lower bastions. It had been some time since the darkspawn tried a frontal assault on the fortress itself.

Ostagar had probably stunk in the Tevinters' day, too: magic could only do so much to gloss over the squalid aspects of life. Now, men, elves, dwarves – dogs and horses – mage and mundane alike – they all contributed in their own ways to the odor of latrines and kennels and stables; of woodsmoke, wet leather, oiled steel, home-brewed liquor, and burnt porridge.

Bronwyn crossed the bridge impatiently, Scout at her

heels, her boots pounding a quick rhythm on the ancient stones. She felt agitated, restless, vaguely angry; she felt like she was going into battle. Soldiers looked up at her approach, saw her helmet, recognized her.

“— Commander...”

“— Glad you're back, Grey Warden...”

“— Good day to you, my lady...”

She nodded to them all. Loghain was meeting with Alistair on the other side of the gorge, in a structure built under the broken vaults of the old hall. It was cobbled together of fallen stone and heavy logs, but it was better situated for overlooking the valley and its fortifications than the room they had used in the Tower of Ishal. It stood where they had taken counsel, the night before the Bloomingtide Battle, when Duncan fell. Now of course, it had a sound roof of pine shingles to keep out the weather.

More buildings were going up. Winter was coming to the south. It was now the beginning of Harvestmere. They could expect snow by Firstfall. The supply convoys were coming in regularly. They must stock up; they *must*. What would happen to the army if the snow were heavy enough to make even the Imperial Highway impassable?

Much as she dreaded it, Bronwyn also wished that the Archdemon would just get it over with and make its appearance. She was weary of its threats in the Fade; weary of its smug gloating. Better to face the monster that walked her dreams in the light of day, sword in hand, and

endure whatever came of it.

The guards at the big hut saw her coming and opened the door, announcing her. Bronwyn strode in, glanced around the rude log interior and then stalked toward the three people at the long table. Scout trotted in, tail wagging, and went directly to Loghain.

Alistair was already up, smiling broadly, delighted to see her. She was gathered up in a clanking bear hug that left her breathless. She laughed, feeling the sharpest edge of her anger slipping away. The left side of Alistair's head was bandaged heavily. Bronwyn remembered Oghren's words about the recent battle.

“You're back!” Alistair let her go, and looked her over. “You're all right? What happened?” He noticed the elaborate horn slung across her chest, and whistled. “Where'd you get that? Looks expensive!”

Astrid was up, too; also smiling. Not as unguardedly, true; but it was still sincere and friendly.

Loghain remained enthroned in his chair on the opposite side of the table, his face carefully, discreetly expressionless. He rubbed Scout's ears, talking softly to the dog. For a moment, Bronwyn's unfocused anger flared again. She removed the little bear gut pouch from inside her tabard and tossed it onto the table like a thrown gauntlet.

“Here's your Ashes, by the way.”

Why was she so angry with him? Loghain looked her over carefully, and seemed pleased to find her unhurt. He

gave Scout a pat and reached for the packet, while Bronwyn was distracted by Alistair's questions.

"Did you see it? Really? Did you see the Urn?" His grin was white; enormous. "Wow... Andraste's real Ashes..."

Astrid, more calmly, asked, "Did you have any trouble?" "Some." Now that it came to it, Bronwyn felt some discomfort at telling them what had happened. "The Ashes were heavily guarded. There was a High Dragon... and Cullen was killed."

Alistair's face crumpled, the joy blown out like a candle. Loghain frowned, but said nothing. Bronwyn, with bitter resentment, wondered if he remembered who Cullen was.

Astrid took her by the hand, and led her to a chair. "Tell us," she said, putting a cup of cider in front of Bronwyn.

So it all came out. Bronwyn forced down her irrational rage, trying to tell the story more sensibly than she had to her comrades. The watching eyes at Sulcher, the ambush, The Reavers and their inhuman strength, Haven and its lunatic dragon cult, Genetivi's miserable fate, the vast Temple, the caverns and the dragonlings, Kolgrim and the "risen Andraste," the Shrine and the Gauntlet. She was brief about all of it, and about the Gauntlet she was not descriptive, except to mention that "the Guardian knew everything about us. Everything."

She said nothing about her friends and their own reward of Ashes. They had agreed amongst themselves not to speak of it, and Bronwyn would keep her word.

Nobody needed to know that there was more than one pinch of Sacred Ashes to be had.

Then there was the fight with Kolgrim and his minions. The horn was Kolgrim's, she explained, and used to summon the dragon. Alistair looked like he wanted to ask questions, but Bronwyn forged ahead, afraid that if she did not speak of it now, she never would. So she told them of the battle with the High Dragon, and how Cullen fell. Loghain leaned forward, hawk face intent, gleaning every word she uttered about how they slew the creature. Scout whined a little, sensing his Bronwyn's distress, and came over to put his head in her lap.

"That was clever," Astrid nodded. "Attaching the bomb to the wing joint ...that was very clever. Detonating it when it was in the air – also excellent. You let the fall and creature's weight do half the work for you."

"More than half," Bronwyn confessed. "We were making no impression on the thing at all. Our swords were as useless as straw against it, until it was down and stunned."

Alistair was slumped in his chair. "Cullen... that's horrible. Do you think he suffered?"

Bronwyn stared at him rather nonplussed, and it was on the tip of her tongue to ask him, "*What do you think? He was bitten to death by a dragon!*"

"It was quick," she said sharply, thinking that however it quick it was, it probably seemed like forever to Cullen.

There was a long silence, while she drank thirstily, feel-

ing foolish and emotional and off-balance. She buried her left hand in Scout's thick fur, needing the reassurance.

Loghain let her drink, and then said quietly, "I am very sorry for the loss of your Warden, but you must realize that it could easily have been the lot of you. I'm astonished that you found and retrieved the Ashes. Now, of course, we must get them to Anora."

"They need to be well protected," Bronwyn said. "Replacing them might be something of a problem."

He thought that over. "Two days ago you could have traveled with Bryland and his escort when he left for his daughter's wedding. There will be a supply train returning north soon. Perhaps that would do." He was dissatisfied with that, but could think of nothing better. If this was a cure for Anora, she should have it as soon as possible, but they could not risk it going astray.

"Who's taking it to her?" Alistair asked.

Well, that was the question, wasn't it? Bronwyn had already given it a bit of thought.

"We'll need to send Jowan. The Queen knows and trusts him, and he and Wynne can work out between them the best way to administer the Ashes. I'd send Anders, but if Wynne can't cure the Queen in the ordinary way, then I presume Anders couldn't either. No. It should be Jowan. And they know him at the Compound, too."

"Not alone, surely," Loghain said. "Though, to be blunt, I'd prefer you not send the Orlesian."

Bronwyn smiled tightly. "I have had proof, time and again, of *Leliana's* courage and loyalty. I consider her a dear friend... and a sister. Though perhaps she has had enough of travel at the moment. Perhaps Carver Hawke. They will be stopping in Lothering, and it would give him a chance to see his family. While they're in Denerim, I'll have them present my wedding gift to the Arl of Denerim and his new Arlessa."

They talked a little longer: mostly about the subterranean attack a few days before. It had given the camp something of a scare. The Wardens and dwarves were checking out the remains of the tunnels. There was a possibility that the ones they knew of were not all there were.

Abruptly, Loghain said, "And now I need to speak privately with your commander, Wardens. We'll meet again when your people return."

Alistair blushed, and then gave Bronwyn a naughty grin. Bronwyn only gave him a mock-haughty look, as Astrid pulled him out the door. Scout sprawled lazily on the floor by Bronwyn's chair.

"Warden Astrid is an excellent staff officer," Loghain remarked, once the door was shut. "A very sound soldier." He gave Bronwyn an odd, inscrutable look, then rose slowly. "Must you wear that ridiculous helmet everywhere?" It was the wrong thing to say, he knew, as soon as he said it.

"Yes, I must," Bronwyn said, standing her ground, still unreasonably irritated with him. "It saves time. Everyone knows who I am, and I don't have to waste my breath

arguing with people about my identity."

Loghain removed the helmet gently, and set it on the table. With a careful hand, he smoothed her ruffled hair. "I already know who you are. Why are you angry with me?"

She hardly knew herself, but the words burst out of her without conscious thought. "You weren't *there!* You didn't see how bad it was! I've lost a Warden, and we weren't even fighting darkspawn! Scout was almost killed!"

He took her in his arms, glad to comfort her. She was so young; so impossibly young. A quick, awkward kiss; and then a longer, sweeter, surer one. It is was unfortunate, but he could not take her here: anyone might walk in at any time. And they were both in armor, and it would take forever to take it off and then put it back on. Tonight, though...

"I'm sorry I wasn't there," he said, with unfeigned sincerity. "And don't imagine that I'm ungrateful. I suppose all we can do at this point is hope the Ashes cure Anora, but you've done more than anyone could... more than I have any right to expect. And I'm sorry for your Templar. He was a brave man. He was the one who threw you up onto Flemeth's back, wasn't he?"

"Yes." So he did remember Cullen. It soothed her anger quite a bit. "But I don't want to talk about that place anymore. Maybe someday. It was too much like the sort of thing you dislike — fantasy and make-believe, but horribly *real*. Imagine meeting dragon worshipers in this day and age! Anyway, it's done. I've asked my people not to talk about it —

especially not the location of the Temple or the village. The Divine would order it occupied and have all the villagers massacred. And stupid fortune hunters would get themselves killed, rather than coming south to join the army. Yes, enough of it. I want to talk to you about Arl Teagan."

He drew her closer, and let her rest her head against his jaw. Embracing a woman in armor took some care, but was doable, unlike more serious intimacies. He had learned the art long ago with Rowan.

He told her, "Alistair came to me with a letter from Teagan. The worthy arl mentioned your visit, and pleaded with Alistair to assert his *'rights.'*" Loghain chuckled. "The boy was desperate for me to find a way for him to get out of it."

"I told Teagan that Alistair is no fit claimant for the throne. The Landsmeet will never accept an unacknowledged bastard."

"Teagan was also peevish about your *'understandable bias in favor of a brother.'* Did you tell him you were supporting Fergus?"

"Not exactly," Bronwyn smiled to herself, "but I said my brother would do his duty. As it happens, a letter from Fergus arrived while I was gone. I brought it with me. It might be of some interest to you."

He pushed her away to arms' length, trying to read her expression. She produced the letter, and laid it in his hands.

"For brevity's sake," she said, "I shall translate the code. We are welcome to all the kingdoms of the earth, as long

as we leave Highever to him."

Loghain's eyes blazed with a cold blue flame of triumph, but Bronwyn was oddly disturbed by her own words, remembering her father's phantom in the Gauntlet.

"...you reach for an earthly crown, but the kingdom you must conquer is the kingdom within. That is the one realm that will be yours in eternity..."

But Loghain was kissing her again, mouth hard on hers, and her father's voice faded, and was forgotten.

"We have much to do," he said afterwards. His expression was unusually tender. He cupped her cheek in a calloused hand, and gave her a brief smile. It changed his face so much that Bronwyn's heart caught; it was a fleeting glimpse of the young rebel he had been, long ago. She smiled too, more so, when Scout thumped his tail in drowsy approval.

Bronwyn said, "So my cousin Bryland has already gone north. Fergus reminded me to send Habren a present, lest she hate me forever."

Loghain snorted. "Wise advice, especially at this time. Bryland's going to sound Urien about it all, but we still needed to find out where your brother stood. I'll send a courier to Bryland to bring him up to speed. Let's talk to Wulffe later. If we have Gwaren, Highever, South Reach, and West Hills, it doesn't matter what Teagan says — or even if Urien dislikes it. Obviously, though, it's best to have a consensus."

"Of course."

"And then," he frowned. "There's the matter of the wedding."

Bronwyn regarded him blankly. Surely he did not expect her to rush to Denerim to attend Habren's nuptial rites? All things considered, she would just as soon be fighting darkspawn.

"Wedding?"

He scowled at her, at once amused and vexed. "Yes. Our wedding. If we are to present ourselves to the Landsmeet as a couple, we have to actually... *be* a couple."

A wedding. Bronwyn's heart sank. What girl did not dream of a wedding? There was, however, no way that her wedding could be anything resembling her youthful dreams. She had always imagined a noble event at Denerim Cathedral, surrounded by friends and family, attended by the King and Queen.

How many of those people were dead and gone? Her guest list was grown sadly thin. Her father was dead and would not give her away. Her mother would not be there, iron will wrapped in velvet tact, to see that everything was perfect for her. Oriana would not kiss her and whisper secrets. Oren would not make silly faces and call her "Auntie."

Very likely, not even Fergus would be there. He was far away in the north, setting Highever in order. She had no kinswoman available to stand up with her and strew the bridal bed with flowers — if there were any flowers to be had this time of year.

Her only kinswomen close enough to count were her

Bryland cousins: fussy, elderly Werberga and Habren, the soon-to-be Arlessa of Denerim. The image of *Habren* performing such a role was almost enough to put Bronwyn off the idea of marrying altogether.

Loghain was still looking at her, waiting for a response. "Yes. I see," Bronwyn managed. "The question is: when and where would be best? We could be married here in camp, I suppose, and the army might like it, but it wouldn't do us much good with any of the banns in Denerim."

"Bryland wants to put forward the idea of having the Landsmeet at South Reach. Urien won't like it, but it might be best."

"Urien won't be the only one. People are creatures of habit."

"People are fools, most of the time," Loghain sneered. "but I grant you that the stay-at-homes won't want to be any closer to the darkspawn than they need to be. Speaking of which: we need to strike hard against the darkspawn, and soon. We need to keep them at bay while we bring the nobility into line." He began pacing the floor, head down, deep in thought. "At any rate, we need to be married before the Landsmeet convenes. The actual wedding could be only a few days beforehand; however, we need to announce the betrothal fairly soon, to give substance to our claim."

"That announcement," Bronwyn sighed. "will be a public acknowledgement that we are seeking the crown."

"Yes," Loghain smirked. "Be ready for the storm to follow."

He needed to brief his trusted lieutenants and those of his sworn banns who were not already in his confidence;

she needed to tell the Wardens. She shrank a little from the thought, but only a little. Alistair was always going to be the hardest to convince, and Alistair already knew her plans. Would the others care? Would they be offended? It was not as if she would be deserting them.

"I will not be stepping down as Warden-Commander, not while the Blight lasts."

Loghain approved – and seemed unsurprised.

"Fair enough. The Blight is the greatest threat. Besides, if we need an administrator in Denerim, we have Anora."

Bronwyn thought that over, trying to ignore a faint stirring of unease. "You mean... keep her on as...? No. You want to appoint her Chancellor of the Realm..."

"Why not?" Loghain shrugged. "She's been doing the work for years. She knows all the Court and City functionaries. She knows the ambassadors. Yes. It's unconventional, but why not make good use of her skills? She'll have the title of Queen-Dowager to give her status. She'll be happiest, doing what she does best; and you and I can deal with the darkspawn. Unless you really want to trade the armor for silk and swan about the Palace?"

"Not while there's a Blight," Bronwyn said slowly. "But I may, *someday*. And there's the issue of inheritance. Fergus is my heir. He has a right of blood equal to my own. I won't have him set aside."

"And Anora is *my* heir," Loghain answered, his eyes hooded. "And I expect to receive the Crown Matrimonial."

There. There was a capital demand. Bronwyn was prepared for it.

"I expected no less, but Fergus is next in line after the two of us."

"You will want this in the marriage contract?"

"Absolutely."

A stiff, uncomfortable silence. Loghain gave her a long look, and Bronwyn braced herself for a fight. The Crown Matrimonial for Fergus as heir to the throne. At the moment, Loghain's expression reminded Bronwyn very disagreeably of cunning peasant freeholders she had known in Highever, forever looking for ways to get the best of a noble. The fight, however, did not materialize. Loghain cocked his head and then spoke briskly.

"We'll talk more of this, of course. I'll have my clerk start drafting the marriage contract. The first step is to secure the crown. The Landsmeet would no doubt be appeased by Fergus as the next heir. Still, Anora will want a secure place, either in the capital or in Gwaren. You can't expect me not to want her taken care of."

"I know that you must consider your daughter's honor and prestige, but let us see first if the Ashes will restore her health. If all goes well, I think Chancellor is a great honor."

Loghain kissed his difficult, proud young warrior again before she left, and then ticked through what else must be done. He must meet with Cauthrien and the other captains,

he knew; but first he must see to his correspondence. There were two letters to write, and his clerk could have no part in them. If the courier were quick and clever, he would intercept Bryland before he reached Denerim. And Bryland would see that Anora got her letter as well. He sat before the parchment, considering what to say and what to conceal.

Bryland—

Bronwyn is back in Ostagar and safe, her mission successful. No darkspawn west of the Lake, which is a relief, of course. A letter from Fergus Cousland arrived for her. She tells me that he has renounced his claim to the throne in her favor. Bronwyn insists that he be heir, however. Perhaps this is for the best. She has agreed to the Crown Matrimonial. We will announce the betrothal fairly soon, but after your return to Ostagar. Sound out Urien, and find out where his loyalties lie.

L

He set it aside, and then pulled out another sheet of parchment.

My dearest daughter —

Bronwyn is back in Ostagar. She has the item, and it will be coming to Denerim, heavily guarded. We have high hopes. Very soon we will announce our plans to wed, and then to claim the throne. I will be granted the Crown Matrimonial. Both of us will be deeply involved in the war in the south, and so I have suggested a central, vital role for you. As Queen-Dowager, you shall rule the kingdom as Chancellor in name as well as in fact.

Fergus Cousland has written to Bronwyn, renouncing his

own claim to the throne for the moment. He will, however, be named as her heir in the marriage articles. It will, as you know, give us all the votes from Highever and Amaranthine. Forgive me for writing to you like a hard-headed politician, but I urge you to consider a marriage with Cousland. If Bronwyn and I have no children, he would be king, and you would once more be Queen. If you like, it can be made a condition of our alliance.

Your loving father,

Loghain



Adaia returned to the Tower to find that the wayfarers had returned. It was a shame about Cullen, but she had not been close to him. She was very relieved to see Tara and Zevran, though.

"Such a lot a loot we got," Tara whispered to Adaia. "Though we should have got more to pay for poor Cullen."

Silver chalices and gold plates; jewels and coin in plenty. And Arl Teagan had given them all noble garments when they stopped at Redcliffe and stayed at the castle. Adaia uttered a hoarse squeal of delight at Tara's new finery.

"What a beautiful dress!" She ran work-roughened fingers over the silken velvet and pressed it to her cheek. "This is lovely! Who would have thought a great arl would have something to fit an elf maiden?"

"It was probably something for a human girl. Who knows how he came by it? The servants at Redcliffe said Arl Teagan has cupboards and cupboards of grand clothing, and bolts

of fine silks beyond count. The old Arl's wife put every penny the arling had on her back. Arl Teagan gave clothes to us all, and to his young cousin, too. I heard he sent silks and velvets to that cousin of Bronwyn's who's getting married."

Adaia rubbed her cheek on the velvet again, hoping that Tara might give her her second-best dress, now that she had this. Wistfully she remembered her own dress on the day of her wedding, the only fine clothes she had ever possessed: fine white wool and bright embroidery on the gown; shiny bronze studs on the belt. It had not lasted a day before it was torn and bloody. Even the boots had been ruined. "Can I see what everyone else got?"

They spent a pleasurable time admiring Leliana's blue and lavender ensemble, and Zevran's dark yellow doublet. Danith pretended to be uninterested, but her eyes were drawn to the rich colors and graceful lines. Even Morrigan granted the clothing her cool approval. Anders thought that perhaps the Wardens should check Redcliffe Castle again – very thoroughly – for possible darkspawn infiltration.

"In the cupboards," he mused. "Wouldn't want the darkspawn to disguise themselves as noblemen."

Leliana sighed. "Laugh now. Before Brosca comes."

Morrigan muttered to Anders. "The dwarf girl is better off without that stiff-necked fool. Anyone could see he thought himself too fine for her."

Leliana hissed an angry breath, ready to take it up with the witch. Adaia dreaded the idea of a fight among her

friends, and burst out with more clothes talk.

"What about Bronwyn? Didn't she get anything?"

When Bronwyn returned to the Wardens' quarters in the Tower, she found them talking about clothes, of all things.

"So let us look at this gown of yours, Bronwyn," Leliana urged her, as the companions admired the loot of Haven. "I have ideas about it."

"I heard it was red," Adaia said eagerly. "I love red."

Bronwyn had folded it very carefully and wrapped a clean shirt around it. She pulled it out of the saddlebag, and laid it out on her cot. All the women – and quite a few men – came to admire it.

"A good color for you," Anders said. "Very bold."

"You should wear it tonight!" cried Adaia.

Bronwyn shook her head. "It's too chilly for this. I'd shiver all through dinner with nothing on my shoulders!"

Leliana admired the gown, too, but in a business-like way. "Yes, yes, the silk is superb. Heavy... soft... a fine hand to it. Nonetheless, the style is hopelessly antiquated. Even in the days of Queen Rowan it would have been out of fashion."

"If it came into her possession during the Rebellion," Bronwyn laughed. "Fashion would hardly have mattered to her."

"That is so," Leliana conceded, "but it could explain why the Queen did not bother to take it with her after she was crowned. A sentimental relic of her adventures. Still, I think something can be done with this. The long train...

no one wears them anymore. That is a good thing, since the worst wear shows here. Some little snips of the shears, and a new hem, and so!"

Zevran was intrigued by the project. "The style is Antivan. I recognize it. I fear, Noble One, that only very old ladies wear it now, which is a pity, since I like a fine pair of shoulders on a woman."

Bronwyn shrugged. Her own arms and shoulders were not parts of her body that she particularly cared to show off. Exercise and endless combat had left them scarred and sinewy. Very good for riding and fighting, but not particularly *pretty*.

"Better to cover them up," she said. "Besides, it's too late in the year. I nearly froze, wearing this at Redcliffe."

"That is easy!" said Leliana. "Have one of those dear little capelets made... perhaps in black velvet. They are so in vogue now, and it will be warmer with winter coming. Yes, black velvet, with a high collar. And fastened with a big brooch..." She dug through the loot and found a brooch of gold, fashioned in the shape of a dragon encircled by its own tail, whose eye was a ruby cabochon. "This one! No one would see the old neckline that way, and it would be very dramatic. With a very high collar, to set off your long neck!"

Bronwyn let Leliana talk, amused and diverted by the talk of fripperies and fashion. Still, there was something in it. She would have to wear something other than armor at the Landsmeet – or that Warden gown – and it would

not do to appear shabby or out-of-date. Perhaps, Loghain's words to the contrary, she should send Leliana north with Jowan with some commissions.

Astrid and Alistair arrived. They had taken a walk around the camp and stopped to talk with some acquaintances. They found their friends earnestly exchanging fashion tips.

"I can sew," said Adaia. "If I had some black velvet, I could make that capelet."

Leliana was quite intrigued by the project. "I sew as well, and it would not take more than three ells of fabric. Between us, we could accomplish it. Surely someone in this camp of thousands has some black velvet. We shall make a search. I might put some boning in the collar to make it stand up."

Astrid was amused, and remembered the chest in her old rooms at the Royal Palace of Orzammar, filled with garments of fine surface silk. There had been a gown of pale blue, with a sheen like an opal. Her favorite gown. Bhelen had probably given it to his concubine... Broasca's sister... The thought wrung a wry chuckle from her.

"Piotin Aeducan probably has some black velvet. He likes to be fine, and he favors black. Mind you, he'll want a good price."

And there was the plunder to admire. Some choice pieces had been claimed by those on the spot, but quite a bit remained. A fifth would be the portion of the Wardens, and sent to the Compound. Others pieces would be shared out to everyone. Bronwyn set aside the some big gold sac-

ramental items: a chalice and a pair of candlesticks to enrich the Compound. Then she pondered over a shallow bowl hammered out of pure, soft gold in the form of a flower. She really must send something to Habren for her blasted wedding present...

After some trading and bartering and endless talk. Bronwyn got the bowl for Habren and the dragon brooch for herself. If she was going to present herself as a Queen before the Landsmeet, she must look like one; and she could not very well dress as a Warden at *that* particular gathering.

The patrol returned at twilight. Broasca was so undone at the news of Cullen's death that everyone was ashamed of having spent the afternoon in trivial pleasures. Leaving Bronwyn to deal with Broasca, Alistair took Sten and Jowan aside and got the report from them; and then went to Loghain with them to discuss their findings — or lack of them.

They had not seen any darkspawn, which in a way was even more ominous than running into the horde. Where had the creatures gone? Had they disappeared into the earth again? What was the Archdemon planning? They had much to think about, but Bronwyn was too involved with Broasca to be any part of the discussion at the moment.

Tara hung back a little, uncomfortably aware that Cullen had preferred her to Broasca. Was she hard-hearted? Should she be ashamed of her own happiness? It wasn't her fault that Cullen had followed her around like a puppy, because

she had certainly given him no encouragement at all. She gave Brosca a pat, and a "sorry," and then retreated to her cubbyhole with Zevran.

Leliana gave Brosca a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek, and murmured comforting words about Cullen's courage, eyes glimmering with sympathetic tears. Perhaps they were more than merely sympathetic, but Leliana, whatever she felt, was not speaking of it.

There were other kind words and gestures. Oghren muttered something incomprehensible, and shoved a stone bottle of home brew into Brosca's hands. Dwarves sometimes understood each other best, for Brosca seemed grateful. Bronwyn was left to talk with her, and heavy going she found it.

"When he came back, we were going to be together. I know we were," Brosca sobbed out, her sturdy back shaking. "The day he left we kissed, and it was *special*. We both knew then that it was meant to be. He just needed time to get over Tara. I could do that. I could give him time..." Her voice broke. "Did he talk about me?"

Bronwyn took a breath, and uttered the comforting lies she had prepared on the quiet nights afloat on the *LADY OF THE LAKE*.

"Cullen did talk to me about you," she said. That much at least was true. "He smiled, and told me all about how you kissed. He said such good things about you... that you were a good comrade... so brave and cheerful... wonderful, really. He was only concerned that with all the dwarves in

Ostagar you might find someone else while he was gone."

Brosca's nose was running. She wiped it on her sleeve, and shook her head. "Never! He was the one for me! I'd known a lot of men who called themselves noble in Orzammar, and mostly they were just big shithheads; but he was the real thing. He didn't need a title to be noble. He was decent and honest and... and... high-minded. He was so damned good-looking that he was good-looking enough for both of us. I never met anybody like him before, and I never will again." She uncorked the bottle and took a long swallow.

"Don't give up on your future, Brosca," Bronwyn said, squeezing the girl's brawny shoulder, ashamed of her lies, but dreading how the truth would hurt this girl even more. "Don't give up. Cullen wouldn't want that. A man who gives his life for his friends doesn't want them to be unhappy."

"I'm not unhappy," Brosca insisted, wiping her nose again. "I'm fine. I've got friends and I've got darkspawn to fight."

"Look," Bronwyn said, showing Brosca the gleaming amulet. "We were given these on the journey. This was Cullen's. I thought he'd like you to have it."

The dwarf girl seized it and put it around her neck immediately. "Thanks. I'll never take it off again — not even to wash. Did he have any last words?"

Bronwyn did not permit herself to shudder, remembering those awful agonized screams. She forced a smile, and said, "No. It was over in a flash. He didn't even have a chance to know he was dead."

"That's good," Brosca muttered, a little consoled, fingers tugging at the amulet. "That's always the best way." She took another drink.

Loghain was glad to see Bronwyn out of armor at dinner, though not thrilled that her only gown appeared to be in essence a Grey Warden uniform. Didn't the girl have anything else?

Probably not. He would be wise not to say that to her face, or it would make it even angrier than criticizing her helmet. He knew that the girl had escaped Highever with only the clothes on her back — which were not exactly clothes, but armor, anyway. Aside from shirts and breeches she had scavenged here at Ostagar, what else would she have? The Grey Warden gown at the Warden Compound was a twenty-year-old hand-me-down from Commander Genevieve, but it would be easier to remove tonight than her chainmail.

She had been traveling and fighting constantly since Bloomingtide. Not being an insipid spendthrift like Habren Bryland, she been too busy to waste her time at a dressmaking shop. She had her priorities straight, certainly, but Loghain suspected she might not object to wearing a fine gown now and then. Rowan certainly had enjoyed it, when the opportunity came her way.

She looked very nice, at any rate, and he was glad to have her sitting next to him once more. Had she lost weight on her Frostback adventure? She needed to eat more.

"Courtesy of Bann Teagan," he said to her as she sat down. The mess servants were setting bowls of dried-fish stew before them. "He sent us a good lot of provisions along with Alistair's letter. Nothing fancy, but not bad at all."

"Looks good," she said. "I'm starving." It was far better than the snack she had had in the Wardens' quarters. She applied herself seriously to the food before her, and let Loghain do the talking.

"We've been lucky with the harvest. The Bannorn has had a good year, though the freeholders aren't pleased at the share that goes to the army. It's much the same everywhere, as the wagons from Redcliffe indicate. Didn't Teagan feed you when you saw him?"

"He fed us heaps, and it was all wonderfully elegant. But that was two days ago, and I'm hungry again. This bread is really not bad. The bakers seem to have finally figured out the camp ovens. Aren't you going to finish that cheese?"

"Yes, I am," he said repressively. "But I am not eating like a dragon — like a famished wolf."

"You can say 'dragon' in front of me. Just not to Brosca. I just broke the news about Cullen to her. She's taking it hard."

Loghain glanced over to the dwarf girl, who was pale and silent, sitting between the Orlesian bard and the other dwarf. "It hasn't affected her appetite, at least."

Bronwyn glared at him. "Of course not. She's a *Warden*. It doesn't mean she's not grieving."

He took another look at the Wardens' Table. "The dragon

folk apparently dressed in style. Did they capture all the guests at an Orlesian masked ball?"

Bronwyn saw that he was looking at Tara and Zevran in particular. "No, that's from Teagan. He has heaps of clothing. Most of it was Isolde's, but there were some other items. I suspect the doublet Zevran has on is something Teagan wore as a boy. And some of the extra silks have been sent to Denerim for Habren's wedding present. How nice for her."

"You were not a recipient of Teagan's largesse?"

"Oh, he gave me a gown, but it needs a bit of work." She waved down a servant. "Another bowl, please."

"I'm glad to hear it. It might not be politic to wear your Grey Warden garb to the Landsmeet."

She took another bread roll, and it disappeared in seconds. "Believe it or not, that did occur to me. I'll try to make something of the gown Teagan gave me, but I suspect I'll need some other things. My Wardens can take an order to Denerim for me."

Arl Wulffe arrived, and flung himself onto the bench with a grunt. "Fish stew! Just the thing! The south hills were clear, Loghain. Bronwyn, my dear lass... good to see you!"

"And you. You look well."

"I'll be better for some hot food. What news from the west?"

"No darkspawn, and Arl Teagan sends his greetings."

Loghain leaned around her back, and said quietly, "Let's talk privately after dinner. Bronwyn had a letter from Fergus."

"All right then. Bronwyn, do you suppose that Warden-

minstrel of yours might give us a song?"

"Generally, the problem is stopping her once she starts."

"Pretty woman. Always fancied redheads, myself."

Leliana was pleased to have a chance to perform, and whispered to Alistair, "I'm so glad I'm wearing my new gown." She left to fetch her lute straightaway, and was back in moments.

Bronwyn waved her over, and whispered, "Not the song you sang on the boat, though. It's lovely, but it's likely to do Brosca in."

Leliana smiled ruefully, and nodded. The hall stilled, eager for entertainment, as she strummed an introduction.

*THERE were two sisters sat in a bower;
Binnorie, O Binnorie!
There came a knight to be their wooer,
By the bonnie milldams of Binnorie.*

—
*He courted the eldest with gloves and rings,
But he loved the youngest above all things.*

—
*The eldest she was vexèd rare,
And envied she her sister fair.*

—
*Upon a morning fair and clear,
She cried upon her sister dear:*

—

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DRAGON SLAYER

*'O sister, sister take my hand,
And let 's go down to the river-strand.'*

—

*The youngest stood upon a stone,
The eldest came and push'd her in.*

—

*'O sister, sister reach your hand!
And you shall be heir o' half my land.'*

—

*'I shall not give you hope nor hand,
For I am heir of all your land.'*

—

*'O sister, reach me but your glove!
And my sweet William shall be your love.'*

—

*'Sink on, nor hope for hand or glove;
Sweet William shall surely be my love.'*

—

*Sometimes she sank, sometimes she swam,
Until she came to the miller's dam.*

—

*Out then came the miller's son,
And saw the fair maid floating in.*

—

*'O father, father, draw your dam!
There 's either a mermaid or a milk-white swan.'*

—

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DRAGON SLAYER

*The miller hasted and drew his dam,
And there he found a drowned woman.*

—

*You could not see her middle small,
Her girdle was so rich withal.*

—

*You could not see her yellow hair
For the gold and pearls that clustered there.*

—

*And by there came a harper fine,
That harped when nobles came to dine.*

—

*And when he looked that lady on,
He sighed and made a heavy moan.*

—

*He made a harp of her breast-bone,
Whose sound would melt a heart of stone.*

—

*He took three locks of her yellow hair,
And with them strung his harp so rare.*

—

*He went into her father's hall,
And there was the court assembled all.*

—

*He laid his harp upon a stone,
And straight it began to play alone.*

—

*And then the harp sang loud and clear,
'Oh, farewell, my father and mother dear.*

—

*'Farewell, farewell, my brother Hugh,
And farewell William, sweet and true.'*

—

*And then as plain as plain could be,
Binnorie, O Binnorie!*

*"There sits my sister who drownèd me,
By the bonny mill-dams of Binnorie!"*



The Hall was silent, entranced. Leliana struck a chord, and said,

"And the harp snapped and broke, and never sang again."

Enthusiastic applause: shouts of "More!" As Bronwyn predicted, once she started, Leliana was as hard to stop as a ogre going downhill. No one complained. Wulffe was enchanted, muttering, "Aye, sibling rivalry is a terrible thing. Sounds like the Perrin girls..." He then asked what that song was that Bronwyn told the girl *not* to sing, because he wanted to hear it.

"Not tonight, if you think it will trouble one of your people, but later. I'll make it worth her while, too."

And then Leliana got them all singing along with one they knew: "THE WILD ROVER," with its chorus of "No! Nay! Never!" Fists pounded the rhythm on tables; boots stamped on the floor; hundreds of battle-worn voices shouted in

unison. Oghren loved the song, and got up on the Wardens' table to bellow along. It felt for a moment like the Tower itself was shaking.

"Then it's "No, nay never!"

(Thud, ump, ump, ump, crash)

'No, nay, never, no more!

Will I play the wild rover,

No, never, no more!"

It was all they could do to get Wulffe to come along with them to Loghain's quarters. Others were summoned: Bann Stronar, Ban Thorne, and Bann Carlin. It was a start. The mess hall was making so much noise they did not see them leave.

Scout followed up the steps, slipping through the door after them. The door shut on the song, and the nobles settled down to serious business. Bronwyn found that they were already prepared for the news. Scout sat by Bronwyn's chair, keeping an eye on the men.

"So..." Bann Thorne nodded sagely. "I can guess what this is about. King Loghain and Queen Bronwyn. You have my support, certainly. Plenty of people will think it's the right thing at the right time."

"Is Arl Bryland with us?" asked Bann Carlin.

"He is," Loghain said crisply, "and all his vassals."

Wulffe asked, "And what does Teyrn Fergus say to all this, Lady Bronwyn?"

They were being rather formal, so Bronwyn took the lead from them, "My lords, my brother has written me,

giving me his blessing to take the crown. He is embroiled with setting Highever to rights at the moment. However, we have agreed between us that he is to be my heir."

"I like that," Stronar nodded. "Fergus as the heir presumptive? Yes, I like that."

Wulffe said, "Loghain's to be granted the Crown Matrimonial. But yes, Fergus as the heir of the two of them. Making Fergus the heir straight from the beginning makes clear that he's in agreement with this. We've got both teyrnirs, and two arlings — three if you count Amaranthine, which Fergus is ruling directly now. That should be more than enough."

"The Bannorn is a wayward animal," Bann Thorne remarked, heavy brows gloomy. He bit his lip, and asked Bronwyn. "What about the Wardens? What are they going to say about you taking the throne?"

Bronwyn replied coolly. "My Wardens will support me. The Wardens elsewhere have offered no Ferelden any assistance whatever, and therefore have nothing to say about how we arrange our affairs."

"No assistance at *all*?" Wulffe frowned. "I'm sorry to say that I doubted you, Loghain. You were right about them. In the Orlesians' pockets, most like."

Bronwyn did not think that was precisely true. However, she saw no point in defending the honor of those who had none.

Other than Riordan and Fiona, was her mental reservation. And what they had done was not to uphold the mis-

sion of the order, but for friendship and love.

"Bryland's gone to speak to Urien," Loghain said. "Bronwyn, tell them about your meeting with Teagan."

"After some idle conversation, I thought it best not to confide our plans to him. He's a very decent man, but still grieving deeply for his nephew. He assumed that I was supporting my brother, and while he understood my views, he is not inclined toward a Cousland king. His loyalties are with the Theirins, and he was unwilling to let go of the old royal line just yet."

"Well, he'd *better* let go," Wulffe snorted. "For they're gone. Who does he *want* for King?"

Loghain gave her a slight nod. Bronwyn took a breath and said. "King Maric had a bastard who was raised at Redcliffe."

When the amazement died down, Loghain said. "Maric never acknowledged the lad. Eamon raised him in the stables —"

"What!" Stronar gasped. "And Maric permitted it? That sounds pretty dodgy. Did Maric tell *you* about this boy, Loghain?"

"No," Loghain said flatly. "He never spoke of him. I came across some papers in which Eamon mentions raising a bastard at Redcliffe. However —" he said, raising his hand for silence. "I know the lad. He is not interested in the crown. Teagan wrote to him, and the boy showed me the letter."

"Who is he?" Carlin asked, but Wulffe was nodding his head and rubbing his beard.

"It's Warden Alistair, isn't it? He favors Maric quite a bit. Nice lad, though I can't say I know him well. You believe

he's Maric's, then?"

Loghain grimaced. "I think it's possible. Proving it, however, is *not* possible. We don't even know if the mother was human or elf."

Stronar groaned. "That would go down well! So you're sure the boy isn't going to kick up a fuss?"

"He wants to be a Warden," Bronwyn assured them. "That's *all* he wants. He confided in me, and I discussed the possibility of a claim with him. He was horrified. He was not brought up as a noble, and fighting is all he knows or wants to know. I told Teagan this. I also pointed out to the arl the utter lack of evidence and the probability that all this claim would do is embarrass Alistair and endanger him. It is *possible* that the Orlesians already know about him."

Loghain dismissed that. "I'm *sure* they know about him. Arlessa Isolde likely informed her family and they would have shared the rumor with the Empress. Still, Maric never acknowledged him. If he'd meant for Alistair to inherit anything, he would have provided for him."

"I've certainly provided for my own bastards," Thorne muttered. "I just can't see Maric abandoning his own blood like that, Loghain. I think Eamon made it up. Found a boy with Theirin hair..."

Bronwyn temporized. "Arl Teagan is quite sincere in his belief, but he admits that Maric never directly told him."

"But," Loghain pointed out, "belief is not proof. Teagan believes what his brother told him, and that brother is

now beyond swearing an oath before the Landsmeet. Alistair is not interested in pursuing this claim, but you needed to know of his existence if Teagan mentions him."

"Well," Wulffe shrugged. "I don't see why Teagan would care all that much. It's not like the lad is his own blood. Cailan was his nephew, but Alistair is no kin to him at all. Wait... I tell a lie... maybe a fourth cousin or so."

"Actually," Bronwyn said, "I am more closely related to Alistair than Arl Teagan. If he is indeed a son of Maric's, then we are third cousins. I think it is possible, but it cannot be proved. There is nothing in writing that we can present to the Landsmeet. The sooner Arl Teagan drops it as a lost cause, the better."

"I agree," Wulffe said heartily. "Now let's talk about reality. When are you two getting married?"

Thunder rolled in the distance. Bronwyn went to the window to see the clouds thickening to the east. "It will be rain tonight."

The room grew colder. Scout padded over to the warmth of a brazier and curled up to sleep. Bronwyn knelt to give him a good-night pat, and his only response was the flick of an ear. He had had a hard few days. Sighing, Bronwyn got up to rejoin the conversation.

They talked a little longer, solidifying their plans. The betrothal would be announced at Satinalia at the end of the month. The wedding would take place shortly before the Landsmeet, and would be solemnized wherever the Lands-

meet convened. Wine was poured, and they pledged faith together; and the others drank solemnly to the King — and — Queen-to-be. Then, with some insufferable winks and nods, the nobles departed, evidently thinking themselves very discreet and tactful. The door opened, and music rose up along the stairs. The door shut, and there was silence again.

"That went well," Bronwyn said, swirling the last of the wine in her goblet. Rain was coming down hard, sheeting the mullioned windows. The thunder was closer now.

"The idea was not new to them," Loghain said. "We'll have the rest of them in over the next few days. The army will support us, no matter what Urien or Teagan or those stubborn fools in the Bannorn say. And we've taken care that there is no one else."

"No," Bronwyn sighed. "Just us. I suppose we're committed now. To everything."

Loghain came over to her, raising a quizzical brow. "It's a little late for second thoughts."

"No second thoughts. This is what must be. I'm just taking in the finality of it all."

"Good. Because there is no turning back now." He took her hand, pressing a kiss into her palm. Lightning flashed outside, briefly turning the window to a harsh white square. Catching by her wrist, Loghain pulled Bronwyn along with him into the dark bedchamber beyond.



On the other side of Ferelden, Fergus Cousland was fin-

ishing dinner in the Great Hall of Castle Highever, when he received some excellent news.

"Haglin's agreed to obey the Queen's orders!" Ser Naois announced. His grin dimmed somewhat as he added. "Mind you, the man's not fool enough to turn down a full pardon for himself and his men. He's already withdrawing toward West Hill, and he says he'll be in Ostagar in ten days, Maker willing."

Fergus sighed. "So much for Haglin. Bastard. I'd rather have killed him."

Adam Hawke lounged easily at the table, feeding his mabari tidbits from their meal. "And his five hundred men? They've essentially surrendered. Let the darkspawn have them!"

Fergus scowled, unsatisfied, and Hawke glanced at Naois. Of course they wanted their revenge, but Hawke thought they should set bloodlust aside and accept that the Queen's solution was for the best.

"Really, my lord," Hawke smiled. "They were supposed to have gone south to fight for Ferelden last spring. Now they will. Even men of that sort can be useful. And the Queen ordered that they march along the west shore of Lake Calenhad, so as not to raise discontent in the Bannorn. The only people they're likely to plague are the hillsmen and then Arl Teagan in Redcliffe, though they'll not make an enemy of him if they have any sense. You said Haglin was loyal in his own way. Let him give his life for his country, so some other poor sod doesn't have to!"

Naois barked an unwilling laugh. The other men shifted restlessly, but Fergus could see they were in agreement. Highever did not need more battles, but peace. At least Haglin and his men had not been party to the Highever massacre.

Fergus put up a hand in surrender. "Have your scouts keep an eye on Haglin for the next few days, Naois. Keep lookouts posted along the Neck, in case he tries to double back. If he's really going, let him go. It's past time Amaranthine sent troops to Ostagar. The Queen's a wise woman."

Very wise. And a good idea, sending Haglin's men out of the way when feelings were still so high. The Amaranthine men would cross the Neck, and take the Imperial Highway southwest along Lake Calenhad. They were to bypass Orzammar, and then report to the commander at Gherlen's Halt, just to make certain they were moving in the right direction. They were then to proceed south and march through the Hinterlands, to join the army under Loghain's command. The journey was three or four days longer than the eastern route down the Lake Road, but it would prevent a large armed force from disturbing the Bannorn during harvest time. And Haglin, self-proclaimed Fereldan patriot that he was, could not possibly object to Loghain's authority. Fergus swore to himself that neither Haglin nor any of his company would ever set foot in the north again.

The Queen's most recent letter was on the table before him, telling him pretty much everything she had told Haglin. Fergus had received Anora's first letter a few days

after he had written to Bronwyn, renouncing his claim to the throne. The Queen was unhappy, of course; bereft of her King and husband, even if he had not been everything to her that he should. Her letter was very kind; flattering even. She expressed complete faith and trust in Teyrn Fergus, and hoped to have the benefit of his company and counsel as soon as his duties in Highever permitted. He had written back, explaining his difficulties with the renegades, and she had resolved the matter very neatly. A wonderful woman.

In veiled terms, she spoke of her improved health. However, it was as yet not perfect, and she could use a strong arm to aid her. She sounded lonely, as leaders always were. And clearly, she wanted something from him. Fergus was no fool, and understood that she had an agenda of her own. Only natural, of course. Somehow, he seemed to be part of hers. Once the matter of Haglin was cleared up — and if the bastard truly kept his word — Fergus might be able to consider a trip south to Denerim, to see what he could do to serve his Queen.

Word of the death in battle of King Cailan had reached Val Royeaux on the twenty-first of Kingsway — or Parvulis, as civilized people called it. The Empress and her Court went into mourning for the brave young king. The bells in the towers of the Grand Cathedral tolled mournfully. Despite her grief at the loss of one so young and charming, the Empress performed her duties with admirable energy. There were

many people to see; many orders to give. With the demise of the king of Ferelden, there was great speculation as to how the poor savage provincials would govern themselves. The line of Calenhad was broken, alas. It was very vexing; very unfortunate. Plans had been made for a lasting, honorable peace, and now... all was over. *Quel dommage!*

No one, knowing his reputation, could be entirely astonished at how Loghain Mac Tir had brought the dark-spawn invasion to a standstill. He was a formidable man, without doubt. Some surprise, however, was expressed at how efficiently the junior Grey Wardens had forged alliances with dwarves and elves. They had even persuaded the Knight-Commander of the Circle to release a number of mages to support the army. The Divine, when consulted, professed herself uneasy, though the Grey Wardens were certainly within the letter of the law. Perhaps the Knight-Commander had grown too old and... well... *infirm* to bear his responsibilities any longer.

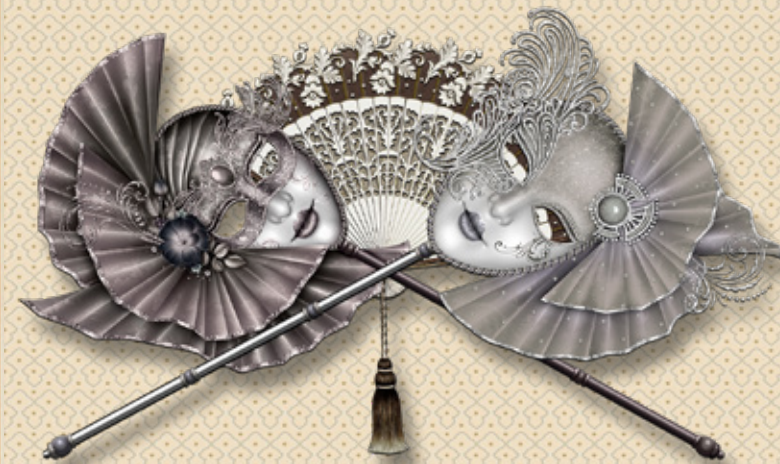
It was the doing of *le Prince* Cousland's daughter, apparently: a remarkable young person. While for reasons unknown she had not played much of a role at Court, she had stepped out of the shadows to prove herself a leader. She had quite disregarded the commands of the First Warden to come to Orlais and put herself in the hands of those older and wiser. Many shook their heads, hoping that the young lady's pride would not have too hard a fall.

The other young Warden, it was said, was a bastard

child of King Maric himself. How very unfortunate that *he* had not come to Orlais, where his royal blood could be honored, and he could be trained in the arts of war and peace in a way befitting his rank.

While Wardens were not supposed to involve themselves in politics, nor hold high office, young people could be very impulsive. A Warden King and his Warden consort? Shocking. Romantic, perhaps; but still shocking. Not at all *comme il faut*. Wiser heads must take counsel, and correct this.

So Empress Celene saw many people; gave many orders. By the first of Harvestmere – ah, no – *Frumentum*, riders were galloping east and south; swift galleys on the Waking Sea sailed toward the rising sun; and permission was granted for some amusing and completely deniable adventures.



CHAPTER II

A BREATHING SPACE



OWAN, CARVER, AND LELIANA REACHED LOTHERING ON A LATE AUTUMN AFTERNOON, RIDING WITH A CONVOY OF NEARLY EMPTY SUPPLY WAGONS BOUND FOR DENERIM. There was nothing much in the wagons, other than some boxes of human cremains, returning home to their unhappy families.

Leliana was tired, but rather excited about the opportunity to go to Denerim. Bronwyn had told her candidly that Teyrn Loghain did not want Leliana to go, but with so much happening, Bronwyn needed Leliana to run some errands for her in Denerim that only she was qualified to handle. Given the nature of the commissions, Leliana agreed. If Bronwyn needed the items on the list, she could hardly entrust them to Jowan or Carver. And she had taken Bronwyn's measurements very, very carefully, so there should be no inconvenient mistakes. They would stay overnight in Lothing with Carver's family, and then continue on. Jowan had vital business in Denerim, but Leliana thought her own errands were not without value.

Lothing was in good shape. The lookouts were posted in towers and on the walls. Everyone seemed busy with the aftermath of the rye harvest. Smoke rose from chimneys, and the smell of haystacks blended with incense floating from the Chantry. The Wardens told the wagon-captain that they would see him in the morning, and sought out the Hawke cottage.

They found it, of course, without trouble, but were puzzled to see a covered wagon drawn up in front of it. A pair of oxen were tied up next to the shed. The door of the house stood open.

"Mother?" Carver slid off his horse, and stood in the doorway, staring about him. "Bethany? What's going on?"

Jowan and Leliana looked at each other, and dismounted, following their friend.

Inside, the house was in chaos, the big kitchen filled with trunks and crates and bizarrely, a dressmaker's dummy. Charade's curly brown head peered up over the table. She was filling a box with crockery. "Hello, Carver. We're packing."

"You're packing?" Carver asked, bewildered. He stood in the midst of bedlam, wondering what had happened. "Where are you going? You're not still going to Gwaren, are you?"

Charade clicked her tongue impatiently, and then swore under her breath when she closed a lid on her finger. "No."

Bethany scrambled down from the loft, and gave her brother a fierce hug. "Carver! I'm so glad to see you. Did you get my letter?"

"No, I —"

She burst out in a rush, her cheeks uncommonly pink.

"We're not going to Gwaren! We're not going to Kirkwall! We're going to Denerim and then to *Highever!*" She saw Jowan and Leliana standing uncertainly outside the door, and apologized. "Oh, I'm sorry! Please come in. Of course you can stay with us. I'm sorry everything is such a mess. We're packing up to join my brother Adam in the north. The Teyrn gave Adam leave to have his family join him. We're to live at Castle Highever! At least for the time being. Adam says it's very nice."

Carver stared, his breath taken away.

"Thank you," Leliana said softly. "We'll care for the horses. Come on, Jowan, and we'll let Carver have a private moment with his family."

Jowan patted Carver's shoulder. "They'll be safer in the north." He and Leliana walked away, whispering together.

Carver slumped onto the bench at the kitchen table. "But this is our *home!*"

Charade made a face and found some bread and a crock of butter in a crate. She started slicing the loaf, while Bethany put out cheese, sausage and apples.

"Not anymore," Bethany said softly. "Mother sold the cottage to Tobery Salt. His family needs more space than they have at his mother's, with all his sisters and their children living there now. She sold the cows and chickens, too. He takes possession the day after tomorrow, and then we'll take the Imperial Highway to Denerim. Adam gave us a map, and marked where we should stay. He gave us

some coin, too. It's all planned out."

Carver shook his head, still stunned by the news. He asked Charade, "What about Uncle Gamlen? Is he well enough to travel?"

Charade's face was hidden by her hair. She kept on slicing bread, but jerked her head at a square box piled with the rest of the luggage. "That's Father. He's dead. Four nights ago. Nice of you to ask, though. After that, your mother decided we should take your brother up on his invitation. Nothing to hold us back, now."

Bethany touched her arm, her pretty face sympathetic. "As long as we're together, we'll be all right."

Leandra, wrapped in a handsome blue cloak, fluttered up the path, her arms out. "Is that Carver? Thank the Maker!" She embraced him for a long time. Then she took his face in her hands, looking him over. "You must have got the letter! I'm so glad! Are you coming with us?"

"I didn't get a letter. I was on my way to Denerim on Warden business."

"But that's all right!" Bethany said eagerly. "We can all go together! That's safer, anyway!"

"Oh..." Leandra was a little disappointed, but then rallied. "Well. You could use a nice strong cup of tea, Carver. Make the tea, Bethany."

Leliana and Jowan made their appearance, food was devoured and sleeping arrangements organized. With Gamlen no longer occupying the largest bedroom, that

was not so difficult, though some of the beds had been stripped of their linens.

"Yes," Leliana told Leandra. "We have business in Denerim. We are traveling with the army wagon train in the morning. I am sure the captain would not object if you joined us. We may camp, but if you arrange your belongings carefully, you can sleep in the wagon, since it has a cover. Or under it. Be sure to bring a featherbed and plenty of quilts. We expect to be in Denerim in four days, and with an armed escort so large, no one will trouble you."

"It does seem the Maker's own luck," Charade said slowly.

"There's so much still to do," Leandra fretted. "How will we ever be ready in time?"

"You have extra hands," Jowan said, with a shy smile. "We'll make sure everything is packed and ready, and then in the morning we can load it up really quickly."

"And you don't have to take *everything*, Mother," Carver snarked. "Not if you're going to live in a *castle*."

"Where were you planning to stay in Denerim?" Jowan asked, trying to smooth things over. "I don't think Bronwyn would mind if you stayed at the Wardens' Compound."

"But that's all settled!" Leandra beamed. "Teyrn Cousland has graciously given us leave to stay in his house in town! Such a kind friend to Adam he is."

"But I'd like to see the Compound," Bethany comforted the dashed Carver. "I'm sure it's lovely."

"I'd like to see it, too," Charade chimed in. "It sounds

interesting. So let's get packing."

They set to work, stuffing books in crates and wrapping breakable keepsakes. Bethany consulted Jowan about the best way to store her father's magical items so no one would notice them. Meanwhile, Leliana helped Leandra decide how to transport their best clothes so as to prevent wrinkles.

"My dear Adam sent us the loveliest Orlesian silks!" Leandra gushed. "Look at this! I made it for Bethany."

Leliana nodded, evaluating the gown. "Very nice. Such tiny stitching. That shade of blue is very becoming to a dark-haired girl. Your son has excellent taste."

"Adam does everything well. Of course we set to work as soon as his wonderful present arrived. I don't want Adam to be ashamed of our appearance. There was just enough for a gown for each of us, though I would have liked a contrasting underskirt under Bethany's. I didn't want us to dress identically — I'm afraid we'll look like a troupe of minstrels! We have new traveling cloaks, too, from the money Carver gave us. And we all need new boots, but the cobbler here isn't up to really *fine* work."

"I know a brilliant shoemaker in the Market District," Leliana assured her, deliberately not hearing the reflection on minstrels. "During your stop in Denerim, I will take you there. And any lacks in your wardrobe can be easily amended. Of course, in Highever they have many fine shops and craftsmen, too. I have heard much of the town from our Commander."

"Oh, yes! Lady Bronwyn! She has done our family such good!" Leandra was overflowing with gratitude. She pressed Leliana's hand. "We owe her all our good fortune. Recommending Adam to her lord brother was the best thing to happen to us since my darling Malcolm died."

Leliana smiled. "Teyrn Fergus is a most charming and honorable man. Everyone is glad to know how well your son has got on with him."

She left herself open to a great outpouring of Leandra's maternal tenderness for her son Adam: his looks, his keen intelligence, his extraordinary talents. Leliana only smiled, and listened kindly.

And Jowan, up in the loft, expressed his own views to Bethany. They had torn a worn-out sheet to rags, and were in the process of wrapping a multitude of little vials of potions ingredients. "See what you think of the Compound when you're in Denerim. Maybe you'll find that you'd like being a Warden as much as Carver does."

Bethany smiled and shook her head, fingers working busily. "I can't see fighting darkspawn as anything I'd like."

Jowan handed her more rags. "You'd be safe as a Warden, though. The Chantry couldn't touch you. And we don't fight darkspawn *every* day. A lot of my work has been healing or research."

"It's nice of you to think of me, but I couldn't leave my mother. I'm really all she has. Well... and Charade, too, though Mother doesn't appreciate Charade like she should.

With Carver in the Wardens and Adam in the midst of his oh-so-brilliant career, it's just... the three of us."

Jowan raised his brows, smiling a little, "*Oh-so-brilliant career?*" Are you less than impressed with your brother Adam?"

Bethany sat back in a heap, wiping her hair out of her face, smearing her nose with dust from the vials. It made her look oddly childlike.

"No. Everybody's impressed with Adam. I love him. He's a wonderful brother, but he's very much the golden child. It's only natural, I suppose. Carver resents it, but I've accepted that Adam really is very extraordinary and we all simply exist in his shadow."

Jowan made a face, in complete disagreement. "You're a brilliant mage. Magic is a gift unlike any other. Your brother doesn't have that."

"Much good it does me or anyone. I'm just Bethany. 'Make-the-tea-Bethany.'"

"Well, just come and have a look at the Compound. It's nice. It sounds like your mother will be living with Adam from now on. Maybe you'll want to do something for yourself someday. Just think about it."

And in the kitchen, Charade was talking in a hushed voice to Carver.

"Lady Amell. Lady Leandra Amell. That's what she's going to call herself from now on. Father confessed to her that her parents never disinherited her. The estate is gone, but your mother reckons she has a right to the title.

She thinks calling herself that will help Adam up there among the posh Highever folk."

"Maybe," he grunted. So Mother thought herself too good to be a Hawke? "'Lady Amell.' Sounds grand. Too grand for the likes of me."

Charade gave him a cheeky grin. "*You* have a title, *Warden* Carver! Your mother brags about you, too. Anyway, I can't complain. Bethany and I have become really and truly friends, and your mother's letting me come with them. I may be the poor relation, but at least I'll have a roof over my head. And I got a really fine gown and a new cloak out of it, so that's all to the good."

Carver grunted a scoffing sort of laugh, and looked around at the shelves.

"Remind me why Mother wants to pack all these pots and things? She's going to be Lady Amell, not mess about in a kitchen. You don't need much more than your camping gear and your clothes and Bethany's lute. And maybe some sewing things, since Mother thinks fine ladies spend all their days embroidering flowers."

Charade cuffed him lightly on the jaw. He danced away, and seized up a cheese hoop and twirled it on his arm. "Might as well leave all this for the Salts. *They'll* make use of it."

Charade snatched the hoop away. Carver laughed outright. She had quick hands.

"I have an idea," she whispered. "Let's hide this lot in the pantry. I've already packed all the gear we'll need for

traveling. Then we'll keep her distracted so she doesn't look for it. And I'll keep out the churn and show her we haven't room for it. Come on!"

Laughing like bad children, they began filling the pantry with pots and pans, with milkpans and roasting forks and drying racks and the rest of country life.

Anora burst out laughing at the last bit of advice from her father.

"...I urge you to consider a marriage with Cousland. If Bronwyn and I have no children, he would be king, and you would once more be Queen. If you like, it can be made a condition of our alliance..."

She set down the letter, and murmured, "I'm several steps ahead of you there, Father."

The royal courier had got through quickly, changing horses at every stop. At least now she knew the shape of the future, and was prepared to take her place in it. As satisfactory as it would have been to rule as unchallenged sovereign of Ferelden, it was not to be. However, to be the daughter of the King of Ferelden was no contemptible thing. And perhaps... just perhaps, the throne would be hers again in the future.

But Father proposed to name her Chancellor! Had Bronwyn agreed to this? That was... an interesting prospect. With the war in the south, the chancellor of the realm would wield extensive powers. Anora had ideas of her own — improve-

ments that would bring Ferelden out of its backward condition — and she longed for the chance to realize them.

The Arl of South Reach had arrived today for his daughter's wedding, which would be held two days hence. He was expected at the Palace later in the afternoon, when he would pay his respects to her and give her some further insight into what was being spoken of in the south. Presumably the courier had caught up with him and given him the latest news about Father and Bronwyn and their plans.

Fergus had written twice to her now. She felt very pleased about her solution to the problem of the Amaranthine troops on Highever soil. If Ser Haglin had any sense at all, he would take her offer of pardon, and head to Ostagar to make his amends. She hoped he would. The sooner that problem was put to rest, the sooner Fergus could join her in Denerim. To build a personal and political alliance, she felt they needed time together.

It was fortunate that mourning became her, for custom demanded that she wear black through the full traditional month of mourning for the King. However, the month would be complete the day before the Bryland-Kendellss wedding, giving her the excuse to wear some new gowns. Nothing loud or garish, of course; it would not do to offend people's sensibilities. And winter was coming, so darker colors would be appropriate. Still, the dark blue velvet she planned to wear to the wedding brought out the color of her eyes.

After some time before the mirror, and further time in

contemplation, she had decided to change her hair style. She had adopted Eleanor Cousland's look when she was first crowned Queen; feeling that she needed to appear mature, admiring the older woman's elegance, and wanting to show gratitude for her past kindnesses. Now, of course, it was inappropriate. It would never do to remind Fergus of his mother, and only Erlina had really had a knack with balancing the two coiled plaits, anyway. Instead, her long golden hair was woven in a single braid and twisted into an elaborate bun at the base of her neck, with a few curling tendrils softening her face. It was a far more youthful look.

And 'the item' Father spoke of... Had Bronwyn really found the Sacred Ashes? It seemed incredible... but if she had, would they be the cure they hoped for?

She was not feeling ill, except early in the morning and late at night. Wynne had amazing powers, and was a very pleasant woman. Still, to be truly and completely healed... She tried not to hope for too much, for that way led to crushing disappointment, but if it should work, and she should be cured, and well, and fit to marry...

"Oh, Maker! Make it so!"

With Haglin out of the way, and his knights in firm control of the north, Fergus felt he could ride to Denerim and see what exactly the Queen wanted of him. The ruffians had been banished from Highever; Amaranthine was well patrolled; Bann Frandarel's castellan at the for-

tress of West Hill had finally reported to Fergus and made his submission. The bann himself was in Denerim, safely ensconced in his luxurious townhouse. Much of the bannorn was there, invited by Urien to his wedding. No one wanted to miss a free feast — and the first feast after the death of the king, at that.

Fergus was almost sorry he would not be there in time. Even if they rode hard, he did not expect to reach Denerim until the ninth. That was two days after the wedding. He would still need to pay a wedding call on the happy couple, of course. Smirking, he tried to picture Urien and Habren as man and wife. Perhaps Habren's pride would be satisfied by the title of Arlessa... at least for a short time. He nearly laughed aloud, imagining her reaction if Bronwyn were to be crowned. The two girls had never got on; not even when they were small.

Hawke rode with him. Fergus thought he would be a good companion on the journey, and as he was fairly new to Fergus' service, he had not been given more serious administrative tasks yet. In time, Fergus would know better what sort of man Ser Adam really was. For the moment it was enough that he was a good swordsman, and could tell a joke without spoiling the punchline.

"We'll stop at the North Road Inn tonight," Fergus called out. "I don't want the horses foundering by the time we reach Denerim."

Anora's letters were something of a puzzle. Was she...

flirting with him? Surely not. Her husband was dead only a month. On the other hand, how much would she mourn for a man who was planning to cast her aside? Perhaps she was already looking for a way to move on with her life.

He blinked, coming to a realization. His horse, sensing his confusion, stumbled briefly, making Fergus pay attention to his riding. Was Anora considering *him* to be part of her future? He would be Bronwyn's heir, after all. He could hardly blame her. He was already getting two or three marriage proposals a day. Anora would be far more to his taste than any of the other 'suitors.' And she was a widow, and he a widower...

Yes, death had ended her marriage with Cailan. Would divorce really have been an option? Perhaps the Divine would have made her a special case and dissolved the marriage by Divine Fiat, but it was inconceivable that Anora would have been left alive and free, nursing her grievance. More likely her murder was always part of the plan, and Cailan, who never heard anything that he did not want to hear, simply put his fingers in his ears, and went on merrily with his scheme, leaving the inevitable dirty work for others. Who else had been marked for death?

Loghain, of course. Surely Cailan had understood that setting Anora aside required the murder of her father. Another coup for the Orlesians, and a sweet one: the elimination of the man, who more than any other was responsible for their loss of Ferelden. There had already been the

one attempt. Fergus would be very surprised if there were not others. Bronwyn had best watch out for herself if she was going to be in the man's company.

By now the Empress must know that the king was dead and her plan for conquest by marriage in ruins. Long ago, Father had told him to remember that the Orlesians always had a plan: always, always, always. If one plan was rendered moot, there was another to take its place. Ferelden was at war and vulnerable. Fergus had made a point of ordering the northern towns to keep a good watch on the Waking Sea.



Fewer and fewer darkspawn were to found in the Wilds. It was a puzzlement for the Wardens. Though the dearth of enemies had given them a brief breathing space, they feared that what came next might be worse than everything they had previously experienced. Even their Fade visions were ambivalent, peculiar. The Archdemon was being very coy. Was it hiding something from them? The Wardens discussed this among themselves, and a plan was made to explore the Blight Wound, the area of tunnels and caves and pits where the darkspawn had first issued from the earth. So few darkspawn were in evidence on the surface that Bronwyn feared they were massing underground for an attack.

A large force marched out of Ostagar early that morning to explore. Scouts and archers, led by Danith and Tara,

moved out in front, while Loghain and Bronwyn rode with the main body. Bronwyn had decided to take most of the Wardens with her. They would have a large area to examine, and very likely would have to split up into small teams.

"I'm going to have to conscript more Wardens," Bronwyn told Loghain. "A lot more. I'm sorry to poach from the army, but I see no way to get good people otherwise."

Loghain was only surprised she had not made the demand before. "How many soldiers do you want?"

"I thought I'd start with twenty from your army, twenty dwarves, and ten Dalish. *They* certainly won't like it, but it's necessary. My people are stretched too thin as it is, and if we're going down below to look for the darkspawn, I need more bodies. And of course, out of that first fifty, I'll be lucky to get half that number as Wardens."

"You can't have Cauthrien."

"I'm not going to steal Cauthrien, though I'm sure she'd survive and be a splendid Warden. I've going to leave it up to you. Have your captains recommend the people, and I'll meet them. I'd like good fighters, but I simply don't know how to judge who's going to survive the Joining. We were fantastically lucky with our first crop of recruits, but I don't expect our luck to hold. I'd prefer volunteers. Perhaps... they shouldn't have families..."

"I'll pass it along and have them sent to you for your approval. If it's known that you're looking for people, you might have more volunteers than you expect."

They made contact with only a few small bands of darkspawn. By the time they reached King's Mountain, Bronwyn was feeling mildly bewildered at the lack of resistance.

The battlefield was ominous enough. Huge scorched patches of earth bore witness to where the piles of darkspawn bodies had been burned. Some of the Taint had soaked into the soil, killing the surrounding vegetation. That, too, was burned to keep it from spreading. It was an ugly scene, and would remain so for many years.

Not wanting to expose any more people than necessary to the Taint, her underground force was comprised of most of the Wardens plus twenty picked warriors from the Legion of the Dead. Outside, Loghain, Alistair, a company of Maric's Shield, and fifteen mages would keep watch in a fortified position in case of a sudden counterattack. Alistair would keep alert for any darkspawn activity. Dalish elves were entrusted with patrolling the area, listening for any activity coming from the tunnels.

They had come this far and seen almost nothing. Before them loomed cracks in the stone cliffs, a few wide-mouthed tunnels, and some bottomless-appearing pits in the earth. The biggest tunnel looked quite large enough for a High Dragon to squeeze through, but no darkspawn challenged them. Save for a few stray birds, the world was silent. Bronwyn fidgeted with her sword belt, not sure what to do.

Alistair whispered to Bronwyn, "Do you think they've retreated? Maybe we've actually beaten them back!"

Bronwyn had studied enough history to know what that meant. "Darkspawn don't retreat. It's possible, though, that the Archdemon has called them in a different direction. That wouldn't mean the end of the Blight. They'd pop up somewhere else."

"Where else?" Loghain asked harshly.

The two Wardens looked at him, not liking to give him the obvious answer, but Bronwyn finally said. "It could be anywhere. Really, anywhere. The Archdemon hasn't been showing us much lately. It could be planning a surprise."

They dismounted, and walked along in front of the tunnel mouths, listening; all their senses open for a hint of darkspawn. Finally, Bronwyn said to Loghain, "I'm really not picking up much of anything. They must have moved fairly far down. I'm getting the most sensation from the big tunnel, so we might as well go that way."

"Don't go far," Loghain ordered. "You don't want to find yourself surrounded and cut off." Alistair shuddered.

"No," Bronwyn agreed. "I don't. A series of probes, then. We'll map out all the branches and try a short distance down each. It will take some time."

He did not move to touch her; not in front of all these people. "Maker watch over you, then."

She gave him a nod and brief smile. Alistair clapped her on the shoulder, with a whispered farewell. Bronwyn turned away, signalling to her people to follow. Her party could deal with pretty much anything other than

an attack by the massed horde. A pair of dwarven cartographers was also attached to the party, entrusted with charting out the twists and turns of the raw stone of the tunnels. There was always the possibility that the darkspawn were mining under Ostagar again.

"We'll go about a mile, and then we'll go out and try another tunnel, and then another," Bronwyn said.

"They may connect, Commander," one of the mapmakers told her. "It's almost certain they do. The only question is where."

This was all very disturbing. She had no idea where the Archdemon was. It could, as she had told Loghain, emerge from any number of openings in the earth. There was one very close to the city of Gwaren. There was one southeast of Lake Calenhad, and another one east of the north end of the lake. There was one in the far north, close to the old fortress of West Hill. There were others, too, according to the old dwarven maps. There was one in the middle of the Dragonbone Wastes in the arling of Amaranthine. Those were the ones she knew of. The map they had copied was damaged, and did not show eastern Ferelden very clearly. There might well be more. For all she knew, there was one right under the Royal Palace in Denerim.

Perhaps she should have someone watching those old exits. They were sealed and long unused, for the most part, but someone might have broken into them for a spot of treasure-hunting. During the Rebellion, Loghain had crossed Ferelden traveling along the Deep Roads; going

down into them by way of West Hill, and emerging to surprise the Orlesian invaders in Gwaren.

Ideally, the guards on the exits should include Wardens, who could sense darkspawn activity. All the more reason to make a great many more Wardens, and to do it right away. As she prowled underground, her mind was making lists; how many known entrances, how many more Wardens she ultimately would need. With the first levy of fifty, how many would survive?

As she moved deeper into the foul and tainted tunnel, another idea came to her.

Where were the other Wardens? A small band of experienced Wardens would be a gift from the Maker, even if all they did was watch the Deep Road entrances.

The Orlesian Wardens – all but two – had failed them; the First Warden had done worse. Still, there *were* other Wardens, and surely some of them would like to take part against the first Blight in four hundred years. Where were they?

Surely there was a branch of the order in Nevarra. She knew there was in Antiva, for Oriana had spoken of knowing some of them. There might be some in Rivain, but she simply did not know enough about that country. There were some posts in the Free Marches, but where? They were not in every city, she now understood.

The story of Garahel held some clues... yes... he served at Ansburg. There was a post in Ansburg, and one in Tantarvale. There must be Wardens in Tevinter, but her mind

revolted against begging them for aid. Tevinters were slavers. Tevinters were heretics. No, she would not ask anything of them. That the Grey Wardens were some sort of brotherhood was clearly a myth. Then she remembered Genetivi's book. Perhaps there was something in there about Wardens. She would look when she finished here.

Brosca dropped back to talk to Adaia, whose huge eyes were flicking about her in horror and disgust. "So... this is your first time in the Deep Roads... What do you think?"

"I think it stinks," Adaia declared. "This is awful. Somebody needs to scrub this place down with lye soap."

A ripple of laughter. Bronwyn laughed with the rest. "That's a lot of soap!"

"These aren't the real Deep Roads," Kardol, Commander of the Legion of the Dead, corrected them. "These shoddy diggings are darkspawn work. We know the Deep Roads head toward Ostagar, but we're not sure how far."

"Well, they must connect with the Deep Roads," Bronwyn said, "because we saw the Archdemon in the Dead Trenches. The creature has been moving along the Deep Roads, wherever it pleases. Where it is now is anyone's guess."

Abruptly, the vague sensation of darkspawn changed from an ominous tickle to a harsh rasp. Bronwyn raised her hand, and the party slowed. "Something big up ahead."

A pair of scrawny hurlocks materialized from around a corner and rushed them. Danith shot them down, and the rest finished them off.

They met more darkspawn as the tunnel angled down: a few small parties; a larger party led by an emissary; one very powerful Hurlock warrior. Nearly all the darkspawn they came across were hurlocks, in fact. A curious smell reached them... curious and ugly and then, all too recognizable. And that was when they saw the first of the pinkish tendrils. Scout pawed at it and growled.

"A Broodmother," groaned Tara. "We really don't need this."

"Let's scout it out carefully," Bronwyn said, her voice low. "Perhaps it would be smarter to go back for a band of archers or a ballista. A Broodmother is a stationary target, after all."

"For the record," Zevran remarked, "I like that idea."

They entered a broader chamber, when the pulpy matter had spread over the stone floor and twined up along the sides. A few pulsing bags glowed a darker pink. Bronwyn gave a wordless signal and swords were slashing through them. Half-formed hurlocks spilled out wetly, squealing as they were hewn asunder.

Danith's face was white with horror. Bronwyn remembered that she, like Adaia, had not been with them in the dark of the Deep Roads on that first, terrible adventure there. For that matter, few of the Legion had actually seen this.

"This is how a Broodmother reproduces," she explained, raising her voice just a very, very little. "The captured female, whether human, dwarven, or elven, loses her mind, and is transformed. The body swells enormously and the feet atrophy. These tendrils lead to sacs where the darkspawn form.

Broodmothers, though they cannot pursue you, are very powerful and dangerous enemies. They develop strange abilities. Beware their spit. It is a deadly poison and can blind you. Their arms are tiny in proportion with their size, but have very sharp claws. The massive bodies are difficult to wound, since they are heavily padded with fat, but they are vulnerable to magic. They can also summon their brood. When we locate the Broodmother, we'll see if we can withdraw and obtain heavier weapons."

Her heart fluttered like a netted bird; telling her to *get away, get away, get away...* The pain and terror of her encounter with the Broodmother in the Dead Trenches had never quite faded, any more than the scar on her face or her poison-green eyes. Dragons were terrifying creatures, but they did not inspire the skin-crawling dread she felt now. She would be prudent. She would not risk losing another Warden as she had Cullen. They would destroy the Broodmother, but they would do so sensibly and without stupid heroics.

"Archers!" she called out softly, first to Danith, and then to those in the Legion. "If we can't withdraw easily after spotting the Broodmother, aim at the head. It's not an easy target, for it's a tiny object high atop a massive body, but that is the only place where your arrows will do much good. And remember, the thing you see is not a woman anymore."

Down they went: down and down. The pulpy mattered squelched audibly under their boots. Ichor leaked out, and

the stench of it sharpened. They found and destroyed a large number of darkspawn sacs.

"This one's a real breeder," Oghren grunted.

The tunnel opened even more, revealing a big natural cavern. At the far end were a number of fissures, some of them very wide. Bronwyn could sense darkspawn in that general direction, but it was difficult to tell which of the fissures she should enter. The dwarves spread out, inspecting the stone work for clues.

"Commander!" Kardol called to her in a careful rumble. "This way, maybe? Down there..." he squatted down and thrust his torch deeper into the largest opening. "Look at the bottom. Dwarvenwork. This might be where we connect to the Deep Roads!"

"Mark it," Bronwyn briefly instructed the mapmakers. "Mark them all, but we'll follow this one."

The darkspawn sensation was intense now. Sacs hung from thickening tendrils with numbing regularity. Now and then, hurlocks leaped out at them from branching tunnels and alcoves. Bronwyn was tempted to pull back and examine some of the other tunnels. She dreaded the possibility of being ambushed down here. Just a little farther, and then they would head back to the surface – or at least to a side tunnel.

Zevran and Danith moved ahead, cat-footed and silent, peering around corners. The air had changed, growing ever more rank. There was noise up ahead: a low

wailing, inharmonious and painful to the ears. As they approached, it grew louder; a cacophony of anguish. Not on a single note, either, but clashing and dissonant, as if a band was playing out of tune. Scout whined and pawed at Bronwyn's knee, unhappy at getting any closer.

"I can feel it, Commander!" Kardol whispered. "There's a big chamber around the corner!"

Danith got there first, crouched cautiously behind a protruding rock. She leaned out, sleek muscles tense and still. She did not move, and Bronwyn grew impatient, moving up behind her. Zevran leaned around the corner above her, paused and pulled back. He saw Bronwyn and frowned, with a quick shake of his head. He pulled insistently on Danith's arm, whispering something into her ear. Danith withdrew behind the rocks, her movements stiff and awkward, her eyes glazed. By the time Bronwyn reached them, Zevran had composed himself.

"You must look," he whispered, voice nearly inaudible under the hellish din from the chamber. "You must look, but quickly. Then we must go back and plan."

Zevran helped Danith away. Bronwyn glanced at the Dalish girl in concern. Her mouth was slack; she appeared to be in shock. Well, why shouldn't she be if she had just had her first glimpse of a Broodmother?

Careful not to bang her armor against the stone, Bronwyn peered cautiously over the rock, and an involuntary gasp escaped her. She clenched her teeth together, willing

herself to be silent, to observe, to count, to *think*.

There must be nearly a dozen of them: monstrous, grotesque, bloated; their mindless moaning echoing through the caverns, vibrating up from the floor. Tentacles waved like seagrass in the surf, little clawed arms clutched futilely at thin air. Most horribly, their heads were still the heads of women: recognizable as human, but the eyes dull, unfocused; the faces filthy; the hair matted and foul.

She slowed her breathing, and counted. Three...five...eight...and one more. There were nine Broodmothers here. No wonder the place was filled to bursting with their wretched spawn. The Archdemon may have summoned the horde elsewhere, but these Broodmothers could never move from the place where they had been made.

Considering every movement, she edged back and pulled herself out of sight. Zevran was staring at her, his eyes very wide, offering her a canteen.

She shook her head, and gestured him back.

"We're going," she mouthed at him. "Too many for us."

They returned the next day with three ballistae, with a large party of archers, with fire bombs and shock bombs and with Dworkin's lyrium grenades. With *reinforcements*. Carefully, they checked out the nearby tunnels, and stationed enough people in them to prevent ambushes.

Loghain insisted on coming. Bronwyn did not argue about it. She felt that he should see and understand the

worst of the enemy they were fighting. However, while they were underground, she told him, *she* was in command. He frowned, but agreed. She sensed that he was only humoring her; that it was a pretense, and an infuriating one. She had no doubt that if things went pear-shaped, he would attempt to take over.

Of her own people, everyone insisted on coming. This was an important action, and well supported. Alistair refused to be left behind again. Even Adaia, warned about how bad it was going to be, wanted to help.

"I'll bring bombs," she promised. "Lots and lots of bombs."

Very cautiously, they prepared for this attack by exploring and closing the other fissures in the nearest big cavern, and by destroying all the darkspawn sacs along the way. Bronwyn felt a little mean satisfaction at Loghain's pause and silent absorption of *that* nasty little reality.

And they met some resistance — more than before. Bands of hurlocks — some newborns naked and unarmed — rushed up the tunnels and were shot down, blown apart, incinerated. And then there was the final revelation of the Broodmother chamber. That was even worse than anticipated, for some of the Broodmothers were recognizable... and recognized. A pair of soldiers collapsed at the sight of an old friend's head surmounted on a hideous hulk. A few vomited. Some wept. Others cursed. There were screams, and misery, and Loghain's stoic, haunted stare. Bronwyn glanced at the creature his gaze was fixed on, but she did

not know her. Many women had been lost in the Bloomington Battle. Many had been lost since then.

Before she led them here, Bronwyn had made a point of explaining what they were to face: what a Broodmother was, how they were made, and that they had forgotten their lives as women and were now lethal monsters. Clearly, she would have to work on making herself better understood, for the warriors with her were wholly unprepared for the horror of it. Mercifully, no one asked her if the women could not somehow be saved. It was all too terribly plain that they could not be. It was difficult to issue commands... it was difficult to *think* in the clamoring din of the chamber, where the Broodmothers wailed, and groaned, and screamed.

Their spawn swarmed in, but were met with archer volleys and bombs and fireballs. Ballista bolts, impregnated with poison, worked well on the Broodmothers themselves. It still took a great deal of time to finish them off. Bronwyn's people used precautions, but a few of the others were hit by the poisoned spit. Even then, waves of darkspawn attacked them. Bronwyn had the Legion of the Dead lock shields, stationed the archers behind them, and they pushed their way to a bottleneck, forcing the darkspawn to come at them in twos and threes that could be easily slaughtered.

And slaughter it was. Corpses piled up, and the darkspawn climbed over them, squawking. The mages set



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the piles of darkspawn dead afire, burning those behind them. Human, dwarf, and elf alike were almost suffocated by the reeking black smoke.

"Let me try freezing them!" Tara shouted. Bronwyn gave her the nod and waved at Anders to do likewise. This worked well. Combined with shock bombs, the darkspawn shattered into bloody fragments. Bloody slime coated the walls and splashed randomly up to the stalactites hanging from the cavern's ceiling. At length, the attacks slowed, and then stopped, and there was nothing left to be done but clean up the unspeakable mess left behind.

Bronwyn ordered everyone out but Wardens and dwarves, though that order was not universally obeyed at first. Soldiers remained to gape at the dead Broodmothers, unable to believe what they were seeing. Bronwyn was surprised at the drawn, sick expression on Ser Cauthrien's face: she had imagined the woman to be unshakeable. Somehow, she found herself liking Loghain's trusted lieutenant the better for that revealing moment.

Some of her Wardens were no better off. Adaia was crying, her arms around Danith. Tara was drooping, slumped wearily against a thick stalagmite. Brosca and Astrid were talking together, too low to be heard in all the noise, their faces hard and determined. Morrigan alone forced her expression into blank calm, but her shaking hands and unnaturally shrill voice betrayed how much the effort was costing her.



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Bronwyn grimaced at Loghain, wishing he would go, knowing that her face must be as black with soot as his. "This is dangerous for anyone other than Wardens!" Bronwyn called to him, over the confusion made by scores of voices echoing in the cavern. "Too much exposed darkspawn blood! We can finish here!"

He gave her a hard, inscrutable look, but before he could answer, a young soldier was shouting in her ear.

"The heads, Commander!"

She stared at him, not understanding.

"The heads," he repeated, looking pained. "We want to give them decent rites. Can we take the women's heads with us?"

Alistair gaped, disgusted by the idea. "Go!" he shouted at the soldier. "You can't do anything for them."

"But —"

"No!" Bronwyn snapped at him. "They're Tainted! Everything down here is Tainted. Stay away from the bodies and the blood and everything else! Go to the surface and wash it all off!" The anguish on the man's face reached her. "They will be burned. Pray for them!" She glared at Loghain. "Get them out of here! They're likely to be infected if they stay!"

"Some will be, anyway," he told her grimly. "But as you like. At least we've deprived the darkspawn of further reinforcements."

The Wardens were left with the tasks of killing anything that still moved, and setting fires that reduced most of the corpses to ash. They would let them burn for a day or two, and



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then come back to clear the way. The mystery of the Archde-mon's current location, unfortunately, was still a mystery.

Her friends gathered round, staring solemnly at the hillocks of dead monsters.

"Yup," said Oghren, "I'd call this a good day's work."

"Me, too," Brosca agreed, "though I wish we'd brought a few barrels of ale down here with us."

Bronwyn laughed, a sound that came out more as a cracked groan.

"What seems to you amusing?" Danith asked, nearly numb with the horrors and efforts of the day.

"I just remembered," Bronwyn said, blowing out a deep sigh, "that far away in Denerim, up on the surface, my cousin Habren is being married today, in a grand ceremony probably entirely devoid of darkspawn."



Wynne made her way carefully through the labyrinth of the Royal Palace. The Queen was responding well to her twice-daily treatments. It was personally taxing for Wynne herself, but she tried not to let the young woman see it. Why should Anora feel guilty, when it was so clearly Wynne's duty to her patient?

And it was all made easier by the fact that Wynne *liked* this particular patient. Queen Anora was so pleasant, so courteous, so appreciative of Wynne's efforts. She had no fear of well-intentioned mages, though Wynne would have preferred that she be a little more wary of Jowan.



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Still, whatever Jowan had done, he had attempted to make up for it by his scrupulous care for the Queen.

A pity he was not a more talented Healer. Sadly, Jowan was not the best exemplar of what the Circle could offer. Little wonder that he had been intended for the Rite of Tranquility. That would never happen, now, of course, now that Jowan was a Grey Warden. He seemed to be serving well, and in this time of crisis, perhaps – all Wynne's first impressions to the contrary – perhaps he was where he needed to be.

Such a maze! How different from the simplicity of the Circle, with its long spiral staircases and circular corridors: it was far more logical than the Palace. The Palace was more like a living thing; growing organically over time.

She had not seen all of the Palace, of course. Her own duties kept her to the Queen's private quarters, the Little Audience Chamber, the solar at the top of the West Tower, the Royal Library, and, once or twice, the Family Dining Room. There were whole floors she had not seen, and whole towers out of bounds. The King's private quarters, unsurprisingly, were sealed off. The poor young Queen no doubt could not bear for them to be changed in any way.

Twice a day, Wynne visited the Queen for the regenerative treatments. Aside from that, Wynne's time was very much her own. It was a quiet life. Most of it was spent in the Wardens' Compound, in her own comfortable room. A little confining, of course, but that was the nature and burden of the life of a mage.



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She had done a great deal of reading, and she had taken on a share of sewing and knitting from Mistress Rannelly, that good woman. The Wardens needed fresh tabards, sturdy shirts and socks, clean smallclothes and warm cloaks. Grey Wardens were hard on their clothes: it was to be expected. Wynne was happy to help with the work, enjoying the cheerful company of the staff.

The next lot would be sent south in two days, when Arl Bryland returned to Ostagar after his daughter's wedding. Such a nice nobleman. Wynne sighed, wishing she could think of something equally pleasant to say about his daughter. Of course, they had never met – not formally – but Wynne had seen her.

She was... pretty. Yes, she was definitely pretty. Good features, with a slight resemblance to her cousin, Lady Bronwyn. Too bad her expression was so unpleasant – almost sneering. She was young, of course, and there was plenty of time for her to mature. Wynne hoped that Arl Urien was kinder and more accommodating in private than he was when walking the corridors of power.

She passed the tantalizing door that she understood led to the War Room. That, too, was a place she had not seen. It was supposed to be very handsome in a severe way. Perhaps it was something like the Wardens' Hall. Wynne had grown quite fond of that place. It was so pleasant to see Warden-Commander Duncan's portrait in a place of honor. Wynne had liked the man. Such a beautiful voice, now silent forever...



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The Queen was very busy today, dressing for the wedding. It was clear to Wynne that the Queen did not care much for Lady Habren or Arl Urien, either, but she would do her duty, as she always did. Wynne would see the Queen late tonight, when Her Majesty returned to the palace after the wedding feast. In the meantime, Wynne's time would be spent pleasantly and industriously.

Out through the west door, and then only a few steps across a courtyard to the Warden's Gate. A kitchenmaid at the Warden's Compound was fond of feeding the pigeons in the courtyard, and there were always clouds of them. Though.. how quiet it was today! Everyone must be busy, preparing for the Queen to leave for the Cathedral. She, of course, would go out through the King's Gate, where the royal coach would await her. Perhaps Wynne could slip out and watch later.

Where was the guard? Shame on him! There was always supposed to be a guard here. He was gone, probably to scrounge something from the kitchens, which were not too far from here.

Wynne pushed the door open, and the gloom of the stone corridors gave way to a burst of sunshine. Briefly blinded, Wynne, paused, squinting.

The smite struck her without warning. She was falling, she was helpless, her mana squeezed and drained like a fruit ripe for plucking. The stone steps were coming up to meet her face...



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From a great distance, she felt the strong hands seizing her; hands encased in leather and steel. The men were silhouettes, dark shadows against the light, faceless in their helmets. The only sounds were the startled pigeons cooing and fluttering in the courtyard, and the scrape of boots on stone steps, and low muttered commands.

"Put that phylactery away! We won't need it anymore."

Wynne knew she must reason with the Templars; she must explain to them that she had duties here... very important duties to the Queen; but her tongue was sluggish, unable to form words. Only an incoherent "Unhh... Unhh... Unhh" issued from her numbed lips.

"Shut her up!"

The Templar's sword pommel rose and fell. A thunderclap of pain slammed into Wynne's skull. White light flashed across her eyes. She slumped, held in remorseless arms, her skull fractured, vaguely aware of the slow, wet trickle down her temple. She gazed curiously at the tracks in the gravel her heels made as they dragged her away.

No, not like this... not like this... I was supposed to see the Queen again tonight...



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CHAPTER 12



THE SEVENTH DAY OF HARVESTMERE, PART ONE

ER NORREL HAGLIN, ONCE BRIEFLY BANN OF HIGHEVER CITY, REACHED GHERLEN'S PASS ON

THE SEVENTH OF HARVESTMERE. Mountains loomed on either side of the road, and road signs pointed forward to the west, informing travelers of the short distance to Gherlen's Halt and the Orlesian border; informing them also of various distances to the cities of Jader, Halamshiral, Lydes, and Montsimmard. Another stone was marked with the route south, first to Sulcher, and then to Redcliffe. Haglin did not bother to look at the stone's other side, which displayed the way north to Highever, and home to Amaranthine. He was unlikely to travel that road ever again.

He had been a proud soldier of Amaranthine since he was sixteen years old, and he was a proud soldier still. Whatever Teyrn Fergus might think of him, Haglin had done his duty as he saw it. Rendon Howe had been his liege lord, and orders were orders.



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Rendon Howe, however, was now dead, along with two of his children. Of Lord Nathaniel there was no word. Without his arl's knowledge, Haglin had sent the boy a letter back at the end of Justinian when things were clearly going wrong. Not sure where Lord Nathaniel might be, he directed it to the boy's last known place of residence, Markham in the Free Marches. In a way, Haglin was glad Nathaniel had not come home earlier. He might have saved his family, but more likely he would have died with them. He was the last of them now. If the Howes were to have any claim at all to Amaranthine, Nathaniel needed to get back to Ferelden, and as soon as possible.

Whatever Bryce Cousland had done or not done, he was dead and gone, and his son and daughter were mighty powers in the land. The girl, from all reports, was Loghain's lover and right hand; Fergus was high in favor with the Queen, and was now unchallenged in the north.

It was useless to be bitter. The Queen had been fair enough. Haglin and his men were to go south and join Loghain's army. Likely they would be put in the vanguard and marched to their deaths, but in any army, some soldiers had to go first. Knowing Loghain, he would not waste troops out of mere spite. Haglin admitted to himself that it was better than having his head stuck on a spike over the gate of Castle Highever. The old arl had a lot of respect for Loghain, and Haglin trusted his judgment in that, at least.

Their route along the west of Lake Calenhad was slow,



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but not particularly arduous. They could take the Imperial Highway all the way to Ostagar, resupplying themselves at the villages along the way. Their first important stop was at Gherlen's Halt, where they were to report in, and then have a courier sent ahead, to inform Loghain they were on the march. They might even be issued new orders, based on the situation in the south.

As the column moved deeper into the pass, they met a courier galloping the other way. The soldier pulled up his horse in a cloud of dust, and shouted at them.

"Who are you? Who's in command?"

"I am," Haglin told him. "Ser Norrel Haglin, en route to Ostagar. I was instructed to report to the commander at Gherlen's Halt."

"Good luck with that, ser," the courier replied. "The Halt is under attack since early this morning. I barely slipped through."

The soldiers nearest to the conversation murmured, looking at each other.

"Darkspawn?" asked Haglin urgently.

The courier spat. "Orlesians! We're told they claim to be 'independent mercenaries' but we know better. Even without the badges and the banners, we can see that they're being led by chevaliers. Not a peep out of the Rock. They must know what's going on."

Haglin briefly bowed his head in thought, and then began firing rapid questions at the courier: the size of the attacking force, where they were strongest, their

armament, if they had siege engines... There was no doubt in Haglin's mind where his duty lay.

"I have five hundred men," he told the courier. "I think they may be of some service. Show me the way through the pass, and then ride for Ostagar."

This was the day appointed: the seventh of Harvestmere. The marks were expected back in the late afternoon. Yesterday, all the necessary gear had been meticulously prepared; quarrels sharpened to razors, crossbows and poisons hidden in the chosen concealed vantage points. No one would suspect them. They had already found a place where they could slip unseen through the barricades. They were unarmed, and appeared completely harmless. All they would have on their persons were fresh, dry bowstrings, hidden out of sight in the pockets of their aprons. It would all be easier if their marks shared the same quarters, but their plans took that into account, and followed the marks' declared schedule. The strike must be simultaneous, lest one mark warn the other. If all went well, it should be possible to blend in after the initial hue and cry, unsuspected.

Poison would have been surer, but the marks did not eat privately, in the state due their rank. They ate from the common pots, and it would have been necessary to poison everyone. The risk of a bystander eating first and the situation coming to light was simply unacceptable. Getting close to the individuals had also proved impracticable. They were

never alone, unless in their quarters, and even there they were rarely alone. If they were, only a few trusted servants were admitted. Their quarters had proved inaccessible by the usual means. The only way was to attack at a distance, with very accurate weapons. Even if the marks wore armor, there were always vulnerable points, especially considering the potency of the poisons in which the quarrels would be anointed. It was an interesting challenge, and by no means a sure thing. But then, what was?

The upper camp was not suitable for the venture: too exposed and too crowded. The valley below, however, was another matter. There was tree cover: there were piles of debris. Just outside the gates of the lower camp was a heavily wooded area through which the marks must pass. The marks would be talking on their way back, and they would be tired; not imagining any danger so close to the camp. The rest of the party would be in conversation. Yes, there would be noise. Crossbows made noise, of course, but only briefly. At a distance, it could be confused with the sound of someone chopping wood; and there was always someone chopping wood nearby.

Anora looked about her with carefully concealed distaste. Werberga and Habren had certainly gone all out for this wedding. Huge sprays of autumn flowers sprouted up, ogre-like, from every corner of the Cathedral; the designated seats of Denerim's elite were draped in pink satin.

Anora was well aware that pink was Habren's favorite color. So much pink in the Cathedral, however, seemed to her frivolous and inappropriate. The huge statue of Andraste seemed to think so as well. Usually Anora would describe the unworldly expression on the Prophet's gilded face as one of renunciation: in the present context, Anora felt she could detect a certain disgust. At least the Grand Cleric imposed some sort of restraint on the decorations here in the Cathedral; Anora dreaded the atrocities that had no doubt been perpetrated on the Arl of Denerim's estate, where the feast was to be held. She was almost sorry that she had worn her lovely blue dress and her crown, since she was thus contributing to the overdone grandeur of the day. Everyone of importance in Denerim... everyone of title... everyone who could beg or bribe an invitation was crowded into the Cathedral today.

No amount of blossoms or pink satin could make Arl Urien look anything other than what he was, of course: a dyspeptic, hard-eyed man in late middle age; soft around the belly from indulgence at table and having everything done for him. He had not looked so badly when he had first returned from Ostagar, but since then he had deteriorated.

Perhaps the engine of the change was the loss of his son. Everyone else might have despised Vaughan, but he had been the sun, moon, and stars to his father; the focus of all his hopes and plans. Now Urien was forced to start all over again, and try to have new plans and a new heir.

He was obviously not enjoying this day as relentlessly as Habren and her aunt were, nor was he dressed in pink satin, thank the Maker.

Habren was encased in enough of it, certainly. She looked very happy, and pretty enough, Anora supposed. That combination of dark hair and fair skin that came through the Pengallon line was much admired by a great many people. Bronwyn was very much of that type, though only in the face. She was much taller and not nearly so curvaceous as Habren.

Oh, dear! Father and Bronwyn were planning to marry. What a spectacle that would be... Anora hoped they would do something simple and quiet and not so utterly devoid of dignity as this carnival, but the pressures of politics might demand otherwise.

The Grand Cleric was pronouncing the wedding prayer now. Urien had not smiled once. Anora sighed. Habren was smiling enough for everyone, but Anora suspected that state of affairs would not last more than a few days. Being married to Cailan had been blissful in the early stages – even fun – but Cailan had been a beautiful young man who loved life and had at the time loved Anora, too, quite a bit. The memory made her so sad that tears prickled in her eyes, fracturing the candlelight into dim rainbows. She felt very sorry for Habren, whom she was sure would not enjoy the night that would follow her wedding day. Urien would do his duty to beget an heir, and would not consider pleas-

ing his young wife to be any part of said duty. Everyone knew how unkind he had been to his wife and daughter.

Habren, however, would be an Arlessa. That seemed to be all the silly girl understood about it. She would be important for a day, dress grandly, and receive a great many expensive presents. Had she even really thought about what followed after? Did she imagine that Urien would open his purse strings as her father had? Did she imagine she would have any power of her own at all?

There was Arl Bryland, stepping back to sit with his fine little boys. Anora had always thought him quite an attractive man. He looked... relieved... Anora supposed. Habren had been too much for him. He obviously loved her, but did not know how to guide or improve her character. This wedding must have cost a fortune, and they had not yet moved on to the feast. Leonas Bryland had contributed coin in plenty for that, though it would be held at the bridegroom's estate. The Arl of South Reach's house in town was large, but nowhere near as large as Arl Urien's Denerim estate, which was of course his principal seat. All sorts of people had been hired for the occasion: minstrels, maskers, jugglers, performing animals, dancers, and experts in *Maker-knew-what*.

The choir was singing now. It was almost over, and then would come the final blessing, more singing, the procession out of the chantry, the giving of alms to the poor, and the departure to Arl Urien's palatial estate. She, of course, had

precedence, even on another woman's wedding day. And, even better, since she was so recently a widow, she was not expected to be cheerful, as if she approved of this folly.

She looked the spectators over carefully as she made her way down the aisle and out the door. A great many people were here to goggle at a grand wedding, but more were here, like Anora herself, to work: that is, to make connections, to observe, to comprehend the tides of power and politics.

There was quite a bit of cheering in the streets for the parade of carriages, splendid horses, and fine clothes. Anora had felt some concern about this flagrant display of wealth and luxury at a time when many Fereldans were grieving the loss of loved ones in the war against the darkspawn. She was a little surprised that there were no signs of public unrest today. Much of the good feeling was probably due to the alms that the Arls were distributing. As it was his wedding day, and as Bryland was paying for the wedding, Urien must have coughed up a decent sum for the alms. As well he should. Anora eyed the crowd analytically. Everyone in the street was human... no, wait... there was a dwarven couple with a babe in arms. No elves. Of course, there were no longer many elves in Denerim, and they had little reason to cheer Arl Urien in any case.

A slow, tiresome ride across the river to the feast. It was not far from the palace, which would be a good thing at the end of a long, long, day. As they drove down Gate Street, Anora took note of Highever House, lofty and elegant; the city home



THE ARL OF DENERIM'S ESTATE



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of the Couslands. Anora had visited Eleanor there often, and particularly loved the rooftop garden. The idea of living there was not at all an unpleasing prospect.

A brief delay on arrival, as Arl Urien and his Arlessa stepped down from their carriage, then formally welcomed their guests.

"I wish you and your lady all happiness, my lord Arl. Such a beautiful wedding," said Anora.

The couple bowed. Urien's simple, "I thank Your Majesty," was counterpointed by Habren's, "Oh, Your Majesty! Wasn't it perfect?"

Anora was ushered into the reception hall and was impressed, though not entirely favorably. This feast would cost a fortune in candles alone, she estimated. The air was heavily perfumed by masked and costumed dancers carrying pomander balls or glass vials of colored, scented powder, which they blew into the air with little pipes. Anora had heard of this being done in Orlais. Thank the Maker Father was not here to see it here! Once down the corridor and into the hall appointed for the feast, the perfumes merged with the smells of roasted meat, and meat was winning.

I suppose we're going to eat all afternoon, she sighed to herself. Except for those of us who will spend the entire time drinking.

Her seat was between the two Arls. It could have been worse. At least she did not have to sit next to Habren, who was preening and smirking as if she had never heard of

marital incompatibility. The juxtaposition of the newly-widowed with the newly-married was too pointed for Anora's liking as it was. Anora's two bodyguards were posted discreetly behind her chair, nearly out of sight.

Leonas Bryland had the good breeding neither to boast about nor apologize for the excesses of the day. The two little boys were eventually settled down in between their father and their aunt Lady Werberga, who would, Anora hoped, see that they were not made drunk or sick by the wagonloads of rich food and strong drink on continual offer.

"I had to leave Killer at home," the older boy, Corbus, complained. "Habren hates him. Just because he liked me better. It's not fair."

"Enough of that, Corbus," his father reproved him. "This is Habren's day. You'll see Killer at home tonight."

A large consort of instruments played sweetly up in a specially-built minstrel's gallery. Someone was singing, but Anora could not make out the words due to the shouts, the toasts, the stupid jests of the noblemen, and the shrill, excited squeals of titled ladies.

The tables were set in a wide U shape, to give sufficient room for the performers. Against the far wall, watched over by two imposing guards, was a large table, on which the bridal gifts were displayed.

"Not all of them have arrived yet, of course," Habren declared loudly to the room in general. "Everything is in such a muddle with this awful war. I haven't had a thing from



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Bronwyn, though Fergus sent me quite a nice silver salver.”

A troupe of tumblers, colorful in cheerful motley and animal masks, were going through their routine now. They leapfrogged, pirouetted, and somersaulted in all sorts of astonishing ways. An assistant set up hoops and the tumblers bounded through them; backwards, upside-down... It was quite diverting.

The first course, composed of soup and foreign delicacies, was carried in on silver platters. Not everyone knew how to eat the artichokes, and Anora felt scores of eyes on her as she composedly dismantled the vegetable.

The Grand Cleric was on Habren's other side, and the older woman was listening with ironic kindness to Habren's frenzied babbling about the glory of the day. Beside Her Grace was the Knight-Commander of Denerim, Ser Tavish, a tall and impressive man, though not noted for his conversational abilities. He drew his belt knife and cut through to the artichoke's heart with rough dispatch, devouring it whole.

After the first course came the dancing, since the ladies wanted to have a chance at it before everyone was too drunk to stand up straight. Anora had been discreetly approached, some days before, and asked if, under the circumstances, she cared to dance.

Of course she did. She had few enough occasions to dance as it was. True, Cailan was only dead a month, but life went on, and Anora loved to dance. She still had precedence over everyone else in Ferelden, at least until the



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Landsmeet, and so she would lead the opening dance. It might be her last chance to do so. So, yes, she replied, she did, in fact, care to dance.

Thus, according to strict rules of precedence, she, partnered by Arl Bryland, would be first in line for the pavane, followed by the bridal couple. After that, the lesser nobles could fight it out for their places in the line. It would be amusing to see them at it.

Leonas Bryland, whispering a brief, firm admonition to the little boys, rose, and led Anora to the top of the set, which was rapidly forming behind her. Anora smiled quietly, listening to the civil – and not so civil – disputes about precedence taking place further back in the line. After more wine, there might even be a fight or two...and not just among the men.

What wonderful music! Urien had engaged some excellent minstrels. She must ask him about them later. From time to time, it had occurred to her how pleasant it would be to have a minstrel or two about her on a permanent basis. Erlina had played well, but was gone, gone... A human woman, perhaps, would be best, to thwart the inevitable gossip: a woman who played well and had a pleasing voice. Not even Father could object to that – as long as the woman were not Orlesian. Come to that, Anora had no great desire to keep Orlesians about her any longer.

The Arl of South Reach was a man who could manage to remember the steps of the dance while still chatting

pleasantly, something one could not always take for granted. His hands were warm and dry, and not clammy like so many others. He could tell her something of the recent adventures in Ostagar; lighter things, not inappropriate to a feast. She wanted to understand more about the people who were so important to the war; and choosing a favorable moment, asked him specifically about the Grey Wardens, beginning with Senior Warden Alistair.

She was curious about Alistair. Cailan had once confided in her about the existence of a bastard brother. Bronwyn had mentioned him in passing, but no one seemed to think him a threat.

"Alistair?" Bryland smiled. "Very pleasant young man. Splendid warrior, too. Loghain's trying to bring him along as a leader. A bit too self-effacing. He's done well while Bronwyn's been off on her jaunts. He's from Redcliffe, originally. At least I think so. Now that Astrid of his — there's prime leadership material, if you like."

"I have met Warden Astrid," Anora said. "She seems very intelligent. Are she and Warden Alistair... fond of one another?"

"That was my impression."

This... was rather good news. If Alistair was involved with a dwarf, princess or not, he was not positioning himself to grasp at the crown. It seemed strange and unnatural to her, but some people really were not very ambitious. Perhaps he genuinely liked being a Warden, and did not wish to risk his life for his father's throne. It was one less com-

plication, which was very welcome. Still, she would like to meet him. She wondered if she would see Cailan in his face.

One dance ended, and another began. This time her partner was Arl Urien, who hated dancing. It showed. Then Bann Sighard and his pretty young son Oswyn, then Bann Moorcock and Bann Ceorlic, and finally Bann Frandarel. After that, the second course was announced. People settled down for serious gluttony and more entertainment, to be followed more entertainment, more dancing, and by the best entertainment of all: the bedding of the bride and groom.

Anora did not look forward to this event, and thought it all very nasty and tiresome. She well remembered the leers and prurient curiosity at her own wedding. Habren's experience would be much the same.

The tipsy revelers would call out bawdy jests, while the most distinguished guests would follow the procession down the corridor to the bridal chamber. Anora, alas, would have to take part in this, and would have to smile and pretend to like it. The Grand Cleric would bless the marriage bed, and Lady Werberga would strew it with flowers, which Anora remembered could be very awkward if not all the roses had been stripped of their thorns. How she and Cailan had laughed...

Tears prickled in her eyes again, and were swiftly overcome at the sight of the mismatched couple who would soon be in bed together. At least no one followed the ancient custom of displaying bloody sheets any more;



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though in Orlais, the distinguished guests waited in the bedchamber, sipping wine, until the bridegroom pushed the curtains aside and declared the marriage consummated. And the Orlesians called Ferelden barbarous!

Anora played with her food, more interested in the performers. The newest entertainment was quite riveting, even for the drunken guests... even for Anora. She had never seen a knife thrower before. The man was wonderfully skilled; and while Anora expected the pretty elf assisting him to be killed, she was not. The man unerringly sank his blades into the painted backboard behind the girl, outlining her shape, slicing off the feather in her headdress with astonishing precision.

After these feats came a woman who could walk on her hands, while her three little dogs walked on their hind legs. The crowd was less certain about this; uncomfortable with the idea of dogs wearing clothes, though the little red and blue satin coats, which matched the woman's costume, were rather adorable. In the end, everyone was won over when the dogs danced to a cheerful tune.

And the food kept coming. Whole roast boars were trundled into the hall, and then a great meat pie in the shape of the Arl of Denerim's estate. There were geese stuffed with apples and chestnuts, and ducks stuffed with prunes and whole cooked duck's eggs. There were huge joints of beef and mutton, which many of the guests, inhibitions relaxed by the excellent wine, were frankly gnaw-



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ing upon, as if they feared this were their last meal.

So much meat made Anora feel a little queasy, and when the minstrels struck up more dance music, she was pleased that Lord Oswyn requested the honor of another dance. Better by far to be dancing than eating and drinking until she was sick, like all too many here. Besides, Oswyn was handsome, reasonably sober, and a good dancer. If she were very tired by the time she left, Wynne would attend to it on Anora's return to the palace. She hoped to dance until the next round of entertainments.

Arl Bryland could not partner her at the moment. The little boys were understandably bored and restless, wanting to see the tumblers again, and the younger was innocently gloating about the fact that Habren was to be put to bed earlier than he.

"She was bad, wasn't she? She always is."

The older boy, Corbus, then apparently shared his own understanding of what Arl Urien was going to do to their sister, which from his gestures was gleaned entirely from mabari behavior. Lothar was impressed and horrified, and then both boys began giggling uncontrollably. Lady Werberga loudly pleaded with her brother to stop them. Arl Bryland threatened to have the boys sent home.

"Fine with me," Corbus sulked. "Then I can play with Killer."

"I want to see Habren sent to bed early!" protested Lothar.

The guests were becoming sodden and unruly, and Anora began to hope that the bedding would be soon, since she could leave immediately afterward. Bann Loren begged her

very courteously for the honor of a dance, and Anora decided it was best not to refuse him when she had permitted others the privilege. It was getting dark outside, and the light had changed; more lurid from the great fires. Flickering shadows on the walls mirrored the dancers and the masked mimes who frolicked alongside them. Anora ducked under Bann Loren's arm and came face to face with a startlingly life-like bear. The mime roared at her, and then dropped to all fours, lumbering through the crowd. One of the dancers, dressed in a filmy silk dress, ran up, straddled his back, and rode him up and down the hall, to much applause.

Yes, it was getting entirely out of hand. She fixed a smile on her face, wishing she were anywhere else. Urien was speaking to his seneschal. Surely the couple would depart when the dance had ended.

The musicians struck a final, brilliant flourish, and the guests applauded. The minstrel playing the straight flute bowed, and swept off his half-mask. He had a striking face, swarthy, black-haired and moustachioed, a cheerful smirk on his handsome face.

"And now," he proclaimed, with a most charming Orlesian accent, "you shall dance to a new tune!" As one, the minstrels dropped their instruments and rose up with crossbows. And with that, hell broke loose.

It seemed later to Anora that only her own bodyguards and Leonas Bryland grasped immediately that they were under attack. They saw it coming from the time the musi-

cians dropped their instruments. Bryland shouted at his sons to "Get down!", and pulled a dagger from his boot, dodging out of the way of a tumbler who bounded at him with alarming speed. A masker with a stiletto charged him from his other side. One of the bodyguards shouted, distracting him, and Bryland hit the attacker with a chair.

Anora, under the shadow of assassination for so long, understood the danger as soon as the crossbows came up. Most of the noble guests stood gaping, as if thinking this must be part of the entertainment. Anora tore her hand from Bann Loren's grasp, running for the cover of a trestle table. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the knife thrower turning in her direction, and a moment later, heard a pair of knives thud into the pillar where she had been a second before. Behind her, Bann Loren was clutching at a crossbow quarrel sprouting from his chest. Anora knew she had been the target, but was fiercely glad it was Loren and not she, as she huddled under the table, drawing her feet up under her.

Orlesians! If they didn't have to make a game of it, they could have shot me dead while I was dancing!

Her little dagger was sewn into her gilded corset, she fumbled for it frantically, nearly slicing off her thumb. One of the performing dogs scampered under Anora's table, and pressed against her, shaking, its little satin coat spotted with blood. Cautiously, Anora peered out from under the tablecloth.

Most of the guests made a dash for the south door,

trampling the slower among them underfoot in a frenzied din. This crush kept the Arl of Denerim's guard, mostly posted in the corridors outside, from being able to get into the hall and deal with the assassins.

"Hold! Stop this violence!" the Grand Cleric cried, trying to make herself heard over the chaos.

"Your Grace! This is none of our affair!" Ser Tavish shouted, bodily dragging the old woman away.

"Release me, ser! You overstep your —" Her objections were smothered as Templars closed in and rushed for the door, swords drawn, the Grand Cleric sheltered in their midst. Shrieks rose up as they cut their way through the crowd. Bann Sighard protested indignantly, and went down, dead or stunned.

Arl Urien's servitors had overturned one of the tables, and the Arl crouched behind it, pulling Habren down beside him, while some of his bodyguard, carrying shields, materialized from behind a tapestry. Anora watched them, intent on what was happening. There was a door hidden there. Urien was wounded and bleeding, and backed toward the doorway, shouting at Habren to follow him. Anora cursed the distance. There was too much open space between her table and the hidden door. She would never make it if she tried to follow them.

"Habren!" Lady Werberga screamed for her niece, and Habren screamed back for her aunt. Without further ceremony, Arl Urien cuffed Habren across the jaw, and the girl

slumped, unconscious. A guard dragged her out, while others sheltered the Arl with their shields. One of them fell, and the rest rushed through, slamming the door, leaving the other revelers to their fate. Werberga screamed again, briefly, when an arrow thudded into her chest.

Bodies sprawled and twitched amongst the overturned tables. Bann Loren sobbed, sitting in a pool of blood, trying to pull the quarrel out of his chest. Bann Reginalda drooped in her seat, her throat cut by one of the tumblers. The knife thrower shouted in triumph as he flung a blade into Bann Grainne's eye. Dancers blew powder in the guests eyes, blinding them; and then they danced away to the safety of the minstrels' gallery.

But the initial shock was over, and the Fereldans were fighting back. Bryland had grabbed up a big silver platter from the floor, scattering sweetmeats. Using it as a shield, he snatched a burning brand from one of the fires, and flung it at the base of the scaffolding under the minstrels' gallery, where the crossbowmen were positioned. Following his lead, others did the same. Quarrels pinged and clattered on Bryland's makeshift shield, and the dog trainer grabbed at him from behind a drapery. Bryland smashed the platter into her face, and she went down. One of the bodyguards — perhaps Bann Sighard's — finished her off. One of her dogs licked at her dead face, whining. The little dog huddled with Anora yelped and ran out into the fight. A stray quarrel struck it in the back, and

it squealed horribly, thrashing on the floor. Bryland and Oswyn cornered the knife thrower, and the man fought back with a wild yell. They struggled, blades rising and falling, and then crashed into the table loaded with gifts. It went over, spilling silver vessels onto the floor like a prodigal's sacrifice. Bolts of sumptuous silks and velvets unrolled, and were trampled and bloodied by the combatants. Blood and wine spread over the stones.

Anora saw her bodyguards looking for her and trying to fight at the same time. "I'm here!" she shouted at them. "Bors! Dalkeith!" They heard her and started running toward her table, shields up.

"No!" she shouted again. "Help Arl Bryland!"

Her table jolted, and Anora was grabbed from behind. It was the man in the bear costume, and his hands were horribly strong. He growled, beast-like, at Anora, and without thinking, she stabbed at the man's eyes, small and human behind the mask. The masker cursed and let go of her: and then was dragged backwards out from under the table by two guardsmen. The bearskin was nearly as tough as armor, and they stabbed and stabbed him until he lay still. Anora shuddered and looked away, knuckles white on her dagger.

A cheer rose up. Oswyn was bleeding, but he had yanked down some of the draperies and threw them into the fire under the minstrel's gallery. Instantly they were aflame, the blaze crackling up the supports.

"*Allons-y!*" shouted the moustache on high. A pair of

tumblers somersaulted onto the scaffolding supporting the minstrel's gallery and climbed up, inches ahead of the flames. Two of the minstrels threw instrument cases through the windows, shattering them. There was a bustle Anora could not quite see, and then the assassins were getting away, climbing down rope ladders, the leader grinning and bowing as if he had done something frightfully dashing and clever. He had time for a parting shot, and then threw his crossbow at Oswyn and leaped out the window after his confederates.

Across the room, a child's scream shrilled out. Another child's voice joined in, shocked and terrified.

"Lothar!" cried Bryland. The little boy had stood up to watch the fight, and the moustachioed assassin had put a quarrel through his shoulder. His face paled as his tunic reddened. Corbus stared at his brother in disbelief.

Lothar whimpered. "Daddy... hurts..."

Bryland swept the boy up in his arms, his face terrible. Anora crawled out from under the table to see what could be done. A few of the attackers were still alive, moaning or unconscious. First of all, though, the Arl's son must be saved, and as many of the other victims as possible. Oswyn rushed to his father, who seemed, against all odds, to be alive.

"Dalkeith, fetch a Healer!" Anora shouted at her guardsmen. "Find Mistress Wynne at the Wardens' Compound! Rouse the city guard after the assassins! Bors! Don't let the men kill all these wretches. I want them questioned!"



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Danith and Merrill walked back to camp together in silence. What Danith had seen under the earth was too terrible for speech, but whispers had reached the Dalish scouts of the horrors the Wardens had found and destroyed. There had been stories... legends half understood. Much was now explained.

Merrill touched her friend's hand. "Is it cruel of me to say that I am still glad that one of the People is a Grey Warden?"

"No," Danith said instantly. "These things must be known. How else to guard against them? Our women must know what to do if the creatures take them. If it were only shemlens talking, many would not listen. This fate, though, is not a matter of race: it is the fate of all women in grasp of the darkspawn. Men can become ghouls, but this horror is not for them."

Her voice trailed off. Thanovir came up beside her and offered her some water. She was glad of it. Her canteen was empty after the smoke and stink of the Broodmother caverns.

She said, "Bronwyn has hinted that she wishes to recruit more Wardens, Dalish among them. It will be hard for some to leave their clans, just as it was for me, but I believe it to be necessary. These creatures must be destroyed, for they are utterly evil."

They were nearing the camp, and Danith longed for her little cot in the Tower of Ishal. She never thought sleeping under a roof of stone could be so inviting. The elves passed a stand of larches, and a flock of crows rose up with a great noise.

Thanovir whispered, "Keep walking, but be silent!



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Someone is watching."

Danith knew instantly that he was right. Not darkspawn, no; but something or someone. Using her peripheral vision, she scanned the trees on either side, and her gaze paused at the trampled undergrowth.

They walked to the gate in careful silence, taking in all the signs left by a hunter hiding in a blind.

Time passed slowly for the watchers in the trees as the weary soldiers filed by: first the savage Dalish; then human footsoldiers, muttering among themselves, shaking their heads; a disciplined band of sturdy dwarves; then some of the Wardens, looking particularly grim. The targets were on horseback, a little behind, talking to each other. It was nearly time. Everything was in readiness.

So focused were the watchers that they were unaware that they themselves were being hunted. There was only a sudden breeze as the twined branches of their shelters seemed to melt away. Then strong hands pulled them down and disarmed them; and fierce, tattooed faces were inches from their own.

"The Dalish were not pleased to discover they were elves, I take it." Loghain settled into his chair and rubbed his forehead, hoping to ward off a headache.

"Not at all," Bronwyn said, "They were disgusted with them. Dalish don't think much of city elves to begin with, but this kind of murder seemed to them particularly

squalid and dishonorable.”

She could not settle down. An assassination attempt. Again! This had been a clever one, and very likely would have succeeded, but for the superior woodcraft of their Dalish allies. She was angry; bitterly angry that anyone would knowingly try to assassinate a Warden in the midst of a Blight. It was an act of depraved indifference to the welfare of everyone in Thedas. A quartet of elf women had nearly accomplished what great warriors had attempted for years: the removal of Loghain Mac Tir from the political scene. Bronwyn hated to admit it, but she was not only angry; she was frightened, too.

The assassins’ gear was piled on Loghain’s writing table: fine crossbows, easy to break down and assemble quickly; razor sharp quarrel heads of silverite; a collection of powerful, cruelly lethal poisons guaranteed not to simply cause death, but lingering agony. Also on the table were the women’s other weapons, found in their quarters: superb daggers, throwing stars, more poisons, and cunning wire garottes. Their employer had deep pockets.

“So far, we don’t even know if you or I or both of us were the targets,” she growled.

“Who sent them is the other issue,” Loghain pointed out. “Most probably the Empress. She has the most to gain by getting rid of both of us, though of course each of us has other enemies. You never know. It could be Crows paid for by Rendon Howe, still trying to get at you. All we know so far

from what papers we could find is that the attack was to be made on this day and no other: the seventh of Harvestmere.”

The elven agents had been extremely clever: not revealing that they knew each other; coming to Ostagar at different times in different ways; above all, playing the parts of humble servant girls so very, very well. They were being held separately now, and Loghain hoped that at least one of them would eventually confess all she knew.

“I want to talk to them,” Bronwyn said briefly, not slowing in her pacing. “I want them to know what I’m prepared to do to them if they don’t cooperate.”

“And what is that?”

“I’ll give them to the darkspawn. Not for long, of course. I wouldn’t allow them to become mature Broodmothers. However, I will describe the process in detail. What else do people who interfere with a Grey Warden’s mission deserve?”

He was surprised; even shocked, and took another look at the stormy young face. She might threaten it, even convince herself the threat was real; but in the end, could she do such a thing? Loghain doubted it. It was quite an impressive threat to use, however. She had grown harder than he realized.

“Yes,” Bronwyn said. “I’ll talk to them, and then leave them to your people. Then I’ve got to move ahead with recruiting. If it’s Orlais, it’s a clear sign that they will do anything to keep Ferelden from defending itself. We need more Wardens, and we need them now. But I want those elves to talk, and tell us where the next blow is coming from.”

"They'll talk," Loghain assured her. "Make your threats. Let them believe that we won't give them a clean death. In the end, they'll talk. I cannot guarantee, of course, that we'll like what they have to say."



LEONAS BRYLAND, ARL OF SOUTH REACH

CHAPTER 13



THE SEVENTH
DAY OF
HARVESTMERE:
PART TWO
AND WHAT FOLLOWED AFTER
T'S CHAOS FOR THE MOST
PART OUT THERE, MAJESTY, AND
THAT'S THE TRUTH."

Anora was sure it was, but the truth was a rebuke to her, to the Arl of the Denerim, and to the City Guard. A handful of Orlesian agents had struck terror in the heart of Denerim, killed and wounded a large number of Fereldans, and looked to be getting away with it. She had sent a messenger to the commander of the city gates to let no one out, but for all she knew, the assassins had already fled. She did not know what was worse: that they should escape from her, or that they should remain hidden in the city, planning new devilry.

And it could only get uglier. Rumors of the attack were spreading, and there had been retaliation. A young Orlesian merchant had been beaten and raped in the Market District by a mob looking for an easy target. Houses suspected of harboring Orlesians had been attacked and set afire. That last was intolerable, for fire could easily spread out of control.

They had five prisoners in custody, and two of them were unconscious and not expected to survive. Anora remained at the Arl of Denerim's estate, both for her safety and because there was so much to do here.

There was a grim tally of dead and wounded. Anora knew she must have been the prime target of the assassins. They had failed in that, but the blow was still a damaging one. Four Fereldan banns were dead on the scene: Loren, Reginalda, Grainne, Walden... and Bann Ceorlic, too. Alfstanna, like Arl Urien, might die yet.

There were no wounds found on Ceorlic, nor did he bear the signs of poison. It was possible that the man's heart had given out in the terror of the moment. Without a competent Healer, who could say? He was, one way or another, quite dead. His heir was somewhere in the Free Marches.

Others had died, too: wives and sons and daughters of members of the Landsmeet. Some of those wounded would die, and some would never be the same: lamed or disfigured.. Bryland was griefstricken about his sister, and beside himself with worry about his little boy. Where was Wynne?

The guards she sent to the Palace came back with servants, healing herbs, and linen, but no Healer.

"Majesty," one of the the guardsmen said urgently, "We could not find Mistress Wynne. We have a witness that she was taken away earlier in the day."

"Taken! What do you mean? Where is this witness?"

The witness was a cleaning maid named Meggy, ter-

rified at being taken before the Queen. It was some time before she could manage to speak.

"If it please your Majesty, I was washing the window above the south door, when I saw that lady step out to walk around to the Wardens' Compound where she'd been staying. We were told she was supposed to be here, and that we were not to trouble her. All the same, we did see her. They said – " the girl's voice dropped to a whisper, "that she was a *mage*."

"Go on, Meggy."

"Well, I saw the Templars standing on either side of the door, and they were Templars, after all.... "

Anora raised a brow, waiting.

The girl said, "One of them raised his hand up high, and when the lady went through the door, she fell down. Then they grabbed her and started dragging her away. She must have done something wrong, because one of the templars bashed her head with the pommel of his sword and she lay still after that."

Anora's eyes grew larger. Her gaze hardened into a glare. The girl trembled.

"How many of them were there?" asked Anora.

A pause, and the girl looked at the ceiling in thought and counted on her fingers.

"Four," she said, satisfied with her arithmetic. "There were four of them. They were big."

"Could you recognize them?"



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"They were Templars, Your Majesty," the girl whimpered. "They had their big helmets on."

Wynne might be injured. She might well be dead. Anora swallowed her fear and rage, and dismissed the girl. She then summoned two knight of the royal guard.

"Go to the Cathedral," she ordered them. "Request, in my name, that Mistress Wynne, the Healer assigned by the Grey Wardens to attend me, be released to your custody immediately. Tell the Grand Cleric I would consider it a very great favor, as there are dozens of people wounded here at the Arl of Denerim's estate: wounded by Orlesians assassins and by her Templars, in their haste to flee the scene. If she says no, tell her there will be consequences. The first of them is that if I cannot see Mistress Wynne, then I insist on seeing *her* – the Grand Cleric. At once."

She had always thought herself so clever. She had scoffed at Father's ranting on the subject of Orlesians, thinking him behind the times, but what had he said that was not true? Father had *told* her – he had warned her again and again that the Chantry was in the pocket of Orlais. The Chantry had betrayed Ferelden and collaborated during the Occupation. Individual priests might be fine people – like Mother Ailis – but the Chantry leadership's loyalty would always be to Orlais. It would be interesting to hear what the Grand Cleric said.

She sat down abruptly, feeling exhausted. What would become of her, without Wynne's healing spells? Another,



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terrifying thought flitted through her mind. How much did the Chantry know about Erlina and her poisons? The Grand Cleric, she suspected, knew something about Cailan's plan to put her aside. What else did she know?

Some of the walking wounded, like Bann Sighard, had gone home to their houses here in the city. Others, like Arl Bryland's little boy, were too hurt to move. Arl Urien himself had taken to his bed – and not to consummate his marriage. His wound was either going bad, or it had been poisoned. Habren had been stowed away, like an unwanted pet, in an upstairs chamber, and locked in for her safety. A few servants had crept out, and were now trying to clean the site of the attack. The wedding presents – some of them badly damaged – had been taken to a strongroom.

Anora knew she must get a message to Father. This was the worst time possible – and the Orlesians no doubt knew it – but she needed Father and some of his troops back in the capital as quickly as they could manage it. If she were to have it out with the Grand Cleric, and if things went wrong... well, the Grand Cleric commanded a very large armed force of her own.

The ciphered note was written, and then the courier summoned and entrusted with the message. He was sent off with instructions to get to Ostagar as fast as fresh horses could carry him there. Another courier was sent to find Teyrn Fergus. Wherever he was, he was closer than Father.

The room spun, and Anora put her head in her hands,



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feeling drained. Wynne's spells had kept her from realizing how badly damaged she was. If she already felt so weak, what would she feel like tomorrow?

It would be a provocation, but if Wynne did not soon make her appearance, Anora might offer blanket amnesty to any secret mages in Denerim, offering them protection from the Chantry in exchange for their services.

The Chantry....

If the Grand Cleric would not come to her, Anora would go to the Cathedral.



Ser Blayne Faraday, the commander of Gherlen's Halt, had just experienced a miracle. He was not dead, as he had expected to be only hours before.

The infiltrators had been clever, and got into the outer keep disguised as merchants. Once there, they had ruthlessly slaughtered the guards on duty and had launched a surprise attack on the inner keep: an attack that had almost succeeded.

Was this a declaration of war? The attackers were clearly Orlesian, and clearly well funded. They were not, however, given support from the Rock — or at least not visible support. De Guesclin had sent no messages, and had not replied to the herald sent by Faraday.

The chief means of Faraday's salvation was now sitting opposite him at his table, wolfing down mutton hash with every sign of relish. Faraday had never met Ser Norrel Haglin before — never really heard of him either — but Haglin had



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saved his life, and the lives of the survivors of the Halt.

"We'll have to send another courier after the first," he remarked, "or Loghain will think the Orlesians are invading."

"Maybe they are," Haglin grunted. "Maybe they're being cagey about it."

"No papers on any of them, and the leader's dead. I have my men mounting some heads on the walls, facing the Rock."

Haglin grunted again, this time in appreciation. "Sound idea. Show them what to expect, the bastards." He sighed and sat back, thinking it over. "I'm supposed to be on my way to Ostagar, but my men need time to rest, and the wounded — " There was little point in speaking of his dead. He had lost seventy-seven men in the engagement, and over a hundred were unfit to march. The fact that the Rock had not come out in force to support the attack was intriguing. Perhaps the Empress did not want all-out war; but simply wanted to make trouble for her neighbor when it was already racked by darkspawn and civil unrest.

Faraday shook his head. "I don't mind saying that I'd prefer if you could see your way clear to stay here for the time being. I'll explain in the message to the courier. Loghain's got a big dwarven army supporting him at Ostagar, brought to him by the Wardens. The Cousland girl was here back in the summer after arranging it."

"The Girl Warden," Haglin said. "Never met her, myself. Knew her father, of course."

"Fine girl. Has the greenest eyes you ever saw. My cou-



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riers tell me she brought in some of the Dalish clans to scout for the army." Faraday did not divulge other gossip related by the couriers. Something was going on between the Girl Warden and the Hero of River Dane. What with the King's death and the uncertainty about the succession, loose talk was unwise. Who knew who the next king – or queen – would be?



The puppy was very tired, and bruised along the left ribs where a strange-smelling man had kicked him. The man had bad manners, not understanding that the puppy was hungry and had traveled a long way, searching for his Boy. No one had ever begrudged him food before. At Home, the puppy was given the best of everything, and ate from his own plate by the Boy's side. People were always giving him food. The Boy's littermate, whom the puppy liked almost as well as his Boy, slipped him treats under the table. The Boy's sire was generous, too, and his bark was always friendly.

The females of the pack were not so pleasant. The old one only ignored the puppy, or complained that he was dirty, which was a wicked lie, indeed. The young female who covered her natural, ready-to-mate smell with strange flower odors hated him, but was higher-ranking in the pack than the puppy. He could not bite her, and so he gave her a wide berth, and never tasted the treats she tried to offer him: the ones that looked juicy and bloody,



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but smelled of bad things.

His Boy had gone away and left him with the lowest-ranking members of the pack; the ones he was not allowed to growl at or bite, but who were otherwise beneath his notice, unless he wished to find a snack. Bored, the puppy decided to find his Boy, and had slipped away from Home, with the foolish humans running after him, yelling nonsense. The trail was easy to follow, but many strange people crossed his path. Some saw him and wanted to make friends, barking in a friendly fashion and rubbing his ears pleasantly, but they were not his Boy. Some small people wanted to play, and that would have been amusing, had the puppy not been on an important mission.

He licked his chops. The human had succeeded in kicking him, but the puppy had made off with the plucked chicken. It was quite good, though the puppy preferred his food cooked, just like the Boy's.

He met some other dogs, too; but they were uncouth, and their talk was entirely composed of crude threats. The puppy prudently quickened his pace to evade them.

At last he reached a wide courtyard that reeked of horse. The pack's horses had been here, but the Boy had left them and gone in through the big door. The puppy trotted to the door, and waited until it was opened. All doors opened eventually.

Once it did, it took no time at all to find the Boy, or rather the inside door that kept them apart. He whined and nosed until that door, too, opened.



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"Killer!" Corbus jumped down from his chair and ran to meet the barking puppy. "Shh!" he told the mabari, very seriously. "We have to be quiet. Lothar's hurt."



When Bronwyn met with Alistair to tell him what intelligence had been gleaned from the elven assassins, he was fairly horrified at the punishment she suggested.

They walked along the crumbling stonework of Ostagar Bridge. As the weather turned colder, the green moss on the south side of the stones had withered and turned brown. A chill wind, presaging winter, cut through the mountains. The two Wardens talk in quiet voices, not wishing to be overheard. Even so, plenty of soldiers leaned close as they past, hoping to hear more about the upheaval that had shaken the camp.

"What?" Alistair stood staring at Bronwyn for a long moment, and then shook his head. Then he came close and took her by the shoulders.

"Grey Wardens protect people. They don't give them to the darkspawn, no matter *what* they've done."

Rage soared up to the top of Bronwyn's head again. Did Alistair not understand what these assassins had tried to do?

"They don't care that I'm a Grey Warden! Or you either, for that matter. Those wicked fools don't care about the Blight. All they cared about was murdering Loghain and me."

"But they didn't."

Alistair gave her a hug, and Bronwyn first punched his



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shoulder, and then resigned herself to the fact that hitting him on his armor was ineffective. She half-heartedly hugged him back.

She growled, "Calling them 'wicked fools' is almost a compliment. They were quite happy to give all of Ferelden to the darkspawn, as long as they accomplished their mission. One of the women won't talk at all, one managed to kill herself, and the two others still don't see that they did anything wrong aside from being caught. It's all part of the Great Game, to them. They know they lost, but they don't see the Game as evil in itself."

"Do we know the Empress sent them?"

"If you mean: did she give them their orders personally? — of course not. That was left for underlings, but I don't doubt the mission originated within the highest circles. The younger one is the most talkative, but of course she was only told what she needed to know. She did say that she had nosed out that the seventh of Harvestmere was to be a 'great day for Orlais.' It's possible they're up to something else, but all we can do is send a courier to Anora to tell her what happened and that we're all right."

"No more about dumping them in the Deep Roads," Alistair told her sternly. "You know that's wrong. Every Warden knows that's wrong. You might get some of us to do what you said, but we'd always remember it."

"Loghain will insist they be executed. They don't deserve any mercy."



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"Who does?" He reached for the little silver Sword of Mercy she wore around her neck. "I'm flattered that you wear this, what with all the fine jewels you've got now. Just remember that it's more than just a trinket."

She hissed with annoyance, but could not meet his mild brown gaze. Had the Guardian of the Gauntlet foreseen this? Were all his admonitions in preparation for her to be just and honorable even – and perhaps *especially* – when her own life was threatened?

"Duncan told me once –" Alistair spoke in the soft voice he used when talking about his mentor. "He told me that there was this thief in Orlais who killed a Grey Warden. Commander Genevieve could have had the man executed, but instead she conscripted him to take the dead man's place!"

"Oh, Alistair!" Bronwyn groaned with laughter. "Tell me you're not seriously proposing putting those women through the Joining!"

He made a face. "I suppose not. Being a Warden is an honor, not a punishment! But Commander Genevieve did it. Duncan told me about it when I gave him a hard time about poor Daveth. You remember him – the one who died at your Joining?"

"I'm hardly likely to forget *that!*" Bronwyn replied tartly.

"I guess the point Duncan was making was that when you become a Grey Warden, it's sort of like being born again. Nothing wrong you did in your past life matters. What matters is being the best Warden you can be."



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Bronwyn snorted, and then punched Alistair's shoulder again. She had heard him on the subject of Duncan before, and while she did not share Alistair's admiration for the man, she had no desire to spoil Alistair's fond memories of the only man ever to be a true father to him.

On the other hand, there was a rough justice about the idea of subjecting those assassins to the anguish and peril of the Joining that pleased her. Not that they could be trusted in the least. If she were to undertake such a scheme, the assassins would have to be watched carefully. These were not random street thieves, who might well be glad of a Warden's stipend and a roof over their heads: these were dedicated agents of the Orlesian Empire. It was unlikely they would forego their primary mission merely because they also felt an overwhelming urge to kill darkspawn.

Alistair was right, of course; most of her Wardens would be scandalized at the idea of execution by darkspawn. Not all: she was almost certain that Astrid would back her. However, there were ways and ways. The women would have to win their vial of darkspawn blood – dangerous enough even in the best of times. If they succeeded in that, the Joining might well still be fatal. If they became Wardens... well, Bronwyn would have to find a mission for them that they could perform without endangering other people. Probably a mission involving fighting a great many darkspawn.

And best of all, Bronwyn herself would gain a reputation for high-minded mercy. A reputation she might not

at all deserve, true; but she would gain it nonetheless. The idea really was worth considering. Perhaps Loghain should sentence them to death first, and then...

"Give them a *choice*?" Loghain snarled. "Are you mad?"

"No," Bronwyn said, her mind intent on the prospect. "I don't want to conscript them. When you sentence them to death, I wish to give them the choice: death, or life as a Grey Warden. That way they cannot say, even to themselves, that they were coerced. And Loghain, I assure you, even were they to run away this very night, they will someday end their lives in the Deep Roads."

He hated that reminder of how the Grey Wardens had circumscribed the limits of Bronwyn's life. Surely something could be done about it eventually. But they were talking about the assassins.

"So..." he considered. "A bit of theatre to entertain the troops. Not immediately, though. Conscript your fifty Wardens beforehand. Besides, I want to question these women a little longer." Unexpectedly, he smiled. "Forget them for the moment. I have a present for you."

Bronwyn was quite pleased, and immediately envisioned a glittering betrothal ring. The chest Loghain pointed to, however, was rather too big to contain nothing but a ring.

Inside was a suit of armor. *Loghain*, Bronwyn sighed to herself. *This is a totally Loghain sort of present.*

And it was amazing armor: dark red in color, and

chased with gold. Was it enameled? No, it was...

Bronwyn stood up, blinking.

"This is Flemeth, isn't it?"

Loghain considered the question. "Well... yes, mostly. It would have a scandalous waste not to make use of a High Dragon. You think your witch will object to this disposal of her mother's remains?"

Bronwyn burst out laughing, and pressed her hand to her mouth, trying to stop. To her surprise, Loghain laughed a little, too.

She said, "It's awful, if you think about it. Flemeth's bone and scale and skin... Still, it's absolutely magnificent armor. Is this Master Wade's work?"

Loghain came over to admire it. "Yes. I told him that it had to be completed by the Landsmeet, but apparently he was inspired. It arrived in today's supply train. Wade had your measurements already, but I had that mage girl of yours measure your armor just to be certain. And I even had him make a ridiculously old-fashioned Grey Warden helmet for you."

He lifted it from the chest and set it on her head, rolling his eyes as she drew her sword to see her reflection. The wings fanned back dramatically, and the helmet did not feature a simple nasal, but a half mask that surrounded her eyes and protected her nose. The designs and gilded edgings were superb.

"There now," he murmured. "You are a true warrior queen."

Bronwyn told Morrigan about the armor first, and in private. She was rather nonplussed when the witch broke into a wild cackle of laughter, and then she laughed herself, a little ruefully.

"So you are not offended —"

"If you go about wearing *Mother*? 'Tis all one to me... No, I confess it. I am amused at the idea. A peculiarly just kind of revenge. Perhaps I should demand a share of the dragonhide from the Teyrn! 'Twould be quite the inheritance!"

The chest of armor was brought to the Wardens' quarters, and exclaimed over. And then Bronwyn had to put it on, so she could be exclaimed over again. She did some exclaiming herself, for the armor fit her as no armor had before. The thought of wearing it outside the following day was rather daunting, since she would attract more eyes than if she walked naked through the camp.

So, instead, she wore it down to dinner, so everyone could get their gossiping over with; and in that magnificent armor, she made her official request to the leaders of the armies for Grey Warden levies: twenty from the dwarves and humans, and ten from the Dalish elves. The candidates were to be brought to her the following morning for her approval.

As the afternoon progressed, Anora grew more and more worried about her physical state. Wynne had warned her against overexerting herself, but today's events had

made it impossible to do anything else.

Her messengers to the Cathedral were back rather soon, with bad news. The Grand Cleric was unavailable, having need of a nap after the horrors at the Arl of Denerim's estate. Revered Mother Gertrude, her assistant, did not know this "Wynne," the Queen wrote of, and so was quite unable to be of assistance. Perhaps, in a few days, the matter could be sorted out.

"I *told* them, Your Majesty," her officer insisted. "I told them that was no sort of answer, and that people were dying here. I gave her your message, just as you ordered. The priest said she was very sorry to hear about the wounded, and that they would be prayed for directly." He saw the wrath building behind Anora's eyes, and repeated, "I *told* them..."

"Gather your men," Anora said crisply. "There is no time to lose. And have my carriage brought round. You will escort me to the Cathedral. I am going there myself."

A few days! Anora fought down panic. As weak and ill as she felt now, how would she feel in 'a few days?' The Grand Cleric must be made to see reason, and she must see it before it was too late.

She told Bryland where she was going, and refused his escort. "No, my lord. You are needed here. Someone must reason with the Grand Cleric, and someone must maintain order in the city."

Bryland looked at her with the grimmest expression she had ever seen on that pleasant man's face.

"If the Grand Cleric," he said slowly, "is denying my son the services of a Healer capable of saving his life, she and every priest and every brother and sister in Ferelden will answer to me. Yes, and every Templar too, swords and helmets and all. Perhaps it is I who should reason with the Grand Cleric."

Anora wondered for a moment if he was right, and then decided to hold to her original plan.

"The Grand Cleric can hardly refuse me to my face, and I wish to deal with her peaceably. I expect to return shortly. However," she lowered her voice. "If the Grand Cleric cannot produce my Healer, I have resolved to offer amnesty to apostates here in Denerim. The Grand Cleric presumed too much when she sent Templars to arrest my personal Healer."

The carriage arrived, and Bryland handed her in, unconvinced and concerned. "I advise you to take a larger guard, Your Majesty. Those Orlesians might still be out there in the streets."

In the end, she took a sizable company with her, and set off to beard the Grand Cleric in her den. The crowded bridge slowed her down, armed guard notwithstanding. There was unrest in the streets, but plenty of townsfolk cheered her as she passed. Even upset as she was, Anora made an effort to wave and smile. It was actually a good move, she thought, to show herself unafraid, and to assure the people that she was safe and unharmed.

When she finally arrived at the Cathedral, it was very late in the afternoon, and when she saw the number of

Templars stationed at the doors, she began to wonder if she had not been a little — impetuous. The doors, in fact, were shut. If the Grand Cleric refused her admittance, it would be an insult... a blow to her prestige... even a humiliation. She was here, though, and could not turn back. She sent a herald ahead to announce her, and stepped down, determined to find out what had become of Wynne.

Revered Mother Gertrude met her, and seemed civil enough. Anora had dealt with her before and had found her cool but efficient. She was escorted into the Cathedral, along with a half-dozen of her guardsmen, and then was ushered into a private study, while her men waited outside.

"Her Grace is not well, Your Majesty," the priest assured Anora. "Not well at all. She's not a young woman, and the violence today was a great shock to her."

"It was a great shock to us all," Anora said smoothly. Her head was throbbing, and it was all she could do to sit up straight. "I have come from the Arl of Denerim's estate, where there are many wounded. A Healer is needed as soon as possible. There appears to have been an unfortunate mistake. Senior Enchanter Wynne, the Healer sent to Denerim by the Grey Wardens to study records of past Blights kept in the royal library, was accosted by a band of Templars and taken away. Her services are required immediately."

"I regret to inform Your Majesty," the Revered Mother replied, equally smoothly, "that you have been the victim of a scandalous crime. The Apostate Wynne was arrested today,



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and is suspected of causing the death of your husband, His Majesty King Cailan, by means of the vilest Blood Magic."

Anora's eyes flashed, but she kept her voice level. "I cannot imagine how such an accusation came to be made," she said, "as both my father and the Warden-Commander were at the King's deathbed, and informed me quite positively that he died of Blight disease. So have all the witnesses, in fact. In addition, I was told that *Senior Enchanter Wynne* did her utmost to care for him. As the Warden-Commander must be considered the final authority on matters pertaining to the Blight, it is obvious that Senior Enchanter Wynne is quite innocent of any wrongdoing. Furthermore, as she is bound to obey the Warden-Commander by the Grey Warden Treaty of Divine 1:15, I fail to see how she can possibly be accused of apostasy. I would like to see her now, if you please."

"As much as I regret to discommode Your Majesty in the slightest," said the Revered Mother, "I fear that is impossible. The apostate was killed trying to escape."

A pause. Anora had tried to ignore the possibility, but the priest's cold words lay heavy in the silence. Anora knew exactly what "killed trying to escape" meant. Wynne, that gentle-voiced Healer, had been hunted down and put to death by the Templars with no more compunction than they would have felt in swatting a gnat.

Anora stared at the smug priest, and then staggered to her feet, overcome with shock and fear. Spots swam before



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her eyes; her legs did not seem strong enough to support her. For a moment Anora felt she was already dying.

"Murdered, you mean!" she burst out. "Four Templars were seen beating her savagely in the Palace courtyard! How odd, how very odd that the finest Healer in Denerim should be murdered by Templars just hours before the nobility of Denerim was attacked by the Orlesians!"

The Revered Mother rose too. Anora saw her in a blur, the gaunt figure dancing and swaying like the flame embroidered on her robes. The priest's voice came from a great distance.

"Your Majesty is ill. This is likely the work of the Blood Mage as well. We shall investigate it thoroughly. In the meantime, perhaps your Your Majesty should rest..."

Rest. Anora tried to call out to her guard, but crumpled to the stone floor instead.



Anora's courier met Fergus' party on the North Road in the late afternoon — too late to press on to Denerim immediately. The news he gave them was grave: assassins had attacked the Arl of Denerim's wedding. The Queen was safe, but many others were dead, including allies of the Couslands. Bryland's sister had been killed, and his little boy had been shot, and might be dead by now.

"Arl Urien was wounded, too. The bride's all right, as far as I know," the courier said. He gave Fergus the Queen's note, and then was told to join the Teyrn's party. They

would gallop for Denerim at first light.

The Dalish brought their ten to Bronwyn first, early the next morning. Merrill introduced them, and the young elves before her seemed resigned to their fate. Bronwyn was sadly reminded of the Legion of the Dead, and how their families bade them farewell and gave them their funeral rites, and then spoke of them as no longer among the living. One of the elves was a mage, in line to be a Keeper herself someday, and Bronwyn expressed her gratitude to the elves in making such a sacrifice. Velanna might prove very useful. The Dalish, Tara had told her, possessed a great body of magical lore that was unknown to the mages trained at the Circle. Velanna might also be able to learn shape-shifting, for which neither Tara nor Jowan had shown any aptitude. Both of them had come to the Circle so very young that their affinity for the natural world had been sundered, perhaps permanently. A Dalish mage, however...

Some of the twenty dwarves actually were members of the Legion of the Dead. Bronwyn had high hopes of them. One of them, Sigrun, was surprisingly chipper about it all. She had grown up in Dust Town, and was about Broasca's age. In fact, it was soon revealed that the two girls knew each other slightly.

The humans, too, were an interesting group. Seven of them had been in the battle the day before, and five were showing signs of Blight sickness. Becoming a Warden was now their only chance of survival.

Bronwyn felt a certain reluctance to engage any of the recruits closely, since many of them might well be dead in two days' time. There were some fine fighters here, however; even some individuals who seemed capable of leadership. One of the captains among the regulars had actually volunteered.

Aveline Vallen's husband had been killed in a skirmish while Bronwyn had been on her quest for the Sacred Ashes. To Bronwyn's surprise, the man had been a Templar — one of those rare married Templars. Being unusually scrupulous in his duties supervising mages, he had gone with them into battle, which was something most Templars were not inclined to do. He had died, and his widow was still grieving. She had taken part in the battle against the Broodmothers, and Bronwyn gathered that the horror of it had hardened her resolve against the darkspawn. Good for her. It was better than running away to the north, which some of the women in the army were muttering about. Aveline was a tall, muscular redhead, who fought with sword and shield. Bronwyn viewed her as a potential asset, and hoped she survived the Joining.

Two of the Circle mages had approached Anders, wanting to be Wardens; looking upon it as their best chance of anything approaching freedom.

Niall, Bronwyn was informed, was an Isolationist. That particular mage fraternity held that mages would be better off living completely apart from "mundanes." As that



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seemed quite impossible in any conceivable version of the real world, he was willing to take a chance on the Wardens, so he never need return to the Circle and its cloistered life.

Petra was a fine Healer, Anders said. She was one of Wynne protégées, and had got on with her far better than Anders had. That said, she felt she had something to offer the world, and felt she could serve best as a Warden. Bronwyn had always liked her, remembering that she had been the very first mage of the Circle to sign up for duty at Ostagar. Also, Petra hinted that she was not happy about the vicious slanders that the Revered Mother had uttered about Wynne. If she went back to the Circle, she would have to hear more of the same, and she was tired of it all.

Fifty-two recruits. Bronwyn sat down with Alistair and they organized six groups of ten or eleven. Each would be led by a Warden, and each party had a mage assigned to it. Anders and Morrigan would fly out in bird form and scout the Wilds for any bands of darkspawn they could find. If none could be located, everyone would go to the Blight Wound and enter one of the fissures, exploring it until they made contact with darkspawn enough to retrieve enough blood for the Joining.

But no. There were to be fifty-three recruits, because as Bronwyn finished her elaborate plans, Oghren came in, ready to volunteer. He was drunk of course, but as he usually was, Bronwyn saw no reason to dismiss what he was saying.

"Well, Commander, this is it. Oghren Kondrat, ready for



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a new adventure. I think the time has come..." he belched musically, "for me to try my hand at being a genuine Grey Warden. So," he flung his arms wide, "Take me!"

Through the doorway, Zevran grinned at her and gave her a thumbs-up.



They were led out that very afternoon. Bronwyn saw no reason to drag her feet. Three scattered bands of darkspawn had been located in the Wilds, and three of the Warden parties would be sent in pursuit. The other three would descend into the Blight Wound and hunt darkspawn there. The parties were to rendezvous at the old Warden outpost, where the Joining would take place. A few items were left at the spot. If recruits died at the Joining, Bronwyn felt she had a better chance of keeping it quiet at the outpost rather than in the middle of camp.

She was certainly not going to slack off while the recruits were risking their lives. She led one of the parties, choosing the more perilous underground mission. Perhaps she should be worried about more attempts on her life, but she refused to live her life in fear. Ironically, it was likely that she was safer from assassination in the Deep Roads than anywhere else. And now, of course, she had even better armor.

A party of ten was not too small to face the Deep Roads with hope of success. Bronwyn had faced Ortan Thaig with about the same strength, and brought them all back alive. Of course, three of the party had been mages, and

that counted for a great deal.

But they had the advantage of Bronwyn's experience, and Anders thought well of Niall's abilities. There was Scout with them, utterly fearless. On the minus side, two of the recruits in the party were Dalish, and had never ventured underground before. For that matter, only one of the humans other than Bronwyn had been below before, and that was the admirable Captain Aveline.

The three dwarves, of course, were perfectly at ease: alert and capable. It would be interesting to see how the various recruits in the different parties fared. Some would fight in an environment familiar to them, and some, like the dwarves with Danith out in the Wilds, would not.

Bronwyn's party would go through the fissure where they had burned the Broodmothers the day before, and this promised to be depressing and nasty. A secondary aim of the mission was to make certain they had destroyed all the Broodmothers' miserable offspring. At least all the members of the party had at least been told what a Broodmother was and what had happened yesterday. No one would experience the creeping, bewildering horror that Bronwyn had known in the Dead Trenches. Swiftly and surely, she led them to the site of yesterday's battle. The reek in the tunnels was horrific.

Some of the recruits were shaken by the sight of the spawning matter, even though they were prepared for it. Others, especially the humans, whispered to each other

about the painful discoveries made here.

" — One of them was Mara Clery! Remember her? She was the second in Captain Mac Gough's company — the one who always won at Wicked Grace. We all thought she was dead, but the darkspawn had taken her, poor girl..."

The Broodmother cavern itself was a nightmare, but a danger to spirit, rather than bodies. Shapeless mountains of charred, Tainted flesh remained, but they found nothing living there. A few trinkets, a few amulets glistened from the ashes. Aveline Vallen picked up a little gold pendant on a broken chain.

"This was Eliane Pentree's. See her name on the back? I'll give it to her lover. He'll be glad to have some sort of keepsake."

They were not there to grieve over what could not be helped, so Bronwyn pushed them on, feeling a faint scratching on her nerves that heralded darkspawn. It was not very strong, but it was what they had.

They moved through a series of tight passages and found a little cul-de-sac that showed signs of darkspawn habitation. And then they found the darkspawn: a quartet of hurlocks. Three were very ordinary creatures, one was not.

Vexing as it was, Bronwyn had to step back and let the recruits deal with the creatures, for this test was theirs, not hers. Niall had been in the south for several months, and had a good sequence of spells to use against darkspawn. Not at all to Bronwyn's surprise, Captain Vallen took the lead, fearlessly directing the fight with admirable



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skill and good sense. She was definitely a find.

Once it was over, everyone had a filled vial, and everyone was accounted for. Bronwyn ignored the uncomfortable sensations of darkspawn further along in the tunnels, and took her party back to face the Joining.



The Hawkes and their Grey Warden escort arrived at the Great Gate of Denerim, already alarmed by the news that people running the other way were telling them.

"Orlesians attacked the Arl of Denerim's wedding! Half the nobles in the kingdom are dead!" one excitable fellow gasped out. He took to his heels before they could find out more. Something quite terrible had happened, obviously. Some people said the Queen had been stabbed by a bard, and some said that Arl Bryland had been killed. Others disagreed, maintaining that it was Arl Urien who had been killed... or wounded... or was it his bride?

The women riding in the wagon looked at each other, wondering if they should try to enter the city at all.

"Come on," Carver finally said. "You'll all be safer behind the walls of Highever House than out here in the open. If it's really bad, you can stay at the Wardens' Compound. I'll go talk to the wagon captain."

That individual was going to Denerim, whatever the situation, since he had to deliver the wagons to be reloaded. Among themselves, the Wardens agreed that this was still the safest choice.

"The wagons turn south to cross the river," Jowan said,



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remembering the streets. "We'll take our leave there. It's only a short way up Gate Street to Highever House. We'll make sure your family's safe first, Carver, and then we can go to the Palace and find out what's really happened."

"Yes," Leliana agreed. "Let's do that." She had become quite fond of the Hawkes – and Amells – on their journey north. Bethany, she discovered, played the lute very nicely, though she definitely needed more lessons. Charade had a good voice, and was a splendid archer. They were pleasant company, and she was looking forward to their projected shopping spree in the city. Now, of course, that might have to be postponed, if there was rioting in the city.

Once they entered Denerim, things seemed even more ominous.

"We have orders to search everyone coming into the city," The officer in command of the gate told Carver.

"We're Grey Wardens," Jowan said, with the mild confidence that looking down on people from horseback gave him. "And we have orders from the Warden-Commander and Teyrn Loghain to report to the Queen." He leaned out of the saddle to show the guard the letter of transit.

"Good luck with that," the officer grunted, impressed by the Teyrn's seal. "The Queen's been locked up in the Cathedral since last night. Arl Bryland's got the place surrounded. He's in charge of the city, as much as any one is right now."

"What!" Leliana stared at the man. "He would attack the Chantry?"

The officer narrowed his eyes at her accent. "The Tem-



plars turned on the Arl's guests. Killed a few of them, too. When the Queen went to the Grand Cleric to complain, they locked up her up. They say she's controlled by a Blood Mage, but Arl Bryland doesn't believe that. He thinks they're in league with the Orlesians. His own son's like to die, and he's not feeling very friendly to the Chantry at the moment."

"This is terrible!" Leliana gasped out.

Jowan already had a crawling suspicion as to what might be going on. 'Controlled by a Blood Mage'. Did they mean... *him*? Or — but this was absolutely insane — *Wynne*? He had better find Wynne right away. If the Queen was being held by the Chantry, she was not getting her treatments, and might be in a bad way... Or maybe...

He said, "Let's get Carver's family safe to Highever House, and then we'd better find Arl Bryland."

The streets were surprisingly deserted, and they were told by the few people they met that nearly everyone had gone to the Market to see what was happening. Carver pulled out the little map Adam had sent, and eventually they were at the gates of the courtyard outside Highever House. To their surprise, it was full of horses. Carver showed the letter, and the guard, reassured by their Grey Warden tabards, let them in.

"The Teyrn said the ladies would be along any day. Welcome, Grey Wardens. The Teyrn arrived a short time ago."

"He's here?" Carver slid from his horse, and hurried to help his mother down from the wagon. They made enough



noise to attract the attention of those inside.

Adam came running out, a barking Hunter beside him, and swept Leandra up in a hug. "Mother!"

Teyrn Fergus stepped out into the courtyard, serious but welcoming, and introductions were in order. Leandra murmured in Adam's ear, and he gave a nod and quick grin.

"My lord Teyrn, I present to you my mother, Lady Amell, my sister Bethany Hawke, and my cousin Charade Amell. This lout is my brother, the Grey Warden Carver. I believe you already know Warden Leliana..."

"Yes, of course. Welcome to Highever House, my ladies. Wardens, you are most welcome, too." He looked at Jowan. "And a Warden I don't know..."

"Warden Jowan," Leliana supplied. "A very skilled Healer."

Fergus gave Jowan a nod. "Yes, I know of you from my sister's letters. A Healer! Well, you couldn't have come at a better time. There are wounded people at the Arl's estate who need help desperately, I understand. And the Queen..."

"I'm here to serve the Queen," Jowan said. "I'll help everyone else I can, but I need to see the Queen as soon as possible. We were going to go to the Market and report to Arl Bryland."

"I'm going there myself," Fergus said. "I just received a message from Bryland, apprising me of the situation. Obviously, they've gone mad at the Chantry, and I'll need to sort it out. Since the Queen is..." — he dropped his voice, eyes fixed on Jowan — "...unwell, any assistance you can give will be appreciated."

"But is it true, my lord?" Leandra wanted to know. "Was the Arl's wedding truly attacked by Orlesian bandits?"

"I don't know about 'bandits,' my lady," Fergus said grimly. "But attacked it was, by assassins disguised as minstrels and tumblers."

Leliana's soft, pained gasp went almost unheard.

Fergus had more to say. "My cousin Bryland's sister was shot dead, and his little son gravely wounded. Bryland is sick with worry about him, and furious that he cannot be at his side because of the Chantry's outrageous conduct. At least four banns are dead. Many more were hurt, including the Arl of Denerim himself. Most of the badly wounded are still at the Arl of Denerim's estate."

Bethany burst out, "How cruel to hurt a little boy!"

Fergus nodded gravely. Adam had said his sister was pretty, and it was certainly not just a brother's partiality. A very pretty girl, indeed. In fact, all of Adam's womenfolk would brighten up Castle Highever considerably. Bethany was clearly a nice girl, too, with her heart in the right place.

"Cruel... yes, of course," he answered. "Even crueler is the Chantry's decision to keep healing from the wounded. The Queen was being attended by a Healer named Wynne, and we discovered that she was arrested the morning before the attack, leading Bryland to believe that there is some collusion there."

"Wynne's a prisoner?" Jowan knew that Wynne despised him, but she was a decent person, and old, and the Templars would...

Fergus said, "The last word Bryland had, the Chantry

were denying all knowledge of her, but a witness saw Templars dragging her away from the Palace courtyard, so we know they're lying. Bryland has authorized a proclamation on behalf of the Queen that any apostate mage will receive amnesty if he or she will come forward to assist the wounded."

"Really?" Bethany said, not daring to glance at her brothers. "That's very... sensible of him."

The housekeeper came to see to Adam's family, and the rest of them prepared to set out for the Market. Short as the trip to the Market would be from here, Fergus, Adam, and the Wardens would go on horseback, which would give them visibility and authority. Fergus' soldiers would march with them. And there were others who volunteered.

"We would go with you, my lord. We know how to fight, and wish to help the brother of the Lady of the Wardens."

Fergus puzzled over the tall men with odd yellow eyes. Yes, these were the people Bronwyn had sent north, with orders that they be allowed to stay at Highever House and be put to work. Five men, three women, a young girl, and two young boys, all named Wolf and all with the same curious yellow eyes. It must run in the family. Bronwyn had left a note that the housekeeper had given to him with a long-suffering expression.

Fergus—

These unfortunates were under a curse, and have had a hard time. If you could find something for them, I believe they



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would serve you loyally.

I can practically see the look on your face, but do it anyway.

Love,

Bronwyn

Bronwyn and her heroics! These must be yet more people rescued by the Girl Warden. The housekeeper had told him that the Wolfs were hard-working enough, but *peculiar*. The men before him were all armed, and all protected with good leather armor. Why not take them along?

"It could be dangerous," Fergus told them, "but as you wish."

They set off for the Market, the soldiers shouldering a path through the crowds. The tower of the Cathedral rose high above them, guiding them to the mass of soldiery barring access or egress to anyone.

"Fergus!"

Fergus dismounted and clapped his older cousin on the shoulder, concerned at the dark circles under the man's eyes, and the lines of bitter anger on his face.

"I'm here," said Fergus, "and the city guard told me what happened. I am very sorry about Werberga, Leonas. Is Lothar any better?"

"I don't know!" Bryland snarled. "I'm here, trying to sort things out with the Chantry, who have bloody *abducted* the Queen and locked themselves in, thinking there's nothing we dare do about it!" He waved irritably at the massive building. "I've sent to Fort Drakon for a battering ram. I hope it doesn't come to it, but I can't let the Grand Cleric thumb her nose at



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us. And Maker knows what they've done to the Queen."

"Why did she even put herself in this situation?"

Bryland blew out an exasperated breath. "I advised her against it. I suppose she thought they wouldn't dare defy her. She was coming to fetch her Healer, and the next thing we know, we're told she's under the influence of Blood Magic, and requires prayer and purification! They arrested the Healer just before the wedding. What a coincidence!" He jerked his head over to a knot of men guarding a prisoner.

"That priest was sent out to tell us to go about our business like good boys and girls. Mother Heloise is her name."

"I want to talk to her," Fergus said.

"Come on, then."

Fergus eyed the woman up and down. She seemed perfectly calm, and not at all alarmed by the presence of a mob of armed men. Of course, a priest would be accustomed to ordering mobs of armed men about. The Templars, Fergus assumed, would be inside the Chantry, barricading it against attack.

"What have you done with the Queen?" Fergus asked shortly. "Where is she?"

"Where she is safe from malign influence," the priest declared smugly. She pointed to a small window, high above them. "In the tower chapel."

Bryland snarled with baffled rage, but Fergus only laughed. The older man was surprised at the smirk on the Teyrrn's face.

"I'll need a rope," Fergus said, "and a grappling hook."

CHAPTER 14

THE GOLDEN BOWL



CORBUS BRYLAND WAS AWAKENED BY KILLER WALKING ON HIS CHEST. Instantly he was miserably aware that it was not

just a bad dream. He was not at home. He could smell blood and herbs and voided urine, and wrinkled his nose, wondering if he could make it go away if he slept some more. Maybe if he wished *hard*, Father would come and fix things. He wondered why his tutor, Master Cletus, hadn't come to look after Lothar. Wasn't that his job?

He asked as much of a servant boy his own age. The boy was eager to share his own gruesome imaginings. "I expect it's too dangerous for him to come, with the Orlesians rampaging through the streets. I hear they're shooting anybody they catch." Corbus ended the conversation there, frightened at the image of Father being killed by those people in bright motley.

He and Lothar had been put in a room with the other wounded people, but at least Lothar had been given a bed. Bann Alfstanna had one, too; up against the far wall. She hadn't made a sound since they carried her in. And they

said that Arl Urien was dying, off in his own great chamber. Habren wouldn't like that. Corbus wondered if Habren would come home and live with them now. Then he thought of Aunt Werberga and sniffled. She had been fussy, and Habren was her favorite, but she had always been a part of his life. When they didn't bring her here, Corbus understood that she was dead. The servants said they were putting the dead people somewhere else. Corbus had seen the quarrel sticking out of her chest, and all the blood. Would they take the quarrel out or leave it in when she was burned?

Many people were lying on the floor, on straw pallets or blankets. A servant had gone around giving the wounded a drink of something to help them sleep, and Corbus had been allowed to help. Then more people had come to wash the wounds and bandage them. Bann Alstanna never woke when they bandaged her. Her face was all grey and twisted. The servants shook their heads, and told Corbus that since her insides were hurt, there was nothing more they could do for her.

Lothar had cried and screamed when they pulled out the quarrel, and then they had given him more of the sleepy drink. Corbus was tired and sick after that, and he had curled up next to his brother and fallen asleep without needing any special medicine.

He could hear Lothar's breathing beside him. He blinked his eyes open, ashamed to fall asleep during the day like a baby. He blinked again at the pretty young face looking down at him.

"I'm Bethany," the girl said. "I'm here to heal your brother."



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"My little sister could *die!*" Irminric hissed, glancing around the great nave of the Cathedral for eavesdroppers. His friend and fellow Templar, Ser Otto, put a calming hand on his shoulder, and pulled him into the shadows.

"We have prayed to the Maker for her," Otto soothed him. "That is all we can do for now. That, and watch."

The forces of Chantry were on guard against the outside world, but also against one another. A hum of voices reverberated from floor to ceiling, punctuated by the occasional sharp cry or angry shrilling. Revered Mother Gertrude had declared that they were in no danger. The Queen was here, being rigorously examined for magical influences. Arl Bryland was outside, his mind unhinged by the terrible events of the day; but he would respect the sanctity of the Chantry. Not everyone agreed with her, but no one had challenged her publicly. Yet.

Ser Irminic, elder brother of Bann Alfstanna of Waking Sea, and heretofore a loyal Templar, was one of the foremost doubters. His faith had been sorely shaken by the heartless behavior of Knight-Commander Tavish, who had ordered his men to force their way through the crowd at the Arl of Denerim's wedding, injuring and wounding a number of people. They could have stayed and fought the assassins; they could have protected the weak and helpless. Tavish, however, felt that it was a political, secular matter, and that his chief responsibility was Her Grace's safety.



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It was all hearsay, of course. Irminric had been put out, early that morning, to find that he was not to be included in the Grand Cleric's honor guard at the wedding. He had thought he would be a logical candidate, due to his high birth. He had even looked forward to it, anticipating spending time with his sister. Instead, Irminric had been ordered to remain in the Cathedral for the day.

Alfstanna was a brilliant bann: strong, fair-minded, sensible. Irminic acknowledged this. He had never held their father's decisions against her, even when they entailed Irminic's relegation to the Chantry. He had not wanted to be a Templar, but he had submitted to his father's will and the will of the Chantry. Why was he being shunted aside now?

"Maybe Tavish knew something was going to happen," murmured one of the younger Templars. "Maybe it was all *planned.*"

"Stennis," one of the young man's friends whispered back, "you'll get in trouble, talking like that."

A pair of young priest-initiates passed the Templars, fair faces flushed red. They hurried away to find a more private place to exchange confidences.

Irminric had always hated politics. It was one of the main reasons his father had made Alfstanna the heir.

"They'll eat you alive at the Landsmeet, boy,"

Poor Father. He, like so many others, never realized that Landsmeet politics were a game of ninepins compared to what went on within the Chantry.



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Within the Chantry, everyone agreed that there was but one Maker, and Andraste was His Prophet. Everyone agreed on the importance of restraining and controlling mages.

Beyond that, it was a snakepit of warring factions and furious accusations of heresy, impiety, sacrilege, doctrinal impurity, and heterodoxy. Debates raged on the nature of Andraste's divinity, on the number of children she had borne to Maferath, on the divisive issue of whether elves, dwarves, or Qunari had souls in the truest sense of the word. Had Andraste's mortal body experienced physical death, or had she been translated before Hessarian's blow was struck? Had Andraste in fact *been* mortal in the usual sense of the word? *That* issue had sparked angry controversy and the assassinations of highly-placed priests.

And it was a fact that priests and Templars, sisters and brothers, were sometimes all too human. Revered Mothers had taken lovers and embezzled Chantry funds; Templars had abused their power over mages in disgraceful ways; initiates of both sexes ran away with peddlers or mercenaries or each other. There was that terrible scandal a few years ago, when it was discovered that an entire monastery in a remote part of northern Orlais had resorted to outright banditry and extortion. All attempts to suppress the facts had failed – at least within the Chantry itself. The Knight-Commander involved had been executed, and the foundation broken up. The women and young boys held there were paid off to ensure their silence, and then



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sent abroad for decency's sake.

In Ferelden, the most burning issue was the relationship of the Chantry to the secular government of Orlais, where the Chantry had been founded. Val Royeaux and its Grand Cathedral were the heart of the Chantry. Templars, when their minds and bodies grew debilitated from lyrium, retired to the hospice there. Priests dreamed of the lucrative administrative positions to be had, close to the Divine herself. To achieve such a high position, one had to toe the line of orthodoxy and obedience very strictly.

Of course, no Fereldan priest could dream of being named Divine. That position had been held exclusively by Orlesians since the beginning. Because of that exclusivity, there were sometimes accusations that the Divine favored Orlais in matters not relating to the Chantry. During the Occupation – which any Chantry priest or Templar hoping for promotion must refer to as the Rebellion – the Grand Clerics of Ferelden had thundered denunciations of the Theirins and proclaimed their support for the Orlesian-born subject kings that had supplanted them. Mother Bronach had supported Meghren right up until the moment when Maric and his armies reached Denerim.

People in orders who had grown up as children of the Chantry might be able to swallow the Chantry's official version of recent history, but Irminric had been raised in a noble household, and had heard tales of Meghren's deranged cruelties; and also of how members of the



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Chantry had spied and informed for the – call him by the right name – *usurper* and his toadies. It was impossible not to acknowledge, albeit only to himself, that the Chantry had played a shameful role in the conquest and subsequent oppression of his homeland. For obvious reasons, it was imprudent to speak openly of this, unless one wished to be posted to the Aeonar Prison indefinitely. Nevertheless, there were some vocally pro-Ferelden priests, like Mothers Perpetua and Boann. Mother Boann, of course, was dismissed by many as a radical, due to her ministry to the Alienage. Irminric might have dismissed her, too, had he not been made to see the value of her work by his best friend and fellow Templar, Ser Otto.

He could always confide in Otto. Otto loved the Chantry with a deep and abiding passion, but he loved the Chantry Triumphant, rather than the Chantry Mundane. That is to say, he loved the Chantry as it was in the mind of the Maker, rather than the worldly institution that was its pale reflection. It was all very mystical, and Irminric was not sure he always understood what Otto was saying, but he was sure that what Otto said ought to be true, because it was beautiful.

Young Stennis had slipped away, and then returned with a priest, Sister Justine.

"Tell them what you overheard!" the boy urged her.

Irminric liked Sister Justine. She was a nice, well-meaning woman, and Curator of Denerim Cathedral's archive of manuscripts and religious artifacts. The Grand Cleric



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was fond of her, too, and because of that, Sister Justine had ready access to Her Grace. But not today.

Looking very uneasy, the priest whispered, "I believe that Her Grace has been drugged. She was not wounded when she returned, but she was given some wine to settle her nerves. I heard Mother Heloise speaking of it to Sister Collette. They wanted her to sleep, while they... 'did what needed to be done.' They thought it was best that Revered Mother Gertrude have control. I know they've always found Her Grace too... moderate." She looked briefly miserable. "Things would not have got to this pass if Her Grace were herself!"

Ser Stennis clearly agreed. "It doesn't help that half the Queen's guard overheard the argument between her and the Revered Mother. She all but accused the Revered Mother of foreknowledge of the attack. Something to do with the mage that Ser Gauthier and his team dealt with that morning. The Queen claimed the mage was sent to Denerim on the orders of the Grey Wardens, and wasn't it convenient that the only Healer in reach was arrested just hours before an attack that left so many badly wounded?"

Irminric licked his dry lips, thinking of his sister, and then of the healing powers of magic. "That's a very serious accusation."

Sister Justine said gravely, "If the mage was under the orders of the Grey Wardens, then dealing with her as an apostate is in clear violation of the ancient treaties. Ordinary laws do not apply during a Blight."

"Of course," Irminric said, trying to think it through, "only scholars like you you know that. There hasn't been a Blight in four hundred years."

Sister Justine hated to be told — however indirectly — that she was the guardian of little-known and useless facts. "I am quite sure," she said, "that the Grand Cleric, the Revered Mothers, and the Knights-Commander are all cognizant of the treaties. I retrieved the Chantry copies and forwarded the appropriate clauses to all of them!"

"Ah," Ser Otto sighed, "but did they *read* them?"

"Is it possible," Irminric ventured, the words like lead, "that some individuals within the Chantry might actually..." he hesitated, "be —"

" — agents of Orlais?" Otto bluntly finished his thought. "Not in so many words, I think. However, Mothers Gertrude and Heloise were born in Orlais, and love their country. That is only natural. They have brought many old colleagues with them from Orlais. Perhaps they genuinely feel that a union between our countries is the best hope for peace."

"That is putting a very generous construction on their acts," Sister Justine bristled.

"Many villains think themselves virtuous, and their enemies wicked," Otto replied mildly. "Does the Maker care about nations and borders? I think not. No more than do the darkspawn."

A silence. Then Irminric said, "The Maker may not, but the Empress certainly does. We live in the world as it is,

and Anora is Queen of this country. I do not think that the Revered Mother is acting in good faith."

"Well, then?" Otto raised his brows, face serene. "Just what are you prepared to do about it?"

The denizens of Denerim Market had not seen such entertainment in years. Arl Bryland had called in the City Guard and his personal militia, and they were lined up in front of the Chantry, demanding that the Grand Cleric release the Queen. Word was that the Arl had sent to Fort Drakon for a battering ram, and was going to storm the Chantry if the Grand Cleric defied him.

"Blessed Andraste!" a red-haired thief declared, in awe of the Chantry's gall. "I never thought I'd see the day when the Chantry would lock up the Queen! You suppose they're going to hold her for ransom?"

"Why did they do it?" a dwarf trader wondered. "Are they crazy?"

His father-in-law told him quietly, "Humans and their religion! Most of them will do anything a priest tells them. The Chantry killed the Viscount of Kirkwall outright and took over the city. Maybe they think they can pull that off here."

"I'm sure the Grand Cleric has good reasons for anything she does..." an old woman murmured fretfully.

"Maybe those assassins have taken over in there," a man speculated. "They were disguised as minstrels before. Maybe they pretended to be priests and Templars and got in that way."

"Maybe the Chantry's in league with Orlais," a crippled old soldier said grimly. "We've seen it before."

There was a great deal of uneasy muttering.

"Do you suppose she could be a mage? Maybe they found her out..." whispered a nervous man in a hooded cloak. He carried a heavy walking stick with curious carvings. Arl Bryland had proclaimed that anyone with Healing skills would receive amnesty from the Crown, but the nervous man refused to be taken in by such a trick.

"Queen Anora? Teyrn Loghain's daughter?" scoffed a mercenary. "Never!"

"Look! Those are Grey Wardens!" came a shout. A confused clamor followed this, as people strained to admire the fabled heroes.

"Oh, is the Girl Warden there? Is it the redhead? She's pretty! I didn't know she was a redhead!"

"That's not her. Too short."

"Bugger. I wanted to see the Girl Warden..."

"Fine-looking lot, aren't they? That's quite a sword the tall one has."

"Who's the other big fellow?"

"That's the Teyrn of Highever!" declared a lounger. "I saw him at the Gnawed Noble! He gave me three silvers for holding his horse! What's he doing?"

People crowded close against the shields of guardsmen to see. The big man had climbed up on a low retaining wall beside the chantry and was swinging a rope in a

slow circle, playing a little more out with every circuit. At the end of the rope was a grappling hook.

A woman with the reddened hands of a laundress and a fair but faded face bloomed with the glow of romance. "I know what he's going to do. He's going to rescue the Queen!"



The grappling hook held on the first try. Fergus grunted with relief, glad that he hadn't made a fool of himself in front of all Denerim. He could climb the rope up to the lower buttress, and then should be in striking distance of the top of the tower. Getting the hook up to the top of the tower would be easier and safer than trying to latch onto the window sill.

Climbing armed was no joke. Hand over hand, he pulled hard, boots pressed against the stone. No windows faced this way, so he should be safe from discovery, even though a cry was rising up from the crowd.

"A rescue! A rescue!"

He hoped so. He really did. If the priest had lied and Anora was somewhere else, Fergus was going to be very, very angry with whoever was in the tower chapel. Interesting that the crowd was not more favorably disposed to the Chantry. On the other hand, not so surprising. However much the Chantry spread their talk of the dangers of the magic, blood would tell, in the end. Nearly every Fereldan knew of a child who had been taken away by Templars, never to be heard of again. A large proportion of those children were someone's son or daughter;



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someone's niece or nephew or cousin or neighbor. There were places, certainly, where mages might be stoned to death on sight. There were more where apostates operated on the sly, tolerated by local lords and freeholders in exchange for healing or fighting or help tilling soil and breaking stones. Fergus knew his father had turned a blind eye toward hedge mages in Highever on more than one occasion. Was that why the Highever Chantry had been so complacent about the murder of the Couslands?

And old grudges died hard. During the Occupation, the Orlesians had squeezed taxes for themselves and generous tithes for the Chantry. Over the ensuing years, the Chantry had not won many friends with their incessant demand for coin and their interference in secular affairs. Fergus smiled grimly. They had overreached themselves at last. The chickens had come home to roost, with a vengeance.

The wind was colder, up here above the ground. Fergus briefly wished he were a mage, like that luscious friend of Bronwyn's: the one who could turn into a bird and fly away at will. All of this could be so much easier that way. Except for the getting-down-with-the-Queen part. Fergus had a few ideas about that.

Obviously, it would be much pleasanter for everyone if they could just walk out the front door. The Chantry could save face, say that it was all a huge misunderstanding, and Anora would probably let some of it pass, after privately having the hides of the instigators. The Grand Cleric would probably



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have to retire to Val Royeaux "for her health," and a number of other prominent heads would roll. Then, alas, it would be back to business as usual in a few years.

But perhaps they would not be leaving by the front door. Fergus had allowed for that eventuality as well. He had some strong linen bandages tied around his waist. If the Queen was too ill to cling to him, he could tie her to him. It would be hellishly hard to manage, but he might have no choice. If she was completely unconscious, he would tie the rope around her and lower her down first. That could be tricky to do without bashing her against the side of the Chantry. One way or another, she had to be delivered to Jowan and his healing skills.

He swung out, close enough to the buttress to get a leg over. The cheers were more distant now, blending with the wind. He gave the crowd a wave and then carefully stood on the top of the buttress, found a secure footing, and began circling the rope again for another throw. He wanted to place the hook above the window itself. The window was stained glass and did not open, so no one would see the rope though it. He hoped.

Another roar came from below, surging up like waves against the Cliffs of Conobar. A bronze battering ram, its head a snarling mabari, had arrived, drawn by two dozen oxen. The crowd rushed to help the soldiers, and as if on wings, the ram was being moved into position. There was a partial wall sheltering the Cathedral courtyard, but it

didn't look likely to stand long.

Fergus released his grip just before the top of the arc, hope flying with hook and rope. The hook slid down the lead-sheathed roof with a brief, metal-to-metal squeal. The hook caught on the edge. Fergus yanked hard, and sent a prayer Andraste's way. He took a deep breath, and swung out again.

Glad that the tower was not smooth marble, but rough hewn stone, he set his boots firmly on the tower wall and walked cautiously to the side, making the quarter circuit he needed before climbing straight up again. He wondered what Cousin Leonas was doing now, but he knew better than to look down. He must make it to the window, and then he would have the element of surprise. Perhaps it would be enough.

There were candles: candles in pairs making a dazzle of gold on the stone wall. There was a pool of red and blue light on the floor. Anora stared at it, too tired to move her head. Her fingers reached toward the light, but could not quite manage the last few inches.

She was lying on a pallet in front of a little altar. Andraste soared above her on the wall, hands upraised, eyes rolled up to the Maker. It was quite impossible to attract her attention. Voices buzzed like horseflies around her, but Anora ignored them. No one would speak to her sensibly, and now it was nothing but buzzing. Her eyes were playing tricks on her: she was not sure if one priest or two was kneeling in front of the altar.

What had become of her clothes? Her fingers tugged, puzzled at the thin white linen shift. Had someone undressed her without her leave?

There had been a circle of eyes around her: some concerned, some sly and smug, some hostile, some fearful, some uneasy. They had withdrawn, and now there was nothing but distant buzzing. Anora did not recall seeing the Grand Cleric, but she was not sure that her memory was perfect at the moment, either. There had been a Templar, she was sure, because he had buzzed at her in much deeper tones, and his face had been hard and angry. He had gone away, and Anora was glad. She was now certain that she disliked Ser Tavish.

"...I detect no magic, but..."

"...It must be magic! There is no other explanation!"

"...Oh? It's not possible that she could simply be sick? And how are we to explain that the Queen died while in our custody? Her father will think we murdered her on orders from the Empress. Those he kills outright will be fortunate..."

"...Here lies the abyss, the well of all souls.

From these emerald waters doth life begin anew.

Come to me, child, and I shall embrace you.

In my arms lies Eternity..."

Louder than the buzzing was the beating of her heart; irregular and sluggish. Anora listened to it with detached interest. Things had certainly changed for the worse.

There was a scraping near the window. Idly, Anora pic-

tured a raven, black feathers glossy, head cocked, eyes sharp in the autumn air. It would gather itself, and take wing...

A crash. The blue and red window splintered inwards in shards of rainbow light. Anora thought it very pretty. The buzzing about her shivered into screams.

Had the raven she imagined smashed against the glass? There was a black shape, silhouetted by the sunlight now streaming into the chapel. A man? A man had flown in through the window. That was... unusual, wasn't it?

A big warrior in armor. At first Anora thought it must be Father, come to find her. Hot tears of relief blurred her vision.

"What have you done to her?" the man shouted. "Get back!"

The frightened priests cringed away. One lunged for the door, and the warrior pounced ahead of her, cursing.

"I never hit a priest in my life, so don't make me learn new ways. The two of you — into that cupboard, and I don't want to hear a sound!"

There were whimpers and thumps and the bang of a door closing. Another sliding sound and a grunt of satisfaction. "That'll hold them," the man muttered.

His armor clanked a little as he came close, kneeling down by her. Not Father. A younger face with a soft brown beard and kind dark eyes.

"Your Majesty... Anora..." Fergus Cousland said softly. "I'm going to get you out of here. You're going to be all right. Bronwyn found the Sacred Ashes, just as she promised. Warden Jowan has them and he's here."

Someone pounded on the door, shouting. "*What's going on in there?*"

Fergus laid a comforting hand on Anora's shoulder and then got up and strode over to the locked door.

"What's going on is that you are going to release the Queen! I am Fergus Cousland, Teyrn of Highever, and you will be held to account for kidnapping the Queen of Ferelden, Chantry-folk or not!"

Whatever the unseen man behind the door was going to say was lost in thunder that shook the Cathedral. The thunder was followed by screams from far below in the sanctuary. Fergus chuckled. "It's sounds like my cousin Leonas has finally had enough! That, Your Majesty, was him knocking on the Cathedral doors!"

There were shouts outside and the clash of steel. An argument had gone violent. Fergus listened at the door, waiting. There was a horrible, gurgling ground and the sound of something sliding down the other side of the wall.

"*I'm sorry I had to do that,*" a man said, "*but it's the end of the Chantry in Ferelden if we don't give up the Queen immediately.*" A key clanged in the lock, and Fergus stood back, drawing his sword.

With tremendous effort, Anora turned her head. The door was opened, and distant shouts filtered up the tower staircase. A group of Templars stood there, along with a pale, fair-haired priest holding a candelabra in her hand. The man in the lead started at the sight of Fergus.



"My lord of Highever!" he cried. "We did not..." He collected himself. "We have come to see that Queen is returned to the Palace. Perhaps you don't remember me, but I am Irminric, brother to Bann Alfstanna."

"Of course I know you," Fergus growled. "What madness have you lot been up to?"

"Nothing of our doing, my lord," said another Templar, his voice gentle. "Nor of the Grand Cleric's, whom we believe to be likewise a prisoner."

Irminric said quickly, "Sister Justine here found the key. We knew that keeping the Queen here against her will was wicked folly. Let us assist you and put an end to the violence below."

Fergus paused, hesitating, and then made his decision. Sheathing his sword, he returned to Anora and bending, gathered her up in his arms.

"Lead the way," he ordered.

Anora gasped a little at the boldness of it. She could not recall ever having been carried like this since she was a little girl, running to Father when he returned to Gwaren. Just as long ago in Father's arms, Fergus' armor hurt a little, but she cared nothing for that, happy to be safe, held again in arms of steel. She gazed up dreamily as the ceiling as it turned with the man's movements, as they wounded down, down, a long spiral staircase. She passed the painted figures on the wall like crowds at a procession.

"My lord!" cried a voice, accompanied by the sound of feet running upstairs. There must be a mabari there, too,



from the all the whuffing. Anora smiled faintly at the idea of a mabari running wild in the Chantry.

"It's all right, Hawke," Fergus said. "They're with us."

Anora caught a glimpse of tall and handsome Ser Adam Hawke, sword drawn, moving protectively in front of Fergus. They continued down the stairs. The space enlarged and vaulting stretched out before her. They were descending into the sanctuary. Fergus shifted his arms so it was easier for her to lift her head and see.

The sanctuary was a battlefield. Bryland's men had poured through the front door, and some had fallen. But they had taken even more Templars with them, judging by the armor. Priests were huddled together here and there: some screaming imprecations at the soldiers, some terrified, some explaining themselves very quickly indeed, some already helping with the wounded. There were pockets of resistance, but they were scattered and desperate.

"Fereldans!" shouted Fergus. "Here is your Queen! Put up your swords, and do her homage!"

"The Queen!" Shouts rose up. A deep, heart-felt pause, and the last of the Templars surrendered, and were disarmed.

Bryland, bleeding from a cut over his ear, rushed to the steps. "Your Majesty!" He looked her over, shocked at her appearance. "What did they do to her?" he asked Fergus.

"She's been ill," Fergus told his cousin in a low voice. "The mage's healing was keeping her going. The Chantry took that away, but the Wardens have brought a cure."

"A cure?" Bryland certainly hoped so. Queen Anora looked half-dead – worse, she looked like she had been tortured. If Fergus hadn't told her she was already ill, he would have put the Chantry to the sword on the spot.

The Wardens were here, too: Carver glaring at the priests, and leaning on his sword: Jowan uncomfortable and grim: and Leliana frantically trying to make peace and calm both sides.

Anora tried to speak, but it was so difficult. She managed a whisper, close enough to Fergus' ear that he heard her.

"Not here. Outside."

He looked down at the frail woman. Her hair had come loose, and her face was a sickly yellow. "You want to go outside?"

"Outside," she murmured. "Out of here."

It was hardly surprising, after all. He shifted her in his arms, and carried her down the last steps.

"We're leaving. Wardens, prepare the Ashes outside."

"Ashes?" Bryland asked, puzzled; but he strode along with his cousin, ordering a detail to lock up the prisoners. No one had seen the Grand Cleric as yet. He sent more men to track her down.

The battering ram had been withdrawn, and they stepped past rubble into the light of day. The sun of noon shone down, defeating all disguise. People climbed up on nearby roofs to take in the scene in front of the Chantry. As the people coming outside were recognized, another shout rose up, of triumph and relief.

"There's the Queen!" shouted a man. "I see her yellow hair!"

"Look! The Teyrn's got her!"

"I knew he'd save her!" cried the laundress. "Maker bless good Teyrn Cousland!"

"Is she hurt?"

"What did they do with her clothes?" wondered one woman, scandalized. "She's barefoot!"

"The Ashes!" Fergus ordered. "Quickly!"

Jowan had the little envelope, and had thought quite a bit about how to administer them. He had rejected the idea of using his finger to put them on the Queen's tongue as gross and indelicate. A spoon he had also considered, but now there was surely a need for more spectacle.

"Leliana," he said urgently. "Find that present that Bronwyn was giving her cousin and put a bit of water in it."

Leliana had left the Chantry reluctantly, miserable at the situation there. Glad to have something to do, she hurried to her horse and fetched the golden bowl. Her fingers lingered on the cool hammered metal, admiring it.

It was certainly a princely gift. Not very large, but entirely of pure gold, it was a shallow, footed bowl in the form of a flower. Leliana winced as the sunlight reflected off it blindingly. Quickly she poured some water from her canteen into the bowl, and held it while Jowan opened the little packet of Sacred Ashes and sprinkled them into the clear water.

"What is that?" Arl Bryland asked.

Jowan knew that Bronwyn wanted the Ashes kept



secret, but he felt that this was no time for secrecy. What the Chantry had done was open and public. The Queen's cure should be the same. Besides, he really could not resist the chance to stick a finger in the eye of the Chantry and their Templars, pointing up their malice, their stupidity, their uselessness. He would never have a chance like this again. He answered the Arl loudly enough that a great many people could hear him.

"A few months ago, the Queen was poisoned by an Orlesian spy. The poison was resistant to magical healing, despite everything I and Senior Enchanter Wynne — arrested by the Chantry yesterday — could do. Lady Bronwyn Cousland, the Warden-Commander of Ferelden, went on a Quest to find the one remedy that could not fail: the Sacred Ashes of Andraste. She succeeded. and you see them here in this golden bowl before you!"

He lifted the bowl to Anora's lips, careful not to spill a drop. She raised weary eyes to him, and drank it down. It tasted... like ashes in water. A little gritty, and rather nasty, in fact; but she was really rather thirsty, and it could have been worse. She swallowed, swallowed again, swallowed the last of it, and then screamed, more in surprise than distress.

"Ahhhhh!"

Fergus held her fast, his hopes plummeting as she spasmed. Was this going to end in disaster?

It was certainly very intense. Anora was not certain if she was in pain or not. Little shocks pulsed through her



body, twinging along her nerves, quickening her blood. Pulses collided at intervals, and she seized up, bewildered at what was happening to her. Her heart jolted... almost as if a hand had squeezed it. There was a curious hard pressure on the right side of her head, and then sharp pinches in her back just below her ribs. Lower down, her belly cramped as if she were having her courses. The shocks rippled through her from head to toe and abruptly stopped. And everything was suddenly quite different.

Into the gaping silence, she said quietly, "I'm all right. Put me on a horse, so everyone can see I'm all right."

"*You're all right?*" Fergus choked out, astonished. Even more astonishing was her appearance. The yellow skin was transforming to rose and ivory; her blue eyes were clear and shining. She did not even look... tired.

Anora wondered if she would burst out laughing. How odd she felt. She had had no idea how sick she really was before. She felt perfectly well now. She could do anything. Bronwyn had found the Sacred Ashes, and given Anora back her life. It was a miracle.

"I'm fine. I'm perfectly well. Get me on that horse — that nice grey — so everyone can see me and hear me. We have work to do."

In wonder and relief, he smiled down at her, and she reflexively smiled back up at him. Her heart seemed to squeeze again, but this time she did not think it was the Ashes.

"Well..." Hawke raised his brows, and remarked his brother,



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"that was... impressive. Come now, the Ashes of Andraste?"

"Yes," Carver said. "Really and truly. Bronwyn found them in the Frostbacks. She told us not to talk about them, but I suppose Jowan wanted to make the point that the Chantry isn't the sole conduit to the Maker. Anyway, it looks like the Queen is all right, and that's what matters. It's why Jowan, Leliana, and I were sent to Denerim: to deliver the Ashes to the Queen. We didn't expect it to be so... public, though."

"That was pretty damned public," Hawke snorted, swinging onto his horse. He dug into one of his saddlebags, and pulled out a cloak.

"The Queen looks cold, my lord," he said quietly to Fergus.

A grateful look, and Anora was wrapped in Hawke's best blue cloak. He wondered if he would ever see it again, but perhaps it was a sound investment in his future.

Bryland left a strong force to secure the Chantry, and mounted with the rest of them. Let the Grand Cleric stew for now; he had to get back to his boys. Jowan was gazing thoughtfully at the amazing golden bowl that had held the Ashes, and the Arl spoke, a little wistfully.

"I don't suppose there are any left?"

Jowan glanced up, and inclined his head in respect. "No, my lord. But I'm a pretty good Healer. I'll have a look at your son first thing."

Leliana murmured, "I'll have to ride with you, Jowan. The Queen took my horse."



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Jowan gave her the golden bowl, and swung onto the horse. Leliana clutched the bowl, sighing. After holding the Ashes of Andraste, it seemed a shabby thing for this vessel to be handed off as an ordinary wedding present. It should be preserved, as the sacred relic it was. She took Jowan's hand and vaulted up behind him, letting the sunlight play on the gold, bright as a good deed in a wicked world.

"Your family's more interesting than ours," Corbus declared to Bethany. His new friend had a twin brother who was a Grey Warden! And her older brother had been knighted by King Cailan. So her family had a knight, a mage, and a Grey Warden. Corbus felt a little envious. He and Lothar were lords, but they were just boys, and had never done anything important. Habren never did much but go to the Market and spend Father's coin.

Bethany was amazing. She could make blue light come out of her fingers, and she had fixed everybody in the room. She would have fixed Arl Urien, too, but his guards didn't like mages and had threatened her when she tried to see the Arl. She knew about mabarais too, because her brother had one. Killer already liked her a lot, because she had made Lothar all better.

She was exhausted, and stretched out on the stone floor by Lothar's bed. Corbus gallantly gave her a pillow. Everyone in the room was looking much better. Bann Alfstanna was sitting up now, and talking quietly to a group

of ladies. Servants had brought in soup, bread, and cheese for everyone. It was like a party for wounded people.

Old Lady Seria Mac Coe walked over to thank Bethany, carefully leaning on the walls.

"You shouldn't be up, my lady," Bethany said wearily.

"My dear, I had to come and talk to you. I cannot thank you enough! I thought I was going to die, here in this terrible place. And you not only healed my wounds, but you have quite taken away the pain in my joints!"

Corbus politely made room for her on the edge of the bed, and the elderly woman sat down gingerly, lowering her voice.

"Life can be so hard for those with the gift of magic. I want you to know that you are welcome to come and stay with me if you ever need a roof over your head."

"That is very kind of you, my lady," Bethany thanked her, "but I cannot leave my mother. Arl Bryland promised mages amnesty in the Queen's name, and I cannot think he would break his word."

Corbus piped up loyally, "Father says a nobleman *always* keeps his word!"

Lady Seria gave the boy a kind, sad look. "Noblemen often mean to do many things, and then complications arise. At least let me know where you are staying, my dear. I wish to reward you for all your help today."

"I didn't do it for coin," Bethany said, growing embarrassed.

"Of course you did not," the old lady replied. "No one would do all this for mere coin. A keepsake, perhaps? A token of

my gratitude? I may be old, but life is still sweet to me, and I was not ready to leave my children and grandchildren."

"I am staying at Highever House," Bethany said slowly. "My brother, Ser Adam Hawke, is in the service of the Teyrn of Highever."

"Ah." Lady Seria considered. "You are of gentle birth. I thought as much. Nicely spoken. Well brought up. All the more reason, my dear, for me to welcome you as a companion in my household, were you ever to need shelter."

There was noise in the corridor: the trampling of armored feet and the clamor of excited voices. The door opened, and Arl Bryland burst in. Killer filled the room with ecstatic barks.

"Lothar!"

The Arl stopped, astounded, to see his little boy sitting up, smiling. He was pale, and his shoulder was bandaged, but he no longer looked to be dying.

"Father!"

Corbus ran to him, threw his arms around him— heedless of the blood on his father's armor— and started babbling. "Lothar's all right! Bethany fixed him! Come meet her! Her brother's a Grey Warden!"

Bethany groaned inwardly, but forced herself to get to her feet to greet the Arl. Carver and his friends said he was nice, but you never knew how "nice" people would react to mages.

Lady Seria smiled at her. "I suspect you will be receiving other tokens of gratitude, as well."

Bryland hugged Corbus back, and let himself be dragged

forward. He hugged Lothar, too – carefully – and then had a look at the pretty, dark-haired girl in traveling clothes.

Others in the room were speaking up, praising Bethany's efforts. Bann Alfstanna herself edged up cautiously from her bed to put in a word. The Bann had been convinced that her stomach wound was a death sentence, but this young girl had saved her. Magic was perilous, true; but it was, by the Prophet's own words, intended to serve man.

"We are all indebted to this young woman, Leonas. Many of us would be dead by now, if not for her."

Corbus caught at Bethany's hand, a little jealously. She was *his* friend, and all these people were trying to take her away. It was time to assert himself.

"Her other brother's a knight, so she's a lady, Father. Her name is Bethany Hawke."

Bryland could place her, now: he had met both of the Hawke brothers, but of course they would have kept the mage sister very, very quiet. A brave and decent girl, to come forward and risk discovery, since she had no pecuniary motive.

He bowed to her, heart full of relief and gratitude. "My lady, you have my thanks. You have done great good here today. Know I am eternally in your debt, and whatever the Arl of South Reach can do for you, will be done."

Blushing, Bethany stammered, "I'm... just so glad I could do something... What happened was so cruel..."

A guard called out, "The Queen!" and Anora entered, still barefoot in a white shift and Adam Hawke's blue cloak.

Fergus Cousland was at her side, and just behind them were the Hawke brothers, who caught sight of Bethany talking to Arl Bryland. Simultaneously, they slapped their hands to their heads in despair. Bethany was no longer a secret. Worse, she was being presented to the Queen.

"Yes, everyone's grateful *today*," Carver muttered to Adam. "But what about tomorrow?"

Bethany was already speaking to Anora.

"I was not able to go to Arl Urien," she said, embarrassed. "The guards threatened me and chased me away. Arl Urien wanted nothing to do with a mage. I'm sorry I could not do more."

"Arl Urien made his choice," Anora replied coolly. She turned to Bryland. "I regret to inform you that your daughter is already a widow. The seneschal told us that Arl Urien is dead."

Shocked exclamations followed, which Anora silenced. "Our forces are still in pursuit of the assassins. We hold the Chantry, and we will investigate thoroughly their connivance with the attack."

Jowan said softly, "Your Majesty, since you are well, might I be allowed to go there and search for Wynne?"

Anora sighed, "You may go, but I believe it would be fruitless. I was told there that Healer Wynne was killed by the Templars shortly before the attack – another reason to suspect collusion between the assassins and elements in the Chantry."

Fergus said, "I was told by a priest loyal to us that the Grand Cleric has been locked away. There needs to be a thorough search of the Chantry, both to determine the degree of guilt

of those involved, and to clear those who are innocent.”

“All will be revealed, in time,” agreed Anora. “Therefore, I call all surviving members of the Landsmeet now present in Denerim to attend me in the Landsmeet Chamber tomorrow. We will cut to the heart of this conspiracy, and the enemies of Ferelden will pay.”



GREY WARDEN MAGE JOWAN

CHAPTER 15



AMONG
THE RUINS

FIFTY-THREE RECRUITS MARCHED OUT OF OSTAGAR INTO THE COLORFUL AUTUMN OF THE KOCARI WILDS, ON A MISSION

TO FIND DARKSPAWN AND BECOME GREY WARDENS. They divided into six war parties, and were ordered to meet afterwards at the old Warden outpost. It was a crumbling ruin now, but it would give them privacy and shelter, of a sort.

Wisely, they had left a supply wagon at the outpost, with a party of guards to protect it and what horses the Wardens had. The wagon was plentifully stocked, and should provision the Wardens sufficiently for the time they would be here.

As it happened, Tara and her party were the first to return. It was late in the afternoon, and the sky had clouded up. Tara prayed that it would not rain on them. Immediately, as planned, she dismissed the guards, and ordered her people to start unloading some of the supplies and gear. They also set to work building up the fire and pitching the tents. These were fairly big ones that would protect them from the wind, if not the cold at night. For

that they had blankets and some rather ratty furs.

"Why can't we sleep in the outpost?' asked a tall, bearded human... Walther... yes, Walther. He fought really well, but was always asking her questions. "What if it rains?"

"That's what the tents are for. We can't sleep in the outpost because only bits of it are safe, and we need it for the Joining ceremony. Put up all the tents while you're at it."

Walther protested, "We only need two!"

"Actually, all of us can fit into *one* of them, but our friends will be coming in, and it would be nice," she said sharply, "for them to be up and ready. *Especially* if it rains."

"What about opening one of the kegs of ale?"

"Later," Tara said, an edge to her voice.

"Come on, Walther," his friend Griffith said, pulling him away. "We're supposed to mind the Senior Warden." Tara watched them move away, talking urgently. Surprisingly, she was not worried about them doing as they were told. They had been pretty impressed with her during their two skirmishes with the darkspawn. All the same, Walther was one of those people who had to question everything, and just would not shut up.

The dwarves gave her less trouble. Sigrun and her friend Jukka were quite willing to fetch water and put the big pot on the boil. They chopped up the salt beef and vegetables, while the other two, Asa and Roldron, diligently dug the latrine. The two Dalish elves in her party, Darach and Lorrian, were quietly sticking close to her. They had

shot a brace of rabbits on the way back, and she told them to add them to the pot.

"Yes, Keeper," Darach murmured respectfully. Tara rolled her eyes.

Danith and Brosca's party reported in next. They had run into an ogre, and had been cut up pretty badly. Two of the recruits had been killed. The mage Petra was assigned to them, and she had her hands full with wounds and with two of the five recruits who were already suffering from Blight sickness. Those two – both elves – were pale and exhausted, and as soon as they had something to eat, Tara sent them off to rest in the tent she had assigned to Danith.

One of the humans, a big-shouldered, black bearded rogue named Aeron, sat down by the fire, and pulled out battered lute, singing in a surprisingly sweet tenor voice.

Petra, bustling here and there, stopped and said to Tara. "Strange. As big as he is, I'd have guessed he was a bass." Some others joined in, and soon quite a chorus was singing "THE BALLAD OF BRIAR BLOSSOM."

Anders came in with his people. They had also suffered casualties. Adaia was with him, helping with two humans who were in the early stages of Blight sickness. There had been another, who had abruptly died on them during the patrol. The rest were nervous and afraid of contracting the disease themselves. It had been a tense few hours.

"That was worse than herding cats," Anders told Tara, weary and disappointed in himself. "I swear!"

By the time Bronwyn and her recruits arrived, it was

already well into twilight. Bronwyn accepted a bowl of a-bit-of-everything soup gratefully, and agreed that it was quite all right to breach a keg of the ale.

"There's enough for everyone to have two cups. They're not very big cups, after all," she told her Wardens.

A perimeter was established, and a rota of guards scheduled. Bronwyn was not particularly pleased that this had not been done before she arrived, but decided to discuss it later with her senior people. Danith, she felt, should have known better — or at least better than Tara and Anders, but Tara was her nominal superior officer. Tara had not been brought up to command a camp, however. She was quick enough when someone took the time to teach her something.

So Bronwyn consulted with her, and showed her how such things were organized. With larger groups, they must be more regimented than when they were only four or five. At least Tara had had the sense to have her people dig a latrine and set up the tents.

"Are we going to start the Joinings tonight?" Tara whispered.

Bronwyn had given that a lot of thought.

"No. The other parties might still come in later, and it wouldn't do to be interrupted. And Alistair, especially, would be hurt if we didn't wait for him."

It was still going to be hard to manage. Maintaining order would be key to their success.

Had she, in old Nan's pithy phrase, 'bit off more than she could chew'? It would be hard to control this large

group, especially if many were traumatized by the deaths of friends. And the large number of dead would be difficult to dispose of. Mages would make it all go more smoothly, of course, but it would still be an unpleasant task. However, it must be done all at one time, or recruits who experienced the Joining would panic and want to warn their friends of the danger.

Danith had made her promise that the Dalish dead would be buried after their own customs, and Bronwyn had agreed. That would involve grave-digging and seedling trees planted over the graves. As this was clearly important to Danith, and would make the Dalish as a whole more reconciled to dealing with humans, Bronwyn had decided to allow them their way in this. Astrid and Brozca were not so particular, thank the Maker. She went over her plans with Tara.

"Once Alistair and Astrid come in with their parties, we'll get started. I suspect that by now they're going to camp where they are overnight. If they're late tomorrow, we'll separate into groups for training exercises to keep everyone occupied. For the Joining, we'll take them in the groups they were in today. I want to get the sick ones Joined as soon as possible, so they'll go first."

Even the unwounded recruits were tired enough from fighting and working that they settled down for the night with a welcome degree of docility. Bronwyn sat inside the ruined stone hall of the outpost, working on her roster by

candlelight. Those who never tasted the Joining potion were not considered Wardens, and so would not be listed as such. Reluctantly, she consulted the enlistment roster and crossed through the names: *Ulfar Galro, Gron Saelac, Rose Oldfield...*

Once finished with that duty, she crept silently into her team's tent, whispering to Scout to be quiet, hoping that her dreams did not distress the recruits.

She was somewhere in the Deep Roads again, but the darkspawn were tantalizingly far away. Time and again, the Archdemon seemed just around the next bend in the tunnel, but Bronwyn ran ahead trying to catch the creature, and each time she found nothing. There was only a tickle in her mind, like the reflection of a smirk. Where had they gone? She was so tired...

Her eyes opened. It was still dark in the tent. Snoring. That had awakened her. There was the muffled sound of a hard shove and then Aveline's furious whisper.

"Toliver! Turn over! Nobody can sleep!"

The warrior snorted and shifted, and the snoring stopped. The dwarves, who had been snoring too, but more softly, awakened and cursed, quietly but feelingly. The two Dalish murmured to each other. Possibly Dalish elves did not snore at all, and found it another proof of the inferiority of other races. Possibly they were right in this case. More snoring emanated from the other tents. Bronwyn tried to compose herself for sleep again, but some of the chilly damp was soaking through her blanket. She sighed and shifted to a drier place, and then remembered her dream.

What was the Archdemon up to?

The following morning, she let the recruits sleep in, all but those who were up for the changing of the guard. The night had been quiet, but cold. It was not much trouble to build up the fire herself. Some of those recruits unlucky enough to be stirring in the pearly light of dawn were set to cleaning out the stew pot. Others were ordered to fetch water and begin cooking porridge. There was a large kettle for tea as well. Bronwyn longed for it like a child for her mother.

The last of the Wardens and their people arrived before much of the camp was awake. Alistair and Astrid had met each other on their return, and joined forces. Bronwyn glanced over their numbers and found them three men short. Nonetheless, they greeted Bronwyn fairly cheerfully and headed straight for the porridge. Scout liked Alistair, and trotted over to him.

"Who's a good boy?" Alistair grinned, scratching the dog's ears.

Oghren, unsurprisingly, was alive and not more battered than usual.

"Hey, Boss! You can't get rid of Oghren Kondrat with a measly few dozen darkspawn!"

Also alive, to Bronwyn's relief, was Emrys Stronar, a nephew of Bann Stronar of Redesdale. He had ridden his own warhorse to the outpost yesterday, and a fine beast it was. Bronwyn had not been thrilled to accept him as a recruit, since his death would cause political trouble for

her, but the young man was a capable warrior and no fool. He was a distant cousin, too, and Bronwyn did not want to seem to be favoring her family by sheltering him from the hazards of becoming a Warden. Aside from a bandage around his arm, he appeared to be none the worse for wear.

The Dalish mage was with them, and had evidently busied herself tending wounds, though she seemed to find dealing with humans distasteful. She would have to get over that. Bronwyn privately resolved to keep the assignments mixed, and not pair Danith and Velanna together. There was no room for a Dalish clique among the Wardens.

Though that would be tricky. Danith was up, and was already greeting Velanna, wanting her to have a look at the Blight-sick Dalish. Then she was heading in Bronwyn's direction, frowning. Bronwyn made herself greet her comrade with a friendly, helpful look on her face.

"Nuala and Steren are very sick," Danith said, without preamble. "They must be Joined as soon as possible."

Bronwyn nodded calmly. "We will rouse the camp, and set everything in motion. As soon as everyone has had their meal, the Joining will begin. Your team will go first, and then Anders' people, since some of them are sick as well. Find Brosca and Adaia, and send them to me. I need Tara and Anders, too. Tell all the group leaders to keep an eye on the recruits, and not to let anyone wander away. And remember to stay alert for darkspawn!"

The two girls came soon, and were given the task of pre-

paring the ruined stone chamber for the ceremony. Tara and Anders were to mix the Joining potion. After that, they were all to report to Bronwyn immediately. Bronwyn joined Alistair and Astrid at the fire for a bowl of porridge. No matter what happened, porridge should stay put and sustain her.

"We had to go pretty far to find darkspawn," Alistair told her, gesturing with his spoon. "Round and round. We found some treasure, too. Of course, it didn't make up for losing poor Breedwell, but he was *really* careless."

"I lost two dwarves," Astrid added, more soberly. "Not Legion, but good fighters. One lost his head, trying to protect his friend. Fortunately for us, they weren't noble caste, so there shouldn't be any repercussions."

Meanwhile, Brosca climbed into the wagon, and out of the barrel of oats she drew the bag that Bronwyn had hidden there: a bag that contained some of their plunder from Haven. The gold candlesticks and golden goblet would do them proud; Anders had contributed an elegant silk shawl that he meant to give to Morrigan later; and in a box were enough fine wax candles to illuminate the battered little stone hall in the outpost all day long.

The recruits were too busy to take any note of the two girls hurrying into the ruins, clutching their burdens. Bronwyn drank her tea slowly. It was going to be a trying day.

Each group was ordered to wait inside their tent with their team leader. Adaia was given the duty of summoning the groups, and leading them to the ceremony. The

other extra Warden, Brosca, Bronwyn wanted beside her, in case there was some... awkwardness.

Bronwyn told Aveline that she was in charge of their team, and to keep them with her until they were called. They could play cards, they could talk, but they were not to get drunk or leave the tent. Aveline had strong nerves and could wait better than many another.

Tara told her people to go into their tent, and Walther immediately asked her why, and what was going on. Bronwyn stalked over, her nerves on edge.

"Your Senior Warden has given you an order. If you can't obey it, then you can start walking for Ostagar right now!"

The man backed away, eyes wide, and hands up in surrender.

"No offense, Dragonslayer. Just asking."

"Your questions will be answered in due time. All we ask of you at the moment is that you prove that you can wait."

"What if we need to take a piss?"

"Then do it right now, or bring a bucket into the tent with you!"

She strode away, irritated. The men behind her had plenty to say.

"Walther, you're going to get your arse handed to you if you're not careful. Just give it a rest."

"Did you ever see such green eyes? Scary! But why —"

His words were muffled, as his friend dragged him into the tent. Tara followed them, sighing. Bronwyn went back to the ruins, and had a look around her.

Brosca and Adaia had done a good job fixing up the gloomy stone ruin. It looked like a place where mysteries lurked. The gold candlesticks glittered in the dim light. The golden cup which had once held dragon's blood had been cleaned scrupulously. It was now filled with an even fouler mixture.

The hall was partly open to the sky, and light filtered greenly through layers of ivy and moss. Red and yellow leaves had drifted down, carpeting the dusty stones. Another chamber adjoined, and Brosca had lit candles there too, while Adaia had laid out blankets for the survivors. Another blanket was neatly tacked up on some rotten timbers to screen the doorway.

"And there," Brosca said, jerking her thumb toward a dark crevice. "is a cubbyhole where we can hide the bodies. Don't worry. There's room for lots of them."

"How nice," Bronwyn muttered, hoping that there *weren't* 'a lot' of them. She told Adaia to let Danith know they were ready.

"Brosca," she said, "if anyone tries to get out of Joining... if anyone pulls a weapon... you know what to do. Only Wardens leave this room."

Brosca thought a bit, remembering bits of her own Joining, and then nodded. "They don't get to disagree about darkspawn blood. Got it, Boss." She faded back against the wall, and drew her sleek shortsword. Casually, she laid it on a a out-thrust fallen stone, then gave Bronwyn a thumbs-up.

"Scout," Bronwyn whispered, crouching down by the mabari. "You have to be very good and very quiet today.

Stay there," she pointed to a corner by Brosca. "And don't move or growl or bark! All right?"

If Scout had been human, he would have rolled his eyes. As it was, he went to the corner, flopped down, and dozed through most of the subsequent proceedings.

Petra was in Danith's group. As a Healer, she might soon be useful — if she survived. At any rate, she was a composed young woman, and Bronwyn decided to call her forward first. The recruits filed in, eyes wide, and the rite began. Bronwyn recited the same speech she had given King Cailan, and then began the ritual words.

"Join us, brothers and sisters: join us as we stand vigilant..."

The recruits looked suitably impressed. They were even more impressed — and not very favorably — when they understood what they were to drink.

Bronwyn's confidence in Petra was not misplaced. As expected, the mage fell back, unconscious but alive. Brosca caught her and lowered her gently to the ground. Then Bronwyn gathered her courage and called the first of the two Blighted Dalish. To her surprise, both Nuala and Steren survived. The singer Aeron survived, but the next recruit did not. When Bronwyn said, "I am sorry, Kerald," there was an uneasy stir.

"He's dead!" whispered a dwarf. Bronwyn fixed him with a stern eye, and called him forward.

"Ketil."

Things might have turned nasty, but he was tough

enough to take the cup without argument, and survived. The last of the group, another dwarf, perished horribly.

"Well," Brosca said afterwards. "That was disappointing, but at least I didn't have to stab anybody in the back."

"It was much better than my Joining," Bronwyn replied. "This wasn't only one surviving out of three, at least. The first died and Duncan had to kill the second."

Danith gave her a quick, shocked look, and then nodded thoughtfully. She was unsurprisingly pleased that the Dalish had survived. They tended the living first, and then the dead.

"They are lovers," she told Bronwyn, indicating Nuala and Steren. "It is well that they shall have each other."

Bronwyn agreed, but was deeply relieved that one had not died to leave the other grieving. That could get extremely depressing for everyone. In future, she would take more care to break up couples during the Joining. A bereaved recruit might lose all control and lash out.

Adaia, very shaken by the deaths, was given a sip from Brosca's stone bottle, and then went to fetch the next group.

This was Adaia's own group, led by Anders, and once again the results were not very cheering.

A bright-eyed, red-haired boy named Quinn survived, and the Dalish elf, Siofranni, and then they lost a dwarf. There was the same uneasy, frightened stir, but the other dwarf in the group, a woman of the Legion named Idunn, bravely swallowed the potion and lived. And then things got very bad indeed. Three humans in a row perished

in the same horrible way: choking, choking, clutching their throats, their eyes rolled white in their last spasms. Bronwyn expected a fight, but the first of the three was a woman, and perhaps the men thought they were bound to succeed where she failed. The next recruit was a slight and slender archer, and the burly warrior who followed clearly thought himself the better man. He was not.

The pretty blonde girl who was last in line began weeping, hands shaking too badly to hold the cup. She was already grey with Blight-sickness, and Bronwyn held little hope for her now.

"Maeve," Bronwyn said wearily, "from this moment you are a Grey Warden. Anders will hold the cup for you. You have to drink. There is no turning back."

Anders gently wiped away the girl's tears, lest they fall in the cup. She drank, collapsed, and lived. There was no accounting for the Joining.

They dragged or carried the survivors to the next room, and laid them down on blankets by their restless fellows. So far, in proportion to their numbers the Dalish were faring best, the humans worst. It was not quite what anyone had expected. On the other hand, none of their earlier elven candidates had failed the Joining. It was something else to think about.

Bronwyn decided to call Tara's group next. Plucky little Sigrun took the cup first and survived, as did her friend Jukka. They lost the next two dwarves, but the annoying

Walther lived, as did his friend Griffith.

Joy. I so look forward to all of Walther's questions. Then she rebuked herself for wishing failure on any recruit. Of the two Dalish, the first lived, and the second did not.

Danith didn't like that, Bronwyn noted. Neither, for that matter, do I.

Nor did Tara, whose face had gone white and strained. She must not take this as a personal failure. They were all losing recruits from their teams. Adaia needed another drink, but Brosca was holding up quite well. She was pleased that her old acquaintance Sigrun had made it, and philosophical about those who did not.

"The ones in the Legion were counted as dead already. This just makes it... permanent."

Bronwyn let Anders and Tara take charge of the living. She and Brosca handled the uglier task of depositing the dead into the dank little hole. She decided that her own group had waited long enough without a Warden, and sent Adaia for them.

Niall's brown eyes were very big when the secret of the Joining was revealed. For that reason, Bronwyn called first on Aveline, and her trust was rewarded.

Without a word, the tall redhead took the cup and swallowed her dose. Her hands steady, she handed the cup back, and when she fell back, she did not seem to be fighting the potion. Anders caught her carefully.

"She's all right," he said.

Bronwyn liked that. Saying "She lives," instantly gave a very broad hint that there was some doubt as to the outcome. Perhaps that helped Niall take the cup with better spirits, though he waggled his brows and mouthed "*Blood Magic?*" at Bronwyn, who frowned at him until he shrugged apologetically and drank.

Danith uttered a muffled cry when they lost another Dalish, a strong and handsome young man that Bronwyn would have laid odds on surviving.

One of the dwarves stepped back and asked, "Does that happen a lot?" and then looked away from Bronwyn's cold green stare. Two dwarves perished, but the last two lived, which ended the group's festivities on a pleasanter note.

The sleeping and the dead were variously set aside, and Adaia went out to fetch Alistair and his people. Bronwyn had personal concerns about this group. Maker, she was tired. This was just too much at once. She was growing hard and indifferent, and that would not make her a better leader.

Emrys was smiling as he came in, talking quietly with another recruit. All conversation stopped abruptly when they entered the gloomy stone chamber. Bronwyn wished briefly she had lubricated her tired throat with the contents of Broca's stone bottle, but she gave the speech yet again. This time, however, she asked Alistair to recite the ritual words.

And then Bronwyn offered the cup. "Emrys Stronar, from this moment you are a Grey Warden."

She was deeply relieved when Emrys survived his dose of

the Taint. He reminded her a bit of Carver Hawke: a younger son trying to make his own way in the world. He had no chance of inheriting his uncle's bannorn, nor even his father's small manor. His only real patrimony was his horse, his armor and his sword. He was not as handsome as either of the Hawke brothers, but he was tall and well-made, with clear hazel eyes and a strong-boned face. He was Warden Emrys now, at any rate. She would see what he made of it.

Nice young Liam made it. She had discovered that he could handle a team, and had rather been counting on him to drive their wagon back to Ostagar. Bronwyn could drive — after a fashion — and Alistair knew plenty about hitching oxen, but an expert teamster would be helpful. He was a fair-faced boy, too: with sun-bleached hair and a winning smile. There was something to be said for the power of good looks to raise the spirits.

Oghren stepped forward and sneered at the contents of the cup. "Is that all? Is that the regular dose? Or are you commenting on my size?"

"Standard dose," Bronwyn said, trying not to smile. "All you need is a swallow."

He snorted, and then took a hearty draught. Bronwyn took the cup back quickly, a little alarmed.

He belched, his eyes rolling back.

"Hey! Not bad..."

He crumpled heavily to the floor, already snoring.

Others were not so resistant to the potion. A human

archer died, and a little later, a dwarf axeman. Still, the rest survived, and there was only one more group to go.

One last time, they began the ceremony of life and death. Astrid brought her people into the chamber. There was the same brief, awed hesitation, and then Bronwyn began speaking.

Dalish Velanna took the cup fearlessly and drank. Bronwyn caught Danith's eye. A look of unutterable relief was there, as the elven mage fell back, alive. No one else faltered. Perhaps humans and elves had too much pride not to dare what an elf and a woman ventured. Even when one of the humans coughed out his life, the next recruit took the cup. Trembling, yes: but he took it all the same. They lost a Dalish recruit, too. The very last of the recruits, Catriona, a human archer with hair prematurely streaked with grey, survived.

It was over. Everyone took a deep, exhausted breath, and they moved the survivors into the adjoining room. Adaia hurried to spread more blankets for them. The whole process had taken perhaps half the morning.

They had sixteen dead to deal with. The three Dalish would be buried, and the rest burned. Amongst them, the Wardens managed to hitch up the wagon and load the bodies into it. Anders and Brozca stayed behind to keep watch over the sleeping recruits.

"Thanks, Boss," Brozca muttered fervently. "Not that I mind digging, but burning bodies are... gross."

The clouds broke, and the welcome sun peeped out, warming the breeze a bit. Bronwyn drove the wagon over

some fairly flat ground to a clearing half a mile away. Danith and Adaia took shovels and began digging a grave for the Dalish. The thirteen human and dwarven bodies were... stacked... neatly, and Tara incinerated them with terrifying, magical dispatch.

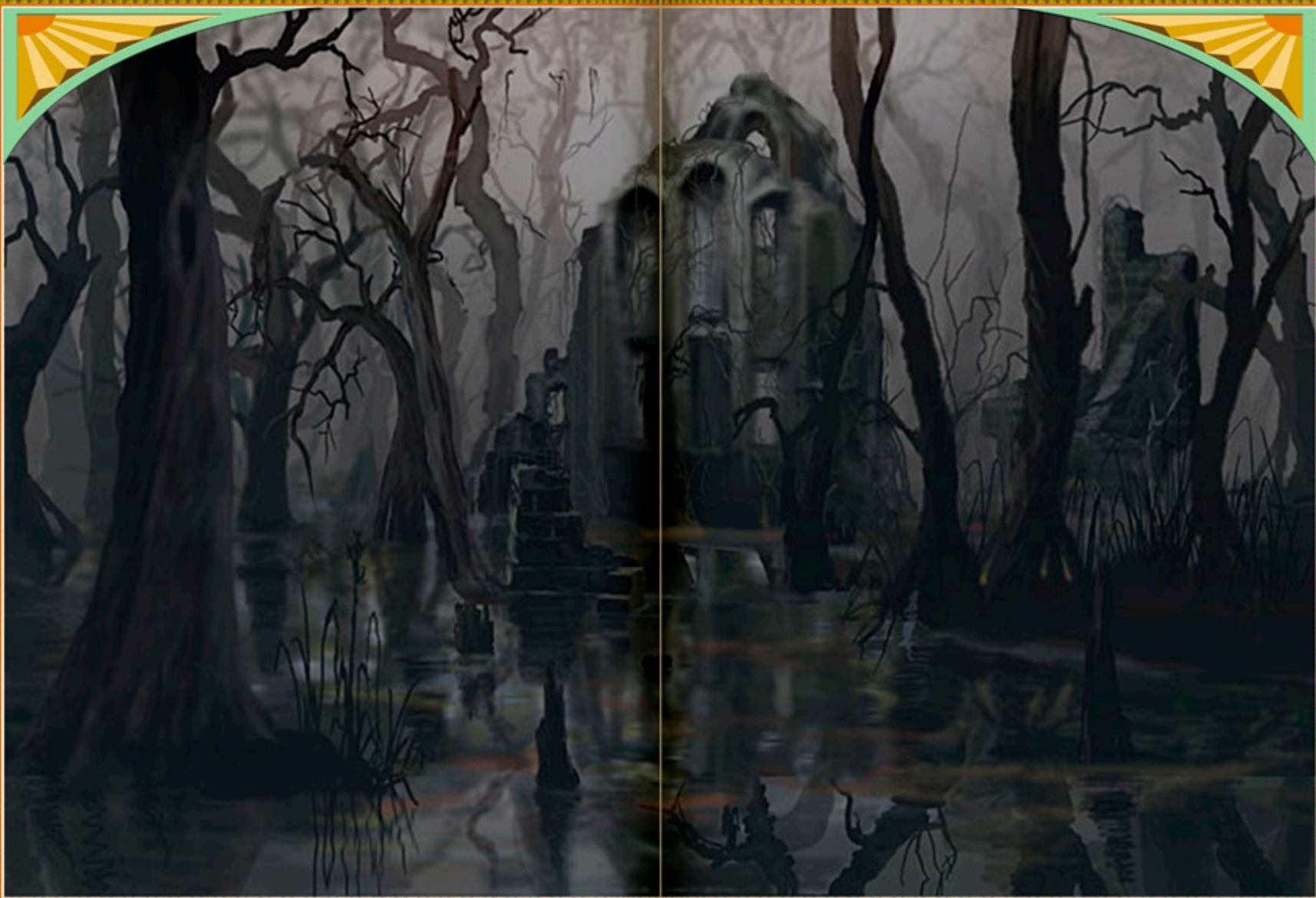
Bronwyn watched the holocaust, eyes dry, but sick at heart. The grand Wardens' pyre after the Bloomingtide Battle seemed very long ago. Those Wardens had been recognized by name, and had speeches made and wine poured in their honor. These unfortunates were being disposed of like rubbish. Bronwyn did not even have commemorative amulets for the survivors. She had forgotten about them, and there was no way to obtain them anyway. They would preserve the remains of this Joining potion, and then procure some hallowed-out crystals at a later date. Probably not by Satinalia. With luck, they could be First Day presents.

Tara was equally miserable. Could they have made a mistake with the Joining potion? Surely not. They had followed Fiona's instructions faithfully. It was impossible to guess who would survive the Taint, and who would not.

"I should go help Danith and Adaia now," she said, turning away.

"Have a drink, first," Alistair said. He smiled weakly at Bronwyn. "I brought a bottle of wine."

They passed it around, and Alistair recited a bit of the Chant of Light. The remaining clouds blew off, leaving the sky a fierce and uniform blue behind the rising black smoke. Astrid took a swig of wine and raised the bottle in salute.



KORKARI WILDS: RUINED OUTPOST



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

"*Atrast tunsha. Totarnia amgetol tavash aeduc.*"

"At least we've got Petra and Niall. Oghren, too," Tara sighed.

Astrid shrugged. "We have thirty-one new Wardens, which is thirty-one more than we had yesterday. I never doubted Oghren for an instant. It is possible that long exposure to the Deep Roads and to darkspawn might lend a kind of immunity. The Legion did well, too."

"It did," Bronwyn sighed. "We might as well learn what we can from this. Tara and Anders woke first, out of their Joining," Bronwyn reminded them. "Perhaps it has something to do with being mages and thus more at home in the Fade. We'll see how the newest mages fare."

Back at camp, Bronwyn sat down with ink and quill, and carefully noted all the recruits down into the roll of Fereldan Wardens: both the living and the dead. Some of the Wardens were striking the tents and loading them; others – led by Alistair – were preparing something like the *potée de chasse* Fiona had cooked in the cabin in the Frostbacks. Alistair was otherwise a terrible cook, but Fiona had taught him how to make proper porridge and decent *potée de chasse*, and the lessons had stuck. They were his only inheritance from his mother, after all.

The sausages were plump and rather salty Fereldan ones, rather than the spicy Jader venison sausages Fiona had used, but as long as there were plenty of onions, parsnips, and turnips, Fereldans would be happy. There were

even a few cloves of garlic to render it something like the original. There was bread and sharp white cheese; there was a basket of red apples. There were two more kegs of ale. They was even a large pot of *hallensal*, and a smaller pot of wild honey; a gift of the Dalish. The Wardens would march back to Ostagar with full bellies.

Bronwyn strolled over to the apples, selected one, and began munching. It had been a hard day's work already, and it was only a little after noon.

Anders stepped out of the ruins and called to Tara, "Petra is waking up."

Tara smiled and went to welcome her, taking a bucket of water and a dipper. Anders was more Petra's friend than Tara was, but it would be good for the young woman to awaken with familiar faces around her.

Tara knelt beside Anders, and gave Petra a drink of water; while Anders calmed her down from the distress of those first, dreadful Fade visions.

"I think I saw the Archdemon!"

"You probably did," Anders told her. "In time we learn to control those dreams a bit better. Bronwyn will have a meeting and explain it all when everyone's awake. Why don't you go outside and get something to eat?"

"Maker! I'm starving!"

Tara helped her to her feet, and said quietly. "Not everybody made it through the Joining. Bronwyn will explain about that, too."



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DRAGON SLAYER

Petra glanced quickly around the crumbling stone chamber at the thrashing, slumbering men and women, and then whispered, "Is that normal?"

"Afraid so. The Joining is dangerous. Mages seem to do better than anybody else, though. Niall's all right."

"Is anyone injured? I could –"

"No," said Anders. "It's the potion itself. It's either a lethal poison or it isn't."

Niall awakened next, and then Velanna. They staggered outside into the sunlight and to their first meal as Wardens. Bronwyn had opened the ale, and that seemed to help. The first two surviving Dalish, Steren and Nuala, were relieved to be cured of the Blight-sickness. They kept apart, talking softly to one another, and then went to speak to Danith, trying to make sense of what they had seen. A few more awakened, shocked by their ventures into the Fade.

A freckled, red-haired boy approached the stewpot, grinning enormously. Bronwyn had nearly stopped the Joining when she guessed how young he must be. He was tall and strong enough, and had killed darkspawn in battle, but that smooth chin had never known a razor.

"So, Quinn... how old *are* you?" she asked, watching him fill his bowl to the trembling brim. He grabbed a hunk of bread, tore it into pieces, and scattered it on top of his stew, like a child.

"F-f-f-f...Eighteen, Warden-Commander!" he lied brazenly. He held his spoon like a child, too.



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DRAGON SLAYER

"Feighteen. I don't know that number," Bronwyn mused. "Could it be closer to thirteen or sixteen? Or in the middle? Fourteen? Fifteen?"

He shrugged, smirking. "Don't know, really. I *could* be sixteen. Anyhow, I'm a Warden now! I hear you get paid regular! Is that true?"

"Absolutely true. You'll all be due twenty silvers when we get back to camp."

The boy nearly dropped his bowl. "Twenty silvers! I'm rich!"

So there was joy, but there was sorrow, too, as the recruits awakened and found that friends and acquaintances were dead. Some were brooding and silent; a few were shocked and rather frightened of the Wardens. Some, deplorably, gloated a bit, feeling that this test had been a judgment on their rivals. Some were deeply horrified by the visions they had seen. For the dwarves, who had never experienced anything similar before, it was particularly disorienting. Grieving or not, everybody ate, and that brought them into contact with their new comrades. Escaping death was quite the bonding experience.

Oghren eventually awakened. He lumbered from the ruins, squinting and cursing. "Sodding nughumpers! I was *seeing* things! And I wasn't even drunk!"

Astrid shoved him toward the food, with a tolerant smile. Bronwyn stopped by to congratulate him, and was given an earful about how the Joining was "worse than the worst hangover. Ever. And I've had a few."

"You'll do," she laughed lightly, rapping him on the pauldron.

Riordan had told them that one never forcibly awakened freshly-Joined Wardens from their first Fade-dreams. Bronwyn let her new people sleep themselves out, and it was mid-afternoon when the last of the recruits – three dwarves from the Legion of the Dead – were up and scraping the stewpot to appease their raging hunger. Scout, the beggar, was cadging treats from the new-Joined Wardens: sausage ends and cheese rinds.

Sigrun was among that last group, eating happily. She grinned at Bronwyn.

"I guess I'm still alive! Funny how that keeps happening!"

Everyone was rounded up, and Bronwyn thought the time was right to give them their official welcome and lay down the law. Scout came to sit beside her, very straight and dignified. Bronwyn pitched her voice to carry in the open air.

"You're all Grey Wardens, the latest in an ancient line of champions against the Blight. Some of you smile, but champions you are, who have just passed your first, great test by mastering the Taint. There will be more tests to come. I inscribed all your names – the names of those who survived the Joining and those who did not – in the Warden roster. When we get back to camp, you will be paid. Regular payday is quarterly, but you're due a bit prior to Satinalia –"

"Twenty silvers each!" Quinn shouted gleefully. Brosca slapped him on the back of his head, and the boy subsided.

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed kindly. "Twenty silvers each.

You've already earned them."

"Commander –" Walther interrupted. "What was that –"

"Silence there!" Alistair ordered, scowling. Bronwyn was pleased. Alistair was doing much better at sounding authoritative. Walther grimaced, obviously bursting with curiosity.

"You all have questions," Bronwyn said. "and the Grey Wardens have many secrets. You have a right to know them, but first you must swear the Warden's Oath never to reveal them to any outside the order. Don't look so eager," she said to some willing faces. "This is serious. The penalty for oath-breaking is death, not just for the careless, loose-lipped Warden, but for those in whom he confides. You don't tell your lovers, your friends, your brothers, your mothers, your clan leaders, your heads of Houses, or your banns. If you do, they will be killed or made to undertake the Joining. As you have noticed, not all who Join survive to serve."

There was a leaden silence. One of the women wiped her eyes.

"So I call on you now to stand, and to swear before Andraste, or by your ancestors, or by the gods you revere, to keep the secrets of the Wardens; to hold all other Wardens as your sisters and brothers, with no regard to their race or creed or rank at birth; and to pursue our mission to protect Thedas from the threat of the darkspawn by whatever means are necessary! Do you so swear?"

A pretty good shout of "I do!" with some scattered agreement around the edges. Bronwyn looked at them all, and saw no refusals, though many new Wardens were puzzled or grim.

Bronwyn took a deep breath, continued. "So be it. You have sworn. Now I can tell you that we bear a heavy burden. The survival of all Thedas rests on our shoulders. Only Grey Wardens can truly defeat the darkspawn. The blood you drank gives us great power. We can sense the darkspawn, and follow them into their secret places. We see them in the Fade, and gather intelligence about their movements. The Joining gives us greater strength and stamina to perform our duties. We are immune to Blight-sickness, and need not fear close action with our ancient enemies. In fact, Grey Wardens, as I understand it, never get sick at all. You may suffer wounds aplenty, but you'll never catch cold!"

There were a few laughs, and a decided lightening of the general mood. Bronwyn was sorry that she must now give them the bad news.

"However," she admitted, head high, "these powers come at a price. After many years — perhaps thirty or so — a Warden's link to the darkspawn becomes overwhelming, and the Warden hears them all the time. Traditionally, the Warden then goes to the Deep Roads to fight a last battle. One way or another, the darkspawn are our destiny. But we are all soldiers, and we know that Fate exacts a payment: the greater the glory, the greater the sacrifice. This too is a secret of the Wardens, another one that you must never reveal.

"And there are other aspects to life as a Grey Warden that you should be aware of," she added. "You have already experienced the Grey Warden appetite for food! That will

not change. It takes a great deal to fuel our powers. You have experienced the terrible dreams we see. In time, you will be able to control them. I have been told," she said slowly, "that Grey Wardens have few children. Whether this is because of the hazardous lives we lead or for some other reason, I am uncertain."

Somewhat to her surprise, there was not a lot of distress at the news. Bronwyn wondered a little at that. On the other hand, perhaps none of these recruits had had it drummed into their heads from earliest childhood that it would be their duty to continue a noble lineage.

She had wrestled with the last, greatest secret, and then had decided to save that. Let these new Wardens settle in for at least a few days.

"There is more to know, but that is enough for one day. We'll break camp and return to Ostagar. Arrangements have been made to give us more space in the Tower of Ishal, and I can tell you the officers you have ousted are displeased!"

More laughter.

"For now, you Junior Wardens will continue to report to the Warden who led you today, with the exception of the mages, who are under the command of Senior Mage Warden Tara. The group Tara commanded today will now be led by Warden Brosca."

Brosca waved a hand.

Bronwyn went on. "In time, as we know your abilities better, there will be reassignments based on who fights best

with whom, and who has special abilities – like those of Warden Adaia in the bomb workshop. If you're interested in that kind of work, talk to her about it. Three of our Wardens are in Denerim right now, and will eventually lead fighting teams. We have also some comrades supporting us who are not Wardens: Morrigan, Sten, and Zevran. Grey Wardens do not refuse powerful allies. Ours have proven themselves scores of times, and are to be treated with respect.

"Learn these regulations now: You must obey my orders and those of Senior Wardens Alistair and Tara, and those of Wardens senior to you. Refusal to obey a direct order will be considered insubordination. Such an infraction will be punished first by loss of pay, the amount depending upon the seriousness of the offense. Further offenses will be punished by confinement to quarters, flogging, or execution, in that order. A combination of punishments may also be imposed. I find it hard to believe that any of you would even face accusations of cowardice. All of you have proved your courage. However, desertion in the face of the enemy will also be punished, depending upon the seriousness of the situation, and whatever mitigating circumstances may apply. Above all," she said, repeating it so no one would forget. *"Keep our secrets.* If you must gossip or confide in someone, confide in a fellow Grey Warden. We are more than comrades-in-arms. We are your family, from this day forward."

She gave a sharp nod to Alistair, who shouted, "Grey

Wardens! Break camp!"

They set to work quickly: saddling horses; scrubbing out the cooking gear and crockery; wiping the cleaned bowls and cups; folding blankets and tents; stowing everything away in the wagon. Liam and Quinn hitched the oxen, and before long they were on the move. Reflexively, the archers moved out to the perimeter, eyes sharp for enemies or a bit of game.

Brosca climbed up on the wagon seat beside Liam and began teaching him a filthy ditty. Aeron accompanied them on his lute, singing an elaborate descant to the melody. Danith shook her head, and talked softly to Velanna, hands sketching out her conversation. Astrid herded the rest of the Wardens into a creditable column before and behind the wagon. Bright leaves fell around them, muffling the tramp of booted feet. The talk was cheerful or at least composed.

Emrys, on his fine warhorse, rode next to Alistair, who was in charge of the rear guard.

"So, there are more secrets left to learn?"

Alistair granted him a wary smile. "A few. Some of them are big, but there's plenty of time. The rule used to be that you were a Warden a full year before you were told everything. Obviously, we have to do things differently during a Blight. Bronwyn will make sure you know what you need to know."

"What are the Commander's strictures on fraternization within the order?"

"She doesn't have a problem with it, as long you do your job.

She lets avowed couples arrange a bit of privacy in the barracks."

"Impressive armor she's wearing. I wish I'd seen her kill that dragon. She's a real hero, isn't she? Perhaps the hero of our time."

"You don't know the half of it."



OGHREN KONDRAT, GREY WARDEN

CHAPTER 16



ILL TIDINGS FROM DENERIM

THE GREY WARDENS RETURNED TO OSTAGAR RATHER SUBDUED, their party considerably smaller than it had been two days before. Bronwyn reported to Loghain immediately.

"You look exhausted," Loghain said, rather concerned. Actually, Bronwyn looked worse than that: drawn and sallow and grim. She looked five years older than when he had last seen her two days before.

"Considering that I just poisoned sixteen people and disposed of their bodies," Bronwyn said, her lip curling slightly, "I think I look fairly *perky*." She added, "Six of my recruits were killed in battle, so I'm not directly responsible for *their* deaths."

"You knew that many would die."

"Yes, I did. They didn't. At least nobody tried to run, thus forcing me to cut them down. That was fairly ugly at my own Joining. But the sobbing and shaking was distressing. I understand that there are murderers who find such things stimulating. It only made me sick and ashamed."

He pushed a cup of wine her way. "I have had a request from the Dalish to deal with the assassins themselves. Do you still wish to offer them them mercy?"

"I suppose I do," she said, "and for that reason, I will not be offering them the chance to be Wardens. Besides, after all my new people went through, it would be wrong to spit on their sacrifice by introducing people who cannot be trusted. Undergoing the Joining doesn't magically make one good, after all. We have no guarantees that they'd suddenly see the importance of fighting darkspawn. More likely they would take the first opportunity to knife Quinn or Maeve or Sigrun in the back, and then flee to Orlais." She finished her wine in a single long swallow. "What do the Dalish want to do to them?"

"Use them for target practice," he grunted. "I got the impression from Thanovir that their Keepers had had something magical in mind, but decided that it would be too shocking for their human allies. I wouldn't have objected to stranding them in the Fade myself, but the Revered Mother would have squawked. At that, I wonder if the offer would have been made, had the assassins been Dalish, rather than city elves."

"Have they had anything further to say – the assassins, I mean?"

"No. Quite professional, in their way. For that matter, I would have had them questioned more harshly, but I had to consider the Dalish themselves squawking. All this con-

cern for the customs and opinions of others is very tiresome. If it were left to me, I'd keep them in cages and hang them from the battlements until they starved, and then send their heads to Empress Celene."

Bronwyn found that a rather horrible idea, though it was admittedly less horrible than her own first impulse to give the women to the darkspawn. "I suppose we'll have to get used to considering the customs and opinions of others."

"Perhaps." He agreed. "I will pass along your consent to young Merrill. I would like to be rid of those women as soon as possible – preferably today, if they can arrange it. Enough of them. What of your expedition? Did you find many darkspawn?"

"We found enough for our purposes, but only scattered bands in the Wilds. The darkspawn are nearly gone from the surface here, though we'll continue to run patrols. In the tunnels there were more, but they too seemed to be remnants. I'm almost sure that the horde has withdrawn elsewhere; possibly quite far away. We'll obviously have to continue to keep watch at Ostagar, but I'm considering sending out parties to check out some of the known Deep Roads entrances."

"That will divide your forces."

"A good thing I recruited so many, then. I see no way around it. Were I the Archdemon, I would be preparing an assault on somewhere undefended. They could pop up outside West Hill, for all I know, and no one would even know they were on the march until they were at the gates of Highever!"

The execution of the would-be assassins was held at sunset, and was over fairly quickly. Sensitive to the views and customs of his allies, Loghain had allowed the Dalish custody of the prisoners they had captured. The three surviving women were marched out before the army and tied to posts, and the ranks of Dalish archers were drawn up before them. The assassins' leader, unrepentant to the end, spat her defiance on the ground, hoping the Blight took them all. No one who did not wish to be part of the execution was forced to participate, but the ranks were nonetheless quite impressive. Maynriel gave them the order to loose, and the feathered bodies slumped. As the women were Andrasteans — more or less — they were then given to the priests to be cremated.

The Fereldan army admired the marksmanship, but was not perfectly pleased with the disposal of the remains, believing that the women's heads should have been put on display, either here or in Denerim. The dwarves rather agreed with this point of view, feeling that an example was necessary in such circumstances.

Everyone attended the execution, of course, including the Wardens. Bronwyn stood by Loghain in the front, the two of them witnessing the end of the women who had sought to end them. Loghain glanced at the girl, who clearly had seen about all the death she cared for that day. Her face was carefully impassive throughout, and she turned away

afterwards, with only brief thanks to Merrill, and a word to Loghain that she must see to her Wardens. Most of the onlookers lingered, watching the corpses carried away, and discussing the iniquities of those who sent them.

"The Dalish were too soft on them, in my opinion. I suppose it comes from living in small bands," Piotin Aeducan said shrewdly to Loghain, after the event. "Elves are used to dealing with each other on a family basis, more or less. If they ever got their homeland and had to live in a proper city, they'd see why you can't be squeamish about treachery. Though I wonder if things aren't changing a bit. This is the largest gathering of elves in some time, I've been told, and there's been a bit of friction. Elves always go on about how it was all peace and love and harmony in the days when they ruled the surface, but I find that hard to credit."

Loghain agreed. The Dalish homeland was going to be a sticking point at the next Landsmeet. Cailan had promised it, and the Dalish must be given something for their service. Bronwyn had told him of some elven ruins she had explored in a remote area in the Brecilian Forest, east of the White River. She held that it would be a more rational place for the Dalish than the chilly south. Poring over the map, Loghain thought such a grant might be feasible. There were no human settlements there, and no regular trade routes, other than occasional hunters or some stray lumbermen. There were those who would decry giving the elves anything at all, of course, and the Chantry would cause trouble, too.

No doubt everything would fall apart for elves eventually, when the missionaries were ejected and the Templars invaded. However, Loghain felt he could not be responsible for what might happen in a hundred years or even fifty. He had to do the best with the situation as it stood now, and the Dalish were performing well, and keeping their agreements in good faith.

Carefully, he drew a circle around the marked site of the ruins. Four hundred square leagues might be no more than a good sized bannorn, but it would infinitely more than the elves had possessed since the fall of the Dales.

The new Wardens were recognized and saluted at dinner. They sat together, and said little to those who were full of questions about the mysterious challenges they had faced, and also about the fates of those who had not returned. The Grey Wardens' reputation for secrecy was upheld, to the frustration of many.

The leaders of the armies met afterwards and discussed Bronwyn's findings.

"So the horde has been beaten back!" cried Bann Carlin. "That's a real victory, but does it mean the end of the Blight?"

Piotin Aeducan harrumphed in disgust. "Perhaps for you surfacers, if that's all you care about!"

Not wanting a quarrel, Bronwyn hastily interposed.

"No," she confessed. "Not at all; not as long as the Archdemon lives. It only means they've mostly gone somewhere

else. We will continue to explore the Deep Roads, but one of the reasons I recently recruited so many Wardens is to make us able to scout a number of different Deep Road entrances around the country."

"That's a frightening idea," Merrill said softly. "I don't like to think they might be lurking anywhere, ready to pop out of the ground."

"There are only a few places where they could 'pop out,'" Loghain said, his voice dry. He waved at the map of Ferelden on the wall. "The entrances are marked."

"The *known* entrances," Thanovir added.

Loghain allowed that. Who knew what digging the darkspawn had undertaken?

"Take some of the Legion of the Dead with you," Kardol advised. "We need action."

Wulffe rubbed his beard. "Will the darkspawn make another major assault this season? Do darkspawn make war in winter, for that matter, unlike humans?"

"Winter means nothing underground," Ronus Dace pointed out. "The darkspawn do not need provisions, like the speaking peoples. They might wander out at anytime, though..." he considered, beetling brows contracted. "...Though perhaps they would not venture out into the cold in force unless led by the Archdemon. It could be that they will remain underground until warm weather comes again. I believe I have read something in the Shaperate to that effect."

Merrill was concerned. "The Dalish always go north for

the winter," she said nervously. "It will be hard for us to bear the cold here, and hard for the halla."

Loghain was prepared for that.

"While we would need a portion of your people to remain here with the army and Wardens, perhaps it would be a good idea for some of you to go north and winter there. There is empty land in the Neck at the mouth of the River Dane." It would be handy to have scouts like the Dalish there, if the Orlesians attempted a sortie into Ferelden itself.

"Or in the Brecilian Forest," Bronwyn suggested. She decided she would speak to Merrill later about the elven temple. That would accommodate hundreds, even in its dilapidated state.

Loghain caught her eye, and shrugged. It might not be bad, at that, for some of the Dalish to scout out the area and see if they thought it would do.

Wulfe was surprisingly sympathetic to the elves' concerns. "Winter in the south is nothing to joke about. I'll tell you a lot of my militiamen are anxious to get home to their farms and families. It was a hard harvest without them."

"But once gone," Bann Stronar said grimly, "will we ever get them back?" He was anxious about his own men, but very proud of his nephew at the moment. Emrys was a good lad, and having a Grey Warden in the family at the moment, he felt, gave him a certain prestige.

Loghain mulled it over. "We have the royal army, and I must hold you to keeping a least a core of your militias in the field. However, we may be sending them closer to home

in some cases. Quite frankly, it would be nearly ruinous to try to feed the entire army through the winter, especially if it appears that the darkspawn have largely moved on."

Bronwyn suggested, "You could grant furloughs to some of the men, and send them home until the turn of the year. Some of them might run, true, but the freeholders have land, and we know where they live. And others feel lucky to get a soldier's pay."

They wrestled with the matter for some time, and within two hours had outlined a strategy to take them through the winter. Bronwyn returned to the Wardens' quarters, wanting to see if all the new people were settled in.

Screens and bookshelves had been arranged to give the Wardens a little more privacy. One of the original chambers had been cleared of cots and set up as a meeting room. In the newly-assigned room, the Junior Wardens had double bunks, and it was interesting to see how determined the dwarves were to claim the lower ones at all times.

Bronwyn found her own cot by the possessions heaped at the foot, and quickly stripped down to her shirt and smallclothes, longing for rest. Her Wardens walked past, clearly wanting to talk to her, but she put a forearm over her eyes and growled, "Tomorrow."

And tomorrow came, to her great disgust. At least they did not have to cook their own breakfast. The first order of business was dealing with the aftermath of their new Wardens'

nightmares. They had been warned, but it was one thing to hear of it, and another to experience it for themselves.

Afterward, Bronwyn called some of her people to a private meeting: Alistair, Tara, Astrid, and then, thinking it best, Danith. She had hit on a plan as she was just falling asleep, and wanted to offer it up for consideration.

"It looks like the darkspawn have largely withdrawn from Ostagar. We can't keep the whole army here over the winter, especially since there's reason to believe that the Archdemon has moved on. Loghain's going to have to release some of the noble's militia for winter furlough. We Wardens need to do some scouting for the horde before the weather turns hopeless."

Astrid looked at her with keen interest. "You think we should send out patrols beyond the far south."

"Exactly. While we must maintain a presence in Ostagar, our increased numbers now give us the chance to hunt the darkspawn elsewhere. When we were in Orzammar we copied some maps of the Deep Roads, and identified all the known entrances. I think we must search them out and descend into them to estimate the darkspawn strength remaining in Ferelden. Each of you will lead a contingent. You will also have detachments of the Legion of the Dead under your command, volunteered by Kardol."

Danith, very reluctantly, said, "I do not have great experience in the Deep Roads."

Bronwyn nodded. "And for that reason, your party will

be largely on the surface. Nonetheless, it will be a challenging mission." She unrolled her maps of Ferelden and the Deep Roads, and the rest crowded around to see them and compare the two. "I want you to lead your party to the east, scouting for darkspawn. Move across the Wilds and through the southern end of the Brecilian Forest, in the direction of Gwaren. There is an entrance to the Deep Roads just outside the city. Descend into it and explore it for some miles — just enough to get an idea of how infested it is. I obviously do not expect you to travel all the way back to Ostagar along the connecting Gwaren Road, but have a look and determine how recently the darkspawn have been near Gwaren. You will be provided with travel documents and permission from the Teyrn to be quartered in his own Keep. Once you are done there, you will have to determine what the weather permits you to do. If it is still fair enough, I would like you to go north through the Brecilian Forest along the White River. You may come across your clan, Danith, and if so, see what news they have of darkspawn incursions."

Danith nodded, so far quite pleased with her assigned mission.

Bronwyn continued, "You may be snowed in. Whether in Gwaren or South Reach, you will have maps of places you can stay." "Or we can stay with my clan," Danith pointed out.

"Yes, there is that option. I'm sure the humans and dwarves under your command can learn much from the experience."

Danith grimaced at that, but nodded. It was only to be expected.

"If you *can*," Bronwyn said, "I want you to proceed north to Denerim, to the Warden Compound. I may be there by then. At any rate, you can resupply and equip your people, and Mistress Ranelly will be happy to spoil you."

"You're not staying Ostagar?" Alistair asked.

"Not for much longer. You'll be in command here," Bronwyn said. "and I'm thinking you should have either Brosca or Oghren as your Second. Think about it. I haven't settled on the individual assignments quite yet. You'll have a mage, of course. Perhaps Petra or Niall. I want Velanna, with her tracking experience, to be in one of the scouting parties."

"Not mine, I take it," Danith said sourly.

"Probably not," Bronwyn said, thinking it best to be frank. "We need to spread out Dalish expertise. I'm thinking Astrid will have Velanna in her party. Astrid and Tara will lead parties in parallel, one on the surface, and one through the Deep Roads. They'll go together to the entrance south of Lake Belennas, and then divide. They will meet at the entrance near Kinloch Hold." Her finger traced the path north, to the east of Lake Calenhad. "At that point, if weather permits further travel, I would like them to switch, and then proceed on the Amgarrack Road north, turning up to West Hill."

Astrid pursed her lips, thinking. "On the journey south, that stretch of the Atredum Road – the Deep Road between Orzammar and the entrance near Ostagar –" she explained to Tara and Danith " – was hotly contested. The

dwarven army killed a lot of darkspawn, I'm told." She shrugged. "It could be that it's fairly clear, at that."

Bronwyn hoped so. "Obviously, we don't know much about the Deep Road between Ostagar and Lake Belennas, but it would answer a lot of questions if the section north of that is not yet repopulated."

Tara thought about it, too. "If we don't see a lot of darkspawn, it could mean that they were decimated, or it could just mean that the Archdemon has led the horde somewhere else."

Astrid pointed to a name on the map. "If we go north toward West Hill, the Amgarrack Road offers many possibilities. At the far end was Kal'Hirol, a center of the smith caste. And, of course, there was Amgarrack Thaig itself, abandoned and lost for ages. I presume that the darkspawn have taken it, too."

"Destroy what darkspawn you can," Bronwyn said, "but don't be destroyed yourself. This is a scouting mission, not a duel to the death."

"Where are you going?" Tara asked Bronwyn.

Bronwyn had considered telling her people about her plans to take the throne, but perhaps this was not yet the time. Instead, she only shared her share of their general mission.

"I'm going north. I have to go to Denerim for all sorts of reasons anyway, but as you see there is yet another Deep Roads entrance – the one in Amaranthine at Drake's Fall."

Astrid leaned closer. "That is very close to Kal'Hirol," she

said, "once a very important site for dwarven invention and smithing. Orzammar would be grateful if there were a way to once again reclaim that thaig."

"Really?" Bronwyn said. "I didn't know that. We'll hope we can achieve something useful for our dwarven allies. There's something else in the north I want to pursue. Near Drake's Fall is the site of an ancient fortress belonging to the Grey Wardens. It was our headquarters for hundreds of years, up until the time the order was banished from Ferelden."

"Yes," Astrid said, "I remember that trader fellow talking to you when we were in Denerim."

"I do too," Tara said, excited. "I forgot about it. Now that the civil war is over up north, you could see if it's in better shape than the outpost down here at Ostagar."

"That's the plan," Bronwyn agreed. "Before we spend any coin on the outpost here, I want to have a look at Soldier's Peak. It's not so remote as Ostagar, nor as cold, and from what Dryden said, it's considerably bigger."

"What if Tara and Astrid get snowed in?" Alistair brought up, sorry that he would not be seeing Soldier's Peak for himself.

"Well, I certainly don't want them to try to survive the winter at the Spoiled Princess tavern!" Bronwyn said tartly. "Good point, and it's not as easily arranged as Danith's accommodations. The northwest is trickier. However, most of the banns there are Cousland vassals, however lightly they wore their loyalty in the last few months. Bann Loren's manor, here —" she pointed, "would do. Even

better would be West Hill, if you can actually get that far. It's a huge and mostly empty old fortress. Quarters there would be no problem, though provisions might be expensive. I'll see you're all well supplied with coin. If you can possibly manage it, make for Highever. My brother's people will see you right. Then you'll simply have to make the best call. If the weather holds, take the North Road for Denerim and report. Otherwise, hold fast where you are and patrol as best you can."

Astrid got up and walked around the table, considering it. "I think," she said slowly, "if the weather is at all questionable, we should stay in West Hill. We can access the Deep Roads from there, and strike out further on the Amgarrak Road. Who is the lord there?"

"Bann Frandarel," Bronwyn shrugged. "He's something of a recluse. He sent a small party to Ostagar. The bannorn was a rich one, long ago, hence the size of his fortress, but the land was laid waste during the Occupation and Rebellion. There was a very significant battle there."

She said no more about that, as the battle had been a very significant defeat for King Maric and his army, and the Rebellion had nearly ended then and there.

"It's true that Bann Frandarel is my brother's vassal, and I shall give you a letter of introduction. Of course, your status as Grey Wardens *ought* to give you hospitality anyway."

Danith looked confused. "I thought that the old arl with the loud voice was the lord of West Hill."

Bronwyn looked blank, and then laughed a little. "It used to confuse me, too. In Ferelden we have both an arling of West Hills, and a bannorn of West Hill. Bann Frandarel's lands are here —" she pointed to the dot on the northwest coast. "The arling is in the southwest," she said, indicating the legend. "It's too bad they couldn't come up with something more distinctive!"

It was a plan, or at least the beginnings of one. The surface party in the west would have a supply wagon, which would slow them down, but be vital to their success. Alistair tended to think that they would need two wagons, in fact. They also discussed taking detachments of their allies with them.

"I do not want a wagon," Danith said, thinking it over. "We will not be traveling by road, and it will be very hard going..." she paused. "Unless we had an aravel, drawn by halla. They are lighter, but could carry a great deal. Merrill might let us have an aravel. Would that be unseemly for Grey Wardens?"

Alistair grinned. "Not at all! I think it's a great idea. Of course, you might want to fly a Grey Warden banner to make it official!"

"One more thing," Bronwyn said, "Tara, I'm taking Anders with me, and thus Morrigan. I was inclined to take Zevran as well, but you may prefer to have him with you."

Tara looked sad. "I'll miss him," she said steadily, "but if you're going to Denerim, he should be there. Zevran's at

his best in a city. He knows all the gangs. It'll give me an incentive to get done and join you. Besides..." she thought a little more. "I think for my first command... people will respect me more if they don't see me with my boyfriend all the time. Take Zevran to Denerim."

"Let's talk to him," said Bronwyn. "We also need to see how he feels about it."

They agreed to let the recruits enjoy a day of rest and leisure, but set up a training and exercise rota for the five or six days until the patrols would depart. Everyone wanted a closer look at the recruits' capabilities before the final assignments were made.

In fact, as they walked out of the Tower of Ishal toward the training grounds, they saw that the recruits had already undertaken some informal practice of their own. A group of archers were in fierce competition to uphold the honor of their race, class, or town. They were putting on quite a show, and many more than Grey Wardens were crowding close to watch and place bets. Bronwyn was considering making it official and finding a piece of booty to offer as a prize, when one of Loghain's personal guards hailed her.

"My lady!" the man said, "the Teyrn is in the War Room, and requires your presence at once."

The contest forgotten, Bronwyn followed the man across the bridge to the big log building constructed under the ancient pillars of the fortress.

"Shut the door," Loghain said. On first glance, he seemed calm. On the second, she saw that he was blazing with repressed violence. "Ill tidings from Denerim," he told her.

"What has happened?" Bronwyn asked, a thousand possibilities flitting through her mind, all bad.

"Sit." He pointed at a chair. In his hand was a folded piece of parchment that bore the Queen's seal, broken. "We were not the only targets on the seventh. The Arl of Denerim's bridal feast was attacked. It was... brutal."

Bronwyn waited, in wretched suspense.

Loghain referred back to the note. "Anora was not wounded, but there were heavy losses. She wrote this immediately after the attack was repulsed – and she gives a great deal of credit for that to Leonas' courage and quick wits. Banns Ceorlic, Loren, Reginalda, and Grainne were killed outright."

Bronwyn caught her breath, eyes wide.

Loghain glanced at her, grim, and continued, "Arl Urien was wounded to some degree, though Anora does not know how badly. Dead are Ladies Werberga Bryland –"

"Werberga!" Bronwyn gasped, horrified at the idea of the murder of that silly, harmless woman.

"– Adela Claycombe, Miriah Poole, and Thalma Youngbloode. Bann Frandarel's eldest son, too. Also wounded were Leonas' younger son, Bann Alfstanna, Bann Sighard, and Lady Seria Mac Coo. Anora says there were more losses, but she was writing this in haste. The assassins were disguised as minstrels and entertainers at the feast. Some of them

were killed, a few captured, and many more escaped and are at large. They were Orlesian, yes, and their hirelings," he added, in reply to her unspoken question.

"The Empress has been a busy girl, it would seem," Bronwyn said, her smile bitter.

"There is more. Some guests were injured when the Knight-Commander had his Templars shove through the crowd, as they hustled the Grand Cleric to safety. And also –" he frowned, making some of the same connections that Anora had.

"Also," he said, "Wynne was arrested by the Templars a few hours before the event, which could point to collusion by the Chantry."

"Maker!"

Anora had not been hurt, but there was no denying that this was a blow – a serious blow – to the safety of the realm. In the space of a few minutes, four bannorns had lost their leaders. There were three vacant bannorns in Amaranthine alone, and four in Highever, and now – Andraste's night-gown! – How were they to find rulers for all these now, too?

Loren's son was dead, of course, killed in the Highever massacre. Bronwyn had no idea who could claim that title. Loren had no siblings, except for a sister who had taken orders and was now gone, too. It was possible that the bannorn would legally revert to Highever's direct rule. It was another plum for Fergus to offer some loyal man of his.

"What a tragedy!" she said, winded. "And what a tangle. How, terribly, terribly cruel!"

"It's clear to a child that the Orlesians want to destabilize the country, hoping to make their move when we are at our weakest. We cannot wait for a Landsmeet in Haring. I must go to Denerim, now – today. And you must come with me."

Trying to keep up with events, Bronwyn thought hard. "I had planned major missions for my people. I briefed them this morning. We should still go ahead with them."

Loghain nodded. "Yes, so you said. You'll keep Alistair here, I trust?"

"Yes. He'll command the Wardens in Ostagar."

"Keep the Qunari here with him," Loghain said. "I don't want him going about the country, nosing out all our secrets."

"Very well. Sten will stay with Alistair and his Wardens. Danith will go east to Gwaren and then up through the Brecilian Forest. Tara and Astrid will go up the eastern shore of Lake Calendhad: Tara on the surface, and Astrid in the Deep Roads. Ultimately I want them to go all the way to West Hill, or as far as they can get before snow flies."

He glanced at the map, seeing it all, and approved.

More slowly, Bronwyn said, "Yes, I must go with you. I can see that. We'll have to announce our betrothal as soon as we reach Denerim. And I was planning to go north anyway. I wanted to scout the Deep Road entrance in Amaranthine. I can call my people together and arrange for my own party to go with us today: six Wardens and one or two allies. The other missions should move out in three or four days. Yes, I can do this."

"Talk to your people," he said, eyes fierce and intent. "I'll call the commanders together. I had not planned to do this immediately, but events have forced my hand. I intend to leave Cauthrien here with a company of Maric's shield. The nobles will want to come to Denerim with us, or at least very soon. Many have family who were killed or injured. I'll talk to the dwarves and the Dalish, and let them know what's going on. Talk to your people and get back here as quickly as possible."

A horrible thought struck Bronwyn.

"What if this is exactly what the Orlesians planned? The breakup of the army? The rush to Denerim?"

He shook his head. "What they do not know is that the darkspawn have withdrawn. They undoubtedly believe us still to be under heavy attack. They think us pinned down. We are not."

Unexpectedly, he seized Bronwyn in his arms and kissed her hungrily. She warmed at the embrace; reassured, flushed with life. When he broke the kiss, he held her at arms' length, with a grim little half smile. Then he gently kissed her forehead.

"Surprise is on our side, my girl. We'll make them regret this."

Darach won the archery competition, to the delight of the Dalish. Cathair, who would be traveling with Bronwyn, and the human archer Catriona had also performed brilliantly.

Bronwyn found Alistair, and whispered her news in his incredulous ear; and then the Wardens were ordered to

report to the Tower at once. Next she sought out Zevran.

"Walk with me, if you please. I have to return to the Tower."

There was no time to be bashful.

"Zevran, I've got to go to Denerim today. In a few days Tara will be leading a patrol north by way of Lake Calenhad. We'd like you to go with one of us, but the choice is yours. Darkspawn and bandits with Tara, or darkspawn and politics with me."

To Zevran, there was no choice. "I am your sworn man, and the Blight is not yet over. I must, by what honor an assassin can command, serve you. Something is in the wind, I take it?"

"On the same day that those elves attempted to kill Loghain and me, there were other attacks in Denerim. The Queen is safe, but some nobles were killed, and everything's in an uproar. Please keep this to yourself, until I have the chance to tell everyone. So you're with me?"

"I have said it."

"Good. I suspect that things will be sticky in the north."

By the time the Junior Wardens had made it back to the tower, Bronwyn had torn through her belongings and found a handsome gold ring.

"Congratulations to Darach, today's champion archer of the Grey Wardens!" She presented the prize to him, amidst cheers. "I'm glad to see all you new Wardens honing your skills. You'll need them in the coming days."

Quickly, Bronwyn informed them of events. Orlesian assassins had attacked in Denerim. Many innocent people

had been slain or wounded, and it was unclear how bad the situation was. Apparently, it was part of the same attack that had targeted Loghain and Bronwyn on the very same day. It appeared that foreign powers were attempting to hamper the efforts against the Blight. She had already made plans to send some the Wardens on scouting missions around Ferelden, and now the plans must be accelerated a little. She and her own patrol must leave today, along with Teyrn Loghain and a portion of the royal army.

"Some of you will remain here under Senior Warden Alistair's command. Senior Warden Tara will command one of the missions. Let me take this opportunity to announce some promotions. Astrid and Danith are also now Senior Wardens, and will command the other missions. After them, the chain of command goes to the Wardens above the rank of Junior Warden in this order: Wardens Leliana, Anders, Broasca, Jowan, Carver, Adaia, and Oghren, due to his long service as our ally."

Even more briefly, Bronwyn outlined the extent and purpose of the missions. The Senior Wardens remaining would have to make the final assignments of personnel.

"I shall be going north, first to Denerim to deal with the political situation there, and then further north to Amaranthine, to scout out the Deep Roads entrance in that arling. With me will travel Warden Anders and the following Junior Wardens: Aveline, Toliver, Cathair, Hakan, and Soren. Our allies Morrigan and Zevran will also

travel with us. Get your gear together: we will be leaving after the midday meal! We'll have a wagon, so at least you'll not be burdened with a pack on the march. Junior Wardens are dismissed. Everyone else, stay."

The door was shut, and Bronwyn looked at her comrades. Only Alistair knew the whole story of what was going to happen in Denerim, and now that it came to it, she felt some sorrow and unease at what she had to say. There was nothing else to be done, so she came out with it.

"As I told the Junior Wardens, I am going north to Denerim, to help sort out the situation. There was a great loss of life in the attack, and there is also the possibility that it took place with the collusion of elements in the Chantry. For those of you who don't know much about human religion, that is a very serious matter. The Divine, the arbiter of our Prophet, rules from Val Royeaux, and certainly has never hesitated in furthering the interests of her own country. If the Chantry is involved in hampering our efforts against the Blight, we might find ourselves fighting Templars as well as Tainted creatures."

"The Templars won't march against Ferelden, if it means they have to face darkspawn," Tara said, scowling.

"They might not come as far south as Ostagar," Bronwyn allowed, "but they might attack our supply trains and make trouble for the mages who are serving in the army. To be frank, Loghain thinks that the Orlesians don't know how effective we've been so far, and they probably believe

we're pinned down here. Our problem is quite different, actually. The darkspawn seem to have largely withdrawn from the south, and we don't know where they are right now. Thus the scouting expeditions. Since I'm leaving in a few hours, you'll have to hash out the personnel assignments yourselves, though I've left some notes with Alistair. You don't need to move out for a few days. It's important that you're thoroughly prepared. I wish all the mages could transform into birds, so we'd have better communication, but we'll do the best we can. Loghain is leaving official letters with the Wardens that will enable you to demand the cooperation of royal couriers."

Alistair was looking at her, kind and serious; it was time to tell them everything.

"There's more, but I ask that you keep it to yourselves until the public announcement is made. As you know, King Cailan left no heir. With the current unrest, it's more important than ever that the Landsmeet choose a ruler for Ferelden that all can unite behind. Many people would like Teyrn Loghain to assume the throne, but he has no royal blood, and the nobles might balk. My family — the Couslands — are next in line of succession by blood. My brother has said that he does not want the Crown, choosing instead to restore the north to peace and security. Therefore..."

"Oh!" cried Tara, smiling like a sunrise.

"Oh!" Adaia croaked, a second later, beautiful eyes wide.

They were the first to catch on, but Astrid looked up

quickly, only a beat behind them.

Brosca gaped, and then said outright, "Boss, are you going to marry the big guy so he can be King? That sounds like Orzammar, sort of."

Astrid laughed. "It does! You will raise him to the royal caste by marriage!"

Anders was grinning. "Bronwyn's getting married! Can I be a bridesmaid?"

"Bronwyn's going to be *Queen!*" Tara squealed. "All hail Queen Bronwyn!"

Danith was more sober. "You will be Queen of the shem-lens. Will you resign from the Wardens?"

"No!" Bronwyn assured them all instantly. "I will continue to serve. Defeating the Blight is of paramount importance. I will be Queen, because that way those who put store by blood will be satisfied, and the country will continue to have the best leadership during this crisis. There will be a wedding and a Landsmeet and a coronation, but in between those events and after them, I will continue to focus on my duties as a Warden. If the darkspawn triumph, a trumpety crown will be of little worth indeed."

"But you *like* Loghain," Tara declared. "It's not like you're having to marry somebody you don't like."

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed. "I like Loghain. I think we can work together well."

Tara only looked annoyed. "That's not what I meant."

"Wait!" Adaia's voice cracked, and she waved her hands

in agitation. "Your red gown! Leliana and I finished the alterations and the little cape. I was going to give them to you for Satinalia!"

Bronwyn had not thought about Queen Rowan's gown in days, but was relieved to hear that she would have something to wear.

"Thank you so much! I'll be sure to take that with me."

Brosca said, "We won't all be together again for a long time, will we?"

A pause. Bronwyn experienced a curious pang of grief. No, she would not see many of these faces for months. If some were unlucky, perhaps... No, she would not allow herself to think like that.

"We'll meet in Denerim!" she said. "And perhaps by next spring, the south will be so clear that Alistair can join us there, too."

"Let's make a pact!" Tara proposed. "Next spring in Denerim! Maybe the first of Drakonis! If the darkspawn permit," she added, in a smaller voice.

The future lay before them, ineffable and uncertain. Each thought about what another five months might bring, and paused, baffled.

Alistair hoped that no one would force him to attend the Landsmeet. Surely Bronwyn would sweep all before her, and the next time they met, he would be bending the knee before his Queen. The thought of Bronwyn married to Loghain did not make as him unhappy as it once might

have. Loghain had been more than decent to him, and had taught him so much. Alistair had once had thought about Bronwyn for himself, but over time they had evolved into brother and sister – if he had had a loving but very bossy older sister. For himself, he would much rather spend the winter here, with the Wardens, with the army and its allies, fighting darkspawn, clearing the tunnels they had dug; making the world safe, though no one else might know it. He would miss his friends, but he would not be totally alone. He had his fine new batch of Wardens, and he already had a feeling that he and Emrys were going to be good friends. Adagia would be here, too, working diligently, so lively and pretty, now that she was able to eat properly. Oghren... yes, he'd keep Oghren here. The dwarf knew how to train recruits, and he and Sten were fairly companionable. Sten... well, he knew that Bronwyn wanted Sten to stay in Ostagar. The Qunari was a fortress in himself, and if the darkspawn doubled back, he would be worth even his considerable weight in gold. Yes... friends, and Wardenwork, a settled routine here in Ostagar. And, Andraste be merciful, no Landsmeet. Life could be far worse.

Tara was excited and more than a little nervous at the prospect of command. Bronwyn made it look effortless, and Tara knew that her own style would be very different. She was not the imposing daughter of an ancient noble house, but an elf and a mage, and thus among the lowly of Thedas. But she was a Warden, and that made all the difference.

She would wear her Warden tabard everywhere. If she had to beat everyone over the head with her status, so be it. She would, she decided, take Brosca to back her up. Oghren and she were not so compatible. Yes, Brosca and she would work really well together. They had the prospect of meeting up with Astrid and her people, too, which was immensely reassuring. Tara had a great deal of faith in Astrid. Zevran... would be missed, but Tara realized she was far more excited about her new command. They wouldn't be separated all that long, after all. Magic was never supposed to rule over people, but Tara would be ruling over her own detachment of Wardens. She had come a long way from the abused and oppressed prisoner of the Circle.

Denerim! Anders was quite enchanted at the prospect. Morrigan had never been to Denerim – never seen a real city, or at least a real *human* city. Orzammar was grand in a creepy, sunless, and monumental way, but *Denerim!* And he was completely safe from the Chantry! He could shop at The Wonders of Thedas with no fear of repercussions, and of course if everyone would presume that Morrigan was a Warden, too. The others had told him what a great place the Warden Compound was. With luck, he and Morrigan could have a private room with an actual bed, which could only improve what was, in his opinion, a beautiful friendship.

I hope I go with one of the scouting teams, Brosca decided. *I need to get out of here for awhile.* Which gang she went with did not matter that much to her, though she was sorry

the Boss was not taking her along. No big surprise. These kids would need all the help they could get in the Deep Roads. She got on all right with Danith, and pretty well now with the Princess of Orzammar. And Tara. She liked Tara, in spite of herself, but the memory of Cullen still *hurt*. She shouldn't hold Cullen against Tara. In the end, he had chosen her — Freydis Brosca — and was coming back to her, if a dragon hadn't got in the way. Sodding Stone, but she *hated* dragons. So she'd go out there and hunt for the Stone-cursed Archdemon, the biggest dragon of them all, and she'd kill it, and wear its hide the way the Boss was wearing Flemeth. She smiled. The Boss had *style*. Brosca hoped they could get the scouting done soon enough that she could be at the wedding, or at least see the Boss in her crown. She wondered if it would be as fancy as that one Caridin made for Bhelen. Thinking of Bhelen made her think of Rica and her nuglet. Brosca wished they could make a detour all the way to Orzammar. She had some nice bits of treasure put by now, and it would be something to give the kid a present. Her train of thought was briefly derailed. Presents? Didn't people give wedding presents? She remembered the Boss finding something to give her cousin — the one whose wedding got broken up by the Orlesian gang. The Wardens should give the Boss a wedding present! Something really special. She'd need to talk to everybody about it later...

Brooding a bit over which Wardens would fall to her lot,

Danith focused on the mission ahead, where she would be in independent command. She would lead her Wardens as she saw fit. Overbearing and arrogant as Bronwyn could be, she at least recognized the value of Dalish expertise. The mission was not an unworthy one, and well suited to Danith's abilities. However exasperating she found them, she must be fair to her shemlen Wardens. Or as fair as they deserved. That fellow Aeron, the singer... he had behaved well, and done as he was told. Perhaps he would prove a pleasant companion. For so many Dalish, durgen'len, and shemlen to work together against the Blight must teach them much about cooperation in the future. And she could not complain about the respect that her status as a Grey Warden commanded. She must get to Merrill and discuss this news. If Bronwyn were to be the shemlen Queen, then there would never be a better time than now for Merrill to get a firm commitment from her about a Dalish homeland.

So Bronwyn would be a Queen. Astrid pondered the matter, wondering if it could serve as a precedent. She reproved herself for such daydreams. Still, it probably had not occurred to Bronwyn that Bhelen might be made very, very nervous by the news that a Grey Warden was ascending a throne. The thought of Bhelen's unease brought a smile to her lips. As it was, she should not complain. She was an officer now, raised to the rank of Senior Warden. She would have a command once more. However small it

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was, it was still a command, and Astrid was going to do all she could with it. A brief regret made her pause. Yes, she would miss Alistair, but he was such a boy, after all... And his claim to the throne was clearly about to come to nothing. He, however, seemed to be glad of it. Astrid would never, if she lived to be a thousand, understand that. As for her, she liked the idea of her mission very much. Some time in the Deep Roads. Some time on the surface. A mixed command, too, with dwarves, elves and humans. That would be a very interesting challenge. The elves did not seem to resent dwarven command as much as they did that of humans. She herself was extremely curious about the state of the Deep Roads in Ferelden. They very possibly might stumble on the horde itself, withdrawn into one of the big, deserted Thaigs. The mission would require care and shrewd scouting. Astrid turned her mind to that, rejoicing in even the shred of power that had come under her hand once more.

A little disappointed that she would not be going to Denerim any time soon, Adaia settled back on the bench. She was promoted, anyway. Maybe she would be due more coin. If any other Wardens came to work on bombs and poisons, she would be in charge, she supposed. Some of the dwarves were interested in that, and that Dalish girl Siofranni. It was not like she minded her work: it was the most interesting and best-paying job she'd ever had. An exciting thought came to her: she could send money home to Father and Shianni! She glanced around, and saw that

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Alistair was looking a bit sad and wistful too. He must be sorry not to get away and have a new adventure. He caught her eye and gave her a rueful smile. She smiled back, and he brightened up a bit. She had never imagined she would think it of a shem, but Alistair was a very nice boy, and very nice-looking, too. When she had first joined the Wardens, she had the idea that he and Bronwyn were something, but Bronwyn was involved with Teyrn Loghain. What she thought about *that* Adaia was never going to reveal to anyone. At least Bronwyn would get to be Queen, and maybe she would be kind to elves. In fact... More pleasant thoughts came to her, as she thought of repairs that could be made, and wrongs righted, if an elf of the Denerim Alienage had the ear of the Queen of Ferelden.

Branka had once told him that there were no second chances in life. *Wrong again, sweet hips*, Oghren snorted. Here he was on the surface, in an outfit that even the deshyrs had to respect, and he'd been promoted to full Warden after a day. A *day*. Whatever the Boss cooked up for him to do, he'd do it and not whine like some sort of pansy elf. As long as he didn't drink so much that he couldn't stand on his feet and swing an axe – as long as he didn't totally screw it up – the world was his. He could march into Orzammar, armed to the teeth, and the bastards would have to nod and smile, and say, "*Atrast Vala, Grey Warden!*" just as nice as you please. Next... he needed to find himself a woman. Astrid was too high and mighty: sort of a Branka

with better common sense, which was a scary prospect in itself; Brosca was still moping about that Chantry Boy. But there were some sodding fine women in camp, and surely Oghren Kondrat could find one to call his own.

News spread of the attack on Denerim. A great many oaths of vengeance were sworn, some even without the aid of strong liquor. As Loghain had predicted, quite a few of the nobles felt they must go to Denerim to see to family and to set things in order. Their Seconds were left with reduced forces, and with instructions to obey Ser Cauthrien and to heed the advice of Senior Warden Alistair.

There was a flurry of packing, of arranging the wagons, of dividing some of Master Wade's weapons amongst the Wardens. Bronwyn promised to order more when she was in Denerim. Tara and Zevran disappeared into their little cubby, no doubt making their fond farewells. They had been so happy that Bronwyn regretted separating them. With luck, it would only be for a few months.

Adaia pressed the refurbished red gown on Bronwyn, and it was deposited, carefully packed, into a trunk. She also pressed on Bronwyn a coin purse and a little bag of gifts for her family, which Bronwyn solemnly promised to deliver.

"And when you're there..." Adaia said anxiously, "if you see something that needs to be fixed, you go right ahead and make sure it gets done. Please?" she added.

She looked so small and defenseless that Bronwyn felt

ashamed to do anything else but comply.

"I shall."

There was little time to do anything but get ready to leave: there was almost no time to think. Nonetheless, Merrill slipped through the mob to confront Bronwyn as she scribbled a few more notes for Alistair.

"I hear you're going to be Queen. Congratulations. That's nice for you." said the fey little elf.

Bronwyn glanced at her friends, who discreetly moved away. Merrill wanted something, and Bronwyn was quite sure she knew what it was.

"Loghain and I are going to be put forward for the throne. I think our chances our good," she answered. "Thank you for your kind words."

"Well, if you are to be King and Queen, everyone thinks it would be a good idea if you'd proclaim that we Dalish are to have land. Oh... I shouldn't have said it right out like that, should I? I was supposed to be diplomatic, but you're so busy, and being diplomatic takes such a lot of time. Cailan wanted us to have land. How do you feel about it?"

Trying not to laugh, Bronwyn thought it best to be straightforward. "Loghain and I both believe that the Dalish ought to have real, concrete rewards for their alliance. Cailan originally proposed some territory here in the south, but since you think it's not suitable for the winter, I had thought that the area around the elven temple we found in the Brecilian Forest might be much better: it's not Blighted, for one thing, and its



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full of game. Besides, the temple itself is so significant and impressive that surely the Dalish would like to reclaim it as part of their rightful heritage.”

Expecting more of a debate, Merrill stared at her a moment. “Oh. Then it’s all right, then. We have to leave some of our people here, but perhaps I’ll have a look at this temple myself. I’ve never been there, but it does sound very nice.”

“The biggest question is whether you want any land on the seacoast.”

“Why would we want that?” Merrill wondered. “We don’t want to sail away. We wouldn’t know how. Of course we do want all the land we can get.”

“Well, then, why don’t you or some scouts have a look at the place and think about what would work best for you? Do it soon, and then come to Denerim to meet with us. I’ll be doing some scouting in the north myself, but I’ll be in the city from time to time.”

Merrill looked at her a moment, blinking. “This is so nice!” she finally exclaimed. “I do like talking with people who will say what they really think. I’ve always liked you, Bronwyn. I hope you enjoy being Queen. It’s quite a bit like being a Keeper, isn’t it?”

“Very like,” Bronwyn agreed.



Dax stood ready: saddled and waiting. Scout ran about, barking and excited, wanting to smell everyone and everything. Zevran and Tara were making a romantic



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spectacle of themselves, which made Bronwyn smile a bit. Commands were shouted in the organized chaos of the departure. Bronwyn caught a glimpse of Morrigan, already mounted, her face closed and tight with displeasure, evidently having some sharp words with Anders. She would have to find out what Morrigan was unhappy about, but it would have to wait while they got underway.

Her Junior Wardens were in order: Aveline had seen to it. That woman was going to be a gift of the Maker.

And her Wardens – her first Wardens – her loyal and faithful comrades – were gathered around wanting to bid her goodbye. Bronwyn glanced at Loghain, who was having a quick, businesslike conversation with Cauthrien. She had a moment, then.

They seemed a little repressed, a little in awe. All except Brozca, of course, who hugged her.

“I’ll miss you, Boss. Put those deshyrs of yours in their place!”

That broke the ice, and there were more hugs, and hearty hand-shakes, as Bronwyn made her hasty farewells.

“Administration is an appropriate role for a capable female,” said Sten, studying her with a considering look. “A worthy use of ability. Hereditary monarchy, of course, is a primitive form of government; but your people have as yet not been enlightened by the Qun.”

Bronwyn supposed this was a form of congratulations, so she smiled and gave him a slight bow of acknowledgment. Oghren slapped her on the back, and even Danith

wished her well. Merrill must have already told her friend the upshot of their conversation. Well, if Danith was actually pleased with her, that was all to the good. The mission to Gwaren was *important*.

She was hugged by a tearful Tara, by a more collected but smiling Astrid, and then, more shyly, by Adaia.

"I won't forget my promise," Bronwyn said softly. Adaia nodded and backed away, biting her lip, eyes alight with hope.

Alistair was red-eyed and mournful, and seeing him made Bronwyn rather emotional herself.

"You take care of yourself," he managed. "Watch out for people in disguise with daggers, because —"

She threw her arms around him, the tears breaking free. "I wish you were coming! I wish you were! Who knows when we'll meet again?"

At that, there were throat-clearings and sniffles all around. Even the coolest heads and hearts among them were grave and thoughtful.

Another fierce hug, metal to dragonbone; a rasp of her cheek against his stubble, and she stepped back, wiping her face. "Alistair, you are and always will be my brother."

He wiped his eyes too, with a crooked grin. "I always wanted a big family."

"You've got one," she laughed a little wildly. "You've got me and the Wardens... over forty sisters and brothers! You've got Fergus as a sort of half-brother, and when I marry Loghain, you'll have a brother-in-law!"

"Does that make Queen Anora my niece?" His voice crackling, he asked anxiously, "Are you sure you've got everything?"

"Yes!"

"And don't forget to write."

"I won't."

"And write the First Warden, too, and give him what for! Duncan would have been ashamed of him, leaving the Blight to us!"

She punched him on the arm, laughing a little. Her Sword of Mercy swung free, and at the sight of it Alistair grinned again.

"Don't take it off," he told her. "It sounds like you'll have lots of opportunity to find out just how merciful you can be, once you get to Denerim!"

"I'll never take it off."

Loghain was looking her way now, ready to be gone, and Alistair gave her a leg up into tall Dax's saddle. The sun was still fairly high. If they moved quickly, they could be halfway to Lothering by sunset. The Imperial Highway stretched before them, lined with trees ablaze with autumn, the pavement gloriously carpeted with leaves yellow as fire and red as blood. A little gust of wind blew past, catching the ensigns, making them snap and flutter.

The trumpets blared, and they rode out together. Bronwyn turned her head, seeing her friends — even Sten — growing small with distance.

"Goodbye!" she called. "Goodbye! Stay safe and hold fast! I'll see you in Denerim sooner than you think!"

CHAPTER 17

TOWARD A RECKONING



WANT THE CATHEDRAL SEARCHED FROM TOP TO BOTTOM," commanded Anora. "I want to know the names of the tra-

itors in our midst. Priestly robes will not protect them. I want to know their secret plans. I want to know to whom they reported, and how, and when."

The Grand Cleric was in no position to object. Too shocked and frightened by the events of the tragic wedding feast, and physically undermined by the drug that had subdued her, she kept to her own quarters, and largely to her bed. Anora considered the possibility that she might be malingering to conceal her own involvement, but decided to bide her time, while building her case against other Chantry officials.

The clergy had been rounded up and were being held in the nave of the Cathedral. Their guards had strict orders not to tell them what had transpired elsewhere in the city. Not everyone was there, of course. Some had been elsewhere in the city, and after witnessing events from the outside of the Cathedral, had decided to lay low for a time.

For the most part, priests and Templars were being treated with respect until they could be sorted out. However, the quarters of certain individuals were being targeted for special attention.

Anora had a list, and Bryland had a list, and at the top of the list were the names of Mothers Gertrude and Heloise and Knight-Command Tavish. Revered Mother Gertrude had held the Queen of Ferelden prisoner, and it was impossible to describe that action as anything but treason. Mother Heloise had colluded with her. Tavish had injured noblemen and noblewomen of Ferelden during his flight from the Arl of Denerim's wedding feast.

Also on the list was Clarine, the Revered Mother at Ostagar, who interfered incessantly and noisily in military matters. While bigotry and a shrewish tongue were not necessarily evidence of treason. Anora was taking no chances. Her quarters were searched as well.

Anora knew her legal standing here was shaky. Theoretically, members of the clergy were exempt from the secular authorities, and were subject only to Chantry law. It was questionable that a member of the clergy could even be deemed a "traitor" in the normal sense. Anora considered the matter for some time, and then decided that she was not going to permit her hands to be tied by those who had tried to compass her death, and who had murdered Wynne in all due legal form. She would not go whining to the Divine, whom she suspected would put her off with

soft words and then quietly reward those in the plot.

Therefore, those against whom there was evidence were taken under guard to Fort Drakon. Cupboards were broken into, and secret hiding places found out. Everything was taken back to the Palace to be pored over at length. Anora, Fergus and Leonas Bryland worked in the Privy Chamber, along with a few trusted knights and clerks, and with the assistance of Warden Jowan, who was only too happy at the opportunity. A steady stream of priests, Templars, and lay sisters and brothers appeared before them to be questioned.

Irminric, Otto, and Stennis were questioned along with the rest, as was Sister Justine, to obtain their views on which of the clergy was most loyal to their native land, and which had the strongest ties to Orlais. On the basis of this, a number of clergy were determined to be no threat: among them Mothers Boann and Perpetua and Chanter Rosamond. Their rooms had been checked like everyone's else's, since no one felt they could be too careful, but it was ascertained fairly quickly that these women had nothing to hide.

"I would like to see my sister, if I may," Irminric asked. "Bann Alfstanna. I heard she was badly wounded."

"Of course you may see her," Anora said. "She is at the late Arl of Denerim's estate, where she is recovering.. She would no doubt be glad to see you."

"She is much recovered," added Leonas Bryland, "thanks to the efforts of Ser Adam Hawke's sister Bethany. The young lady also saved my son's life."

It was not long afterward that Irminric learned that young Mistress Bethany was a mage: a mage declared free of Chantry authority by the Arl of Bryland's proclamation, which was now confirmed by the Queen. Uneasily, it occurred to him that there had been an earthquake of sorts in Ferelden, and nothing would now be the same.

A friendly group of soldiers let Bethany tag along with them after she left the Arl of Denerim's estate. They were en route from Fort Drakon to the Gate, where they would take their turn at guard duty. Bethany was not the only civilian in their wake, but she was a pretty young girl, and therefore particularly welcome. From the Gate, it was not difficult to find her way back to Highever House. She was recognized and admitted by the men working in the courtyard. Inside the door, a yellow-eyed servant woman named Lita reproached her.

"Your lady mother has been so worried about you!"

"Is that Bethany?" cried Leandra Hawke from the stairs. The older woman ran down them and seized her daughter in her arms. "Where have you been?"

"Everything's fine, Mother," Bethany replied. "I took advantage of Arl Bryland's amnesty for mages and healed his little boy. Lots of other people too. They were very grateful."

Leandra burst into tears, wondering if they should grab a bundle and a purse of money and flee the city. It would be just like the early days with Malcolm. People were

grateful – oh, so very grateful – but then they thought again, and realized that the Chantry could destroy them and their families, and that the Chantry said there was no need to be grateful to mages anyway, and then she and Malcolm had to run for their lives. Again and again.

Charade had run down after her aunt, and hung back, feeling awkward, while Bethany tried to be reassuring.

"Don't cry, Mother. It's really all right. The Teyrn was there, and the Queen was there, and they thanked me themselves and the Queen said I was to be free of Chantry supervision! Is there any supper?" she asked the watching Lita.

"Directly, my lady," said the yellow-eyed woman, quickening her pace toward the kitchens.

Charade could no longer restrain her curiosity.

"You saw the Queen? Was she all right? How did they get her away from the Chantry?"

"She was all right, but she had nothing on but a shift and Adam's blue cloak. The priests stole her clothing! Isn't that horrid? Teyrn Fergus climbed up to the tower chapel and carried her down. Carver and Jowan and Leliana had to go to the Warden Compound, but later they're going to help search the Chantry, since the plotting was against the Wardens, too. Everybody wants to know if the Chantry was involved in that assassination attempt on Teyrn Loghain."

Bethany gave them all the news of her own adventures: about her new friends the little Lords Corbus and Lothar, Lady Seria Mac Coe, and Bann Alfstanna; and all about

the Queen's anger at the Chantry.

"I think she's really going to curb their power," Bethany said. "And she promised that I wouldn't have to go to the Circle, ever."

Supper was announced, and a nice meal was laid out on a table in a small panelled parlor.

"I thought," said Lita, "that you ladies would prefer to eat apart from all the soldiers. It will be quiet and private here."

"This is nice!" Charade declared, admiring the pretty room.

Despite her fears for Bethany, Leandra Hawke was otherwise in the heights of bliss, ensconced in the luxurious townhouse of Teyrn of Highever. Not since she was twenty years old had she lived like this, with servants to lay out her supper in a pleasantly warm room, to fetch her bathwater, to take away her clothes to be laundered. After supper was the happily anticipated bath, and after that, she changed into her silk gown, reveling in the sleekness against her skin, determined that she would dress like this every day for the rest of her life... unless she really did have to take to the heather with Bethany.

The girls had baths, too; and Leandra saw to the washing of Charade's mop of bushy brown hair herself.

"You should let your hair grow out, dear, now that we're going to be living this sort of life. More length will weigh the curl down, and then you'll have nice waves. Or we could braid it up into something very elegant. You don't mind if I experiment a little, do you?"

Charade turned her head, so Leandra would not see her rolling her eyes. It really was nice to be fussed over a little. Nobody had fussed over her since her mother died. Bethany looked over from the dressing table and gave her a sympathetic smile.

Highever House was big, but right now its lord was in residence with a large complement of knights and men-at-arms. Therefore, nearly everyone had to share rooms, and Ser Adam's three ladies were quartered together. At least there were two beds: a grand, curtained one big enough for Leandra and Bethany, and for Charade a small, single bed, brought in and set perpendicular to the foot of the larger. None of them felt the least like complaining. The room was big and well-furnished, with a pleasant, cushioned alcove at the window where one could sit and read, and a writing table, all fitted up with inkstand and quills. Screens in a corner concealed the washstand and the close-stool. There was a small bookcase with a few books, and a good fire in the fireplace. Their clothing was put away in a fine clothes press of polished wood. Colorful silk carpets softened the floor. Neither Bethany nor Charade had ever been in such a room in their lives.

After they were clean and dressed, the servants came to take the bathtub away and empty it. That left them to enjoy a peaceful evening within while all was activity and confrontation without. Bethany brought out her lute, tuned it, and played for her own amusement and that of

her mother and cousin, hoping that she found a place in the world for herself, in spite of everything.

In his search of the Cathedral, Jowan found the courtyard where they burned the mages: a squalid, scorched expanse of rough stone and grey dust. Wynne was long gone. The Tranquil who cleaned the courtyard told him that the remains were placed in barrels, pounded into a fine grit, and then carted out of the city to one of the Chantry's farms, where they were used to improve heavy soil in the fields and gardens.

A little storeroom was nearby, filled with staffs and amulets and used robes, with trinkets and books and keepsakes and a locked box for the coin taken from the bodies. The Tranquil worked there, placidly refurbishing the items for return to the Circle or for sale at the Wonders of Thedas and other shops.

One of the Tranquil was meticulously repairing a nice blue-grey gown, newly cleaned. Jowan yanked it from the man's hands.

"That is the property of the Chantry," the Tranquil told him in an even monotone.

"No," Jowan said, forcing himself not to blast the innocent victim. "It's not."

He crumpled it under his arm and stormed out, sick at heart. Tears burned in his eyes, remembering how disappointed Wynne had been in him.

What would he do with the gown? Return it to Leliana? Would she want it, knowing that it had been taken from Wynne's dead body by the thrifty Chantry, looking for coin however they could find it?

As he made his way through the halls, one of the Highever knights, Ser Tyrrel, saw his tabard, and called out, "Warden! Maybe you should see this!"

Deep beneath the cathedral, in a maze of cellars and tunnels, the searchers had found the lyrium storage room, and the soldiers puzzled over it. Jowan knew exactly what it was, of course, and had never sworn any oaths to keep the Templars' secrets. The soldiers could hardly believe it, though some knew friends and comrades who had become dependent on liquor or elfroot leaves, which some chewed to manage chronic pain. His anger burning in him like dragonfire, Jowan gave them the ugliest, most highly-colored version possible, dwelling on the Templars' inevitable decline into drooling idiocy, and their retirement to the nursing hospice in Val Royeaux.

It made quite an impression. Jowan doubted that any of the men would want their sons to enter the Chantry.

Beyond was the phylactery chamber: and this really was a shocker for the healthy-minded liegemen of Teyrn Cousland.

"I'm not sure I'm following you," said Ser Tyrrel. "You're saying this isn't evidence against blood mages? That the *Templars* collected this blood?"

"Yes," Jowan answered, with bitter pleasure. "That's

exactly what I'm saying. When a child is sent to the Circle, the Templars cut the boy or girl and keep the blood. Then they do a spell – " Jowan smirked inwardly at how bad that sounded, but it was really no more than the truth – " to track the mages down if they ever escape."

"Isn't that Blood Magic?" the man persisted. "If a mage did that, it would be Blood Magic, right? So how is it not blood magic if a Templar does it?"

Jowan controlled his face, inwardly dancing with glee, and made himself look sad and concerned. "I can't answer for the Chantry, but you're exactly right about mages. It's a capital offense if a mage did it, but I suppose the Chantry is above the law. "

"That's not right," Ser Tyrrel said, his innate sense of justice aroused. "That's just not right. Ought to smash these things."

Jowan grimaced. "If we did that, the Chantry would make trouble for everybody, and they'd just cut the children in the Circle again."

The soldiers left, grumbling. Jowan smiled, a wonderful idea quickening his pulse. The search of the Chantry was not yet complete. He would be back tomorrow. Perhaps one of the soldiers knew of a slaughterhouse in Denerim. If he replaced the blood with something that looked exactly the same, who would be the wiser?

He would need a funnel, too, or perhaps a syringe...



Early the next morning, Leonas Bryland sat his daugh-

ter down for a private talk, determined to give her the truth of her situation.

"But why, Father?" Habren whined, for at least the twentieth time. "Why can't I remain here? This is *my* estate, is it not? I am Arlessa of Denerim!"

Bryland sighed and rubbed his eyes, slinking lower in his uncomfortable chair. He had rather face a score of Orlesians assassins again than deal with this. This evening they would give poor Werberga to the flames, and both of them were depressed about it. Habren had screamed at the serving maids until they produced a mourning gown up to her standards. It had been finished only just before the midday meal, and now Habren sat stiffly in it. It was not unbecoming.

"Habren, my dear girl, Urien is dead. I'm sorry, but there's no help for it. Since he's dead, you're the *Dowager* Arlessa of Denerim. The terms of your marriage contract are perfectly clear. As Dowager, you are entitled to the manor of Rose Hill. You were granted ownership of those warehouses in the South Docks and some property in the Alienage. Altogether, you'll have a good income. On the other hand, you are not the ruler of Denerim, and you won't have a vote in the Landsmeet."

"Anora is still Queen!" Habren objected. "It's not *fair*!"

Bryland sat up in alarm, praying that no servants were listening at the door.

"Do not speak of Her Majesty in that insolent way!" Seeing her cowed for the moment, he lowered his voice. "Her Maj-

esty is Queen Dowager, and by the will of the King will rule only until the Landsmeet in Haring... if that long. I will remind you that that leaves quite enough time for you to be ruined if you cannot make yourself speak of her respectfully. She has been a hard-working Queen for the past five years; you were Arlessa less than a day. In fact, my girl, think very carefully before you complain of your situation. The marriage was not consummated, and, if encouraged to consider the matter more closely, some might think it invalid, which would leave you with *exactly nothing*!"

He snorted bitterly. "Good luck with trying to get your dowry back. That disappeared into Urien's coffers as soon as it was paid out, and no one appears to have any idea where he kept his gold."

He did not mention that the estate was being searched minutely, both for the Arl's gold and for his papers. There were hints that Urien had had dealings with the Orlesians. If so, it was important that the Brylands distance themselves from him as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

"It's not *fair*," Habren repeated, sniveling a little.

"That's true," her father told her, not unkindly. "However, life is often unfair. You've been lucky up to this point. Now, no one's going to make you leave until the Arl's funeral, but that's tomorrow. I've handled all the arrangements. Then you have some choices to make, and I hope you'll be guided by me. You can either go live at Rose Hill Manor, or at that empty house in the Market District, or — which

is what I advise – you can come home, either to stay or to sort things out for awhile. And,” he added, with the craft born of years of experience. “of course you’ll bring your wedding presents with you wherever you go.”

That was a shrewd touch at her feelings, and he congratulated himself on deflecting her misery.

“My presents!” she cried, brightening a little. “I’m haven’t seen the half of them! I hope they’ve been washed, ” she said, picking peevishly at the embroidery on her skirt, “I heard they were all bloody.”

“Nonsense!” Bryland retorted. “They’ve been tidied and locked up for you. We can go downstairs right now and have a look at them. We’ll have the servants start packing them up. If you decide to spend a bit of time at your manor next summer, you might want to make sure it’s properly furnished. Some of the presents might be just the thing.”

“I haven’t had a present from Bronwyn,” she complained. “She is so haughty.”

Bryland was tolerating no criticism of Bronwyn. He had chosen his side and was sticking to it. “Speak respectfully of your cousin Lady Bronwyn the Dragonslayer. She’s been carrying a heavy burden for months. and has had better things to do than buy presents for spoiled girls. It certainly wouldn’t do to demand gifts at the moment. Let it go, Habren. Bronwyn has always sent you lovely things for your naming day.”

“Things Cousin Eleanor picked out,” muttered Habren, resenting her father’s partiality to Bronwyn. He *always*

took her side. For that matter, he always took the boys’ side, too. She was glad that Lothar hadn’t died – yes, she really was. She didn’t mind him suffering a bit, however, since it keep him quiet and out of her way.

Besides, she ought not to be annoyed at poor Bronwyn. Bronwyn was a Grey Warden, and forced to wear dull, tacky clothes and heavy armor now. She hadn’t sent a present because she was probably jealous of Habren. Nobody would marry a Grey Warden, especially a scarred old maid who had lost her looks. And Habren was an Arlessa now... even if a Dowager Arlessa, and would take precedence of Bronwyn for the rest of their lives. *Yes!* As girls, Bronwyn had walked in front of Habren into the Chantry and into the homes of the nobles, but the tables had turned with a vengeance.

These were all very comforting thoughts. She felt even better when they sorted through the gifts and saw all the lovely heavy silver and colored glass. And she began to like the idea of going home tomorrow. She could leave after Urien’s funeral and sleep in her own bed. The townhouse would be a little sad and empty without Aunt Werberga, who had been the one person who could be trusted to stand up for Habren. Nevertheless, home was still home, and the maids there knew what she liked for breakfast.

Leliana came with Carver the next day to take his family on a tour of the Warden Compound. She was not

known to the Queen, and therefore, unlike Jowan, was not asked to participate in the search of the Cathedral and the examination of the documents found there. Perhaps it was for the best, for she certainly would have been torn in two. It was hard to credit that priests would stoop to assassination... but... well, perhaps it was not so hard, after all.

She sighed. Not every priest in Orlais was a model of disinterested virtue. Plenty had meddled on their own behalf and on that of their families. Some Templars had been known to behave badly – like those who had abused their trust when Tara was a prisoner of the Circle. It was very sad and depressing, and it was not hard to understand why the Maker had lost patience with his creation.

Shut out from the great events for now, she could console herself by helping Carver show his family about the Compound, so they would understand more of what his life was like. Afterwards, the plan was for Leliana to take the ladies shopping. Leliana had a great many commissions from Bronwyn to undertake, and it could all be handled together, for the most part. With the city so unsettled, it was sensible for the ladies not to go out without protection. Then, too, they might find some trinkets to add to their current apparel, for later today they were to be presented to the Queen.

"We must go to the shoemaker," she declared, consulting the list she had painstakingly composed the night before. "It is sensible to do this now. In a month or so, orders will

pour in for the Landsmeet. Then we will visit the dressmaker near the Chantry. She does very good work."

She must also visit Pandelin, the jeweler near the Palace District. His work was always superb, and being distant from the Market, he might not have been attacked by people angry at something done not by him, but by the Empress of Orlais. Leliana would go there alone, of course, and probably tomorrow. What she had to order for Bronwyn was practically a matter of state, and demanded discretion.

The day started with a visit to the Compound, and it went very well. The ladies admired the Warden's Hall, and Leandra insisted on going up into the tower to see the room that Carver was currently occupying. To his relief, the maid had already tidied up in there. There was little criticism his mother could make, as it was infinitely superior to the loft he had slept in since he was old enough to climb a ladder alone.

The housekeeper was in the process of cleaning and readying the dormitory rooms above the hall for the eventual influx of new junior Wardens. Mistress Rannelly was proud of her handiwork there.

"Thirty-one new Wardens!" she exclaimed. "Just fancy! The dear Warden-Commander is such a industrious girl."

Leandra could meet her in praise of that individual. "Lady Bronwyn has been so very good to our family: so kind to Carver, and so generous with her recommendation of my son Ser Adam to the Teyrn of Highever."

The dormitories were three large rooms furnished with bunkbeds and footlockers. They were very plain, but clean and well-lit. Stocks of linens and blankets were being brought out of storage to air. Mistress Rannelly assured Lady Amell that if Carver had a special quilt or blanket, she would see that his bed in the tower was made up with it.

"It will make the place a bit more home-like," she said kindly. "It makes it nicer for the Wardens, often so far from family."

"Oh, how nice!" Leandra cried. "Carver, I saved your quilt with the bears. It was always your favorite."

"It was my favorite when I was six," Carver pointed out, but the females of the species did not seem to hear him. The fluffy bear quilt was his destiny, sure as fate.

They talked so long, and dawdled so over the details, that it seemed reasonable to accept when Mistress Rannelly pressed them all to take an early midday meal in the Wardens' Hall. Jowan alone was not present, since he was busy at the Cathedral. The small and merry group enjoyed it all very much, and the ladies took care to keep their silk dresses unstained.

By now, the sun was high, and the Harvestmere air was not too sharp. It was a fine day for a walk, admiring the tall houses of the rich. Leliana hoped her charges would not be too exhausted at the end of it. At least Highever House, on the north side of the river, was not so very far from the Market District.

"We won't be able to visit the Cathedral, of course," Leli-

ana said in a subdued tone. "There is so much going and coming for the investigation. But you can see the outside, which is handsome. Nearby is the Arl of Redcliffe's estate, which is a large and noteworthy structure."

Bethany was thrilled by it all, as she began to take in that she was really in a city. She had known nothing but Lothering all her life, and stories had not prepared her for the scale of Denerim. They walked and walked, and kept on passing more houses, more little shops, more people. She was used to walking, and was not tired, but she was astonished at how the city just kept on *going*.

Charade and Leandra, who had known Kirkwall, were not so impressed. Some of the noble houses were fine, but there was nothing in Denerim like Kirkwall's Hightown: that exclusive enclave of the wealthy. Even Highever House was more a fortress than a mansion, and the sanitary facilities were comparatively crude. Denerim desperately needed a better sewer system.

Aside from that, Charade and Leandra's views diverged. Charade's experience of Hightown had been that of an outsider looking in. She had seen the great houses, but knew they were not for such as she. The contrast in Ferelden between rich and poor was not so painful, not so extreme. No, there was no Hightown in Denerim: on the other hand, there was no Darktown.

Leandra, for her part, was grateful to the Teyrn for his generosity, but thought that bechambers and sitting rooms of

his house would be more attractive if more of the rough stone walls were to be plastered over or paneled. Ferelden was a poor country, of course, and one must not expect too much.

Gate Street led them to the wide and bustling Market, and everyone was entranced. Carver's jaw dropped at the splendor of it – the life – and Bethany uttered a little cry of joy. Shops surrounded the rough square, and in the center, under a great tent of gaudily-painted canvas, was a multitude of fascinating little stalls.

"How delightful!" Leandra exclaimed.

"Yes," Charade agreed, since she now had a few coins in her purse. It had not been so delightful when she had arrived here with almost nothing.

"We can buy... *anything*... here!" Bethany smiled at the thought.

Leliana carefully herded everyone with her, wanting to get their orders made at the shoemaker's. To Carver's great disgust, he was forced to join them, for Leandra wanted him to have something "nice" for the times when he would not be clomping around in a pair of iron-shod warboots. He let her have her way as long as his footwear was plain black. Once his big young feet were carefully measured, he waited glumly, glancing longingly out the open door at the wonders of the Market.

"I'll just stay by the stalls," he promised, inching away. "On my honor."

"Don't get lost!" Leandra called after him anxiously, and then returned to the orgy of color and texture. While Cha-

rade was being measured, Leandra applied to Leliana for a recommendation of a tailor to make Carver a doublet.

"We must go there next," Leandra decided. "After that we'll let the poor boy go free, as long as he meets us somewhere later."

"The Gnawed Noble Tavern," Leliana suggested. "It is a very nice place to sit and chat."

It was a busy day: dragged to the tailor, Carver was told he liked blue, and he denied it categorically.

"Adam likes blue. I don't."

"But you always wore blue," Leandra objected, puzzled.

"That's because I was wearing his hand-me-downs. I *hate* blue."

Dark grey with black embroidery was an acceptable compromise. Black breeches, too, that would not be too fussy to care for. A black cloak. Bethany told him he would look like the Black Fox of legend, but that idea pleased Carver. He thought he looked dangerous in black. He was sent on his way and told when to meet them at the Gnawed Noble. Being ordered to go to the finest tavern in Denerim mollified him quite a bit.

New gowns were ordered, and new bodices and belts. Fine linen was selected for undergarments and night-gowns. Silks and velvets were chosen for dressing gowns. A stall sold silver hair pins and clips, and Charade was persuaded to choose something that would help tame her cloud of brown hair.

Leliana looked for a favorite vendor, and in her place saw a grave young man instead. She looked through his

stock of fragrant oils, and asked, "Where is Liselle?"

Responding with pleased surprise to her accent, the young man said, "She was attacked during the riots here. She is recovering at home. We were lucky not to be arrested."

He too sounded like a transplanted Orlesian.

"I am very sorry your sister was hurt," said Leliana. "Please give her Leliana's regards. Lady Amell, sample this attar of roses. It is so refreshing!"

Generous purchases of bath oils and perfumes were made, and the young man appeared considerably happier. Bethany bought a clove-decorated pomander, and enjoyed smelling that rather than the general odor of wet dog and garbage.

Since winter was coming, they also stopped at a glover's establishment, and once again were astonished at all the colors that leather could be.

"This is a wonderful place," Charade said, looking about the Market. "I think it would be such fun to live here!"

Leliana's gaze slipped towards the locked and silent door that guarded Marjolaine's little house. "I suppose so."

Others might be enjoying the day, The Grand Cleric was not. She had been allowed a day of rest, but now had to endure a most unpleasant conversation.

"Your dear lady mother," the Grand Cleric told Fergus Cousland, "was my good friend."

Her voice was hoarse with ill health and fear. She had been summoned to the Palace; and alone in the Privy

Chamber, without Templar escort, she was being subjected to rigorous questioning by Queen Anora and her closest advisers present in Denerim.

Anora looked at her hands, allowing Fergus to answer this appeal to sentiment. The Teyrn gazed at the elderly cleric with hooded eyes.

"For four months, my mother's corpse lay rotting in a mass grave – no, that's too dignified a description. My parents, my wife... my son... were thrown in a midden with all the other victims of the Highever massacre perpetrated by Rendon Howe. In that time, until I retook Highever and *demand*ed their just dues, no priest came forward to offer them rites or give them to the fire. Your *friendship*, Your Grace," he snarled, "seems to have been of little value. And don't tell me that Howe had put the priests in fear. If anything, his relationship with the Highever Chantry seems to be have been remarkably amiable. According to his accounts, he gave the Revered Mother in Highever – also a dear, dear friend of my mother – the generous donation of two hundred sovereigns. A similar donation was made to the Chantry of Our Lady Redeemer in Amaranthine. Astonishing that no priest in the city of Amaranthine noticed shackled elves being loaded into the ships of Tevinter blood mages."

A silence. The Grand Cleric collected herself, and said quietly. "That is all vile and atrocious, but I had no part in any of it."

"It is true," Anora admitted, "that no proofs tie you directly to the crimes. Otherwise, this conversation would be taking

place not here in the Palace, but in Fort Drakon.”

Indignant, the Grand Cleric protested. “You would threaten me?”

Anora’s blue eyes were hard as flint. “I will not permit *you* or any member of the Chantry to threaten this country. My father has written to me repeatedly, complaining of how the interference of Revered Mother Clarine has hampered his efforts to pursue the war against the Blight. Evil deeds have been wrought: there have been attempts on my own life, on that of the Teyrn, on my father and the Warden-Commander. Ferelden nobles have been murdered or wounded. All the evidence, to be perfectly frank, can be ultimately be traced to Orlesian intrigue – most especially an Orlesian agent. We know she had many contacts. We now know, based on our search of the quarters of Mothers Gertrude and Heloise, that this agent – and others – had such contacts in the Chantry.” She smiled coldly. “We have strong evidence... circumstantial, but *strong*, that these Mothers and possibly Ser Tavish knew that the attack on Arl Urien’s wedding was imminent. And that is why, contrary to your own treaties with the Grey Wardens, a harmless woman, Senior Enchanter Wynne, was heartlessly murdered in hopes of causing even more loss of life.”

Anora sat back. Bryland had much to add.

“My sister is dead, my son only saved by the intervention of a brave young mage. Tomorrow, my daughter, already a widow, will give her husband to the flames. Your Templars

did not lift a finger to aid or protect anyone in that room other than themselves and you. In fact, I have compiled a list of those injured by your Templars as they fled the Arl of Denerim’s estate. No deaths can be directly attributed to them, but these injuries require compensation. I have calculated a figure which the Queen deems reasonable.”

The Grand Cleric saw it, and forced herself not to gasp or make a face. It was a substantial amount, and was no doubt not simply meant to indemnify the injured, but intended as a punitive measure against the Chantry. She noticed that in the total were two entries of two hundred sovereigns each. Fergus Cousland was evidently very displeased about the conduct of the Chantry in the north. The Grand Cleric pursed her lips, determined to have it out with Mothers Petronille and Ita. She was not particularly pleased with them herself, and whatever these young people sitting opposite her might think, Teyrna Eleanor had indeed been her friend.

To his eternal amusement, Jowan discovered that he did not have to completely replace the blood in the phylacteries to achieve his ends. Even a small syringe full of sheep’s blood rendered them outwardly unchanged, but utterly useless.

The soldiers liked him. He had healed the poor beautiful Queen after all, and he cheerfully dealt with their own cuts and bruises. When Jowan told them he needed some “equipment” for his part in the search, they carried

his kegs for him without question. It did not take long to contaminate every phylactery in the storage area, since the syringe's sharp point easily penetrated the wax stopper. Afterward, Jowan could warm the spot and smooth it over, rendering the contamination undetectable.

Some phylacteries he did not touch: those of mages whom he knew to be dead. He read some names with silent anguish, remembering friends who had disappeared after their Harrowing, or who had been killed for some infraction.

His influence was great at the moment. He knew it would never be greater. The Queen was furious with the Chantry, and now was the time for reform in the treatment of mages. If he could persuade her that the collection of the blood for phylacteries was a sinister form of Blood Magic, he might be able to keep from the Templars their best tool for tracking apostates. Some mages would always prefer the settled, ordered life of the Circle. Some longed to be free. Jowan felt they should have that option. After all, no one else in Thedas was imprisoned for crimes that they *might* commit some time in the indefinite future.

He would like to do away with the Rite of Tranquility altogether, but perhaps that was not realistic. However, if it were only voluntary, and could *never* be imposed on a mage against his or her will, Jowan felt he would have struck a blow for the mages of Ferelden. Some mages might choose Tranquility, fearing the terrors of the Harrowing. For himself, he would rather be killed by a Templar in a

failed Harrowing than be made a walking, talking puppet.

He paused. Wynne's phylactery was in his hand. He set the vial down gently, and wiped his nose.

"So where do we stand?" Bryland asked, glancing through his notes. "We're still not sure about Urien's degree of complicity. I think we should question his guards more closely – especially his seneschal. It's very odd that we can't find either his accounts or his treasury. The account books might answer a lot of questions."

"I tend to think," Anora pondered, "that he was indeed accepting coin from the Empress in exchange for intelligence. That was treasonable in itself. I do not think, however, that he had any foreknowledge of the attack on the seventh. In fact, it's possible that part of the intent was to eliminate him and thus keep him from ever telling us what he did know. And likewise with Bann Ceorlic. His name is mentioned in some of the correspondence. I am sending to Lothering for his accounts."

Fergus agreed. "And there's no evidence that either knew about the prior attempt on you, Your Majesty. They were tools, and they were used and discarded."

Anora tapped her fingers, thinking. "I tend to agree. I don't believe the poisoning was known to anyone other than the treacherous maid, the Orlesian agent Marjolaine, and her principal. That was a very subtle plot, and very nearly succeeded." Her blue eyes looked across the breadth

of Ferelden and beyond. "I believe that the attack on the seventh was a response to the news of the death of the King. The Empress hoped to gain all by a marriage with him... and was disappointed."

Bryland forbore to spit, but there was a foul taste on his tongue. He had now been told about the secret marriage contract, and regretted more than ever that Bryce Cousland had not been elected king. He would not say it aloud and offend the lady sitting opposite him, but Bryce would have had things better in hand. And Eleanor would have been every bit as capable a Queen as Loghain's daughter.

Loghain and Bronwyn were not a perfect solution, and they certainly were no substitute for Bryce, whom Bryland had considered his best friend from boyhood. However, Loghain's experience and military leadership were essential, and combined with Bronwyn's royal strain and her estimable qualities, Ferelden would have a king and queen who stood a good chance of leading Ferelden through this terrible time.

He glanced at Fergus. He was fond of Fergus, too; though Bronwyn seemed the more remarkable of his friend's two children. If by some mischance Loghain and Bronwyn had no children, Fergus would grow to be a fine king. He was willing to be heir presumptive, and no more; but even that would satisfy many of those to whom blood was all.

A pity that Fergus had never shown any interest in Habren, and now clearly never would. He studied the looks exchanged between Fergus and the Queen, and was sure he understood

the situation. There was something there between them. It was far too early for them to act upon it, but it seemed likely that the Queen Dowager might well someday become the Teyrna of Highever. He hoped Anora was not barren, as rumor had it. They would need two children after all: an heir for Highever, and one for Gwaren as well. Unless Loghain kept Gwaren for a second child of his own...

Loghain and Bronwyn; or Fergus and Anora? For Bryland the choice was clear. While the common folk might love their pretty stories of the knight rescuing the fair lady in distress, Bryland felt that Loghain and Bronwyn were the leadership the country needed now. They were each of them true heroes; beings who appeared rarely on the world's stage. By all accounts, and by the evidence of his own eyes, Bronwyn had found the Ashes of Andraste! That was so extraordinary that Bryland felt he needed some time to take it in. So, politics first. After the meeting here, he would go to the Arl of Denerim's estate to visit with the convalescents there and canvas for more votes. The Landsmeet needed no surprises.

Arl of Denerim... Arl of Denerim... Someone had to be Arl of Denerim. Vaughan was dead. Who was Urien's heir? Wasn't there some sort of cousin...?

The Queen was speaking again, and he must attend.

"Mother Gertrude has told us more than she realized. Her complicity is clear, and she has implicated a number of others. Ordinarily, we would protest to the Grand Cleric,

and perhaps the malefactors would simply be sent to Val Royeaux, but that is unacceptable, as the plots originated there. Executing senior officials of the Chantry, however, would be an irrevocable step."

"They're more useful as prisoners, anyway," Fergus said. "We'll likely get more information and more names from them. We can drag out the investigation for a long, long time."

"And if the Grand Cleric pulls herself together and demands their release?"

"I don't think she will," Fergus said, with a faint smile. "I really don't think she will. She, too, is angry and afraid of those around her. Why should she not be? It is clear from our investigations that she was drugged on orders from Val Royeaux. She might well become something of an ally."

"My father is coming," Anora said, taking comfort in the words. "My father is coming. I have received a message. He is only a day away. Once he is here, I believe our next step is to make some decisions about who will fill all these vacant lordships. We will gather our old friends together and make some new ones, too, I think."

A knock at the door. The messenger was admitted, and had the air of repressed excitement that heralded remarkable news.

"Your Majesty," he said, "Lord Nathaniel Howe has arrived, and he begs the favor of an audience."

CHAPTER 18

THE BOY WHO
FOUND FEAR
AT LAST

IN THE ROAD TO LOTHERING, A COURIER REACHED THEM, THIS TIME FROM GHERLEN'S HALT, notifying Loghain of the attack by

Orlesian "mercenaries," and its repulse. This was serious news, and Loghain knew he must share it. He ordered the march stopped and summoned Bronwyn and the nobles. They took council under a huge old oak tree, its leaves beginning to brown, while a chilly wind whistled through the forest, whispering of snows to come.

"Looks like Haglin gave them a surprise," grunted Wulffe. "Well done, that."

Bronwyn agreed. "The Empress is playing the Grand Game, making believe that she knows nothing of these attacks, and pretending likewise that we don't know that she's behind them. It's all very tiresome."

"Tiresome or not," Loghain replied grimly, "The Empress knows that we are in no position to take offense openly and declare war on Orlais. In a way, this "Game" is somewhat to our advantage, in that it enables us to save face."

There was little they could do, and no help they could send to the fortress. Loghain acknowledged the message and told them to hold fast. They mounted up again, and rode to Lothering.

Morrigan had her own horse, even though she hardly needed one; but she was always insistent on her perquisites, however unnecessary. She gave Bronwyn a look that clearly indicated a wish to speak to her privately. Bronwyn allowed her horse to drop back from the leaders, and Morrigan kicked her mount up close to Bronwyn's.

For a while the witch was silent. She had been in an unpleasant and uncommunicative mood since Bronwyn had announced her trip to Denerim. Was Morrigan nervous about seeing the great city for the first time? Was she having some sort of trouble with Anders? Knowing better than to pry, Bronwyn rode beside her, equally silent, curious about what her friend had to say.

When Morrigan spoke, it took Bronwyn by surprise, for it was the last thing she expected to hear.

"Do you truly intend to marry Teyrn Loghain?"

Of course Anders had told her everything. It was only a wonder that he had not stood on Ostagar Bridge and declared it to all Thedas.

"Yes," she answered quietly but without hesitation. "That's the plan. We will marry and claim the throne."

"Indeed?" Morrigan said, rather coolly. "At least you will be Queen. 'Twill be something that makes the sacrifice worthwhile. I see little advantage to you otherwise."

Surprised, Bronwyn looked at the witch's beautiful, stormy face. Did Morrigan *dislike* Loghain? Bronwyn had never suspected it.

"After the death of the King," Bronwyn said, "Loghain and I came to believe that this was the best way to ensure Fereldan security and a victory over the Blight, unhampered by anyone else."

"Did he approach you first?"

Bronwyn smiled wryly. "Actually, the first to openly broach the matter to me was my cousin Arl Bryland. He and great many other people want Loghain to be King, but Loghain has no legitimate claim on the throne of Ferelden at all. My cousin gave me a long and serious lecture about the value of legitimacy in these matters. It would not do for it simply to be a matter of the strongest general using the army to seize power. That would set an evil precedent indeed. My brother Fergus and I have the strongest blood claim to the throne. Fergus is not interested. That leaves me, and my own claim is somewhat clouded by the fact that I am a Grey Warden. Nonetheless, if Loghain and I present ourselves to the Landsmeet as a married couple, I do not see anyone able to challenge us."

Morrigan listened carefully, and then asked, "So Loghain has not pressured you into this... marriage?"

Bronwyn laughed, surprising herself. "No more than any of the other nobles! The idea has gained a great deal of momentum among those who are here with the army. They largely feel that it is my duty to marry Loghain; and all Ferelden

knows the old saw that *'Couslands always do their duty!'*"

No amusement was reflected in Morrigan's yellow eyes. She asked, "Could you not take the throne alone? Without Loghain as your... consort?"

Bronwyn had not seriously considered the idea. "It *might* be possible, but there would be a lot of controversy and I would not have the kind of support that Loghain commands. If I were not a Warden... yes. I suppose so. But the fact is that this is all being proposed in order to put *Loghain* on the throne."

"So you are a means to an end?"

A burst of masculine laughter rang out in front of them. Wulffe had said something his fellow nobles found hilarious. Even Loghain was grinning. For some reason it irritated Bronwyn beyond words. She scowled, hating the way Morrigan put the situation, but acknowledging its essential truth.

"I always knew..." she began. How to explain this? "I always knew that as a Cousland, my life could not be completely and only my own. I could not be selfish, and marry only to please myself. My parents were, for that matter, far more indulgent than most nobles. I at least had the power of refusal. Otherwise, I would have been the wife of Thomas Howe two years ago, when he was old enough to marry, and my life would have been very, very different. Obviously."

Morrigan sneered. "You are not the only young woman whose parents wished to control her. Even Flemeth... well... 'tis common enough."

That was only too true, and Bronwyn acknowledged it.

"Exactly. It is not uncommon. I am, however, uncommonly fortunate in that the man everyone wishes me to marry is the man of my choice."

"So why now?" Morrigan narrowed her eyes, and brushed a fallen leaf from her hair. The wind had picked up again. "Why are you not *already* married to Loghain if everyone thought it such a wonderful idea? Why has the man not already asked for your *'hand,'* in that silly figure of speech?"

The conversation was making Bronwyn extremely uncomfortable. She glanced behind her, wishing that Zevran or Anders would interrupt, but they were deep in their own discussion. While she did not want to answer Morrigan, essential honesty required some sort of response.

"I don't think Loghain ever thought of me in that way, at least before I came to Ostagar as a Warden. My father thought that Loghain would never remarry unless he was given a very, very good reason — and that meant a better reason than a pretty face. And to be perfectly truthful, my parents did *not* want me to marry Loghain." She grimaced. and then lowered her voice further. "They did not think him good enough for me."

"Then they had better sense than you or all these other 'nobles,'" Morrigan said bluntly. "for I agree with them."

Bronwyn looked at her companion in astonishment, and felt her face grow hot. Before she could summon a reply, Morrigan cut her off.

"I will say this but once, since the Wheel of Destiny is already turning. You *are* too good for him. When I see

you together, I see a strong young woman with all her life before her, ill-coupled with a ruthless, hard-bitten, self-made man old enough to be her father: a man who is not too scrupulous to take advantage of her birth and fortune and her fresh young body as well. You have made a bad bargain in Loghain, my friend, and you will live to regret it. Flemeth told me a great deal about Loghain."

Dangerously close to losing her temper, Bronwyn could hardly trust herself to speak. "That would be the same Flemeth who lied to you throughout your childhood and was planning to eject your soul from your body like an unwanted tenant. I do not consider Flemeth a reliable source of information, and neither should you!"

"She prophesied," Morrigan hissed, "that Loghain would betray Maric three times: *'each time worst than the last.'* I presume that his stealing the throne of Ferelden from the Theirin line must be considered the last and greatest of his treacheries, so I cannot speak of the others. Flemeth knew much that others thought hidden. She told me that Loghain's cold heart had warmed but once, and never again. That rather lets you out. No. Do not rail at me. I have done, and I merely foretell."

Wisely, she pulled on the reins, forcing her horse to drop back. Bronwyn refused to look at her, already struggling with unwelcome, half-acknowledged doubts of her own.



Bronwyn felt a little uncomfortable staying at Bann

Ceorlic's luxurious manor, knowing how much she had displeased the man. Loghain, however, preoccupied and laconic, gave her no chance to disagree with his choice of quarters. There was a limit to how far men and horses could go in a day, and everyone needed to rest, if they were to deal with the crisis in Denerim.

She was familiar with the manor, of course, from her last visit. She knew the seneschal Rurik and remembered the maid whose name was Kara. This time, with such a large party, they were packed into the luxurious chambers with little chance for privacy. She would have to share her room with Morrigan and Aveline. At least she would have a proper bath.

It was worse for the men. All six of the Wardens' party were camping out in another of the rooms, some on straw pallets laid on the floor, and with Zevran lying crossways at the foot of the great bed.

"We'll have far more room at Castle Bryland," she consoled her people. "if the weather holds, and we push ourselves, we might make it there by late tomorrow."

Truth to tell, most of them were not very put out at their living conditions. Anders and Morrigan did not care for the arrangements, but Bronwyn thought they could survive not sleeping together for a night or two. Cathair, their Dalish elf, was bewildered by the manor and its excess, but he seemed a rather easy-going fellow, which was a welcome change from the prickliness of Danith.

It was very pleasant to have clean hair and nails again —

however briefly – but it was impossible to dry her hair thoroughly before going to bed. Bronwyn braided up her long brown locks and hoped for the best. If she had been of a delicate constitution – or simply not a Warden – she might fully have expected to awaken the next morning with a cold. She paused by the door to her room, not wanting another scene with Morrigan. The witch's words had disturbed her deeply, and she resolved to forget them. Morrigan meant well, perhaps, but she was meddling in affairs about which she knew nothing.

Then Bronwyn smiled, and decided to seek out Loghain. That would be the best balm for her doubts.

He was in the room she had slept in the last time she was here. And there was a guard at the door. How annoying. And here she was, in her shirt and breeches, pretending to be at her ease. At least the guard recognized her, and did not stupidly shout out "Halt!" just as everyone was trying to get to sleep.

The fellow stood to attention, though. "Good evening, Warden-Commander."

Speaking more boldly than she really felt, Bronwyn said, "I have business with the Teyrn."

Was that a *smile* on that man's face? It disappeared quickly enough, and the man opened the door and stepped inside to speak to Loghain. There was a muffled exchange, and the man stood aside respectfully.

"Enter, Warden-Commander."

Loghain had not yet gone to bed, but frowned – not very welcomingly – at the sight of her. Bronwyn slipped in and

shut the door behind her. Urgent need had brought her here, and at the sight of the man she wanted, she smiled, and moved forward to wrap her arms around him, enjoying the heat from the hard and seasoned body.

"Bronwyn, this isn't the –"

She caught his lips with hers and kissed him fervently, pressing close. He let her have her way for only a few moments, before his strong hands unfastened her arms and he pushed her away.

"You need to go. The last thing we need is unpleasant gossip."

She stared at him, dumbstruck and reddening. "Are you throwing me out?"

He was. Elaborately, insultingly patient, he was ushering her to the door, like an importunate peddler – like an unwanted camp follower. He said, "I trust the guard, but one never knows who is watching. You need your rest, and so do I."

"As if I'm likely to get any, between Morrigan's bad temper and Aveline's nightmares!"

This was awful: awful and humiliating. The desire warming her belly cooled and sickened.

"Don't be a child," Loghain said, scowling. "We have to maintain a degree of propriety, at least until our betrothal is announced. People might be casual about their own romantic arrangements. They might even be amused to hear that I found myself a pretty girl –"

Bronwyn hissed in disgust and looked away. Loghain caught her by the wrist, and went on. " – However, all

sorts of people can be oddly conventional about ladies, especially ladies who might wear a crown. Old women — of both sexes — with Landsmeet votes are the worst. The Girl Warden must be above reproach."

"But it's absurd!" Bronwyn protested, her body wanting relief. She thought with repulsion of that dark little room, already bursting with the occupation of Aveline and Morrigan. "What do I care for gossip?"

"You *will* care," Loghain insisted. "You'll care if the banns probe the matter in detail at the Landsmeet. Nothing is sacred to them. It's impossible to be private in the midst of an army. When we get back to Denerim, we can arrange things more to our liking."

Bronwyn doubted it. In Denerim, she would be quartered in the Wardens' Compound and he in the Palace, and their every movement would be known to the servants.

But somehow he had got her to the door, and had at least the decency not to push her out through it.

"Now off you go."

He looked as if he might be about to give her a brisk goodnight kiss, but Bronwyn glared at him and shook off his hand. She took a quick breath, pulled herself together, and opened the door on the surprised guard. She was gone, shutting the door in Loghain's face. He heard her outside, her voice admirably calm as she spoke to the guard.

"Good night." Her footsteps died away down the hall.

Loghain was relieved to have her gone. He did not want

to be seduced or persuaded, but it would have been difficult to resist her much longer. He knew he was right in this, and Bronwyn would understand some day. Touchy creatures, young women. No doubt she would nurse her grievance for a day or two.

If she could not see the danger, she was fortunate that he could. Luckily, he had the experience to know when to be discreet. Because he could be discreet, Bronwyn — and the rest of Ferelden — did not know that he and Queen Rowan had once been lovers, long ago, when she was not a Queen, but a fellow rebel. Few had ever known it, for Loghain had never been one to kiss and tell.

Rowan must be Bronwyn's model. Rowan had always been very careful of her reputation, even before her reconciliation with Maric. It was one thing to openly declare her feelings in the Deep Roads, with only Loghain, Maric, and the odious Katriel present; it would have been quite another to make herself the talk of the rebel army.

As the daughter of the Arl of Redcliffe, Rowan was watched and judged by everyone they met. Aside from the issue of her suitability to be Queen, any blot on her name might adversely affect her younger brothers or the memory of her father. Bronwyn's situation was analogous: Loghain must protect her and her good name, even if she was too young to understand the possible consequences of malicious gossip.

Bronwyn, meanwhile, was hot with shame and anger.

Never had she imagined that a man she had given herself to — a man who had taken her maidenhood and had won her hand in marriage — a man who was about to claim a kingdom on the basis of that relationship — would reject her affections with such scorn... such contempt.

This was horrifying. She had defended him to Morrigan, but what if he truly cared nothing for her? Perhaps she was only a convenient stepping-stone up to the glory of a throne. Perhaps she had been an idle amusement, and then a useful tool. Perhaps... her mind reeled... she had been a very great fool.

He was a famous man, and a frequent topic of discussion; but once, when she was a little girl, she had eavesdropped on Father and Mother talking about his marriage. He had refused all the noble ladies who had flung themselves at him and had chosen the daughter of a cabinet maker instead. Speculation was rife about that. Father thought it might simply be that Teyrna Celia was a golden-haired beauty, but Mother had interpreted it differently.

"Oh, she's pretty enough, no doubt; but more important, my dearest, she owes him everything. She has no family to defend her when he abandons her for months at a time in Gwaren, while he pulls Maric's strings in Denerim. A noblewoman would never stand for the way he treats her. She would never have to. Celia has no recourse, and has to smile and pretend to like it. Or I suppose she still smiles. We haven't seen her in years, since apparently he doesn't want her about at the Landsmeets."

"He'll have to let her come eventually. I hear their daughter

is becoming quite the beauty. He'll want to dangle her before Maric — or Cailan."

Mother had said, very coldly, "No doubt."

And then she had been discovered and shooed away, alas, and heard no more of their very interesting conversation.

Mother had never wanted her to marry Loghain. Nor had Father. Maker's Breath, what if her parents were *right*?

No. She would not let herself dwell on that possibility. She was committed to the marriage and could hardly get out of it now. Bitterly, she set her jaw, swearing to herself that Loghain wanted her in future he could bloody well seek *her* out... and crawl a little.

Morrigan and Aveline had already gone to bed and blown out the candle by the bedside. The light of the fire lit the room redly. Bronwyn angrily shrugged out of her breeches and flung them disdainfully over a bench. She crept into bed in her smalls and shirt and tried to be still, her body complaining bitterly. She stared up at the canopy above her for what seemed like hours, while Aveline grew restless in her sleep, no doubt tormented by vivid nightmares of the darkspawn.

A deep sigh from Morrigan. She was awake, and angry about it. Bronwyn was too tired to talk and so pretended to be asleep when Morrigan muttered furiously about the noise. Finally the witch snatched up her pillow and a quilt and stalked to a corner. Scout roused and was curious, but Morrigan warned him away with a cat-like hiss.

Unable to sleep, Bronwyn watched the shadows of the

dying fire play on the ceiling and the draperies. Most of the time now, she could suppress her own dreams somewhat. She did not always sleep well, but was rarely shocked awake. She was sorry for Aveline, but wished she did not have to listen to the groans and whimpers. With sour envy, she thought of Loghain, smug in the solitary grandeur of a room to himself. She would not soon forget how he had scorned her.

On the road the following day, another message from Denerim arrived. Bryland's note informed them that the Queen was being held against her will at the Cathedral. This bit of news caused Loghain's face to redden alarmingly. His first impulse was to ride with a small picked band to Denerim ahead of the rest of the forces, but he was old and experienced enough to know that such a course would be madness. It might well, in fact, be exactly what his enemies were anticipating.

"That's enough from those bastards!" he snarled to Bronwyn, twitching his reins restlessly. "I've put up with all I'm going to take from that cow in Ostagar and that doddering fool in Denerim. Things are going to change."

He behaved as if nothing had happened last night — or failed to happen — and Bronwyn was determined to behave in exactly the same way. He must not know how much he had hurt her, for it would be a weapon in any man's hands. As things stood now, Bronwyn did not wish to give Loghain such a weapon. He might actually use it.

Castle Bryland opened to them, pale cold stone and black iron. In the ancient hall, the evening's conference was even grimmer than the last.

"We want to be careful," advised Bann Carlin. "We don't want the Divine declaring an Exalted March on us."

Bronwyn shrugged. "If the Chantry dares to lock up the Queen of Ferelden, I don't see that we have much to lose. It sounds like they're already moving against us."

Loghain stared into the fire. "At the end of the Rebellion," he said slowly, "Maric considered a break with Val Royeaux. The Divine had openly declared herself the enemy of Ferelden. Maric decided in the end that we were too weak to deal with another war hard on the heels of the last." He got up and leaned on the stone mantel, surveying their expressions. "Perhaps it is time to assess the degree of threat an Exalted March actually poses."

"How many Templars does the Knight-Divine command?" Bronwyn asked. "Do you know?"

"No," Loghain admitted. "and I don't have to. The Chantry can't pull all its Templars out of every nation in Thedas to attack Ferelden. Since this is clearly an Orlesian offensive, Nevarra will not cooperate. If the Divine pushes too hard, she'll find more nations arrayed against her than Ferelden. Nevarra knows why Orlais wants Ferelden: for the Bannorn breadbasket that would support the continuing war against Nevarra."

"The Free Marches hate Orlais," Bann Stronar agreed.

"And the individual Chantries would be reluctant to strip their ability to control their own local mages."

"So an Exalted March at this point," said Wulffe, "would essentially be an Orlesian invasion. And because of the war with Nevarra, they won't be able to throw their full force our way."

"But there is another factor," Bronwyn considered. "And that is that we are in the midst of a Blight. The Grey Wardens have kept their distance, but if Orlais attacks us now, they will be forced to make a stand for the sake of their own credibility and honor. The Grey Wardens will not march with Orlais, I'm certain of it. No matter how close they are to the Empress, they still have to answer to Weisshaupt and the rest of Thedas. The Divine will not want a war between the Chantry and the Grey Wardens," she paused, rage rising up from her deepest core, "because we will whip their cowardly, sanctimonious, purple-skirted *arses!*"

A burst of laughter. Even Loghain smiled grimly.

"Well put!" rumbled Wulffe, still chuckling.

"You may well be right," said Loghain. "The Grey Wardens of Orlais might not move against us. It might well be that the Empress will pretend neutrality and use the Templars to conduct a proxy war. I do have fairly good intelligence as to the numbers of Templars within the borders of Ferelden. We'll start there, and take a closer look at their activities."

The conference broke up, and they all took themselves off to their quarters. Bronwyn felt took a certain childish pleasure in bidding Loghain a dismissive good night.

Castle Bryland was indeed much larger than Ceorlic's manor, but there were still a great many soldiers to lodge. Once again, Aveline and Morrigan were assigned to Bronwyn's room, though thankfully in separate beds. Morrigan dragged her bed as far away as possible. She and Bronwyn were carefully polite to each other, but said nothing beyond the most necessary words.

Heavy rains slowed their progress toward Denerim. The West Road north of South Reach was not an engineering marvel like the ancient Imperial Highway. Quite long stretches were paved with stone, but there were deplorably muddy gaps, and in a number of places swollen stream beds had swept away small bridges, forcing their party to ford across.

And at each halt a new message arrived: Bryland was laying seize to the Cathedral; Fergus Cousland had arrived; Arl Urien was dead; the Queen was rescued and saved by the Ashes of Andraste; the Queen was well and in control of the city.

That last, very reassuring message reached them at the royal manor of Skraeling, a very old and inconvenient hunting lodge with a thatched roof. Only a handful of arrivals could find shelter in the house or barns: the rest had to set up an encampment.

Loghain was sending messages himself, wanting to know the situation in Denerim before he arrived. The last reply reached them when they were half a day from the city, and included a lengthy note to Bronwyn from Warden Jowan.

She read it on horseback, letting Dax have his head. She read

it though, read it again, and then told Loghain the gist of it.

"Jowan has confirmed that the Templars murdered Wynne. The Revered Mother in Ostagar was obsessed with punishing her for the death of the King. She wrote to her fellow Orlesian sympathizer, Mother Gertrude, who saw to the matter. The correspondence indicates that Mother Gertrude knew Wynne's location for over a week before she sent the Templars after her. There's no doubt in Jowan's mind that she chose the day very carefully."

Loghain nodded. The Chantry had overreached itself at last. "Also..." Bronwyn hesitated. "Jowan apologizes here for making the Ashes known to everyone. Apparently he told people what they were when Anora emerged from the Cathedral, and her healing was very public."

"Good," said Loghain. "Just as well to make clear that the Chantry had no part in saving her life. Quite the contrary."

Bronwyn was not satisfied by that. "I told him to keep it quiet! I didn't want people talking about the Ashes or going looking for the Ashes. Someday we'll have to do something about Haven, but I don't want there to be some sort of huge rush to grab at miracles. Adventurers are likely to be killed, or the Chantry will try to make coin from it."

Loghain did not care about the fate of the dragon-worshippers of Haven, and even less about the fate of people stupid enough to wander there alone.

"The Chantry will not be in a position to finance expeditions or make new foundations for some time after I finish

with them." He opened another message, and laughed harshly. "A patrol has captured some of our fine Orlesian minstrels. I wonder what tune they'll sing for us?"

The rain stopped before they reached Denerim. In the hazy distance they could just make out Fort Drakon. Loghain ordered a final halt to eat and rest, and perhaps to smarten themselves up a bit before entering the city. He looked over at Bronwyn, talking quietly to her Wardens, with some pride and pleasure. She had taken his admonition to heart with surprising maturity. She really was quite a remarkable girl.

"Bronwyn!" he called, stalking over to her. She regarded him with admirable composure.

"My lord?"

Loghain paused, a little softened by the sight of her young face turned up to his. Yes, a remarkable girl, and already a queen in bearing. Too good for the likes of him; but he would endeavor to learn to be happier than he deserved.

"Don't wear your helmet," he advised Bronwyn, a bit gruffly, fingers light on her cheek. "Let the people see your face."

The troops reformed in good order, the horses by twos, the soldiers in their ranks, the wagons full of baggage and loot trundling along on well-oiled wheels.

People were gathering along the roads to see them pass, chattering and pointing. Bronwyn heard the words "*That's the Girl Warden!*" all too often, even though she had resigned herself to the nickname. Loghain might be at his best look-

ing stern and forbidding, but she could not help smiling at the friendly folk as they held up the children to see. People talked about her looks, her red armor, how she had found the remedy to save the Queen... talked about her loudly, and as if Bronwyn were too deaf to hear them.

Ahead loomed the walls of Denerim, and before them the Great Gate. The last time Bronwyn had come to Denerim, she had slipped in almost unnoticed. Now, the crowds swirled and thickened, calling her name. Guards below and guards above shouted to each other, onlookers were pushed back, out of the way of the advancing troops.

Quite a few people wanted to see them: see her, Bronwyn, in particular. Fathers held up their children; mothers ran alongside Bronwyn's stirrup, wanting her to touch their babies.

Well..."bless" their babies, in at least two cases. Really, what sort of stories had people spread about her?

She began to have some idea, after they reached the Palace and Bronwyn found a priest with a message from the Grand Cleric waiting for her in the courtyard.

"Her Grace wishes to speak to you as soon as possible..."

Loghain had not noticed. He had received a message himself, and was reading it, face inscrutable.

The arrival disappointed her a little. She had looked forward to showing her new Wardens about their Compound. Instead, Jowan, Leliana, Carver met her at the Palace steps with the rest of the officers and functionaries, and Bronwyn had hardly a moment to greet them and

whisper to Jowan, "I need to talk to you —" when she was swept away with Loghain, off to see the Queen.

Her Wardens were left behind, bemused and rather cheerful, to be taken in hand by Leliana. Bronwyn cast a longing look at them over her shoulder as she mounted the steps to the Landsmeet Chamber.

Inside, quite a few nobles lined the long aisle, and the cheers were loud. Nonetheless, as long as it had been since Bronwyn had trod these stones, she could tell that there were faces missing. In the air was a fever of fear and hope; a wish that someone would put things right.

Oh, there was Fergus, standing by the Queen! Bronwyn smiled with her whole heart, just for him, and was rewarded with his white and boyish grin. Beside her, Loghain might evince only a certain sardonic amusement, but Bronwyn found it wonderful to be so respected and validated by the foremost in the kingdom.

Fergus stepped forward to embrace her in a formal but nonetheless heart-felt salute. He whispered a word to Loghain, his voice low, disguised by the noise around them. "Shall I announce the betrothal now?"

"Yes," Loghain agreed. "Better now than later."

Bronwyn felt a silly flutter of nerves, and rebuked herself for it. So it must be. There was no other path. Best to seize the day and make it her own.

Anora arose from her throne to welcome them.

"Welcome to you, my father, Loghain Mac Tir, Teryn of

Gwaren, Hero of River Dane, and General of the Armies of Ferelden. Be welcome also, Bronwyn Cousland, Dragonslayer, Commander of the Grey in Ferelden. Word of your deeds has reached us, and we rejoice to hear that the darkspawn in the south have been fought to a standstill. All honor to you both, and it is our wish that you remain in the city some time, putting paid to the miscreants who have threatened the peace of the kingdom!"

A great deal of cheering at that. Ferelden's nobles had received a very bad fright. Darkspawn in the south were one thing: assassins at a wedding feast was something appallingly close to home.

Anora said, "Some of Ferelden's noblest have fallen and their desmesnes lie vacant. We shall require your good counsel in settling the ensuing claims."

Loud murmuring. Bryland's face was a curious study. Bronwyn wondered which lordship had caught his interest. South Reach was safe, of course. There was no time for pondering the matter, for Anora was speaking about her.

"Lady Bronwyn has done a deed worthy of great reknown. Months ago, I was poisoned by an Orlesian intriguer, and no healing could cure me. Only one remedy remained: to find the Sacred Ashes of Andraste. Lady Bronwyn succeeded in this quest, and the Ashes, administered to me after my captivity in the Cathedral, restored me to perfect health."

Amidst the rising noise and clamoring, excited gossip, the Queen made a most beautiful curtsy. "I thank you,

humbly and sincerely, Bronwyn Cousland, for my life."

Bronwyn felt brevity was best. She bowed, and then replied, "It was my honor to serve the Crown of Ferelden, Your Majesty."

More cheering followed, but Bronwyn's sharp eyes saw there was debate admixed in it.

Fergus stepped forward. "Your Majesty, if I may speak..."

Anora smiled at him. She all but batted her lashes.

"You may, Teyrn Fergus."

Bronwyn nearly smirked. Anora was really laying it on rather thick. Not that Fergus didn't deserve it.

"It is my great pleasure," Fergus declared, "to announce the betrothal of my sister, Lady Bronwyn, to Teyrn Loghain! The wedding is to be held a month hence, and I swear on my sword that no Orlesian villains will mar their rites!"

If there had been excitement before, the response to this announcement eclipsed everything. Cheers, gossip, speculation, envy, some sage nods from people already in on the plans. Bronwyn barely heard Anora's words of approval and congratulation, as her destiny became public property.

Loghain held her hand in his, and looked: if not happy, at least content. He whispered in her ear. "Once we're done here, Anora wants us to join her in the Little Audience Chamber. I think you'll find it interesting."

"This place is fantastic!" Carver assured his new brothers and sister. His new *younger* brothers and sister — at

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least in a manner of speaking. That made all the difference. He smiled, at peace with the world.

Anders had not seen the Compound before, and his grin lit up the Wardens' Hall. As a full Warden, he was informed he would have a private room in the tower. Morrigan, touchy and out of sorts during their journey, was pleased by that.

They were shown the portraits of Duncan and Genevieve, and told something of their history. Aveline and Toliver had met Duncan, and found it all very interesting. Before the little shrine to Andraste was the cinerarium that held the ashes of Wardens past, including Duncan and the fallen of Ostagar. Cullen's ashes, too, had been consigned there.

Servants took everyone's trunks and impedimenta to their various quarters, while Jowan made the introductions to Mistress Rannelly, and the Wardens sat down to a hearty meal.

Afterwards, they were told where the bathing facilities were, and the jakes. Leliana, suspecting that Bronwyn would not be pleased if the Wardens instantly scattered all over Denerim, improvised a schedule. They were to stay in the Compound this evening, and amuse themselves. Tomorrow there would be exercises in the training room above the Hall. As soon as it could be arranged, they would be allowed liberty to explore Denerim as long as they returned at the appointed hour.



Aveline found herself alone in the women's dormitory, and was assigned a single bed there that was far more comfort-

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able than the bunks lining two of the walls. Her trunk was set primly at the foot of the bed. By the wall were armor and weapon stands. She set her poor lost Wesley's shield on one, and sighed. It was a little like having a bit of him left to her, but not nearly good enough. Still, as barracks went, it was very nice indeed. She listened absently to the noise of the men settling in next door. It would be good to have a little quiet time. Morrigan had not been the friendliest of companions, and Bronwyn, while a considerate leader, had seemed preoccupied — understandably so, from the reports coming out of Denerim.

A knock at the door.

"Come in."

Toliver peered around the room: big, friendly Toliver. He was the only other human in their group of junior Wardens, and had naturally gravitated to Aveline, even though she was a former officer and considered "stuck-up."

"Found the training room," he told her. "It's something like! Want to spar?"

Aveline hoped he was not one of those men who looked upon sparring as a form of courtship. She was hoping to get a better look at the Wardens' study, but perhaps that was intended only for the higher ranks... "I wouldn't mind having a look at the place. I don't know about sparring —"

"Do you good. Set you right up. But if you want a spot of entertainment first, the elf's already at the butts."

Aveline smiled slightly. "Let's see if he really can shoot backwards."

Morrigan approved of their room once her wishes were acceded to, and they were settled on the third level of the tower, away from everyone else.

"I do not wish to hear wails, groans, snores, or Zevran attending to his own needs," she said to Anders. "This privacy is very welcome."

"It is, isn't it?" agreed Anders, bouncing experimentally on the wide bed. "Nice place. Everyone told me, but you never know until you see a place for yourself. I hope they let us out tomorrow. There's a shop I want to show you. The Wonders of Thedas. A lot of magical items and funny old books and maps. You'll like it."

"'Tis possible, I suppose," she shrugged. "For the moment, I shall revel in the freedom from Aveline's jejune militarism and Bronwyn's approaching doom."

"She's going to be Queen!" Anders almost cheered. "Think what she can do for mages!"

"Anders, you are such a child, sometimes. She can do only what those imbecilic nobles will allow her to persuade them to do."

He refused to be daunted, and bounced up again, to take her in his arms and nuzzle her superb white throat. "Mnnnnnh. And she's pretty persuasive. Anything she gets for us will be more we've got."

Nathaniel Howe knew better than to complain. He had

been shown to quite nice quarters in the Palace. He also knew better than to complain about the guard at the door, or the fact that he had been requested not to wander away. He was a prisoner, at least in a sense. He could no doubt break out of here and run away, but that would mean the end of the Howe family in Ferelden. For now he must behave himself.

His meals were brought to him, his chamber tidied by a pleasant but uncommunicative servant. No one had said anything about summary execution, so things could be far worse.

Adria had given him fair warning — both she and Varel together. After receiving Ser Norrel's urgent messages, he knew he must choose: either to make his life henceforth in the Free Marches as he could; or boldly return to Ferelden, accepting that his father had roused great anger and brought a bloody vengeance on himself.

He sat in the hard wooden chair, looking into the fire, trying to uncover the riddle of the past few months in the wayward flames.

He was alone. He was an orphan: fatherless, motherless. His silly brother and wise, sweet sister had been thrust from the world by violent hands. Delilah had kept the bond of family alive, writing to him faithfully, her letters thoughtful, cheerful, optimistic; and only on closer reading betraying a deep vein of melancholy. Her short life had never been happy; never... not even particularly happy when they were children. He did not think that Father had meant for her to be unhappy, but perhaps that

was because Father did not understand what happiness was, never having known it himself.

Save for those fragile bonds, save for the casual friends he made here and there, he had been alone for years in the Free Marches. He had not sought more, always feeling that his life lay in the future, at home in Ferelden. He would return someday and then there would be time and opportunity for friendship, for the kind of lifelong regard he thought bound together his father and Bryce Cousland. He had hoped to make just such a friend.

Meanwhile, he had squired for Lord Balimon and Lord Harriman; he had made his bow alive and eager in his hands; he had sharpened his skills with a blade until he could stake his life on it and win.

He had learned other crafts as well: how to hear the words underneath the ones spoken aloud; how to become the man that those around him wished him to be; how to slip unseen through a crowd, along an alley, among the great; and how, when necessary, to make himself both heard and seen... and attended to.

And all these skills might be for naught if Ferelden cast him out as the scion of treachery.

It was impossible to determine just what Father thought he was doing, or why he thought he could get away with it. It was all very unclear — much like trying to find a lost treasure at the bottom of a murky pool. Father had led a surprise raid on Castle Highever and had murdered Bryce and Eleanor

Cousland; and not satisfied with that, he had killed Fergus' Antivan wife and his little son. He had tried to kill Bronwyn.

What was he *thinking*? Father had been a mystery to him: a man who never explained himself, who never made excuses or apologies. The book of his life was closed, and Nathaniel had no access to the key that would unlock it.

Ser Norrel's messages — yes, they had urged him to come home at once. The darkspawn were stirring in the south... folk believed it was the beginnings of a Blight... Teyrn Loghain had led the army against them... the King himself had marched with his soldiers. Father was deep in some sort of political intrigue, and Ser Norrel was concerned about him. Whether his father admitted it or not, Nathaniel was needed at home.

Thus, he bade farewell to his friends and made his way from Markham to Ostwick, where he heard shocking news. The Couslands were dead, murdered by his father. No one seemed to know why. It seemed a brazen, outrageous power grab. How Father imagined he could get away with it was hard to understand. At first he thought that the whole family was dead, and then he heard that the son and daughter had survived. Fergus, in fact, had already left for the army before the attack. It all became even more incomprehensible.

Then he learned that Bann Esmerelle had passed through Kirkwall, heading north to Starkhaven. Gossip was aflame about her, and word from Ferelden was that

she had not been truthful about her precipitous exile. Accompanying her movements was the news that Father was dead, murdered by the Crows. Esmerelle had fled Amaranthine a step ahead of a vengeful Fergus Cousland.

She had come to the Free Marches a very wealthy woman, and the source of her fortune was shocking. She and Father had become entangled with Tevinter slavers. After Father's seizure of Highever, he had sold off the entire Alienage. Then he continued his dealing, luring in elves from Amaranthine, from Denerim, from anywhere with false promises of work. The unfortunates had commanded a high price. Esmerelle was possibly the richest woman in the Free Marches, and those officers who had escaped with her had purses heavy with gold.

Had Fergus hired the Crows? He had ties to Antiva, of course. That had been his first thought, though when he arrived in Ferelden he found no one seemed to believe that, and it was definitely dismissed by Varel, and then Adria.

Adria, his dear second mother, was heartbroken at the fate of Delilah and Thomas. It was she who had taken charge of the bodies and prepared them decently for the pyre. She was certain that Fergus had meant to spare Delilah. The young Teyrn of Highever clearly did not think her guilty of anything. The assassins had escaped in the confusion, and had left behind a spiteful message from Oriana's Antivan mother, written in her own tongue and in the flesh of Rendon Howe's chest.

All the news was alarming, for that matter. On his arrival, the town of Amaranthine was chaotic and fractured, held together by Fergus' garrison: men and women who luckily had not recognized him. Varel had greeted him kindly, but was concerned for his safety. The soldiers Fergus had left at Vigil's Keep eyed Nathaniel like a poisonous snake.

And now he learned that the King was dead, killed in battle against the darkspawn. Nathaniel had not seen Cailan in years, and now would never know what kind of man he had become. A Landsmeet had been called, to be held in Haring, of all preposterous times, though Varel thought the vultures were already gathering. Fergus Cousland was there, at the side of the widowed Queen Anora, who would rule for the next two months until a new monarch was chosen.

"It's a risk, either way," Varel counseled him. "The Couslands are high in favor at the moment. If you show your face, it might be the end of you. On the other hand, the cruelty of that Antivan woman's revenge sickened Teyrn Fergus. I don't think they'll have you executed – or even tried for treason. They might exile you, but that's no reason to exile yourself. The bold thing might be best: make your obeisance to the Queen and your liege lord. Denounce your father's crimes – for crimes they were – but stand firm on for your rights. There's a chance the arling may come to you. If they decide on exile, it's likely they'd be fair enough to see you had a share of the family treasures."

Adria had wanted to come with him and take care of

him, but Nathaniel thought that unsafe for her. He kissed her goodbye, and bowed his head for her blessing. On the road, he heard that Orlesian assassins had attacked the wedding feast of the Arl of Denerim, and killed him. Many other nobles had been killed or wounded. The Queen, too had been injured in some way, and rumors and accusations were flying back and forth. Some of the rumors attributed some of the guilt to the Chantry. Surely, that could not be possible?

In the city, the talk was all of Fergus' storming of the Chantry to rescue the Queen. A more fantastic tale gave out that the Girl Warden – whoever *she* was – had found the Ashes of Andraste and miraculously healed the Queen. Was this the Dragon Age, or some misty, long-forgotten time of myths and legends?

The door opened abruptly. To Nathaniel's relief, the royal seneschal was there, rather than an execution detail. Guards there were, but only four of them. Perhaps they were simply underestimating him.

"My lord," said the man. "The Queen requires your attendance."

Nathaniel did not recognize the corridors. They were not taking him to the Landsmeet Chamber, which was good, as that would be the likely venue of a treason trial. Instead they climbed some handsome stairs, and he was admitted to what was evidently the Little Audience Chamber.

Queen Anora, elegantly dressed in blue, was enthroned on a low dais. Nathaniel had not seen her in years, but she was

still a very beautiful woman. Beside her stood the imposing figure of Teyrn Loghain. Nathaniel had not known he was in the city. Perhaps he had only recently arrived. More ominous was the presence of a somber Fergus Cousland on the other side of the throne, and with him Leonas Bryland, a close ally of the Couslands, equally somber.

His attention was riveted by someone he did not know. Next to Teyrn Loghain was a tall young woman in splendid dragon bone armor of an unusual dark red. A gold double-headed griffon was flourished over her breast. He had heard that Duncan, Commander of the Grey in Ferelden, had died months ago. Was this then the famed Girl Warden? She seemed far too young to command any force of Wardens Nathaniel had ever encountered.

Far too young and too beautiful as well. Her long dark hair fell in loose waves over her pauldrons, brushed back from her white and unlined brow. A thin, pale scar traced its way from cheekbone to jaw. Most arresting were her eyes: a brilliant, glittering green that could not be the natural color of any human's. Did she perhaps have some elven blood? She seemed far too tall and broad-shouldered. He looked at her again. There was something vaguely familiar about her...

A terrible thought struck him.

Do they mean to make me a Warden?

It would make a horrible kind of sense. But Queen Anora was speaking, telling him what had been decided for him.

If he would swear homage to Fergus as his rightful teyrn, if he would forswear pursuing revenge for his family – of whose deaths Fergus was blameless, and if he would vote at the upcoming Landsmeet as the Queen, Loghain, the Couslands, and their allies wished; then they in turn would support his claim to the arling of Amaranthine. There was some crosstalk, to which he listened in a kind of daze. Adria would be thrilled. If only Delilah had lived to see this day.

When Fergus called the beautiful stranger by her name, Nathaniel was shocked. *Bronwyn?* He would never have associated this woman with the lovely, grey-eyed child who had plagued and teased him. What had happened to her? How had she come to be a Warden?

Bronwyn left the Little Audience Chamber after the ritual torture of Nathaniel Howe, exhausted by all the formality and subtextual meanings. She made her excuses to everyone, not wanting to hear anything more about titles and lordships.

Seeing Nathaniel again after so long and in such circumstances had wounded her in some subtle way. He had grown into manhood – a fine manhood – in foreign lands, and must be grieved at such a homecoming. With what quiet dignity he had faced them all... people he must regard as his worst enemies... and stood fast before them. He was clearly Rendon's son – the long, slightly hooked nose and keen grey eyes under dark brows proclaimed that – but Rendon had always been lanky and rawboned...

almost scrawny. This broad-shouldered, slim-hipped man had the strength and grace of a young dragon.

As a child, she had admired him, and expressed her affections in the only way she knew: by making herself obnoxious. She had complacently heard the talk about a marriage, and then he was abruptly sent away. It occurred to her that her passion for Loghain had flowered the spring after Nathaniel's departure. That was... disturbing.

No. She was committed to Loghain, and while angry with him, had not ceased to feel for him. Nonetheless, the remembrance of things past caused an upswell of good will toward Nathaniel. If only he would keep his word! She wanted no more harm to come to him.

In her room in the Wardens' Compound was a pile of correspondence: letters from the First Warden, the Warden-Commanders of Nevarra, Antiva, and Ansburg; vasals of Highever, and citizens of Denerim. And there a personal note from the Grand Cleric, not satisfied apparently with sending a priest with a verbal message.

"Her Grace wishes to meet with the Warden-Commander at her earliest convenience."

Bronwyn sighed. That might be disagreeable. Would she complain about Fergus? Or... she groaned aloud.

She wants to talk about the Ashes. Who wouldn't?

This was no better than the Little Audience Chamber. She heard voices in the study and hurried there, hoping for harmless gossip and a glass of wine.

"Bronwyn!" Carver beamed at the sight of her. "The new lot are settling in. And I have the best room in the world!"

She smiled back, enjoying his frank enjoyment. "I like it here, too. Everyone else satisfied?"

They were: it was a pleasant group. Jowan had recently arrived and seemed unusually cheerful, even elated. She would have to talk to him privately about the Ashes, but what was done was done.

Jowan, Leliana, Carver, Anders, Morrigan, Zevran. And Scout was here, too, of course, sprawled luxuriously in front of the fire. It was almost like the old days before people took it into their heads to make her Queen. She was not the only one who thought so.

"I wish all the rest could be with us just like this," Leliana said wistfully, pouring a cup of wine for Bronwyn. "This is so nice."

"Someday," Bronwyn said, though she thought it unlikely.

Carver, big overgrown boy that he was, had slid out of his chair and lounged on a cushioned stool by the fire, scratching Scout's ears.

"I miss our stories," said Anders. "That was great. Of course we don't have Sten here to make his unique observations on our barbaric customs."

"Why don't we have a story anyway? It's Carver's turn," said Jowan. He was happy: perhaps the happiest he had ever been. Even if Bronwyn reamed him out for revealing this existence of the Ashes, a moment like this was worth it. He had found a whole archive of secret correspondence. Some of it was in

cipher, but there was reason to believe it pertained to the Aeonar Prison. If they could do something about that...

"Yes!" Zevran sensed the mood turning a little melancholy, and seized on the idea. "It is the turn of our young wielder of the mighty greatsword. Who knows when we shall all be together? Why not hear a story now?"

Carver nearly fell off his stool. "I have the perfect story!" he told them. "I've been saving it up ever since I thought of it. My father used to tell it to me. It's called 'THE BOY WHO FOUND FEAR AT LAST.'"

"All right," Bronwyn said, in the mood to be diverted. "Let's hear it."

CARVER'S STORY OF THE BOY WHO FOUND FEAR AT LAST

There was once a woman who lived in a little cottage in the forest with her three children. The two eldest had gone to seek their fortunes, and the youngest was kept at home to bear his mother company. The cottage was isolated and far from any neighbors, and so sometimes the mother was very lonely.

They were sitting together on a winter's evening, when a storm suddenly sprang up, and the wind blew the door open. The woman started and shivered, and glanced over her shoulder as if she half expected to see some horrible thing behind her. 'Go and shut the door,' she said hastily to her son, 'I feel frightened.'

'Frightened?' repeated the boy. 'What does it feel like to be frightened?'

‘Well — just frightened,’ answered the mother. ‘A fear of something — you hardly know what — takes hold of you.’

‘It must be very odd to feel like that,’ replied the boy. He thought about it all night, and decided, ‘I shall go through the world and seek fear till I find it.’ And the next morning, before his mother was out of bed, he had left the cottage in the forest behind him.

After walking for some hours he reached a mountain, which he began to climb. Near the top, in a wild and rocky spot, he came upon a band of fierce bandits, sitting round a fire. The boy, who was cold and tired, was delighted to see the bright flames, so he went up to them and said, “Greetings to you, sers,” and wriggled himself in between the men, till his feet almost touched the burning logs.

The bandits stopped drinking and eyed him curiously, and at last their leader spoke.

‘No caravan of armed men would dare to come here. Even the very birds shun our camp, and who are you to venture in so boldly?’

‘Oh, I have left my mother’s house in search of fear. Perhaps you can show it to me?’

‘Fear is wherever we are,’ answered the leader, smirking.

‘But where?’ asked the boy, looking round. ‘I see nothing.’

Insulted and disappointed the bandits looked at each other, finding that they were not so menacing as they liked to believe. The leader scratched his head, and then had an idea to put this young lad in his place.

‘Take this pot and some flour and butter and sugar over to the ruined castle which lies down there, and bake us a cake for supper,’ replied the bandit. And the boy, who was by this time

quite warm, jumped up cheerfully, and slinging the pot over his arm, ran down the hill.

When he got to the ruins he collected some sticks and made a fire; then he filled the pot with water from a little stream close by, and mixing the flour and butter and sugar together, he set the cake on to cook. It was not long before it grew crisp and brown, and then the boy lifted it from the pot and placed it on a stone, while he put out the fire. At that moment a ghostly hand stretched out, and a voice said:

‘Is that cake for me?’

‘Do you think I am going to give to the dead the food of the living?’ replied the boy, with a laugh. And giving the hand a rap with his spoon, and picking up the cake, he went up the mountain side, whistling merrily.

‘Well, have you found fear?’ asked the bandits when he held out the cake to them.

‘No: was it there?’ answered the boy. ‘I saw nothing but a white hand that came from the air, and belonged to someone who wanted my cake, but I just rapped the fingers with my spoon, and said it was not for him, and then the hand vanished. Oh, how nice the fire is!’ And he flung himself on his knees before it, and so did not notice the glances of surprise cast by the bandits at each other.

‘There is another chance for you,’ said one at length. ‘On the other side of the mountain lies a deep pool; go to that, and perhaps you may meet fear on the way.’

‘I hope so, indeed,’ answered the boy. And he set out at once.

He soon beheld the waters of the pool gleaming in the moonlight, and as he drew near he saw a tall swing standing just over it, and

in the swing a child was seated, weeping bitterly.

'That is a strange place for a swing,' thought the boy; 'but I wonder what he is crying about.' And he was hurrying on towards the child, when a maiden ran up and spoke to him.

'I want to lift my little brother from the swing,' cried she, 'but it is so high above me, that I cannot reach him. If you will get closer to the edge of the pool, and let me mount on your shoulder, I think I can reach him.'

'Willingly,' replied the boy, and in an instant the girl had climbed to his shoulders. But instead of lifting the child from the swing, as she could easily have done, she pressed her feet so firmly on either side of the youth's neck, that he felt that in another minute he would be choked, or else fall into the water beneath him. So gathering up all his strength, he gave a mighty heave, and threw the girl backwards. As she touched the ground, a golden bracelet fell from her arm, and she and the child vanished. The boy picked up the bracelet, and put it in his purse.

'I may as well keep it as a remembrance of all the queer things that have happened to me since I left home,' he said to himself.

On and on walked the youth, but fear never crossed his path, and one day he entered a large town, where all the streets and squares were so full of people, he could hardly pass between them.

'Why are all these crowds gathered together?' he asked of a man who stood next him.

'The ruler of this country is dead,' was the reply, 'and as he had no children, it is needful to choose a successor. Therefore, each morning one of the sacred pigeons is let loose from the tower yonder, and on

whomsoever the bird shall perch, that man will be our king. In a few minutes the pigeon will fly. Wait and see what happens.'

Every eye was fixed on the tall tower which stood in the centre of the chief square, and the moment that the sun was seen to stand straight over it, a door was opened and a beautiful pigeon, gleaming with pink and grey, blue and green, came rushing through the air. Onward it flew, onward, onward, till at length it rested on the head of the boy. Then a great shout arose:

'The king! the king!'

But as the boy listened to the cries, a vision, swifter than lightning, flashed across his brain. He saw himself seated on a throne, spending his life trying, and never succeeding, to make poor people rich; miserable people happy; bad people good; never doing anything he wished to do, not able even to marry the girl that he loved.

'No! no!' he shouted, hiding his face in his hands; but the crowds who heard him thought he was overcome by the grandeur that awaited him, and paid no heed. All around him were cries of joy.

'The king! The king!'

And as the young man heard, a cold shiver, that he knew not the meaning of, ran through him.

'This is fear whom you have so long sought,' whispered a voice, which seemed to reach his ears alone. And the youth bowed his head as the vision once more flashed before his eyes, and he accepted his doom, and made ready to pass his life with fear beside him.

Anders responded to the story with shocked silence, and



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Zevran with veiled and sympathetic amusement. Jowan was about to praise Carver, when he saw the looks on the other faces. Leliana, who had seen it all coming for some time, only sighed, and gave Carver an encouraging smile.

Bronwyn hardly knew what to say. Just when she thought herself safe, her future had slapped her in the face, vividly described by this innocent young man.

She swallowed. "What a... remarkable story," she managed. "Your father was a very wise man. Thank you for sharing it. Now," she said, rising carefully from her chair and setting her wine aside, "I must really return to my correspondence."

Too upset and confused to make a dignified exit, she nearly walked into the closed door. Furiously, she flung it open, and fled to the silence of her room.

Carver stared. "Did I say something wrong?"

"'Twas an excellent story!" Morrigan said forcefully. "A remarkably apt and pointed cautionary tale. I believe it was exactly the story that Bronwyn needed to hear at this particular moment."

"Carver," Anders said kindly, "you do know why Bronwyn is in Denerim, don't you?"

Carver looked at him blankly. Anders pursed his lips.

"You know that someone will have to take the throne, don't you? You know about the Landsmeet?"

Carver suddenly gaped, and then blushed to the roots of his hair. "*Maker's Breath!* She's going to kill me!"

"Perhaps not personally," Zevran pointed out, "but soon it



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will very likely be within her power to order you hanged, drawn, and quartered."



CARVER HAWKE, GREY WARDEN

CHAPTER 19

TASKS
AT HAND

SHE WAS RUSHING THROUGH THE DEEP ROADS WITH EXTRAORDINARY SPEED, HER TAIL WHIPPING BEHIND HER. HER SHOULDERS SMASHED AT THE ROCKS ON EITHER SIDE, SHATTERING THEM TO FRAGMENTS. Her slaves quailed before her and obeyed without question. Other beings, shadowy grey creatures, thrummed at the edges of her consciousness. She reached out, seeing through their eyes, learning what their pitiful minds understood of this strange world into which she had been reborn. Hers, all hers. Victory lay ahead.

Bronwyn slept late. Scout woke her at last, impatient to go outside. She was not exactly tired, but felt as if she had been running a race all night. She remembered flashes of her dreams: an endless slithering through darkness. It was all nonsense, of course.

She let Scout out, and her eyes fell on the correspondence on her writing table. She must sit down and answer it all in detail.

A servant entered, with a small box on a salver.

"From Teyrn Loghain, my lady."

Bronwyn blinked, still not quite awake. She dismissed

the servant, and opened the box.

Ah. The ring she had been expecting when she was given armor instead. Loghain had not given her a ring last night, when their betrothal was announced. Perhaps he wanted to give her a chance to say whether or not she liked it. Did she?

She supposed she did. It even fit, thought that was typical of Loghain's careful strategic planning. The ring was of fine gold set with three diamonds, the one in the center quite large and brilliant. Bronwyn wondered cynically whose ring it once was, and hoped it had not been Teyrna Celia's. That would be tacky, and distressing to Anora besides. But no: Loghain was not *that* insensitive. Besides, his dead wife's jewelry would have gone to Anora.

She put on the ring, admiring the sparkle. She really was betrothed now, she supposed. Blowing out a breath, she turned to her letters, ever conscious of the subtle weight on her hand.

The First Warden was really, really not pleased with her. She might be called 'Warden-Commander' here in Ferelden, but her foreign correspondents made clear that she was nothing of the sort in anyone else's eyes.

The Warden-Commander of Nevarra was friendly enough. He, like the Commanders of Ansbarg and Antiva, wanted to know what was going on. They knew this was a Blight, but what exactly had the Archdemon done?

Hector Pentaghast of Nevarra, himself the scion of a proud and ancient house, seemed very cognizant of the dilemma that Orlais had presented Ferelden: any help

from their Wardens was tied to an occupation by Orlais in all but name, and demanded ultimate submission to the Empress. He knew that Bronwyn had obtained the help of Orzammar and of the Ferelden Dalish. He also knew that King Cailan had been killed, and that the throne was undecided. His questions were clear enough: had the Archdemon diversified its attack? In past Blights, the darkspawn had issued to the surface in multiple locations. Had they been seen anywhere but at Ostagar?

And there was more: he explained why no one had offered experienced Wardens to assist her. The First Warden had forbidden it. It was believed that the main attack would be coming soon. The First Warden held that the attack at Ostagar was simply an early feint — a mere foretaste of the real horror to come. Since no one knew where the darkspawn might strike next, no Commander felt it wise to weaken his own forces, lest the darkspawn appear at his own gates. Unwritten but very clear was the opinion that Ferelden was too small, too remote, too unimportant to be the main thrust of a Blight. The great battles would be fought elsewhere. Bronwyn hoped he was right.

A similar story was told by Ansborg and also by Antiva. In addition, Warden-Commander Enzo Visconti sympathized with Bronwyn's indignation at being targeted by the Crows. He assured her that he had spoken to the Masters of the Houses. One would think that when faced with a Blight, the Crows would forbear to attack Grey Wardens.

Alas, some Crows were greedier and more short-sighted than others, even though no Crow would dare attack an Antivan Grey Warden, lest a vendetta be called on them. It was important to keep the Crows in their place.

There was no word from Tevinter, Rivain, or Orlais. The last did not surprise her at all. As to Rivain and Tevinter — well — they were so far away that Bronwyn doubted that the fate of Ferelden mattered a particle to them. The only Fereldans the Tevinter Wardens were likely to meet were the elven slaves abducted from their homes.

The First Warden was very displeased with her. She had been insubordinate. She was not Warden-Commander of Ferelden according to the First Warden's reckoning. She was a wayward junior Warden who had exceeded her authority. She had not given due regard to the chain of command. Duncan was the last Warden-Commander of Ferelden. Whether a new Warden-Commander would be appointed in future was only the First Warden's to decide. Bronwyn could expect no assistance from Weisshaupt, since Ferelden had refused the assistance generously offered by the Wardens of Montsimmard.

His letter made her so angry that she was unsure she could compose a rational reply. What did she care for the Grey Warden "chain of command?" They seemed willing to give Ferelden to Orlais, and she scorned the "generous assistance" offered by the enemies of her blood. Hector Pentaghast's frank letter answered many questions, and

made clear that no help was imminent anyway.

The letters were not a total loss, of course. She had hopes of developing some sort of link with the Nevarran Wardens. Their country was at war with Orlais, and they clearly sympathized with Ferelden's refusal to admit the chevaliers. While Pentaghost would not send her Wardens, he might well continue to give her useful information.

She set the Grand Cleric's note aside. She must go see the woman. The chantry was being turned upside down by the Royal Guard. Jowan was deeply involved, too, which was awkward, considering that he was a Grey Warden; but it was also very good, as he was a mage who had a unique perspective on the Chantry, and specialized knowledge of their secrets.

But she should go and smooth the waters, as best she could. The Grand Cleric herself had been the victim of betrayal, and might be inclined to make common cause with them... as long as someone stepped forward soon.

There were more letters: various people asking for coin, asking for assistance, asking for recommendations or positions for friends and family.

Among these miscellaneous letters was a missive from the mother of a Templar named Ser Friden. Friden had disappeared, and his officers believed him to have deserted. The mother, on the other hand, wrote that her son had been investigating a possible coven of blood mages active in the South Docks area. The mother included his investigative notes. If the Girl Warden could find the Ashes of

Andraste, could she not find a lost son?

A coven of blood mages? Perhaps it was only a band of wretched, frightened apostates. Perhaps the son really had deserted. It was interesting, nonetheless, and might be worth looking into. She would take Jowan with her, and they would see what was going on. If they were well-disposed apostates, she might consider conscripting them.

There were other things to do here in Denerim. In her trunk was the tattered book she had retrieved in the elven temple, full of notes about a mysterious Gaxxkang, also called "THE UNBOUND." She dug the fragile book out and looked it over. The latest of the entries mentioned an address in Stealcopper Court, and a man named Vihm Madon. He might be able to tell her more. If she could get away for an hour or two, it might be interesting to know the end of the story.

And she must go to the Alienage, and deliver Adai's presents. She could delegate that to someone else, but that seemed shabby to her. Adai had personally refurbished the gown that Brownyn would be wearing to the Queen's table tonight, and thus it seemed only right that Bronwyn would personally deliver the gifts. She would ask after that child that had caught Danith's fancy, too: Iona's daughter... Amethyne. A pretty name.

Breakfast seemed to be the first, best plan, and she splashed herself clean, and then slipped on a fresh shirt, Warden tabard, leather breeches, and decent boots.

Leliana poked her head in, smiling.

"Are you ever coming to breakfast?"

"As soon as I can do something with my hair."

"Oh, come now, and I shall help you afterwards. Carver is so afraid you are angry with him!"

Bronwyn smiled wryly. "I'm not angry. He told a very good story, and it made me think. What else are stories for?"

"That is exactly what I say!"

She noticed the ring and squealed. Bronwyn held out her hand to be gushed over. It really was a very nice ring.

Nobody else at breakfast noticed it, thank the Maker, or perhaps they simply thought it a bit of plunder. Bronwyn did her best to put Carver at ease, while they stuffed themselves with porridge, with sausages, and with bread and honey. Bronwyn directed a maid to unpack her red gown and set it to air... and to iron it, if it were badly creased.

"A major dinner tonight," she told everyone. "everyone's to be in their best by sunset. Junior Wardens, that means you, too. Go to Mistress Rannelly and she'll issue you a Warden tabard. If you need other garments, I'm sure she can find you something."

"What's new in the letters?" Jowan asked.

Bronwyn saw no reason to keep their situation a secret.

"Oh... I've been a very bad girl by not deserting Ferelden. No one's coming to help us, because the First Warden has forbidden it. Also, all the other Wardens think the primary attack will be elsewhere... or they're pretending they think that in order to keep their Wardens close to home."

There was some grumbling at the wickedness of foreign-

ers. Bronwyn's mind was already on her tasks for the day.

"I have heaps to do today, and I'll want some of you along with me. The rest of you are no doubt dying to see the town, and that's fine. However, if you go out this morning, be back for the midday meal at noon. Also, I don't want you out alone. Stay in twos or more at least. The city is still unsettled and I can't afford to lose any of you. After the midday meal, you can go out again, but you must be back an hour before sunset to wash and dress for dinner."

There was quite a bit of excitement at being allowed to see the city. Bronwyn smiled tolerantly.

"I'd like to visit Highever House first thing. I have some personal things stored there, and I'd like to go through them. Carver would no doubt like to visit his family. Then, I must really call on the Grand Cleric and tell her the story of the Ashes. Leliana, you were there, and you should help tell the story. Zevran — "

The Antivan winced and put up his hands. "Not I, Noble One. The Grand Cleric would be very uncomfortable with an elf in her private chambers, and I would prefer to keep my existence and continued survival as quiet as possible."

Leliana would have eagerly assured him of the Grand Cleric's indifference to his race, but even she was not that optimistic.

"Nonetheless," said Bronwyn, "I'd like you to come with me today. After my visit to the Grand Cleric, I'll visit the Alienage and deliver Adai's presents to her family. You've been there before, and I'm sure they'd prefer to see a familiar face."

The note was sent to the Cathedral, and Bronwyn pre-

pared herself for a difficult conversation. Secrecy was impossible. It was probably best to tell the Grand Cleric the truth, and why she had not intended for it to be publicly known. Leliana, of course, was thrilled to meet the Grand Cleric and tell her all about their amazing spiritual experience. Bronwyn, looking back on it, still felt very uncomfortable about much of what had happened.

For her trip to the Alienage and to the Cathedral, she did not change, deciding to let her Grey Warden tabard speak for itself. Leliana insisted on elaborately braiding the sides and back of her long hair into three plaits, which she then braided together. The effect was very good.

Jowan, it appeared, wished to call on the ladies at Highever House. Leliana whispered to Bronwyn, "I think he finds Bethany Hawke very charming. She is a sweet girl."

So Bronwyn, Leliana, Carver, Jowan, and Zevran set off for Highever House. Anders, Morrigan, and the other Wardens accompanied them part of the way, wanting to visit the Market District as soon as possible. Very likely they would cross paths in the course of the day.

Jowan, of course, had already spoken privately to Anders and Morrigan about the phylacteries. Anders was still laughing about it, quietly, secretly; enjoying the sabotage in his deepest heart. Every phylactery in the Cathedral had been contaminated — at least those belonging to live mages. If Jowan would forswear Blood Magic for good and all, Anders felt they might even be friends someday.

"A clever ruse," Morrigan had agreed, eyeing Jowan with more respect. "But what is to be done about the phylacteries that the Templars continue to collect from their new captives?"

"I've laid some ground work for that," Jowan said, voice low. "When I discovered the storage area, I made sure that all the soldiers understood what it was. They were sickened, and will no doubt spread the word. To them, despite the sophistries of the Chantry, it's all Blood Magic. With the Chantry is such bad odor at the moment, it may be possible to rein in such doings." He added, very quietly, "And if Bronwyn becomes Queen, we can hope for real reform."

Anders agreed entirely with that, so they walked together very companionably. All of them had considerable coin in their purses, and plenty of ideas about how to spend it.

Bronwyn had not visited Highever House since she was sixteen, and it seemed very unfamiliar to her at first. At the moment, it was overflowing with knights and men-at-arms. Most startling of all was the presence of some yellow-eyed people whose existence she had nearly forgotten.

But they had not forgotten her.

"Lady of the Wardens," said their leader. "We are glad to see you once more. We have served your brother faithfully."

"I am glad you see you, too. Has life among humans treated you well?"

"It has not been easy, and many among us died, but we preserved the children, and found a place in the world.

Our swords are yours, always.”

A cheerful voice called down. “Bronwyn? You’re here!”

Fergus had not yet gone to the Palace so early in the morning, and was there to greet her and make the introductions. Most of the knights she knew – some of them quite well. Ser Adam Hawke was there of course, and quite at home. He was far better dressed than he had been when last she saw him.

And here were the hitherto unknown Hawke women-folk: Lady Amell, the mother; the pretty sister, Bethany, a mage of whom Cousin Leonas had spoken in the most glowing terms. It was quite understandable why Jowan would be charmed. Perhaps he hoped to make her a Warden, though Bethany seemed too devoted to her mother to leave voluntarily. Bronwyn decided she must speak to Jowan about not conscripting a young girl simply because he fancied her. For all she knew, Grey Wardens might do such things all the time, but she had no desire to so offend one of her brother’s knights, and cause such unhappiness to a decent family.

So the mother was calling herself ‘Lady Amell’ now. Bronwyn had at first understood that her style was ‘Mistress Hawke.’ The uncle had held the title, she supposed, and was now dead. The title had no land to back it up, but if it pleased the woman, Bronwyn would indulge her. Lady Amell had certainly produced some very fine Fereldan children.

There was another girl with them: the cousin, the daughter of the uncle. Should *she* not be ‘Lady Amell?’ Apparently

this Charade had helped her late father escape assassins back in Kirkwall, and had seen him safe to Lothering. Those deeds suggested considerable strength and courage. She was dressed rather blandly in lady-like silks, but her eyes were bright and noticing. Bronwyn rather liked her, she decided.

The women had visited the Compound, and were pleased to have Carver so well settled in life – if only, said the mother – were it not for the darkspawn. Carver rolled his eyes in Bronwyn’s direction. She could not help grinning back.

“Yes,” she agreed solemnly, “the darkspawn are very inconvenient.”

She excused herself for a private word with Fergus. Up in the study, Fergus had opened a hiding place that concealed a great deal of gold. It was a cache that Grandfather had prepared in case of crisis. There was another such hiding place up in Mother and Father’s room. Mother had told Bronwyn about it a few years before, swearing her to utter secrecy.

Fergus was using the room himself, and was aware that there was a hiding place in the room, but had waited for Bronwyn to open it properly. This was done, and a great deal of treasure was revealed. Among the items was a magnificent suit of silverite armor, that might be just the thing for Fergus to wear to the Landsmeet. Mother had left some lovely jewelry and gowns: things she wore only to a Landsmeet and the attendant grand ceremonies.

“You should have this,” Fergus said. “Mother would have wanted it.”

"Mother would have wanted this to belong to the Teyrna of Highever," Bronwyn replied, shaking her head. "Don't think me cruel to say it. I hope with all my heart that you will someday love again, and find a woman worthy of you."

Fergus smiled ruefully, not ready to tell his sister that he had found just such a woman. She might be shocked for Oriana's sake, or if not for her, for the sake of the king, dead only little over a month. Cailan had not been a good husband to Anora, but he had been her husband nonetheless, and it was far too soon to speak.

"I'll see to it that the next Teyrna of Highever has bride-gifts in plenty. You left Highever with nothing, and then Highever was sacked. Mother's good pieces — and Oriana's — and yours were stolen and shared out as loot. I don't expect to recover even a handful. A good lot of them are probably on the far side of the Waking Sea, decorating that bitch Esmerelle. I want you to pick out some things as keepsakes, and you'll need clothes for the Landsmeet."

Scruples aside, what he said was perfectly true. She did not want to go to Loghain like a beggarmaid. Loot she had, of course, and some fine jewels. Leliana had made some heavy orders, but Bronwyn had so little clothing that anything was a help. Among other things, she ended up taking a splendid sable cloak, a belt studded with pearls, her mother's gold and amber brush, comb, and mirror, and an elaborate red velvet dressing gown. She thought again, and took a lacy white silk nightdress too, ignoring Fergus' smirk.

"I'll have it sent to the Warden's Compound," he said agreeably. "Maybe by those Wolf-people of yours. I get the impression that they can't do enough for you."

She took a quick look at her own old room. None of the grand clothes would fit, of course, and it was mostly devoid of personal items, save for a book or two and some dusty toys. She turned from it with a sigh.

Jowan talked Bethany and Charade into going to the Market with their party. Adam decided to go as well, and it was a cheerful mob that left Highever House... aside from Bronwyn. She and Leliana veered off, heading for the Cathedral, while the rest indulged themselves in shopping.

Inside the Cathedral was controlled chaos, and a large presence of soldiers and some areas out-of-bounds to the clergy. Bronwyn and Leliana were shown to the Grand Cleric's private quarters.

"Her Grace gave command that you be admitted immediately, Warden-Commander," said a very, very civil priest. On being asked her own name, they learned that the polite priest was Mother Perpetua. Bronwyn knew that she was considered a Fereldan loyalist. It was very gratifying to see her so close to the Grand Cleric.

Deciding that the old lady had seen enough Cousland anger, Bronwyn decided to present herself as the good, if justly-aggrieved daughter of the Chantry. With Leliana at her side, it should not be difficult.

The Grand Cleric Muirin had spent most of her time in her quarters since the attack on the seventh. The Wardens were shown in, and found the old lady sitting up, wrapped in a shawl, and looking very unwell.

"My dear, dear Bronwyn!" cried the Grand Cleric, putting out her hands in welcome. "And will you not introduce your Warden to me?"

"Your Grace, this is Warden Leliana, who until recently was Sister Leliana of the Lothing Chantry."

The atmosphere warmed notably. The two Wardens knelt for the Grand Cleric's blessing, which was given very willingly.

"I was sorry," Bronwyn began, "to hear of the treacherous actions against you. To drug the Grand Cleric herself! I hope you are tolerably recovered?"

"Thank you, my dear. I am very much better. Such a bewildering series of events. Mother Gertrude had my every confidence. I still can hardly believe she would do such a thing as drug both me and the Queen herself!"

"When the stakes are so high," Bronwyn said sympathetically. "Even previously strong characters can fall prey to temptation. My brother told me that Mother Gertrude had been promised a great deal for her treachery. But now you are safe, as is the Queen. Everything could have been so much worse."

"Arl Leonas is so bitterly angry," said the Grand Cleric. "Though one must be understanding, since he has lost so much."

"He's a very good man, and loves his family dearly." Bronwyn said blandly. "And it's shocking for poor Habren

to have been widowed practically on the day of her wedding. We've been complacent too long, I'm afraid, about the threat posed by Orlais. One would think that in a time of Blight, the nations of Thedas would unite, but it seems not."

"The evidence —" the Grand Cleric began delicately, " — it does indeed indicate that the attacks were of Orlesian origin?"

"Absolutely," Bronwyn said. "The very day of the attack at the wedding, there was an assassination attempt directed at Teyrn Loghain, and at me —"

"My dear!" cried the Grand Cleric.

" — perpetrated by Orlesians. And the fortress of Gherlen's Halt was also attacked that day, led by Orlesians who called themselves 'mercenaries,' but who were clearly based at Roc du Chevalier. The Orlesians are making use of our distraction to attack us, and they seem to care nothing for whom they may harm. They are our *enemies*, Your Grace, and while I understand that even priests may feel attachment to the country of their birth, we cannot allow them to hide behind their robes."

"Terrible times," murmured the Grand Cleric. She paused. "And strange, too. Are you aware, Bronwyn, that there is a rumor circulating that the Queen was 'healed' by the Ashes of our Holy Prophet Andraste?" She peered at Bronwyn's calm face. "And that those Ashes were said to have been sent... by you?"

"Your Grace," Bronwyn replied, her voice steady. "That is not a rumor, but the absolute truth, and I have come here today to tell you the story. What you decide to make of it

will be a matter for your own good judgment." She tilted her head toward her companion. "Warden Leliana was present as well, and she can supplement the tale, which began shortly after the Bloomingtide Battle, when I traveled to the Circle, to obtain the aid of the mages. At the Spoiled Princess Inn, by the shores of Lake Calenhad, we met a traveling scholar: Brother Ferdinand Genetivi, and he was, he told us, looking for the Ashes himself. He believed that he would hear more of them in a remote village in the Frostbacks: a place called Haven."

Leliana shuddered at the name. The Grand Cleric noticed it, and asked, "And Brother Genetivi is not with you. Do you believe him to have suffered a misadventure?"

"He is dead," Bronwyn said bluntly. "When we spoke of his quest, I counseled him against traveling alone when the country was in such turmoil. I am sorry to have been proved right, though I had no way of knowing what peril he would be walking into."

The Grand Cleric listened intently. Bronwyn glanced at her and went on.

"When visiting Denerim some two months ago, I called on Her Majesty the Queen. I was present when she discovered that her elven, *Orlesian* maid had been drugging her tea for some weeks with a slow-acting poison that would mimic a gradual, natural death. The maid had been in league with a highly trained Orlesian bard who was stationed here in Denerim. The agent's correspondence showed that she was

obtaining state secrets from some highly placed sources. Though the poisoning was stopped, we discovered that not even magical healing could entirely cure the Queen: it could only sustain her temporarily, delaying the deterioration. The Ashes — and Brother Genetivi's wild story — seemed to be the Queen's only hope."

"Tell me everything," said the elderly priest.

They did — nearly all: the nervous secrecy at Sulcher; the denial that Brother Genetivi had been seen there; the attack on the road; their arrival at the hostile village of Haven.

"The denials continued at the village store, but in a bin of oddments, we found this." Bronwyn offered a volume to the priest.

"IN PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE: THE TRAVELS OF A CHANTRY SCHOLAR..." The Grand Cleric saw the inscription and the marginalia. "His own copy..." her voice trailed off, and she sighed. "Did those people kill him?"

"Yes. Haven is a very insular community, and over time had developed odd beliefs," Bronwyn said.

"Horrible, perverted heresies," Leliana added. "They claimed to worship Andraste, and referred us to their priest, 'Father Eirik.'"

That was shocking enough for the Grand Cleric, but Bronwyn, not liking to drag it out at length, gave the truth baldly.

"From what we were able to gather, the villagers were true Andrasteans at one point, descendants of faithful followers who carried the Prophet's ashes into the mountains, away from the Tevinters. However, a few hundred

years ago, a madman seized control of the people, and killed those who refused to submit to his lunatic ideas. His rise to power coincided with the appearance of a High Dragon. He claimed that this dragon was Andraste reborn, and ever since that time, the people have worshiped this dragon as a god, drinking dragon blood to give them unnatural strength, and sacrificing strangers to her. That indeed was the fate of Brother Genetivi."

The Grand Cleric sighed again, and put a hand over her face. "Maker turn his gaze upon him. That poor gentle soul."

Bronwyn let Leliana tell the next part of the story: the immense temple filled with fanatical heretics, with demons and monsters, and the caverns where the dragons were raised for the blood rites. Their meeting with the ranting Father Kolgrim, and the trick Bronwyn played to get past him, his followers, and the High dragon, in order to gain access to the Shrine.

"All that is wild and terrible," Bronwyn said, "but there is nothing supernatural about it. Once we stepped into the Shrine, however, it was another matter."

"The dragon cultists wanted Bronwyn to despoil the Ashes," Leliana told the Grand Cleric. "They had the mad idea that it would transfigure their dragon into a being that the whole world would worship. However, none of them could gain access to the Shrine, for it was guarded... by a spirit."

"A demon?"

"No," Bronwyn said, very decidedly. "We have fought

many demons. This was not one of them. It was a man who claimed to have been a companion of Andraste, and who had protected the Shrine from the unworthy for ages."

Leliana's voice lowered into a mysterious music. "There are tests. Anyone who wished to approach the Ashes has to endure them."

"And you did?" asked the priest, growing skeptical again.

Bronwyn silently cursed Jowan, wishing he had obeyed orders and kept the Ashes secret. Why should anybody believe this fantastic story? Why should the Grand Cleric, who had known Bronwyn as a scabby-kneed little girl, believe that she had any remarkable spiritual gifts?

She let Leliana tell the unbelievable story of the tests: how the Guardian had known things about them that no one should have been able to know: how the Guardian had distressed Bronwyn, asking her details about the deaths of her parents. How they had fought phantom doubles of themselves: ugly and distorted versions of the worst in each of them. How they had been confronted by spirits who asked them riddles, and then how they had spanned a chasm and walked through fire to approach the Sacred Urn.

Leliana's eyes glowed with the memory. "Bronwyn was permitted to take a pinch of the Ashes. You cannot imagine what it was like!" Her face fell. "We thought nothing could harm us, but outside were the heretics... and the dragon."

Bronwyn hated speaking of what happened next. "One of my Wardens — a former Templar, Ser Cullen — was

killed by the dragon."

The Grand Cleric raised her brows. "The Ashes did not save him?"

"Not after being bitten nearly in two by a dragon," Bronwyn said bitterly. "By the time it cast him aside, he was already dead."

"Unfortunate," said Her Grace.

Leliana, sensing Bronwyn's rising temper, interposed. "Bronwyn made us swear not to tell anyone about the Ashes. She felt that we needed to speak to you first. Jowan was entrusted with the Ashes to help the Queen, but he was not supposed to reveal their existence."

"But he made a very great scene, I am told," said the Grand Cleric, "and made claims that cannot be substantiated: first because no one knew of the Queen's poisoning, and because no else saw these Ashes." As Bronwyn's eyes flashed, she put up a hand. "I do not deny that you obviously had an extraordinary experience. However, for such an event to be recognized as a 'miracle' would require a thorough investigation." Seeing Bronwyn's anger, she sighed. "Surely you see, Bronwyn, that extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof?"

Bronwyn shot to her feet and began pacing. "I made no public claims! I don't want an investigation! I didn't want this known at all!" She whirled on the Grand Cleric, and tried to lower her voice.

"Haven is a dangerous place! Either foolish people will hunt the Ashes and be killed, or they will slaughter the

foolish, misguided villagers. A pointless slaughter, too, since the Guardian will never let mere mercenaries pass."

Leliana bit her lip, and ventured, "We can prove that the Ashes have the power of healing! We all had a pinch, after all!"

"Leliana!" cried Bronwyn, furious that this last secret was out. Worse and worse! No one could stop talking!

The Grand Cleric's heart thumped oddly. "You have more of these... Ashes?"

Bronwyn clutched her head, utterly confounded.

"Yes!" Leliana cried eagerly. "All us were rewarded with a pinch! We used poor Cullen's pinch to heal the Queen."

Urgently, Bronwyn gestured at Leliana to be still. "Surely you understand, Your Grace, the peril each of us would be in, if that became known. Every one of us would be targeted for death by every treasure hunter in the world! A pinch of the Prophet's Ashes is nearly beyond price... but not entirely. Perhaps an king's ransom?"

"I see," the Grand Cleric said slowly. "However, only one pinch would be required for a test. Bronwyn," she pleaded, "this must be proven, and publicly."

"You could use mine – " Leliana offered.

"No." Bronwyn was furious. "I forbid it! I will not have my people, who suffered unspeakable hardship and braved unimaginable dangers, to be deprived of their just reward. If such a test must be made, you will use my pinch. I will not give them to you," she said, with a furious glare, "but you may find someone to test them on and I will administer them." She

jerked her head at Leliana, indicating that it was time to go. "Choose wisely, Your Grace. It would be absurd and shameful to use this miracle on some priest's cut finger!"

"Bronwyn... wait!" cried the old woman, as the two young women bowed and strode away. Leliana looked back with a wistful expression, but Bronwyn jaw was set hard, and she was down the stairs and out of sight in a moment.

"She is not your enemy," Leliana said softly. "And it is not unreasonable to ask questions and demand proof."

Bronwyn finally came to a stop outside the Cathedral, and took a deep breath. Leliana was right, of course, but Bronwyn would have much preferred not to be in this position at all. Zevran was waiting for them, leaning on a wall, smirking at them.

Surprisingly, the smirk somewhat eased Bronwyn's irritation. Luckily, Jowan was out of sight, no doubt dancing attendance on Bethany Hawke. She would have to have it out with him, sooner or later. Yes, the mages were treated badly, but first Ferelden must defeat the Blight... and Jowan must learn to obey orders. She worked hard at mastering her anger and indignation, and eventually was able to talk rationally.

"Leliana, do you know if any of the gowns you ordered for me are ready for fittings?"

"I can go to the dressmaker and find out."

"Please do. Zevran and I are going to the Alienage. I'll see you back at the Compound for the midday meal." She

paused, and then patted her friend on the shoulder. "Thank you for being there with me, and keeping me from making a complete fool of myself by killing the Grand Cleric."

Leliana dimpled. "You would never do that."

Zevran smirked the more, and Bronwyn laughed reluctantly as she watched Leliana's retreating back.

"That's all she knows. It was touch and go there for a moment."



The Alienage was infinitely worse than she had imagined it would be.

A trickle of sour liquid waste ran down the gutter in the middle of the "street," if one could call it that. It was not even paved, unlike most of Denerim. The buildings were woefully dilapidated, and propped up in places with timbers. The place seemed almost deserted. Now and then a scrawny elf scuttled away at the sight of her, peering at her from the shadows. A rat dashed across her path. Scout growled, but stayed where he belonged, at Bronwyn's heels.

She was ashamed that this was a district of Denerim, capital of Ferelden. Not only that: she was ashamed that she might be the Queen of a country that permitted this — no, *expected* it, as the rightful order of things. She had once heard that the Alienage in Val Royeaux was far worse: ten thousand elves crowded into an area much the same size as the Alienage here. The thought did not make her proud to be Ferelden: it made her ashamed to be human.

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All was not well in Ferelden, where Bronwyn had always had food, clothing, and shelter of the best that coin could buy. Yes, the past six months had been hard, but war and the Blight were special cases. Up until then, she had lived a life of blissfully ignorant luxury. Even when her family was attacked, she had presumed that she was so much more important than anyone else, that it seemed perfectly reasonable for Duncan to rescue her, rather than an elf like Iona, or a knight like Roderick Gilmore. What extraordinary conceit!

If she were an elf, she would go to the world's end to escape from humans.

Or would she? It was easy for her to make such a claim: she, who had been brought up a Teyrn's daughter, accustomed to having her way, accustomed to her feelings being considered. She was not a city elf, made to think from her childhood that she was weak and inferior, deserving to be the lowest of the low. Adaia showed unexampled courage in escaping the chains of such conditioning. Adaia... or Melian Tabris, who had always heard that elves must not use or possess weapons, had taken her little ironwood dagger in hand and fought for her friends. She had made a place for herself at Ostagar, working with deadly poisons and dangerous explosives. She had dared to be a Warden, and never shirked a duty. Seeing where she had come from put into perspective just what an indomitable spirit she possessed. Bronwyn felt rebuked by the girl's unassuming resilience.

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How easy to blame the elves for their squalor, when they were permitted nothing better. Adaia had told her that elves could not legally keep a shop here – though one enterprising soul did, regularly paying off the Arl's patrols. How easy to blame them for the condition of this place: though their human slumlords felt no need to make repairs.

Adaia had asked her to look about and see what might be done. First on the list would be to excavate and put in a sewer pipe under the Alienage, connected to the main drainage tunnel that emptied a little way out to sea. Denerim did not have an extensive sewer system, but that one main sewer could support some more tributaries, and thereby make the city cleaner. Bronwyn was sick of the veiled criticism from her more 'civilized' friends. The Alienage could have something better than a filthy gutter. Once that was accomplished, the main street here could be paved with cobbles, and not be a sea of mud and feces in wet weather.

The only beautiful thing in the entire Alienage was the great vhenadahl tree, now dropping its autumn leaves in a glory of red and gold. The wind blew them everywhere, mockingly festive. It was almost Satalia, after all.

Zevran did not speak and interrupt her thoughts, but he seemed to read them, and gave her an odd, ironic, rather sad little smile. He pointed out the door of the hahren's dwelling. Bronwyn marched up to it. Eyes peeked from the window. There was the sound of a frantic bustle inside, and the door opened.

"Another Warden!" smiled a mild old elf. "We are always glad to welcome those of your order! Come in, please."

This, then, was Valendrian, hahren of the Denerim Alienage. His speech was courteous, even cultivated; his bearing respectful without servility.

"Master Aranai," said the hahren, "how pleasant to see you once more."

"I thank you. Hahren," said Zevran, with a bow. "This is Warden-Commander Bronwyn Cousland, newly come to Denerim."

The womenfolk hiding around a splintered corner uttered muffled squeals. The old elf's eyes opened very wide.

"The Warden-Commander! This *is* an honor!" Even Valendrian's good manners were briefly lost in gawking, but he showed her to a chair — the best chair in the house — and begged her to take refreshments.

"That is very kind of you," Bronwyn replied solemnly. Not for the world would she have shamed or flouted this decent old man. And the biscuits were quite nice.

Valendrian was too polite to ask her her business, but Bronwyn could sense his questions.

"Warden Adaia — Melian Tabris — sends her love to her family and friends. She was quite well when I left Ostagar. She asked me to bring gifts and a letter." Gently, Bronwyn laid her little burdens on the plain, but lovingly polished table. "Adaia wished to send part of her wages home to her family. In addition, she has sent this for her cousin Shianni —" she indicated the little wrapping of silk that

covered a silver necklace.

A fiery-headed girl dashed out, bobbing a little curtsy. Bronwyn guessed that this was Shianni herself, and turned to smile at her.

"Thank you, my lady!" the girl nearly shouted, grabbing at the necklace. "And please, my lady, tell Melian thank you, too! And that we love her and miss her!"

"I shall." She pointed to a silver spoon. "This is for her father... and this, Hahren Valendrian, is for you. It is a Dalish carving of a halla, the creature so important to your elven cousins. She thought you would find it interesting."

"I do," said the old elf, handling the little sylvanwood statuette with curiosity and admiration. "You are generous with your time to deliver these yourself."

"It is no trouble," Bronwyn assured him, "I promised my friend that I would see to it."

They talked for some time. Bronwyn assured them that Tara was also well, and in command of a mission of her own to the west. Then she asked how things had been in the Alienage, after losing so many of their people to the cruelty of Arl Howe.

The hahren sighed. "Things have been... quiet. Quiet, and very sad. Since the dreadful news broke of the Wicked Arl's trading in elves and the implication of Arl Urien's son, the patrols have ceased, and our gardens are no longer destroyed out of spite. Of course, winter is nearly upon us... Yes, there has been some good out of all the evil. We even

have a useful animal in the Alienage – the very milk goat generously given to Deranni by your noble brother. That was a great day for the Alienage indeed.”

Bronwyn blinked. Fergus had given an elf a goat? He had said nothing of this. It would be a minor matter to him, but seemed to have made a tremendous impression on the elves. Of course, she had noticed the lack of animals, other than curs and rats...

“Is it forbidden to keep chickens here?” she wondered. “It seems such a simple, sensible way to earn money and supplement the diet.”

Valendrian granted her a faded, sad smile. “Not forbidden by law, no; but forbidden in fact. If the Arl’s men saw an animal, they would confiscate it. Benammi’s goat was spared because the Arl did not wish to offend your brother. Of course, Arl Urien is now departed... Maker turn his gaze on him, of course,” the elf added automatically. “Perhaps his successor will prove less... exacting.”

“Goats are good,” Zevran considered. “Goats will eat anything. A few goats, and there could be milk for the children, and cheese. Every bit of a goat can be used. With goats and chickens, life could be better here.”

Valendrian did not seem too hopeful. “That is certainly true. We shall see what comes. Right now the loss of so many people has rather taken the heart out of the Alienage.”

“I heard from Adaia – I mean to say Melian –” said Bronwyn, “that the rents here have been reduced with the loss of

population. Who owns the property here in the Alienage?”

Valendrian could answer that in detail. “Most of the buildings belong either to the Arling of Denerim or the Bannorn of South Docks. Arl Urien’s son was the Bann of South Docks, which includes the Alienage, and thus he was our liege lord. However, the building used for the orphanage and a small block of apartments are both royal properties. Various houses belong to others – mostly nobles. I have a comprehensive list, if you are interested.”

“I am. When you are at leisure, hahren, I would like for you to make me a copy.”

Bronwyn then spoke to the hahren of the Highever Massacre, and of the child Amethyne. The hahren thanked her for the coin she had sent.

“Another good from evil. Not only have we been able to dress and feed her well, as you shall see,” said Valendrian, “but with the money it may be possible for her to learn a trade, and thus become self-supporting some day. We would commit her to nothing,” he hastened to add, “without consulting you.”

Bronwyn knew that elves were forbidden to engage in most trades, especially those involving guild membership. And, of course, the regulations forbidding keeping a shop within the Alienage – and the impossibility of an elf keeping a shop outside it – drastically reduced the options.

“What kind of trade might be possible?” she asked.

“Something she can do safely within four walls,” Valen-

drian said wisely. "She might learn to spin. A drop spindle and a distaff are not costly, and she could attach herself to the workshop of a human weaver, spinning an allotted amount of wool or flax for the weaver's use. Weaving itself is mostly out of the question, save for ribbon weaving. For some reason, the inkle loom was not mentioned in the charter of the Weaver's Guild. An inkle loom is an investment, but can be had for a sovereign."

Bronwyn began to grasp why Valendrian looked upon her as the child's patron. Three sovereigns had meant nothing to her, but was a mighty, life-changing sum here. She decided to say nothing about Danith's interest in Amethyne. Packing her off to the Dalish might sound nearly as bad to this man as selling her to Tevinter.

Zevran had some ideas of his own.

"Amethyne is a pretty child with a sweet voice, and might learn to play and sing."

"It is possible," Valendrian cautiously agreed, "though a musical instrument is very expensive. A human minstrel *might* accept her as a pupil. Then, too, for a fee, an elf can apprentice at human workshop to become an assistant: not a journeyman or master, of course; but even an assistant makes decent coin, as the Alienage reckons it. Amethyne might apprentice at a dressmaker's, for example."

"It sounds like you have some very good ideas," said Bronwyn. "I shall send you coin quarterly for her, as we must assume her mother either dead or lost to the slavers. May I see her?"

The child was pushed forward from behind the women's skirts. Bronwyn was somewhat taken aback to realize that the little girl had heard every word of their conversation. Of course, in such a small house there was little expectation of privacy.

"Make your curtsy to the Warden-Commander," Valendrian instructed her gently. "She has been very generous to you."

"I thank you, Warden-Commander," said Amethyne in a small, fluting voice. She curtsied nicely, eyes on the floor.

She was perhaps eight years old: old enough in the Alienage to begin to work and earn her keep. Even common human folk expected their children to be productive from an early age. Bronwyn hoped that her coin would prevent the girl having to work like an adult for a few years at least.

She could hardly remember Iona, whom she had met only briefly. This child did not have her mother's pale blonde hair, the only feature Bronwyn recalled. However, the child's long braid was chestnut-brown and silky, her eyes a very beautiful turquoise-green color. Yes. She could see why Danith was so taken with her: the child was delicate and pretty as a rose leaf, and seemed bright and sweet-natured. Amethyne glanced fearfully at Scout, lounging massively by Bronwyn.

"Come here, child," Bronwyn said. "And don't be afraid of Scout. He would never hurt a little girl."

Timidly, the girl came forward. Bronwyn saw that her clothes were plain but neat: a simple white smock covered

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with a sleeveless brown pinafore. Considering the growing chill in the air, Bronwyn was glad to see that she had warm woolen stockings and ankle boots – a little too large for her, but meant to give room for growing feet.

"Has she a cloak for the winter?" Bronwyn asked Valendrian, and smiled as the girl's face blossomed with excitement.

"She does, Warden-Commander," Valendrian assured her.

"It's green!" Amethyne burst out, "It's a beautiful green and it has a hood!" She blushed, and clapped a hand over her mouth.

"I like green, too," Bronwyn said. "Tell me, Amethyne, what do you like to do? Do you like to play outside, or play with dolls?" Seeing a somewhat blank expression, she tried something else. "Do you like to sew, or are you fond of music?"

"I like music, my lady," the child said shyly. "My mother and I used to sing together. She was teaching me to read, too, when she had time, but she was always very busy."

"I know she was, but I know she always thought of you. When I met her in Highever, she spoke of you, and told me that you were her life. She loved you very, very dearly."

Since everyone now considered her the child's protector, she must take the responsibility seriously. She ought to give the child a present, and cursed herself for her lack of forethought. What did she have about her that would do?

"Here is a piece of silver for you, Amethyne, all your own," Bronwyn said, laying the shining coin in the child's hand. "Spend it however you like. And Satinalia is coming. Now I have a little better idea what you would like."

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She rose to her feet, and nodded to Valendrian. "I hope to be in the city for some time. We will speak again, both about Amethyne and other things."



MURIN, GRAND CLERIC OF FERELDEN

CHAPTER 20

UNBOUND



HE WAS ABSOLUTELY STARVING, AND FOCUSED ON THE MIDDAY MEAL AT FIRST, GLARING A LITTLE AT HER UNIVERSALLY

HAPPY WARDENS. Everyone had bought something, even Cathair, the Dalish archer. He held up a crystal prism to the light, dangling it by a bit of copper wire, enjoying the colored light refracting through it.

"I shall hang it in the window that catches the morning sun, and see a rainbow every day," he solemnly informed Toliver.

"Rainbows are good," agreed his brother Warden. "There's nothing like a rainbow over the meadow after a thundershower."

Then the dwarves, Hakan and Soren, began demanding to know how it was possible to see a 'spectral display' by any means other than a crystallized mineral. A long description of sunshowers and ensuing rainbows ensued. The dwarves did not appear convinced that this was anything other than fantasy.

Even Morrigan was a bit flushed, admiring some

bizarre magical gadget that Anders had found for her. The mages were whispering together, entirely too pleased with themselves.

"Jowan," Bronwyn said, "after you're done eating, I want to see you in the study. Alone."

He looked up at her, and gulped; and then choked on an unchewed bit of mutton. Anders thumped him on the back, smirking. Bronwyn gave Jowan a cool stare and strode off to the study, shutting the door behind her. Once there, she began pacing, hoping Jowan had the sense to come soon and not let her grow any more annoyed.

In fact, he knocked at the door directly, and at her "Enter," poked his head in cautiously. She beckoned him before her with a peremptory gesture.

"Jowan, tell me why you disobeyed my orders. The Ashes were to be *secret*. You've caused me quite a bit of trouble, and there's likely more to come."

"I'm sorry..." Jowan looked at the floor, fidgeting. "I was wrong, but I was just so *angry*... When the Teyrn carried the Queen out of the Chantry she was in such a bad way. I had to do something right away. I had to use my own initiative. And now I know it was even worse than I thought." He burst out, "They *killed* Wynne, Bronwyn! They killed her for being a mage. They killed her for being in their way. And they would have killed the Queen, too, with their plots and their schemes. There's no end to their arrogance, and they're nothing! Nothing! They think they should run

everything, and right now the only people who are really out there trying to save the world are Wardens and mages!"

"Jowan!" Bronwyn brought him up sharply. "Wardens and mages are not the only people fighting against the darkspawn. There are plenty of good soldiers and honest dwarves and brave Dalish who are doing their part. We must not dismiss them. I grant you that the Chantry has been more than a hindrance than a help, but don't paint everyone with such broad strokes. You'll make enemies of friends. Now... all right, the Queen needed healing right away, you say. I can believe that. I'm really not happy that you had to mention the Ashes. Why did you?"

He looked away, his jaw working with tension. "First of all, everybody saw them. Your brother the Teyrn and Arl Bryland and everyone were looking over my shoulder, and they saw everything I was doing. And then, too, I wanted everybody to see how empty the Chantry's claims were. They talk as if only they have importance to the Maker, but it was *you* who got the Ashes! I didn't want them saying it was some priest's stupid prayers. It was you who should get the credit! That's why I took that gold bowl and put them in water. It was such a dramatic moment. I suppose I got swept up in it. Besides, I didn't think I should stick my finger in the Queen's mouth."

"Wait..." Bronwyn cocked her head. "Are you saying you used my wedding gift to *my cousin Habren* to administer the Ashes? That *would* have attracted attention! I hope you

washed it thoroughly before you gave it to her!"

"Actually..." Jowan cowered, and looked about to flee. "We didn't. I mean, we didn't give it to her. By the time the Queen was healed and we showed up at the Arl's estate, he was dead, you see, and I thought maybe it would be... tactless... to give the Arlessa a wedding present... And it's like a holy vessel now, so I didn't think it was something that you'd want given away. I still have it!" he told her quickly, beseechingly, seeing Bronwyn's stunned expression. "I was going to give it back to you as soon as I could do it quietly."

Bronwyn rubbed her face, hardly knowing how to feel. "Where is it?"

"I took it back from Leliana and put it in my saddlebag. It's in my room."

"Fetch it *now*, and give it to me. It certainly is *entirely* too late to give it to Habren now. I'm glad I know that I should not be expecting her thanks!"

Jowan cringed away. He was sorry she was angry, but she would not kill him or make him Tranquil. Her sharp voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Don't *ever* disobey me again, Jowan, or I'll stop your pay for a year and thrash you besides!"

An incoherent apology, and he was out the door, running.

"I hope you did not scold Jowan too harshly, Bronwyn," said Leliana, as they made their way to the dressmaker's in Silk Alley. "It was a terrible time, and he only wanted to

save the Queen. If you had seen how she looked – yellow with sickness – I thought she was dying – and there was your brother holding her in his arms – well, if you had been there, you would understand. And he wished to show proper respect for the Prophet by using the finest vessel we had. I think it was meant to be. Yes. I think it was destined by Andraste herself!”

Bronwyn was not going to shout in the street. “And then today you told the Grand Cleric that we had more! I really wish you had said nothing about that, Leliana,” she said. “I told you I wanted them to be *secret*.”

“So they shall be,” Leliana insisted with sweet and provoking reasonableness. “Only the Grand Cleric and her closest advisors will know. What could be more secret?”

“Leliana...” Bronwyn caught hold of her temper. “The Grand Cleric was drugged by her closest advisors only days ago. We can only hope that her *new* closest advisors are more reliable. Personally, I wish she had never known about it. It’s all becoming too complicated.” She caught Leliana by the arm, and said slowly, “Do *not* mention the Ashes to anybody else. That’s an *order*!”

“Oh, of course I won’t,” Leliana assured her earnestly.

At the dressmaker’s they could not continue their conversation, which relieved Bronwyn in a way, since it was impossible to make Leliana understand her. She had made a mistake in taking her along with her to see Her Grace, and now she must live with it.

No one was perfect, certainly. The gowns that Leliana had ordered for her were quite satisfactory in every way, with an emphasis on bold, warm colors. Her friend had ordered linen of the very finest, and even some very nice boots and slippers. It was the sort of thing she did well. And Bronwyn had another task in mind for her.

“There is something I would like you to do, sometime in the next few days,” she said. Leliana looked up at her from her perusal of a pile of silks, so sweet and willing that Bronwyn sighed to herself for trying to make her friend be other than she was.

“Yes?”

“That child in the Alienage... the child Amethyne... I was discussing her future with the headman who is looking after her. I would like you to visit the child and evaluate her aptitude for music. If she has any potential, I’d like you to recommend a teacher for her. I’ll also get her something musical for Satalia, but I’ll need your advice.”

“What a lovely idea!” cried Leliana. “I should love to do that! Zevran says the little girl is adorable. Oh, I hope she has a good ear! And if she is graceful, she should also learn dancing. I shall go as soon as I can.”

Dress fittings and dressings-down of disobedient Wardens were only irritating: lengthy meetings doling out the vacant lordships of Ferelden were excruciating.

Interesting, too, of course. Nothing would be official

until the Landsmeet voted on the appointments, but with the number of votes they already controlled, it seemed likely that they would largely have their way – if they could decide amongst themselves what that way was.

Some of the titles were fairly straightforward. Bann Ceorlic's sons were in the Free Marches. The eldest had been designated the heir, though he would have to appear at the Landsmeet if he expected to be confirmed. Bann Reginalda's eldest married daughter was her heir, and everyone knew her and thought well of her. As for Bann Grainne, her husband was dead some years, and her son and heir a minor. His father's brother could serve as guardian and steward. No one wanted to do the child out of his inheritance.

Most vacant lordships were in the North, of course. They were the result of Rendon Howe's power grab and its unpleasant consequences. As Teyrn of Highever and overlord of Amaranthine, Fergus was the default possessor of all the Landsmeet votes of the unoccupied titles, giving him immense power. He intended to use it.

They met together: Loghain, Bronwyn, Fergus, Anora, with the Arls of South Reach and West Hills. When Teagan Guerrin deigned to come to Denerim, they would have to admit him into their councils, but they had not heard from him yet. Wulffe had written to him, advising him to come and be heard. Nathaniel Howe, still on probation of sorts, had not been included. At some point they would have to discuss their plans with him, since they would

involve him. Five of the lordships were in the Arling of Amaranthine. Fergus would fill them with his own men. That was not negotiable.

There were three vacant lordships within the boundaries of Highever, and no one questioned Fergus' right to assign those as he pleased. The first and greatest was the bannorn of Highever City. That Fergus intended to keep for himself and ultimately for his heir.

Bann Loren's desmesne, Darkencombe, had no heir. The only son was dead in the Highever Massacre, and due to the Orlesians, there was no kin within five degrees.

"I want Ser Naois Gilmore to hold the bannorn," Fergus said. "He's a loyal and sensible man, and distantly related. It's the least I can do to reward his service. As to Greenleaf Forest, where Howe's men killed the bann, my knight Paley Renwick is the nephew. I don't think anyone can reasonably object to him."

Loghain nodded. This was all well and good. Fergus had a right to do as he liked with Highever, and the men proposed were sound. With Amaranthine, however, there was the possibility of a generation of dispute. It was important not to create a pig's breakfast of hostility there.

Bronwyn agreed with him. "I think it's important to appoint men who can get on with Nathaniel," she said. "Men loyal to you, yes, of course: but also tactful men who won't always be at daggers drawn with their Arl."

"I've been thinking about that, too," said Fergus. "That's

why I'm giving Naois Loren's desmesne. Better to keep him in Highever, and as far from Amaranthine as possible. He'd never forgive Nathaniel for his father's crimes... for Rory's death. Dan Seyforth, though... I think he'll do for Knotwood Hills. The Packtons are dead or fled, and good riddance. Time for new blood there. He's no fool, but he's a bit of a diplomat, and he was with me when we found Tom and poor Delilah. He saw how ugly blind vengeance can be."

That left Hafterhold, Black Marsh, Drake's Fall, and the prime plum amongst them, Amaranthine City. Various names were considered. There was a shortage of noble blood, given the losses of the last year. There was a shortage anyway, never quite made up in the thirty years since the Orlesians were driven out.

"Who will have the city of Amaranthine?" Anora asked. "Such a rich and important place. I take it you do not mean to let it revert to the arling, Fergus?"

"No," Fergus instantly replied. "I want my own man in Amaranthine. Someone I can trust. Furthermore, I think it would be best for the kingdom to have some new blood there, too: someone beholden to no one but us — with no family ties to complicate things. I've been thinking about Adam Hawke."

A silence. Loghain scowled. That opportunistic pretty-boy! A fine warrior, unquestionably, but Loghain was not sure what loyalty Hawke had, save to himself and his family.

"I hardly know him," said Anora. "He is very... charming, of course. He has noble Marcher blood on his moth-

er's side. Lady Amell is a very pleasant woman, and very devoted to her children. The sister, Bethany, is a mage..."

"Splendid girl!" Bryland exclaimed at once. "Saved my Lothar's life, and Alfstanna's, too! A lot of people owe her a great deal."

"That's as may be," said Loghain, "but we were considering her brother's suitability, not hers."

"Adam is very capable," Bronwyn said, partly agreeing with Fergus. She liked the Hawke family, and had no trouble with the idea of doing something for them. Giving them the port city of Amaranthine, however, was a mighty undertaking. "I don't know how much he understands about administration, of course, but perhaps with an experienced seneschal..."

Fergus nodded vigorously. "Adam's a quick study. He's always handled any task given him with dispatch and resourcefulness. And his family links to Kirkwall might help him deal with the Viscount."

"Possibly," Anora said, thinking it over. "He does seem to have a gift for getting on with people."

"Well I think it's a wonderful idea," Bryland declared. "I'll never forget how the late king knighted him on his deathbed. And he stood by Fergus, when we stormed the Cathedral. He's all right. He'll fit in."

Wulffe shrugged. "Can't say I know him well. Seems a decent sort."

Loghain drummed his fingers on the table of the War Room. "Perhaps..." He went on, more decisively. "We don't

have to decide the matter today. Why don't we give the fellow a chance to prove himself? Send him up to Amaranthine town and see how he does as a castellan. If he does well settling the place, then he can be rewarded with the title and all."

Fergus liked the idea. "But I'll let him know that the ladies can remain at Highever House. There's no reason to expose them to the troubles up north until things are calmer."

"Better for young Mistress Bethany's patients," Bryland agreed. "Now... what about Denerim?"

Everyone was too mature to simply groan. "Who's the next in blood?" Wulffe asked.

"I've found out," Bryland said, with a certain veiled eagerness. He had a scheme in mind. "Urien had no surviving brothers or sisters, as you know, and his son and daughter predeceased him without issue. Most of the family were killed in the Occupation. The closest relation is hardly that: only a third cousin once removed, with a small freehold out White River way. Urien held himself too high to have anything to do with the family, but they're Kendells, right enough. The freeholder's a fairly young fellow: Aron Kendells. Considered a good farmer. There's a younger brother and two little sisters. The parents are both dead, so the oldest brother looks after them all."

"Can he," Anora asked delicately, "read?"

Loghain glowered, and looked up at the ceiling, summoning all his patience. It was unbecoming in a freeholder's granddaughter to be a such a snob.

Bryland blinked. "I really don't know."

Wulffe shrugged. "No law says that's a requirement to hold a title!"

Another silence. Bronwyn's conscience troubled her.

"For the record," she said, "and between these walls, I have reason to believe that Bann Vaughan did indeed have 'issue,' though illegitimate and unacknowledged. He was relentless in his abuse of the elven women in the Alienage, and a number of women bore children that could well be attributed to him, though he scorned to support them in any way."

Wulffe grasped the situation. "That little Warden of yours that Vaughan was so exercised about. Was she one of them?"

"Not Adaia," Bronwyn said hastily, protecting the girl's deepest secret. "Though Vaughan did abduct her from her own wedding, along with all her bridesmaids. Her young husband was killed trying to protect her. Adaia escaped, but the other girls were not so lucky, and some of them died after horrid cruelties. However, Adaia did tell me of Vaughan's frequent depredations, which started when he was quite young. The children, human in appearance as they were, were given to the Chantry."

"You know," Bryland said after a moment, "also between these walls, I thank the Maker every day that Habren's marriage with Vaughan never came off. Ferelden is better off without him. He never would have stopped that kind of indecent goings-on, and he would have ended up with his throat slit by some elf woman's father or brother."

Wulffe snorted. "Or by the little elf girl herself! And serve him right!"

Anora grimaced daintily, refraining from mentioning how repulsive she had always found the man.

"I would hope," Bronwyn said, indignation stirring again, "that whoever takes hold in Denerim will have the decency to do something about the Alienage. It's a disgrace and an embarrassment. We don't have to treat our elves as the Orlesians do. I've met the headman there, and he's a very good sort. Considering what they suffered from a high noble of Ferelden, and considering what we're arranging for the Dalish, I think a few improvements and some kinder treatment of the remaining city elves would not go amiss."

Fergus thought of his ill-gotten gold, and winced. "I can hardly talk, as all my elves are gone."

Bronwyn gave him an odd look. "Actually, you *can* talk, as you are something of a hero in the Alienage here. They cannot stop talking about the goat you gave them."

"A... goat?" Anora ventured.

"A goat?" Fergus asked, puzzled. Then his brow cleared. "Oh, yes, I remember. That miserable handful of elves not taken by the Tevinters included an infant. I told someone to buy a goat to keep the poor little creature alive on the way back to Denerim."

Anora smiled slightly, thinking what a fine person he was.

"Well," continued Bronwyn, in a slightly teasing way. "It was one of the greatest events in Alienage history. Appar-

ently, Urien's men always confiscated any animals in the Alienage, but the guards were afraid of offending you, and so left the goat alone. Likewise, they've made a habit of destroying any gardens they find. It seems petty to us, but it's a very great misery to the elves."

"Wouldn't want anybody interfering with *my* gardens," Wulffe muttered.

Loghain frowned thoughtfully. "The Alienage in Gwaren has no such restrictions. Of course the elves need gardens and chickens like everyone else. I can't believe there's anything so ridiculous in the Denerim Alienage edicts."

"I'll have my secretary read them," said Anora lightly. "It is possible that it was simply one of Urien's crochets. Now, let us hear more about this Aron Kendells..."

There was not much more to tell. Bryland said that he had sent a messenger to the man, telling him to come to Denerim and present himself if he wished to claim his birthright. He had a personal reason in this, which he did not mention to the others. Aron Kendells was unmarried, and would need an Arlessa. If he was at all presentable, Bryland would take him under his wing and back his claim to the Arling, on the condition that Habren achieve her dearest wish.

She was so miserable, poor girl. She was disappointed and bewildered and lonely without Werberga. He had had to put his foot down and *make* her understand that she could not come to tonight's feast. It was simply too soon. In

a week or two, dressed in mourning, it might be possible for her to attend public gatherings, but not tonight. She had screamed and stormed and thrown things, but the time had come – almost too late, Bryland admitted to himself – to set some limits, for Habren's own good. And if the Kendells fellow was hopeless... Bryland shrank from the idea of Nathaniel Howe, but he would do as a back-up plan.

They adjourned to change for the feast to follow. They stood, and moved toward the door, still chatting, the conversation changing from matters of state to mere social gossip. It had occurred to Bronwyn that the people here might be interested in what was going on in Redcliffe, and that Teagan might be married by the time he made an appearance. She mentioned that the people of Redcliffe thought it likely that Teagan would soon marry young Kaitlyn Merton, and gave them some of the particulars.

"Merton... Merton..." muttered Arl Wulffe. "You say the girl's related to Babcock of Whitewood Hills? Not much coin there."

"A poor relation, at that. It was my understanding that the girl has nothing of her own. As a distant cousin of the Guerrins, Arl Teagan granted her a small pension and the use of a house for herself and her little brother. She's very young, and very pretty and good-natured."

"Teagan couldn't put it off anymore," Bryland remarked. "High time he did his duty to his family." He had once had hopes of Teagan for Habren, but the man had made his

lack of interest all too clear. "It sounds like he chose someone as unlike Arlessa Isolde as possible!"

Loghain nodded, seeing Leonas' point. A sweet and bidable young girl would not test Teagan's temper or flout his decisions. At least she was not a foreigner. And even if Teagan gained an alliance with the elderly Bann of Whitewood Hills by this marriage, it was not of great political value. It appeared to him that Teagan would be coming to the Landsmeet with no power to challenge his own... or that of the Couslands.

With the teyrns and two of the arls united, with another arl under their control, and the added prestige of the Dowager Queen, it seemed unlikely that there would be any significant challenge to the decisions they made behind closed doors in advance of the Landsmeet.

He glanced over and saw Anora and Fergus talking together quietly, standing in front of the big window. He looked again. Anora was looking up at the Teyrn of Highever with softly sparkling eyes. Well... That was good, he supposed. Fergus Cousland was a decent man. Loghain had suggested such a match to Anora, and she, true politician that she was, had taken his advice to heart. She was playing her part extremely well. Had the man been anyone but Fergus Cousland, the most eligible noble in Ferelden, Loghain would have thought her interest in him sincere. A faint smile came to his lips. Then he looked at her again, his certainty shaken a little. Anora *did* seem sincere...

Bronwyn was looking at the pair in the front of the window, her brows contracted in puzzlement. Abruptly her face cleared, and she glanced at Loghain, a bit surprised.

"I see," she said softly. "Well... I shall join you at dinner later. It's going to be a great affair, it seems."

"Yes, unfortunately. You'll want to wear something other than Grey Warden garb."

"I shall." She gave him an almost mischievous look. "You'll see how much I can *not* look like a Grey Warden tonight!" She lowered her voice, "And thank you for my ring. It's beautiful."

He looked at her oddly, not quite smiling. "Then it suits you. I thought it would."



Leliana, already lovely in her blue and lavender gown, came in to Bronwyn's room to arrange her hair and help her dress. She had an entire box of hairpins with her. She then began to fuss over Bronwyn like a bride's mother.

"We'll do your hair up tonight," Leliana decreed. "Very elegant; very dignified. It will be necessary with the high collar of the capelet."

Bronwyn sat still while Leliana worked her own sort of magic. Morrigan came in and watched for awhile, smirking, but saying nothing. The braiding and the coiling and pinning and the curling seemed to take forever, but at last the bard was satisfied, and stepped back.

"And now for your gown."

Bronwyn dressed as if she were arming for battle, every piece just so. The silk stockings, the lacy garters, a slim and elegant dagger strapped in its sheath to her right calf, the shining new ankle boots of black Antiva leather, the silken gown, the gold belt studded with pearls. Leliana looked at her critically, smoothing the gown, and then the black velvet capelet was settled on her shoulders and pinned with the dragon brooch. The upstanding collar brushed the sides of her jaw, framing her face.

"And now for the best part. Look what the jeweler Pandelin made for you!"

A gleaming, fragile object was pushed into her hair, the front resting gently on her forehead. Leliana teased out some curling tendrils of hair very carefully, and then held up a mirror for her to see.

"Oh, that *is* nice!"

Bronwyn liked the elaborate headpiece very much. It was not a crown or a coronet, nor was it a tiara. It was, however, a very beautiful, very delicate ornament of gold and silver swirls, set with a glowing ruby that rested on her brow like a dragon's eye. It did not make a closed circle in the back, but nestled into her hair at the sides. She could braid her hair, or simply wear it down. Wearing this, she would always look quite grand. It was not improper or vainglorious to wear such a piece of jewelry, and Bronwyn thought it gave her a touch of gravity or... what? *Mystery?*

She turned her head, studying the effect in the mirror.

It was not so heavy that it would give her a headache, but it looked very rich. She had given Leliana a brief description of her idea, Leliana had talked to the jeweler, and this had come out of it. It would go well with her ruby dragon brooch and her crimson gown. The effect would be striking.

She had never seen Anora wear red. Bright red was a very expensive Antivan dye, made from a shellfish that lived in Rialto Bay, and was difficult to obtain in Ferelden. Blue and greens – even yellows and purples were easier to come by. In fact, women rarely wore red at all. She might well be the only woman at the feast in a red gown. The thought made her feel... powerful.

She swept out, meeting her Wardens and her friends, who waited in the Hall. A rustle of astonishment greeted her, and impressed stares. The Junior Wardens whispered among themselves.

Zevran bowed gallantly.

"Noble one, you are in every way a queen tonight!"

Anders grinned at Morrigan, who rolled her eyes.

"Come on," he teased in a murmur, "She looks beautiful!"

"'Tis too good for the man in question, indeed!"

"Spoilsport! And you're looking seriously beautiful yourself!"

Morrigan preened, knowing it was true, and took Anders' arm with a scornful smile, following Bronwyn to the Palace.

A herald and attendant guards were stationed at the door, inspecting the guests carefully. There would be no repeat of the disaster at the Arl of Denerim's wedding.

Bronwyn glanced into the Hall, impressed at the effort that had gone into making this a night to remember. Colorful banners, each painted with the arms of the Crown or one of the noble houses of Ferelden, hung silken from the vaulted ceiling. The tables were laid with white naper, silver goblets and plates, and wreaths of autumn flowers. Candles shone their golden light everywhere. Handsome bronze salt cellars, wrought in the form of fantastic beasts, had been taken from the royal treasury, and each table was adorned with one of them. It appeared that the one at the Queen's table was a dragon.

After her brief glimpse, the herald shunted the rest of the Wardens off to an usher, who would see them to their proper seats. Bronwyn was led to an antechamber, where Fergus, Bryland, and Wulffe were already gathered, chuckling over their wine. They too, seemed impressed and pleased at her appearance.

"My dear Bronwyn!" Bryland exclaimed. "You look exactly as you should."

"Better than that," Wulffe said amiably.

"Out to make more conquests tonight?" Fergus teased. He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Loghain told me he sent you a ring."

She raised her hand for his inspection. "He sent it to me this morning. You didn't notice it at the our council, and I didn't want to be like horrible Hab – a silly person, waving my hand about, shrieking, *"Look what I got!"*



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"What did you get?" Bryland asked eagerly, overhearing her last words.

Fergus bit back his laughter. "Her betrothal ring."

Bronwyn felt herself grow red as her gown, and indeed lifted up her hand for their general approval, feeling ridiculous.

In a few moments, The Queen entered with Loghain. There was a pause as the two women took each other's measure.

Anora was rather taken aback. Having seen Bronwyn only in armor, Warden's tabard, or a rather dowdy grey gown, she had not quite grasped how splendid she could look when properly groomed and dressed. *Red*. Anora did not much like red, and had never thought of wearing it. A mistake, clearly. The color was absolutely riveting. The contrasting black velvet capelet made Bronwyn look very authoritative, and the ruby-set headdress, while not a crown, made her seem already a queen. She had not realized that Bronwyn was so striking a young woman. Of course, she was very tall, and that always drew the eye. With a flicker of vexation, she suspected that all eyes *would* be on her successor tonight. Very astute of her, of course. It was a good move, politically speaking. Most of the nobles collecting for the feast tonight had never seen Bronwyn at all, or last seen her when she was hardly more than a child. This first impression was vital. Anora glanced at her father, and was further vexed at the look on his face.

Men.

In her turn, Bronwyn considered the beautiful blonde



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woman with fresh eyes. Anora looked quite lovely tonight. Since that dose of Sacred Ashes, Anora seemed years younger: her complexion fresh as a young girl's, her sapphire eyes bright and unshadowed, her hair pure, fine gold. She was in a magnificent blue gown that became her wonderfully well. And Bronwyn had not missed the way that the Queen and her brother looked at each other. Everyone had described Fergus' rescue of the Queen as a most romantic exploit. Was Anora to be the next Teyrna of Highever?

Bronwyn had no right to stand in their way. Fergus had suffered so much, lost so much, that anything that would make good his heartache must be welcomed. And he would be a far better husband to Anora than King Cailan had been. That, of course, begged the question: would Anora be a good wife to Fergus? Of that, Bronwyn could not be certain. She would certainly not be the *same* kind of wife that Oriana had been.

After a curious, brief pang of memory, Loghain took a deep pleasure in looking at Bronwyn. He felt proud, approving, really and truly delighted that once again she had risen to a challenge and surpassed all expectations. Everyone in attendance tonight would look at her and see a Queen. And not just any Queen, but a strong and beautiful woman who worked tirelessly for the good of her country. How like Rowan she was!

Still, he had felt it; that moment of painful remembrance. He remembered the night after the victory in Gwaren when

he had met Rowan listlessly wandering the streets, garbed in a fine gown of just that blood-red color, heartbroken at Maric's faithlessness. He had said all he could, given her all the validations that love and respect could offer, hoping to comfort her. She had resisted him then, but had come to him at last on that dark journey through the Deep Roads. That gown of crimson silk Bronwyn wore he took as a sign: this was the right woman at the right time; this was the woman he would *not* let get away; this was the woman who ought to be Ferelden's Queen.

The door opened again, and Nathaniel Howe stepped in, clothed in black. Of course he would sit with the queen and the high nobles. It would not do to isolate or foolishly antagonize him. Rather, it was best to start assimilating him into their ranks; making him one of them, making their decisions his decisions. Howe bowed to the Queen, silent and grave, his eyes briefly widening as he looked at Bronwyn.

Bronwyn felt the brief, unspoken compliment, and smiled mischievously at the clouds gathering in Loghain's face. He had not missed Howe's expression either. He gave her his arm with a certain possessiveness, and they followed Fergus and Anora into the Hall, excited voices rising at their entrance like a vast flock of ravens taking wing.

Scout was snoring again. Bronwyn slowly opened her eyes to the dim grey light seeping through the shutters. A thin shaft of light illuminated the golden bowl, set high

on her half-empty bookshelf. The gleam must have awakened her. She tried to settle back to sleep again, but the vague memory of unpleasant dreams made that distasteful. Soon her mind was racing, thinking over the events of the night before. It had been a great success — of a sort — she supposed. They had been paraded out, they had dined, she had been recognized and honored, but it was all a blur. Too much had happened at once. She had been hungry, but had eaten moderately and carefully, hungry and half-empty, painfully aware that all eyes were on her, and loath to gain a reputation as a glutton. People did not understand about Grey Warden appetites, and the truth of it was a secret of the Order.

She sat between Loghain and Wulffe, which was fine. She could always find something to talk about to Wulffe, who in fact wanted to know all about the Hawke family. Hardly unreasonable, if they were destined for the Landsmeet. So she told him about the noble mother, the knightly son, the mage sister, the Warden brother — whom she knew best — and the girl she knew least, the cousin.

"Not a mage, is she?" Wulffe asked. "That's the one down there, with the curls? Pretty lass. Now let me see if I understand you: the mother's brother had the title, but he's exiled and dead, and now the mother has it? What about the daughter?"

"I don't claim to understand that myself. There were hints that the uncle was not the proper heir and that the mother should have had it all along. It hardly matters, I suppose,

since they've lost their land and fortune in the Free Marches. The girl has no dowry, but she's quite brave and venturesome, to have spirited her ailing father away from the assassins and all the way to Lothering. She seems very nice."

"No dowry now, to be sure," Wulffe said thoughtfully, "but if her cousin becomes Bann, he'd no doubt do something for her."

Nobles and their eternal matchmaking. Bronwyn could giggle over it now, in the privacy of her bed. She wondered if Wulffe was considering Charade for one of his sons. Just as there was a shortage of noble heirs, there was *always* a shortage of attractive potential spouses for them.

Loghain had spoken to her softly, now and then, careful not to say anything that enemies could seize on. Bronwyn understood why. Some agents were trained to read lips. One had to be careful. Once or twice, his hand had slipped into hers, or he had gently laid his hand on her thigh. Once he had murmured into her ear that she should always wear red. His attentions, like the dinner, were enough to whet her appetite, but not enough to satisfy. The difference was that she could beg some bread and cheese from Mistress Rannelly later.

Loghain had promised that they would be together in Denerim, but that so far had not come to pass. They had parted after the feast last night with disappointing propriety.

But Loghain had kissed her hand, and shot her a glance from under his black brows that had given her a pleasurable thrill. She had hoped he would do more, but practi-

cally every noble in Denerim was looking at them at the moment, and Loghain had made clear that he would have no scandal cloud her name. It was frustrating, but after some consideration, she did see his point. Most people were reasonable about such things, but some were not; and those people often had the power to be troublesome.

The Grand Cleric was of course such a person. No member of the Chantry had been present last night, but Bronwyn had no doubt that someone there would report every detail to her. Bann Alfstanna was a decent person and a fine ruler of her bannorn, but she was very, very devout and had a brother among the Templars. For that matter, Alfstanna herself had made her own views on the importance of chastity very well known. She was not alone in such expressed views, though Bronwyn tended to think the others were hypocrites. Alfstanna actually lived her principles.

All the same, Loghain seemed to be able to set her aside without visible signs of reluctance. That was worrying.

She turned her head toward her writing table, and saw the unanswered letters from her brother Wardens rebuking her for her sloth. She really must answer them in the next few days, and attempt to do so tactfully. That might not be entirely possible in the case of the First Warden.

Their general message was clear: no Wardens would be coming to help them. Bronwyn lay in bed, giving that a little more thought. There was good and bad in the situation, looked at objectively.

Loghain distrusted foreigners, and would not welcome foreign members of an independent military order. He would regard them as spies, or at best as meddlers. He would not be the only one. Father had often commented on how much Fereldans hated outsiders. Some parts of the country were worse than the others. Denerim and the Coastlands might have the flexibility to cope with foreign accents, but the Bannorn was notoriously insular, and as for West Hills or Gwaren! So there was that. If no foreigners came, Bronwyn would not have to constantly smooth the feathers of her countrymen.

On the other hand, their supply of Archdemon blood, provided by Riordan and Fiona, was nearly gone. She could prepare Joinings for ten more recruits at most, and that was stretching the supply. Eight was more realistic, and of those, how many would survive? Four? Five?

The Warden's Compound was decently supplied, but not for fifty Wardens. Her funds were not unlimited, either. She must sit down with the account books and see if the tithes were paid up. If not, that would be a depressing and vexing task to add to her duties at the upcoming Landsmeet. It also would do nothing to inspire support for her claim. Where else could she find help for her Wardens? Where might there be more supplies? She had seen all the little cache in the Market District had to offer. She had inventoried the supplies here at the Compound. The Warden Post at Ostagar was a ruin. What else was there?

Quite out of nowhere, she remembered a conversation some months ago with that annoying trader... Dryden... Dryden. What was the first name?

Levi. Levi Dryden. He wanted her to go to Soldier's Peak, the ancient Warden fortress on the Coast. It had been abandoned for two hundred years, and thus was not likely to be full of foodstuffs, but there might be something there. How long did those preservation spells the mages used last? At the very least, some books or records might have survived to help her. She had put the Dryden fellow off, what with Howe's rebellion, but if the rebellion raged no longer...

She must have a look at her maps. How long would it take to get there? It was not nearly so far as Highever. Dryden had implied that he could guide her there. She could not remember his address in Denerim, but she had written it down somewhere. Perhaps it would not be a bad idea to speak again with this scion of the formerly noble Drydens.

She sat up, stretching, rather excited to have a new plan. If she was not very careful, she would be trapped in an endless treadmill of insipid and meaningless court functions. She would write the man a note, and tell him to present himself as soon as possible — *today* if he could!

What else? She slid off the bed, opened the shutters, and dug through her papers, looking for the notes on the "Unbound." She would take a walk to Stealcopper Court, just as soon as she and some of her friends had breakfasted, and speak to this Vilhm Madon. A bit of exercise

was just what she needed.

"...And when his kingdom fell, so disappeared the stolen riches of an age. The beast, the Unbound, lies dormant until one of true spirit claims his throne. So must hunt the hero of his people, the principled one who would search for ancient evil. This is how they can make a real difference..."

The Wardens at the breakfast table listened, entranced.

Bronwyn looked up from the crumbling journal, pleased at their interest. "There's more. Whoever last owned this had collected clues from all sorts of places. Here's a later parchment he slipped inside:

'...The riders follow after every town, ever since my lucky break deciphering the story. I see it now, how they take the locals closest to me, preventing rest or kinship. I thought this a road to glory, but I am dogged at every step by his talons. Gaxxkang: curse his name and the day I heard it..."

"Gaxxkang!" Carver repeated. "What a name!"

A ripple of amusement. The dwarf Soren looked up from his fascinating surface bread and honey, and muttered, "I swear I've heard it somewhere."

Bronwyn smiled, and said, "This was scribbled at the bottom of the page a little way on:

'Three pages, three ages. Same story, updated.

Same as the tavern song, but older!

Signature torn on purpose, but compare and get "Vilhm Madon".

All from him! How?"

"Vilhm Madon?" snorted Anders. "It sounds like an anagram!"

"Of what?" queried Morrigan, very scornful. "Man Hold Vim? Is that any better?"

Leliana burst out laughing.

"What is an anagram?" Cathair whispered to Toliver.

"No idea," the human mumbled around his porridge.

Zevran considered, and his face brightened, "How about 'Lad Hmm Vino?'"

"Or 'Divan Hmm Lo,'" suggested Jowan, wanting to join in the fun.

"This is silly," muttered Aveline, disapproving of the nonsense.

"All right, all right," Bronwyn raised her voice, calling them to order. "Anything can be a name. I have no idea where this Vilhm Madon Divan Vino is from. At some point he lived in Stealcopper Court here in Denerim, according to this person's notes. He might be dead or long gone, so I thought I would go there and find out. If he no longer lives in the house, the current tenant may know something. Oh... by the way, another piece of parchment is inserted in the journal. Listen to this:

'...You asked, so I'm telling you. Don't go. The stories talk of the riches, but never the names, never where they supposedly spent their wealth. I heard the same tales as a lad in Denerim, felt the same pull, but it's a lie, son. They may paint a trail, but once you're on it, does it lead to the beast or back to you?"

A pause.

"I'm in," said Anders, thumping down his cup. "Let's go call on Anagram Man. Ask him about..." he sniggered, "Gaxxkang."

Morrigan raised her brows, looking skeptical, but Anders patted her arm. "It's be fun! Stealcopper Court is on this side of the river, so it's not a long walk. Then we can take the Dock Bridge across and go to the Market."

"Very well," Morrigan generously consented. "I wish to visit The Wonders of Thedas again. I have not yet finished browsing through their selection of books."

Zevran got up to find his armor. "I shall go, naturally."

"We can't all go," Bronwyn declared. "Leliana, I'm leaving you in command of the Compound. I sent a message to a fellow named Levi Dryden to pay us a visit. He approached me a few months ago about the old Warden fortress up on the coast. Wanted me to go there and see what's left. Now that Rendon Howe is gone and my brother controls the Coastlands, I'm inclined to take him up on his idea. Most traders are settling in for the winter now, so there's a good chance he's at home. If he shows up, keep him here until I return. I shouldn't be gone long."

"Wear your armor," Zevran urged, his voice low. "Just in case the trail has led 'back to you.'"

"Yes," Leliana agreed for different reasons. "You should wear your armor and be seen by the people."



Stealcopper Court was nearly as disgusting as the Alienage. It was a back alley of ramshackle buildings, stinking of dead cats and rotten vegetables, of piss and fermented shit. It had rained during the night, and puddles of water – or some sort of water-like substance – reflected the tentative sunshine.

"Ugh!" Morrigan groaned. "I have stepped in something!"

"When you lived in the Wilds," Anders pointed out mildly, "you stepped in 'something' all the time."

Her face grew stony. "'Tis hardly the same thing. Who would live in such a place as this? Bronwyn, have you mistaken the house?"

"No..." Bronwyn replied, amused. "This is the one. Look! It's even conveniently marked with the initials 'VM.' I hope Master Vino Divan is at home."

"'Tis a hovel!" Morrigan sneered. Bronwyn kept her smile unseen. Morrigan's standards had certainly gone up since leaving the very hovelish hovel she had shared with Flemeth.

It was early, but heads poked out of neighboring windows and doors, curious and fearful about the presence of a band of well-dressed and well-armed people with a mabari.

Bronwyn put her hand to the rusted knocker and rapped smartly.

"Hello? I would speak with Vilhm Madon."

No response. The sound echoed in the courtyard, Bronwyn glanced about her, a little self-conscious about the interest she had aroused. If no one answered here, she would bear down on some of the gawkers and ask if they

had ever heard of Vilhm Madon. Surely someone...

She slammed the knocker down again, annoyed.

"I am Warden-Commander Bronwyn Cousland! I've come to ask about Gaxxkang the Unbound! Be good enough to open!"

The lock clicked. Anders gingerly extended his staff, and pushed the door open. Bronwyn wrinkled her nose at the musty odor filtering out. Scout put down his head, and growled.

"I believe the dog," said Zevran instantly.

"As do I," Morrigan said, hefting her staff.

"Well, come on." Warily, Bronwyn stepped over the threshold.

Inside was a hovel indeed. The filthy room, its one window covered with thick oiled parchment, was nearly unfurnished save for the ruins of a priceless Antivan carpet. The light was dim, and provided mostly by the fire in the hearth. Needing a moment to let her eyes adjust to the gloom, Bronwyn had just enough time to catch her breath and consider the man standing before her.

Neither old nor young, but somehow ageless, he was waiting, hands behind his back, quite at his ease. He was not dressed poorly, but his garments were... unusual. He wore the cowl of a mage, but also a heavy bronze gorget protecting his throat, bronze bracers at his wrists, and a jerkin reinforced with metal strips. The style was an old-fashioned one, dating from long before the Orlesian invasion.

His face was perfectly ordinary. No one seeing him would remember him a moment later. Clean-shaven... almost too clean-shaven. His skin was sickly pale, and his

eyebrows nearly invisible. His voice, however, was clear and resonant.

"Grey Warden, isn't it? Strange that you would force such a visit in a time of Blight. I suppose I'm used to inspiring a different kind of seeker."

"Bronwyn," Anders warned her, on a thread of breath. "That's not human."

Zevran smirked, his daggers already in his hands. "Not that it matters to me."

Scout crouched, ready to spring. With a curious, uneasy jolt, it occurred to Bronwyn that perhaps she had made something of an error. Vilhm Madon was not simply a storyteller. He was —

She licked her lips, and said quietly, "Your stories attract them. And then they disappear."

The... man?... chuckled, ominously smug. "I encourage fools to waste their lives in fantasy. The adequate ones find the gems I left as beacons, and then I find them. But you," he said, eyeing her with a certain admiration. "You are already brighter than the signal at Ishal. Eyes are on you from a very high vantage, Grey Warden. I cannot hide in your wake, but I will not be a footnote! Witness Gaxxkang!"

Could light be black? There was a shock, as if the air had somehow turned inside out, and Bronwyn experienced an instant of total blindness. She blinked, drawing her blades, and found her herself facing a demon.

Scout leaped, going for the attenuated legs. Morrigan

screamed out a curse, staff sparking. Anders' arms were lifted, his head tilted back as he shouted his own incantation. A burst of frost from the demon, and Bronwyn choked, unable to breathe.

What kind of demon *was* this? The horrid skeletal teeth occupied half its face. Its grotesque, emaciated arms ended in ragged claws. It glowed redly from within, and cast powerful spells, draining her strength and will. Perhaps it was something like that dreadful emanation in the Elven Temple: hideous, ancient, and strong.

Scout leaped again, trying to come to grips with the monster. Bronwyn managed to suck in some frigid air, and shouted wordless defiance, waving her sword to fix the creature's attention. Somehow, Zevran had slipped behind it, and with a cry of delight, buried his daggers in its bony back.

The demon reared, flung out its arms, and they were all knocked back by a blast of raw power. Bronwyn slammed into the crumbling wattle-and-daub wall, and brushed away dust and debris, scrambling to her feet, wanting to find out who was hurt, and saw —

— that the demon had changed form. It was now a Revenant: an entity she had also seen in the Elven Temple. This was the mighty apparition of a warrior clad in ancient winged helmet and heavy plate. It wielded a frosty blue longsword that shrilled out a song of death as the blade swung down on Anders.

Bronwyn flung herself forward, and caught the blade

on her own. The revenant's blade bit into hers deeply, locking the two swords together. Its weapon was clearly better than hers.

"Maker's Breath!" she shouted, and stabbed with her off-hand dagger, piercing into the unnatural flesh at the joining of the neck and the head.

Another violent shock, and she was once again knocked back. Scout squealed in agony, maddening her. The demon had changed back to its first form, that of a monstrous mage. Morrigan was hurt, her left arm hanging oddly, but her yellow eyes were aflame. She matched the demon, ice for ice, and the creature slowed, glittering with frost.

Zevran threw his arms around the thing, and his daggers crunched through the ribs. He twisted them, his handsome face distorted into a rictus of effort, and was hoisted off his feet. Another blast of magical power knocked him back and slammed him down. Bones snapped, and Bronwyn heard a muffled cry of pain.

The demon was a warrior again, its dreadful sword lifted like a scythe, ready to mow them all down. It could not be stopped; could not be parried. The blow fell, the sword keening triumphantly. Bronwyn rolled aside, her armor protecting her from the splintered floor. Spells flashed behind her head, and she saw the too-white light in her peripheral vision.

"A-a-a-gh!" she screamed, stabbing upwards, her notched blade biting into the massive demonic sinews. The rev-

enant stumbled, its knee giving way. Anders avoided the slash — almost. Flecks of scarlet from his torn upper arm painted the wall behind him. He shouted out another curse, paralyzing the weakened demon. Morrigan, hoarse with fury, drained the creature's mana, while a crippled, whining Scout seized the creature's sword arm in his jaws. Bronwyn scuttled out of the way of the demon's fall, and grabbed it by its bony jaw. Gritting her teeth, she drew her dagger across its throat, slicing deep through undead cartilage. The creature whistled and squealed, and then fell forward, dragging Bronwyn along with it. She slid over the armored back, head first, her helmet's wings taking the brunt of the impact.

For a moment she lay stunned, draped over the revenant's back. Already as cold as a corpse, the creature's stink redoubled as it rapidly deliquesced. Centuries of decay, too long deferred, were made up in minutes. Even its armor crumbled away, no longer sustained by magic. Bronwyn slid away, gagging, and to her dazed confusion, she heard a smattering of applause.

Looking up, she saw a ring of shabby locals peering through the doorway. Evidently, they had enjoyed the spectacle. Some of them. Others were puking into the stragglng weeds by the doorway. It did not much improve the smell.

"That's my neighbor!" shrilled a woman. "He's... all runny."

"Reckon he was a demon," mused her sister. "Can't say I'm surprised. That mean he was — wouldn't lend me so much

as a needle or a cup of meal. Well done, Grey Wardens!"

"Those are mages," a man muttered. "You'd best mind yourselves."

The first woman shoved him aside, eager to see better. "If they're killing demons as was hiding themselves amongst decent folk, they're all right with me."

Staggering to her feet, Bronwyn managed a grimace at the spectators.

"Anders, are you all right? Can you do some healing? Everybody's hurt."

"I noticed. Me, too." Anders sat up and began casting. At the blue flash of light, there was a general withdrawal and some awed cries of "Ooooooo!"

Cuts and bruises, mostly, though Zevran had a broken collarbone and Morrigan a broken left arm. Scout whimpered until Anders healed his bleeding wounds, and now there were cries of "Awwwwww!" as the dog licked the Healer's hand.

Bronwyn shook her head, then stopped, since it hurt. On the floor lay the longsword wielded by the revenant. It was quite the weapon. A little way off lay the discarded shield. She picked it up and hefted it. It must be magical, for it seemed the perfect weight and balance for her. Apparently, they had been the only real things about Gaxxkang the Unbound.

"That's the Girl Warden," another neighbor whispered. "I seen her red armor when she rode into the city." There

was more applause, conscientiously loyal. Bronwyn wondered if she was expected to bow and make a speech.

The first woman edged into the room. "I wonder if I could get this house, now that Master Madon's gone. It looks bigger than mine." She asked Bronwyn, "You mind if I take a look?"

Such infernal impudence could not be tolerated, even when suffering a headache like the one raging in Bronwyn's skull.

"Please step out for now," she managed. "Yes, out there. We need to check the house for more demons. Don't touch the remains until they're done decomposing." With another false smile, she eased the woman over the threshold and shut the door.

"What in the Maker's name," wondered Anders, "was that creature? Two forms? Even if it was a possessed mage, how did manage two different forms? That was just... wrong!"

Morrigan frowned, intrigued by the puzzle. "Perhaps the mage was a shape-shifter in the beginning. Surely it could not be that he was possessed by two demons at once. It is likely we shall never know."

Zevran was sitting up, and now looked much better. He tilted his head at the sword on the floor. It still glowed blue. "Have a look at it, my Warden," he suggested. "It's a fine weapon. Dragonbone, I think."

"Be *careful*," rasped Morrigan, glaring at Zevran, still clutching at her rapidly healing arm.

Bronwyn laid her gloved fingers on the hilt, and even

through the thick leather, she sensed a thrill of magic. Gripping it, she felt something trickle up her warm, like a spider web of connection. The blade seemed content with her, hoping for great deeds to come.

"There's writing on the blade," she murmured, catching the firelight along the length of it. Yes, it was dragonbone, and very, very old. "I can't make it out."

Anders craned his neck to look up at it. "It's Arcanum. The Keening Blade. That's the name. Let me check it out before you use it in a fight, all right?"

"All right."

Zevran rose, testing his limbs to make sure everything worked. Satisfied, he began exploring the tiny house.

Behind the front room was a little alcove, containing a bed and an elaborate chest. Zevran played with the lock, while the rest of them looked over his shoulder.

"Ha!"

The lid was pushed back, revealing the contents. Scout nosed under their arms for a sniff, and seem to find the loot neither menacing nor particularly interesting. The other companions were more impressed.

"He tempted them with jewels, he said," smirked Zevran, "And what jewels, indeed! There is gold, too!" He raised his hands in wonder. "Why do all these powerful beings live in such squalor? Had I such power and wealth I would prefer a palace. With beautiful women!"

"No doubt," Morrigan dismissed him, intent on the treasure.



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"Those gloves..." said Anders, examining them. "I think they may be enchanted."

It was best to divide the loot on the spot. The gloves fit Anders, and thus fell to his share. Not wishing to be selfish, Bronwyn urged Zevran to see if The Keening Blade suited him. He touched it briefly, and withdrew his hand with a hiss.

"I think... not. The sword has chosen its owner, and has no use for me."

The fine shield, Anders told Bronwyn, was named "Fade Wall," and also appeared to have magical qualities. They agreed to take both sword and shield back to the Compound for evaluation. Bronwyn had not used a shield regularly, but this one was so excellent, so perfect for her, so suitable, in a word, that she began to consider changing her fighting style, or at least keeping the shield with her in case the situation merited it.

"If I keep these weapons," Bronwyn pointed out, "then it is only fair that the gold and jewels be yours."

Morrigan selected the most remarkable piece for her own: an emerald brooch of antique make, the grass-green stone carved with the face of a woman. After some good-natured chaffering, the loot was divided and hidden on their persons. Gaxxkang and his armor were now nothing but a roughly man-shaped pile of dust on the floor. It was time to face the community of Stealcopper Court.

They opened the door to more applause, more cries of "Maker bless you, Girl Warden!"



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They nodded and smiled their way through the crowd. The local women had already fetched their cleaning gear. Bronwyn's last glimpse of Gaxxkang's little hovel was of one woman flicking dust out the doorway with her broom, while another washed it into the gutter with a pail of dirty water.



ARL WULFFE OF WEST HILLS

CHAPTER 21

WARDENS ON
THE MARCH

STAGAR SEETHED WITH ACTIVITY AS THE WARDEN PARTIES PREPARED TO MOVE OUT. Alistair was torn in three different directions, worrying about them all. He was not thrilled to be left in Ostagar, but made himself think it over, and came up with some plans of his own. For now, he, like most the Wardens, was pressed into duty in the bomb workshop, putting together supplies for everyone. Adaia was in her glory, showing them all how to measure and mix and pack. Alistair only hoped that they would not blow themselves to the Black City in all the bustle.

Siofranni, a petite Dalish elf with coppery pigtailed, had more or less apprenticed herself to Adaia, wanting to learn the crafts of poison-and-bomb making. The girl's enthusiasm was not dampened when Adaia explained that she was more or less an apprentice herself to Master Dworkin. The dwarves under Alistair's command, Asa and Ulfa, showed some aptitude as well, though Asa's skill with an axe also made him a valuable companion in the Wilds. Ulfa came

from the miner caste originally, and knew her rock and stone, which would be very handy when Alistair led them down into the Deep Roads again. While everyone else was away, exploring the other entrances, Alistair had decided that they could do their part here, and clean out the tunnels beneath Ostagar. For all he knew, they were yet more Broodmothers, spawning replacements for the horde.

Work broke off for a meal, and amidst the laughter and talk, Tara took Astrid aside, wanting to discuss their plans privately.

"I'd like to travel due west, first, rather than go directly to Lake Belannas."

"But why?" Astrid asked. "To sweep for more darkspawn?"

"Well, that of course; but I have a secret agenda. Let's go somewhere quiet, and I'll tell you about it."

They found a corner of the mess hall and fortified themselves with ale and bowls of stew. Tara gave a quick glance about her, and then pulled two things from the inside of her leather cuirass: one was a folded piece of parchment, and the other —

"That is a golem's control rod," Astrid said, tense with excitement. "Where did you find it?"

A lofty, virtuous smirk. "I bought it. From a shifty trader fellow in Sulcher Pass. I just thought of it as a knickknack of sorts, but then I slept on it and talked to the fellow again the next day. He said that he got it further south. He was told there was a golem in a village called Honnleath, and that this was supposed to activate it if you said the words '*dulef gar*.'"

"*Dulef gar*?" Astrid frowned. "That's not dwarvish. Sounds

like gibberish to me. Still... ”

A golem! A golem of their own. Astrid considered what that could mean. Golems had been the first line of defense against the darkspawn for ages, until the secret of their making was lost. Bronwyn, Astrid knew, had met the Paragon Caridin, himself transformed into a golem; and she had destroyed the Anvil of the Void at his request. For better or worse (and Astrid had her own views about that) there would be no more golems. Those that remained were kept under tight security at the Shaperate, preserved for a final, desperate defense of Orzammar.

A golem of their own. There was no question in Astrid's mind. If there was the least chance of obtaining such a powerful weapon, it was clearly their duty to pursue it. She only wondered that Bronwyn had not, and said as much to Tara.

“I didn't really bring it up,” Tara said sheepishly. “Bronwyn had a lot on her mind, and I know she doesn't really approve of golems... because of how they were made. Still, we need all the help we can get, and Bronwyn's off to Denerim. This would be something we could do.”

“Where is this Honnleath place?”

Tara eagerly unfolded the parchment. “Look! I copied Bronwyn's map with those extra places that Brother Genetivi marked. That's Honnleath, at that maze of rivers and little lakes. It's south of Redcliffe, and very remote. We might as well see if the darkspawn have got that far west, anyway. We can ask around about the golem, and then we

can go north and take the road at Redcliffe. That will get us back to Lake Belennas, where the Deep Roads entrance is.” She sat back, excited and pleased with herself.

Astrid was rather excited herself. “You have given this a great deal of thought. Very well. Honnleath first. We should tell Brosca the plan too, but no one else, lest they be disappointed.”



After final farewells and some tears shed, the Wardens separated, some marching to the east, some to the west, and others remaining with the garrison at Ostagar. It was a gloomy, windswept day, a harbinger of the winter to come, and the Wardens wrapped themselves in their cloaks and cast doubtful looks at the skies. Uncertain as the weather was, it was unlikely that waiting would improve it.

The great obstacle in Danith's journey to Gwaren was the White River. It was broad this far south, as it hurried to its final destination, emptying into the frigid southern ocean. There was an old but sturdy bridge further north in the Brecilian Passage, but the terrain was such that traveling there through the forests and hills would add three days to their journey. Danith decided to trust to Dalish ways.

Due east from Ostagar, the Southron Hills diminished to mere ridges, though the forest was particularly dense. However, Danith knew the land well. Her clan had spent the summer before last in these parts.

They came upon darkspawn from time to time: strag-

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glers from the horde, wandering aimlessly over the landscape, spreading their filth. Her new Wardens were coming into their powers, and these random encounters were good practice for them. It grieved her to burn good meadows and noble trees polluted by Taint, but restoring the natural world to health was also part of a Grey Warden's duty, and the part that Danith found the most compatible to her Dalish upbringing. Let the durgen'len have their Deep Roads, and the shemlen their cities. Danith took her pleasure in being a Forest Warden.

Because of the darkspawn, there were also smoking, ruined villages and occasional bands of shy, terrified Chasind. Danith had come across Chasind before, and knew how to talk to them — more or less. The Grey Warden tabard and the little griffon banner fluttering bravely from the mast of the aravel had proved a passport of sorts.

Every day, she blessed the Creators and Merrill's generosity in allowing them halla and an aravel. They did not have to carry heavy packs, since they could store their gear in the aravel. The halla traveled swiftly and tirelessly through the trees, ears alert for danger.

Danith looked forward to reaching the great river. It was a significant natural barrier. Once past it, it was unlikely that they would find darkspawn on the other side — unless they had had emerged from the Deep Roads access point near the shemlen city of Gwaren.

Her party was a strange mix, but not unpleasant. Steren

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and Nuala were fine elves: excellent archers and trackers, and agreeable people besides. The two durgen'len in the party, Idunn and Ketil, were cheerful and sturdy. Ketil was a powerful axeman, and Idunn was quick with her daggers.

Their facial tattoos interested Danith. Unlike the blood writing of the Dalish, which proclaimed adulthood and membership within the clan, their markings were symbols of exclusion and oppression. "Dusters," they were called, and were outcasts among their own kind. Both seemed to regard their adventures on the surface and their admission to the Grey Wardens as the best things that had ever happened to them. Danith thought that in itself a grave indictment of dwarven society.

She had not been present with the other Wardens during their journey to Orzammar and their extensive exploration of the Deep Roads. There was a certain bond between those who had experienced those hardships. It had been very horrible, Danith understood, and Bronwyn had nearly died. Those who were not dwarves had learned unpleasant things about dwarven society; and one of them was the dire situation of those dwarves who had no caste, and thus no place in dwarven life. Tara had seen both the foul city Alienage and the refuge of the casteless, called "Dust Town." She had assured Danith that Dust Town was worse, by far. It was difficult to credit, but Tara was not a liar. Danith did not much care for the Qunari Sten, but she agreed with him that to waste one's own people was a

foolish and wicked thing.

The three shemlen under her command were of a better sort than the usual lot. Human mages, she had discovered, were far more sympathetic and understanding of the Dalish plight than most of their race, since they themselves suffered from ignorant prejudice. Niall was an excellent mage: skilled and willing. He had no more idea how to cook than a baby, and his woodcraft was of the most rudimentary sort, but he was not unwilling to learn. After a day or two, he began talking, and Danith learned many interesting things.

He did not know how to do anything for himself, because in the Circle, such tasks as cooking, cleaning, and the making of clothes were all performed by those he called "the Tranquil." They were in Ostagar, too, but Danith, having no dealings with them, had never chosen to speak to them. These Tranquil were mages, both elves and human, whom the Chantry had mutilated by cutting them off from the Beyond, which the shemlen called the Fade. It left the victims emotionless and submissive, but very hard-working, since there was no longer anything to distract them. Danith heard Niall out, grasped at last what was being done, and felt like vomiting.

Considering the matter further, she also began to understand why Bronwyn seemed not to trust the priest-folk, and wished to keep certain things from them. What she did not understand was why people did not rise up

and drive out those who would commit such hideous acts. Danith made a private vow to the Creators that she would never surrender a mage of the elvhen to the Templars, no matter how much blood need be shed.

Niall told her other things, as well. The mage prisoners of the Chantry amused themselves by dividing into factions, called Fraternities. These factions proposed different ways of life for the mages — ways that were mostly impossible fantasy, given that the Chantry controlled their lives. Niall had belonged to such a Fraternity, called the Isolationists, and they held that mages should live apart and have no dealing with the rest of the world.

"That is more or less what we Dalish have attempted to do," Danith pointed out. "And you can see how well it has worked out. However much we try to avoid the rest of the world, it keeps on finding us."

"Then you haven't gone far *enough!*" Niall shot back, kicking at leaves underfoot. "Beyond the mountains, maybe... There must be islands... There must be somewhere to go where the word 'mage' is not an insult! Or 'elf,'" he added, with a wry grin. "Really. It's a big world. Who knows what lies beyond the mountains to the west or the ocean to the east? Or maybe north, if you can get past the Qunari."

"To the north?" Danith snorted at his naiveté. "Everyone knows that in the far north it is so hot that the very rocks have melted. No plant or animal can exist there without instantly bursting into flames. The Qunari live in the hottest lands that

living beings can tolerate. There is no hope in the north. I know nothing of the ocean, though I saw it once, when I was in Denerim. It is very dirty. The mountains? Perhaps... There is a story which I shall tell you some time."

Quinn, though he towered over the elves and dwarves and knew his swordsmanship, was only a boy in years. He had come from a farmhold, and had done his share of hunting. He had also learned to care for the farm beasts. He was fascinated by the halla, and begged Nuala and Steren to allow him to help them. They were understandably reluctant to entrust the precious creatures to a clumsy shemlen, but allowed the boy to perform some of the menial tasks. His sheer brute strength was immensely useful and rather intimidating to the elves, though the boy was nothing if not cheerful and friendly. Perhaps, Danith thought sourly, he was too young to have been fully indoctrinated into shemlen views of the inferiority of the elvhen.

Maeve puzzled Danith a little. The woman did as she was told, and fought bravely and well, but was silent and withdrawn. Danith understood that the woman's Joining had been very frightening and traumatic, which might explain her somewhat. Indeed, she wondered why the woman had volunteered at all. She was no hunter, but a good camp cook who did not oversalt roast meat as many shemlens did. Though she said little, she wrote every day in a little book she carried. Among all of them, only Niall could also read and write. He had asked Maeve one night

what she was writing, and she had looked away and said, "It's only my diary," and he had not plagued her with more questions. When asked, he informed Danith that a diary was a book into which one wrote the day's events and one's thoughts about them. Personally, Danith did not see the point. Why else have a memory?

On the sixteenth of Harvestmere, they reached the White River. More importantly, they reached a place that Danith knew well and where she had previously crossed.

Only the Dalish in the company had ever seen the White River. Neither the River Dane, nor the River Hafter, nor even the River Drakon was as mighty a stream as the White River south of the Southron Hills. Even after the dry months of summer, it stretched out before them, wide and brownish-green between its banks.

"We can't possibly ford that," Quinn said, his blue eyes very big. "It looks *deep*. Isn't there a ferry somewhere?"

Steren smiled to himself, readying what they would need. Nuala, more open with the boy, said, "Dalish make their own ferries. We shall teach you our ways."

The shemlen and durgen'len learned much that day. A long day, for it took a great deal of effort. Hallas could swim very well, and aravels were watertight. Once Danith had shot an arrow attached to a thin cord of spider silk across to a tree on the other bank, they began to see how it would be done. She would cross the river, with the aid of the thin cord, bearing a heavy rope attached to the

aravel. Once fixed securely on the other bank, the heavy line would allow the landship to swing out into the current and eventually float to a low bank she had spotted. Then they would haul it up to dry land once more.

One major kink in the plan was the reluctance of the dwarves.

"Er..." said Ketil, "You're talking about swimming. I can't swim."

"Neither can I!" Idunn declared.

"You can't swim?" Danith asked, astonished. "Not at all?"

It was so, however extraordinary.

Niall confessed, "I haven't swum since I was a little boy. We don't get out much, there in the Circle Tower."

There was a solution, fortunately.

"Then you shall go in the aravel. Children, the elderly, and the infirm always travel thus."

The dwarves and the mage did not look happy at the classification.

Niall, terribly embarrassed, changed his mind, and decided that he could manage by holding on to the cord and going hand-over-hand. He slipped and splashed and went under several times, but staggered onto the bank inordinately pleased with himself, to the cheers of his comrades.

"This is like adventuring!"

"No," Danith said, not as harshly as she might have a few months before. "This is living life."

It took a long time and a great deal of effort, but by the end of the day they were all safe and across, and the

aravel was not much the worse for its wetting. Even the dwarves had somehow been soaked, and thought themselves fairly intrepid. Best of all, as they dried out around the campfire, Danith sensed no darkspawn. None. Unless some of the creatures had found the bridge at the Passage, and then turned south, the Wardens should have an easy journey to the shemlen city of Gwaren.



The Wardens in the west reached Honnleath on the eighteenth of Harvestmere. They thought it must be Honnleath, anyway. Three windmills rose above the stubby, harvested fields, proclaiming the existence of a village about two miles distant. Even more impressive was a tall, slender stone tower. Tara had not imagined a remote village would have such an impressive piece of architecture. She hoped it was intact. It was too late to push on, however, since the sun had already set in red and gold splendor. Instead, they camped in a meadow near a spring. They had had a strenuous journey so far, and a profitable one.

Fifteen Wardens proved more than equal to anything the wilderness of the southern Hinterlands could send their way. Wolves, bears, a lone Hunger Demon... and darkspawn, of course.

It went without saying that there would be darkspawn. Scattered bands, for the most part, and a powerful, nasty mob, hemmed in at the first cataract of the Rock River. That group boasted two ogres and a genlock mage.

The Wardens however, had Tara, Velanna, and five superb archers. The darkspawn were decimated before they ever got within striking distance. The blade wielders finished off the rest with gleeful ease. The ogres were frozen and hacked to pieces, and there was plunder for all.

"Why do darkspawn carry coin?" Walther wanted to know. "Why? It's not like they go shopping!"

"Reckon they like shiny," his friend Griffith rumbled, lying back on his blanket and holding a old Orlesian gold piece up to the firelight. "I like shiny."

"It's true," Brosca agreed sagely. She bore with Walther's endless questions to Tara's admiration. "The 'spawn have an eye for value. They pick up coin, gems... all sorts of treasure."

Sigrun giggled. "Sometimes they *swallow* the gems. Gold, too. No! I swear it's true. Remember, Jukka? There was that nutcase Fike. He used to cut darkspawn open to see what they had in their guts. He found an opal the size of —"

"Please!" groaned Catriona. "I'm eating!"

"Not opals, nor even diamonds and sapphires," laughed Tara. "Just plain old porridge."

They had sensed fewer darkspawn as they went west. Now the signs were infrequent. Taint seemed somehow to move ahead of the darkspawn, so they saw Blighted plants even when they no longer sensed actual darkspawn. They had been forced to burn some fields near Ostagar, but out here, Taint could be found only in traces, and Tara taught Velanna how to burn it out carefully, without setting whole forests on fire.

Just before dawn, the sentries awakened the camp. They might not have sensed darkspawn before, but they were sensing them now: a large party sweeping up from the southeast, bearing down on the village of Honnleath.

"Move! Move!" Astrid shouted. "Everybody *go!* Leave the gear!"

Advancing quickly, they found a bottleneck on the little dirt road leading to the village, and moved into position. Up on the hills along the road, a handful of Wardens waited: some archers, and some others well-supplied with Dworkin's lyrium bombs.

Thirty-odd darkspawn charged them, without fear and without art. There was never any question as to the outcome.

"No ogres!" Tara shouted cheerfully to Velanna, who was sneering at the darkspawn in disgust. "That's always a good thing!" She flung out her her arms and called down a whirlwind of ice and lightning on the darkspawn. The tainted creatures stumbled and spasmed, weapons dropping from nerveless, clawlike hands. A few staggered doggedly ahead, drawn by the Wardens' Taint, and when they were close enough, it was time for other tactics.

"Archers and mages, fall back!" Astrid ordered. She banged her sword against her shield. "Blades! Follow me!" She caught Brosca's eye. The Duster laughed, and charged with her.

Tara glimpsed a farmer in front of his little cottage, staring at the battle in terror and disbelief, and gave him a jaunty wave. He ducked back inside. A little later, as the Wardens were mopping up the last of the enemy, a boy




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dashed out of the cottage, running pell-mell for the village.

"That's right!" Brosca shouted after him. "Roll out the welcome for the Wardens!"



Tara was crushed. The golem was *broken*. The activation code had not worked.

"It's for the best," a man named Matthias consoled her. "The golem killed my father. That's why we got rid of the control rod."

Their welcome otherwise was very satisfactory. Honn-leath was a remarkably pretty village: far more attractive than Lothing; and, though not as big as South Reach, more pleasant. Not only did it boast the tall tower they had seen at a distance, but a handsome arched gateway and a respectable stone wall. The lack of a gate in the gateway, however, seemed a serious oversight. This isolated place undoubtedly would have been destroyed by the darkspawn if not for the Wardens. They were feasted and praised to even their standards. The junior Wardens were finding their career choice very much validated by the esteem in which they were held.

"We didn't even know there was a Blight!" cried Olaf, the head of the village council. "Why didn't anybody tell us?"

Matthias looked determined. "We'll be better prepared in future. There are things we can do."

It did not take long to figure out what they were. Quite a bit of them involved magic.



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"I wish Niall were here!" Tara shouted gleefully. "This is what the Isolationists have been talking about! Mage Town! It's not bad, actually."

A very large number of the villagers were, in fact, mages. Every family had a father, or a mother, or a child who had magical ability. Matthias was the village schoolmaster, who mixed magical lessons with reading and writing. Most of the mages here did not seem very powerful to Tara, but they had put their talents to strange and inventive uses.

Olaf's wife Maggie used magic to cook. Even Velanna and the other Dalish were rather shocked by that.

"Why not?" the woman shrugged. "Why shouldn't I? I'm not surprised at the Circle, of course. Mages are only accounted useful for healing or for fighting darkspawn, so they only teach that. Strange that you Dalish haven't branched out."

Velanna said stiffly. "There are not enough of us to 'branch out,' as you put it. There are rarely more than one or two mages in a clan, and their powers are needed to protect and lead."

"Well," said Maggie, "there are lots of us here, and my mother learned to manipulate fire spells to roast, boil, and fry. It takes a delicate touch, but we don't need to cut down trees for fuel that way."

There was much to learn here, and Astrid agreed with Tara to stay a few days. The villagers knew a warding spell that would keep out intruders — and made sure henceforth to use it to ward the village gate and walls.

The fences around the outlying farmholds were likewise protected. That spell could be of immense use to Wardens. Tara and Velanna were shown to the cellar study of Matthias' deceased father, Wilhelm, a mage who had been granted his freedom for his service in the Rebellion. Not trusting to the Chantry, he had moved out to this remote place, bringing some his magical friends with him. Magic had been used to build the walls and gateway; and the tall tower that was part of Wilhelm's home. When the old mage was not engaged in magical research, he devoted himself to the art of brewing ale, at which he had excelled.

"How odd," said Tara, "that after leaving the Circle Tower behind him, he built a tower of his own."

"Ah, but you see," Matthias pointed out, "it was *his* tower."

Villagers and Warden mages traded spell for spell, and the rest of the Wardens rested or practiced. Tara wrung a pledge from them never to reveal the existence of mages in this little community. Astrid and Brozca concurred, with the proviso that Honnleath must agree always to support the Wardens. Velanna cared little for a village of shemlen, but was inclined to listen to Tara, who was teaching her the ancient skills passed on to her in the elven ruins.

"Another part of our history regained!" the blonde elf exulted. "The martial arts of Arlathan restored! Have you taught the Keepers at Ostagar?"

"I told Merrill about what I learned, but not everyone has the aptitude," Tara said. "It's like shapeshifting. Anders

has picked it up from Morrigan, but I can't seem to get the hang of it at all. And I didn't want the priests at Ostagar getting wind of these new fighting skills. They'd say it was contrary to Chantry law or something. Here it's just Wardens, and nobody's going to tattle."

Velanna said slowly, "I would like to learn shape-shifting as well. You and Anders are friends. Persuade him to teach me. There are stories that some Dalish Keepers once practiced the art. More forgotten lore must be relearned."

There was no time to get through all of Wilhelm's excellent library, but Tara had found his journal. After translating it — it was written in Arcanum, which Matthias had not bothered to learn — she came rapidly to the conclusion that the man was wrong about the cause of his father's death.

"It was a demon," she said, reading a relevant entry. "Not the golem. You've got a demon locked up at the base of the tower."

That caused a brief panic. There was nothing to do but get rid of it. It was in the form of a purple-eyed cat, but the Wardens did not find it particularly intimidating. Afterward, not only did the Wardens get another good dinner out of it, but a very substantial reward.

"Look here," said Matthias. "Obviously, I have to believe you about the demon killing Father. It wasn't Shale after all, but I don't want to see the thing anymore."

The Wardens glanced at each other, waiting.

Matthias cleared his throat. "The proper activation code is "*Dulen harn!*"



DRAGON SLAYER

Astrid's face lit up, "Ah! Now that is proper dwarvish!" Tara was out the door like a loosed arrow, her target the huge stone statue in the village commons.

"No, Habren," Leonas Bryland said wearily to his daughter, in the quiet of his study in their Denerim townhouse. "You *can't* go to the Satinalia Ball. It's too soon. We're all in mourning, for Maker's sake! We'll have a celebration at home in the morning, and you can have your presents then."

The girl slumped in her chair despondently. "Well, when *can* I go out? This is *boring!* You can't expect me to shut myself up forever!" She wiped her nose, and muttered, "What presents?"

Bryland smiled slightly. "You'll see. And you will be getting out. By the fourteenth of Firstfall, you'll have finished the month of formal mourning. There's no reason at all you can't go to Bronwyn's wedding. You'll no doubt want a nice new gown for the event. That should cheer you up."

Habren's jaw dropped. Nearly to the floor. "Bronwyn's... getting... married?" she quavered.

He would have to break it to her eventually. Putting the best face on it, Bryland said, "Yes, Bronwyn is getting married. The wedding will be at the cathedral, and the feast at Highever House. She is marrying Teyrn Loghain."

An awful pause, like the ocean sucking backwards before a remorseless tidal wave. Habren's hair nearly stood on end.

"Bronwyn's going to be *Teyrna of Gwaren?*" she shrieked.



DRAGON SLAYER

"It's not *fair!* She'll outrank me again!"

"Yes," Bryland said, stiffening his sinews against the onslaught. "She will outrank you. And with the upcoming Landsmeet, she may rise even higher." In quick, carefully chosen words, he explained the political landscape, in which he himself was deeply involved.

Another terrible pause, and the shrieks redoubled. Housemaids down the hall shook their heads and sighed. The young lady was in one of her moods again.

"A demon? In Stealcopper Court, of all places?" Anora wanted to disbelieve it, but could not.

Bronwyn's adventure was the topic of a lengthy and amusing conversation, and her splendid new sword and shield were admired rather gingerly. The four of them dined together: Fergus and Bronwyn, Anora and Loghain, in an intimate, ornate chamber.

"Anders looked them over carefully. He's says they're not cursed, anyway. I've generally fought using sword and dagger, but the shield is so lovely I might make a change."

"You'll need to work on your technique," said Loghain. "Don't try to use it until you've done some proper sparring. Join me in the training ground early tomorrow."

Also under discussion was her plan to go north. Levi Dryden had duly presented himself, his maps were examined, and Bronwyn made up her mind to the journey at once. On disclosing her idea to Fergus, he swiftly coopted

the scheme. They would leave the day after tomorrow. Fergus had meant to install Hawke in Amaranthine himself, and here was the opportunity.

"Can this not be done after Satinalia?" Anora asked. "There is so much to be done before the Landsmeet..."

"We'll be back for Satinalia," Fergus assured them. "On my honor. Bronwyn says she just needs a look at the old ruins."

Bronwyn grimaced. "I also need to have a look at the deserted manor of Drake's Fall, which is in the same general area. According to our readings, there is an entrance there to the Deep Roads. It might be wise to check it for darkspawn activity. But as to Soldier's Peak, there might be artifacts remaining that the king's army would not have viewed as plunder."

"Books of lore?" Anora wondered. "Surely they would be long since decayed."

"Some other things as well," Bronwyn said, the words extracted from her as reluctantly as a stubborn tooth. "The Grey Wardens have secrets, and there might be some answers for me. I must go. After Satinalia, I shall be too busy for such a journey. And I, too, promise that I shall be back by the festival."

Although they were busy preparing for their journey north, Leliana had taken the time to visit the Alienage with Zevran and Cathair. She reported back to Bronwyn that Amethyne had a sweet, trainable voice, a good sense

of rhythm, and a superb ear. Bronwyn was in a mood to hear about something other than arms training, since Loghain, as promised, had put her through the wringer. She had upheld her honor, with the aid of her wonderful new sword and shield, but it had been hard-fought and bruising. Anders had tutted over her, and Aveline had said something about men whose idea of courtship was sparring. It certainly seemed to be Loghain's style.

Leliana was delighted to talk about Amethyne. "With proper training, she could become a fine musician and dancer. It would be a shame not to give her a chance."

"I have every intention of giving her a chance. Find me a teacher for her, and I'll pay the fees. It will have to be arranged once we're back in Denerim, of course."

"Oh, I have already found a teacher." Leliana beamed, proud of her arrangements. "Zoe Pheronis. She is from Nevarra, and I have heard her sing and play many times. Not so much now, of course..."

"Why not now? Has she lost her skill?"

"Not in the least. But once a musician's hair grows grey and her curves sag, the patrons — especially the men — lose interest. It is sad, but it is a fact of life. It is difficult for a woman minstrel when one begins to grow old. I called on her on my way back from the Alienage. She lives in a little house in Red Dragon Street, and has arranged it charmingly with her remaining treasures. She will teach the little girl every other day for a very reasonable fee..."



Bronwyn smiled ruefully. "You have it all planned out very nicely, I see."

"I knew you wanted me to. It is better that the child begins learning at once. Zoe will teach her music and dance, and perhaps a little reading and writing."

"All right then. Finalize it all before we leave. I commissioned the child's Satinalia gift. Do you think I should include an instrument?"

"Not yet – or perhaps something small. I shall see to it."

Bronwyn went on with her packing, not doubting that Leliana would. For herself, she had arranged with a cabinetmaker to make the child a most lovely chest of her very own, inscribed with her name; and large enough to store her clothes, boots, and other possessions. Probably too large at the moment, of course. In it, Bronwyn would put some cheerful oddments: a pair of red mittens, a comb, an old cup-and-ball of her own from Highever House, freshly painted, a green hair ribbon, and some fine green stockings. If Leliana were to find her a little pipe or a gaily painted tambourine, that would make it quite complete. She must also find presents for her *ex-werewolves*, especially those two little boys and the young girl...



Why must she leave right away? Why could she not wait? "Books of lore," indeed! While the rest of the Palace settled down to their night's rest, Loghain paced in the privacy of his chamber, wondering what was on Bron-



wyn's mind. More Grey Warden nonsense, but it was clear she would not speak freely unless alone. Fergus was with her constantly; and if not he, then one of her infernal Wardens, or one of her other companions, the dodgy young witch or the even dodgier Crow assassin.

It was a risk, but one he must take. He threw on a drab, hooded cloak and soft-soled boots, and stalked out, glaring his guards into silence. Stepping out into the courtyard, he walked quietly along the wall. Years ago, he had learned to disappear into the darkness, and he felt the old skills return. The door to the Warden's Compound was not far, and Bronwyn trusted her housekeeper. He brought the knocker down... not very loudly. There was silence in the courtyard, but for the call of a nightbird and the distant crunch of a sentry's footsteps. Loghain waited impatiently, feeling like a thief and a bandit in his own city.

"My lord!" The housekeeper peered out over her candlestick, and let him in at once.

"I need to speak to the Warden-Commander."

The woman was too sensible to look shocked or disapproving or even curious. Rising to the occasion, she merely said, "This way, my lord."

She clearly wanted him to wait in the Wardens' Hall, but Loghain was too impatient to stand on ceremony. He followed her up some steps leading into a round tower. She tapped gently at the second door.

"Warden-Commander, dear. Someone to see you."



DRAGON SLAYER

Loghain nearly snorted aloud. "Warden-Commander, dear?" What kind of military order was this?

The door cracked open. Bronwyn had been in bed, and apparently asleep. She frowned at them, clad in a thin white nightshift, her dark hair rumped. She looked very young. On seeing Loghain, her mouth opened just a little, then she bit her lip. She was pleased to see him. He almost smiled.

"My lord Teyrn. Come in. It's all right, Rannelly. Go on to bed. I have to speak privately with the Teyrn, and I'll see him out later."

The woman gave Loghain a brief, raking look, hinting that he had best behave himself, and walked away with a faint huff.

"Good night, Warden-Commander. dear."

"Good night."

Loghain slipped through the opened door, and Bronwyn shut it softly behind him.

"I'll light a candle," she said.

"No need. The fire gives light enough." He slipped off the cloak and hung it on the hook in the wall over her own. There was an uncertain pause, and then he moved to take her in his arms. With a soft cry, she pressed against, holding him fast. Her lips found his in a long kiss. Loghain decided he was happy to see her too.

"I'm so glad you've come to me!" she said. "So glad! I thought you wouldn't! I thought I'd go north without having taken a proper farewell of you."



DRAGON SLAYER

There were all sorts of sensible things he meant to say, but she was kissing him again, and his body told him that there was a time for talk, and a time for action. She was already drawing him to her bed.

"Wait, my girl. The boots must go."

And then there was eager assistance with his boots, his shirt, his breeches; the quick, capable hands unfastened his smallclothes, fingers lingering and exploring. Somehow the thin nightshift fluttered whitely to the floor, a ghost of modesty. The bed was warm with her, and she was hot for him. Since he was here, it would be absurd not to make himself pleasing to her, and she was too starved for him to enjoy any delay.

"Who is next door?" he whispered.

"What?" she gasped, intent on other things. "The study that way. Leliana over there."

He scowled briefly, reminded of Bronwyn's pet Orlesian. "Then we must be quiet."

Hot blissful release, quick and sure, his mouth muffling her cries. Definitely worth the risk. His mind was a happy blank for some time, until his thoughts coalesced in a slow, contented swirl. He rolled onto his back, smiling faintly as Bronwyn nestled into his side, her hand on his belly.

"I can see why you might want to check out that Deep Roads entrance," he said, his voice low, "but why the old ruin? Why is that so urgent?"

Bronwyn sighed. Trust Loghain to skip sweet nothings

in favor of the hard questions, even after love-making. Relaxed and reassured, she saw no reason not to tell him the truth. He knew enough of it already... why not the rest?

"Because soon I won't be able to make any more Wardens. There's a vital ingredient that I haven't any access to. There might be some at Soldier's Peak, disregarded and forgotten. Not likely, I grant you, but it's my only hope."

"What ingredient?"

"If you must know — and this is another deep, dark secret — it's Archdemon blood. Without Archdemon blood, we'd just be ghouls. Riordan gave me some, but it's nearly gone. I won't be able to get any more from the Grey Wardens. The letters from the other Warden posts have made that quite clear."

"Archdemon blood?" His stomach turned. "How is that even possible? The last Archdemon died four hundred years ago!"

"The mages can preserve it nearly indefinitely. When the army sacked Soldier's Peak, they would not have known what it was. They would have seen only some nondescript vials. I'm hoping that not all of them were smashed."

"And you say the other Wardens won't give you any?"

"The First Warden is very angry with me. In his eyes, I am not Warden-Commander of Ferelden, but an insubordinate junior Warden who is supposed to be in Montsimard as we speak. The other commanders want to know what is happening, but have been ordered to refuse me assistance. The Nevarran commander is sympathetic, and at least gave me some information. You'll find this inter-

esting. It is generally believed that the assault on Ferelden is only a feint."

"A feint?"

Bronwyn rest her head on his shoulder, enjoying the warmth and strength of the arm wrapping around her. She felt rather forgiving. Perhaps he had been right to insist they wait until they could be more discreet.

"If it were a feint," she pointed out, "the Archdemon would want it to be convincing. There is no convincing the rest of Thedas, however. They want to keep their own Wardens close to home. I daresay we would have been much the same, had the darkspawn attacked Rivain, for instance."

He snorted at the thought of rendering military assistance to Rivain — or any other country, actually. "How many more Wardens can you make?"

"Maybe eight or nine. And of those perhaps only half would live. After that, there's nothing. I haven't found anything at the Compound. Perhaps Weissaupt was doling out supplies to Duncan. It's not something that the housekeeper would know about."

On the other side of the wall, a woman's voice, hoarse with sleep, cried out, "*No! No! Maker save me!*"

Loghain tensed, wondering if the Orlesian were being murdered. Bronwyn held him fast, murmuring, "Only a nightmare. Only a nightmare. We have them all the time, when the darkspawn visit us in the Fade. Grey Wardens are unquiet sleepers, especially during a Blight. I hope

you won't find it too taxing." Her hand drifted lower. "Now can we talk about something other than the war?"

They took their time, moving from position to position, happily adventurous. Afterward, Loghain dared no longer stay, for fear of falling asleep in this very pleasant place. His clothes and boots were reluctantly donned, and Bronwyn threw on a sumptuous red dressing gown.

"You should always wear red," Loghain said, his gruff sincerity more pleasing to Bronwyn than any studied compliment.

She smiled and lit a candle, and led the way through the flickering shadows in the Warden's Hall. Loghain glanced about him, reflexively looking for ambushes. A wayward gleam shone on the portrait of Duncan as they passed. The dark eyes followed Loghain, amused and saturnine. Loghain spared the portrait a sneer.

They reached the outer door without discovery. Bronwyn demanded a last, fervent kiss before he slipped away into the dark.



The very large party that left Denerim on the nineteenth of Harvestmere had several objectives.

Fergus Cousland wanted peace restored to the Arling of Amaranthine. To that end, his company included Nathaniel Howe, who would spend a few days at the Howe fortress of Vigil's Keep conferring with his seneschal and getting a better grasp of the general situation. At Vigil's Keep, the party would divide. Fergus' squire Seyforth — now Ser Daniel Sey-

forth — would go west with a band of picked men to the bannorn of Knotwood Hills. If he were to be appointed the bann there, he must be known to the people. Many would be glad of the change from the squabbling and oppressive Pactons.

Fergus would go north, however. The city of Amaranthine beckoned. He wanted to get his man Hawke well situated there before Satinalia. Money was granted to give the people some cheer for the festival. Fergus would get a great deal of the credit, but more would go to the new castellan. Fergus had faith in Hawke's good sense. Amaranthine was a rich and immensely important city to the Fereldan economy. Much of the trade from Antiva and the Free Marches came through the Amaranthine docks.

From Amaranthine, Bronwyn and her Wardens would take the Coast Road west to Soldier's Peak. For various reasons, there was not much along that stretch of the Coastlands. Forlorn Cove had once been the bustling fishing village of Thymney, but had been laid waste during the Occupation — hence the name. A few hamlets made wide spots in the road, but were not more than a homestead or two and a fishing dock. At the point where the Coast Road dipped down beside the Coast Range and turned south to connect with the North Road, there was the little village of Breaker's Cove. Fergus had been through there once, and remembered that it was remote, undeveloped, and very, very small. There was a tavern there, at least, where the Wardens could take shelter. From there, they could penetrate into the mountains with

their guide, Levi Dryden, and make for the ancient Warden fortress of Soldier's Peak.

Bronwyn had not been very forthcoming about her reasons for visiting the old castle, but it was clear that if she was going to go before spring, she must go now. Then too, she wanted to make certain the darkspawn were not creeping out of the Deep Roads entrance at Drake's Fall. They would have just enough time to return for the feast of Satinalia, and after that she would have only half a month to prepare for her wedding on the fourteenth of Firstfall. That was going to be quite the affair.

He, Bronwyn, and Loghain had already thrashed out some ideas about the wedding. The ceremony itself would be in the Cathedral – presumably thoroughly searched and returned to Chantry hands by then – but the debate had been over where to hold the ensuing feast. Loghain had a house in town, the ancient city residence of the Teyrns of Gwaren; but since he had always lived at the Palace proper since the return of the king, the townhouse was shut up and looked after by a caretaker and his wife. Loghain would have to have major work done to put the house in order for an event like a wedding. There was Highever House, of course, and Fergus liked the idea of giving his sister a proper send-off to married life. Bronwyn seemed to like the idea herself. The other choice, of course, was the Palace itself. That was where Anora's wedding feast had taken place.

None of them thought that a particularly good idea.

"Presumptuous," said Bronwyn, dismissing it. Highever House it was to be, then.

In a way, it was good to escape Denerim for a few days, and thus escape the looks Loghain was giving him. The man missed nothing, and certainly had not missed Fergus' interest in the Dowager Queen. What did Loghain expect? That Anora would withdraw from society and rusticate in the country – or even take Chantry vows? Besides, it was absurd of Loghain to be touchy about giving away his daughter to Fergus, when he had not hesitated to give her to Cailan. For that matter, Fergus was entrusting his own sister to the man, which seemed him far riskier and more venturesome than a match between Anora and Fergus, who were almost exactly of an age.

Anora was much too young and beautiful to live alone – more beautiful than ever, in fact. And Fergus hoped that a marriage between them would be blessed with children. Perhaps even *lots* of children. He might be flattering himself, but she seemed to return his own interest, smiling at him, encouraging him with her attention.

"You're miles away, my lord," a voice said, recollecting him to the here and now: the horse between his legs and miles stretching behind and before him. He grinned at Hawke.

"Full of plans."

"So it would seem." Hawke grinned back, rather excited about the opportunity ahead. He was to rule the city of Amaranthine on the teyrn's behalf – and that of his direct

overlord, the Arl of Amaranthine. Mother and the girls were so proud. He was sorry that he would be far away for Satinalia, but he had left his presents with them, and had theirs in his luggage. They knew he was working for their future, as well as his own.

The horses jogged along, and the soldiers marched sturdily. It was damp and chilly, but the weather was holding. Tonight they would sleep at Vigil's Keep, and the rain could come as it liked. And then, only one more day to his destiny...

He had been introduced to Arl Nathaniel Howe, who was riding a little way behind them. At least everyone was *addressing* him as arl. He would not be confirmed until the Landsmeet, but his prospects, with no rivals to challenge him, seemed bright. The young man seemed serious and decent, and no fool, either. Hawke knew he would have a fine line to walk between his professed loyalty to the Teyrn, and the formal oaths that would be expected of him as an Amaranthine vassal. The old man had been a swine and a bastard and a slaver, but no one had had a word of blame for the son, who had been in the Free Marches while he father went to the bad.

The arl was riding beside Lady Bronwyn, and they were carrying on a quiet, unsmiling conversation. Very sensible. If he had been in Howe's shoes, with a treacherous father who had murdered the Cousland kin, Hawke knew he would be doing everything he could to distance him from his father and build what bridges he could. The

Teyrn was cool to him. Lady Bronwyn was kind, in a sad, aloof way, but today they were certainly talking.

"You know the Hawkes as well as anyone, Bronwyn."

"I know Carver quite well, and I think he's a fine boy. He's a Warden, of course, so I've spent time with him, and seen him fight, and seen how he deals with danger and pressure. Adam I don't know as well, but he's an outstanding warrior, and quite resourceful and personable. Very tactful. I think he's being considered as much for his ability to get on with people as he is for his fighting ability. Nonetheless, when I've asked anything of him, it's been done, and done well. And both the lads love their family very much. The women are all very nice, and seem to be more than mere pretty faces."

"Arl Bryland speaks highly of the mage, Mistress Bethany."

"Bethany saved his son's life, Nathaniel. She saved quite a few others, as well." She paused, thinking, and then plunged on.

"When I was a child, I remember being terrified by the Revered Mother's sermons about the evil of the magisters and the perils of magic. Like a child, I pictured mages as sinister, ugly villains, plotting to murder little children, hanging over their beds as they bled them for monstrous rituals. I think I even had bad dreams about them... and I would not be the only child who did! If I have learned nothing else as a Grey Warden, I've learned how false — even wicked — it is to brand them as all the same. I've

learned that mages are *people*, Nathaniel, just as elves and dwarves are people. Mage children are as innocent and charming as any other children. Forbidding them the sight of the stars in the heavens or the flowers in the fields is *wrong*. Mages can be power-mad — like many non-mages — but they can be high-spirited or serious, frivolous or bookish, tender-hearted or cruel. They are moved by the beauty of nature and music, they tell jokes and sing songs, and can be as silly as any nobleman's daughter. Bethany Hawke is a mage, but she's also a pretty young girl, with a young girl's hopes and dreams; all of which are circumscribed by the limitations of being a mage in Thedas. I know something about one's role in life imposing limitations, but I've also come to understand how fortunate and privileged I've been."

She saw him looking at her, his brows knit, and she burst out with an embarrassed laugh. "Sorry! I promise not to preach any more sermons at you!"

Fergus turned in his saddle, scowling to see her laughing with Howe. Almost immediately, he was relieved to see that Howe himself was not laughing. No cheerful camaraderie there, he decided, and returned to his conversation with Adam Hawke.

Nathaniel looked ahead, and said quietly, "Some would call your views radical, but you are clearly not alone. Many are at odds with the Chantry at the moment. Do you reject the right of the Chantry to oversee the mages in their Circles?"

Bronwyn scowled briefly. "I don't know that I would put it exactly like that. Magic can be dangerous, but I do think that the Chantry's treatment of mages is disproportionate to the scale of the threat. I believe there are more humane ways to deal with the issue. I also believe that magic is so valuable that we ought to accept it as part of our lives and make use of it. The mages with the army — and among the Wardens — they've been of inestimable value as fighters and healers. They've been so brave and so resourceful. Is it impossible to credit that a mage might love his country and wish to serve it?"

Nathaniel smiled faintly. "No. Not when you are before him, inspiring him with thrilling speeches."

"Ha!" She shrugged. "I deserved that. But I retract nothing. I've met all sorts of people that ordinarily I would have been sheltered from all my life. Some of them were horrid, but many were kind and clever and brave, and some were beautiful. And they're all *people*."

She paused a moment, and then laughed again. "Well, all but the darkspawn, anyway."

After consideration, and with the advice of Seneschal Varel, Nathaniel went with them all the way to the city of Amaranthine.

It was the sensible thing to do, and showed teyrn and arl working together, united in their choice of castellan for the city.

Amaranthine had been restless since the departure of

Bann Esmerelle. She had not been particularly beloved, or even a particularly good ruler of the city, but she was a known quality. People could predict how she would act in a given situation. Granted, it was usually in an unpleasant and venal way, but one could prepare for that.

Adam Hawke felt the eyes on him, anxious, hostile, questioning, hopeful – even admiring. He was presented to the Guard Captain, the Revered Mother, and the city worthies, and made a short speech himself. It was not hard to feel motivated. Teyrn Fergus had hinted that if Adam did well, this could be permanent for him, and would carry the traditional title.

To be a bann of Ferelden! To sit in the Landsmeet! Such a dizzying rise had never been seen in the history of Ferelden. Even Teyrn Loghain had put in hard years of service during the Rebellion to earn his rank.

That was a sobering thought. Years had passed, and there were those who still resented the great man; who felt that a peasant had no place amongst them. Adam hoped that he could avoid that particular charge. People knew of his noble mother, and he admitted that Mother had been shrewd to call herself "Lady Amell" from the first. It would soften the feelings of those who considered nobles like themselves to be a race apart.

He looked out the window of his comfortable quarters. Up so high, he could look out over the city walls and see the harbor beyond, the water grey and glittering. Further off was the dim haze that he had been told were the shores of the Fair

Isle and Brandel's Reach. This was where the Amaranthine Ocean blended into the Waking Sea: a point of ambiguity on the map of the world; a place of infinite possibility. He would make this work, and make all of this his own.



"I'd like Varel to have Hafterhold," Nathaniel said, apropos of nothing, as he and Fergus inspected the docks of Amaranthine.

Fergus scowled. Howe had been quiet enough when Fergus told him what was in motion for the vacant fiefdoms. Perhaps he should have waited until everything was settled, and there was nothing else to be disposed of. He grunted noncommittally, thinking it over.

Actually, it was not a bad idea at all. He trusted Varel himself. He was a man had defied Rendon Howe's orders and been demoted for opposing his crimes. He was indisputably honest and certainly competent. And Hafterhold, so close to Vigil's Keep, was a shrewd choice. Nathaniel could keep Varel on as an advisor, and Varel could have a man of his own manage the small bannorn.

For that matter, it would be no bad thing to have a man of Varel's good sense and rectitude in the Landsmeet. Depending on who held multiple fiefdoms, the actual voting members of the Landsmeet usually varied in number between thirty and forty-five at maximum. At the moment they were actually down to twenty-eight, giving each vote additional importance. Too many in the

Landsmeet were greedy half-wits, thinking themselves important because of things their great-great-grandfathers had done. Ferelden was short of nobles, and more importantly, short of *competent* nobles.

Finally, he said, "Does Varel have any children? I really don't know."

"There's a son in the army. In their cousin's company, actually. I don't think Varel thought his family had much of a future here in Amaranthine back in my father's day. There's a daughter, too, but she took Chantry vows years ago. Varel goes to see her now and then."

Fergus nodded. "An heir. That's good. At his age, having an heir will help his claim."

It was strange, walking together... talking. At times, it was almost as if the horrors of the past year had never happened. Almost.



Bronwyn led the way out from the west gate of Amaranthine, rather glad to be on the move again. The tension between Fergus and Nathaniel was so painful and fraught; the air so charged, so full of ambivalence, that she needed to get on her horse and get away. And Soldier's Peak beckoned. She was restlessly excited at the prospect.

Most of the party was mounted. They had a wagon to carry their gear, driven by their guide, Levi Dryden. The wagon was something of a luxury, but it also slowed their progress as they traveled the Coast Road. Moving so slowly,

Bronwyn could indulge Cathair, who preferred to walk. The elf seemed to be enjoying himself, as he admired the view of the sea or leaned over for a closer look at late-blooming blood-lotus. One would have thought him off in a world of his own, until he straightened suddenly and put an arrow in an overbold rabbit. Said rabbit was promptly stuffed into his game bag and designated as supper.

Morrigan rode out of town, but then grew bored and took to the skies, creeling scornfully over their heads. After a moment, Anders joined her, leaving an indulgent Jowan to lead their horses. Cathair seemed to enjoy the shape-shifting, too, smiling and pointing. Aveline and Toliver were fearfully startled, though they had been quietly apprised of the mages' abilities, and told not to gossip about them outside the Wardens. The two dwarves, Hakan and Soren, were already so full of wonders that the mere fact of humans turning into birds seemed all of a piece with everything else.

Levi Dryden saw the birds, and smiled nervously. He had spoken to Bronwyn with some passion about his desire to uncover the mysteries of the Wardens, but some mysteries, when seen in person, clearly made him uncomfortable.

Hakan sat with him on the wagon seat, luckily, distracting him by asking questions about ox-driving. Soren lounged in the back, at his ease on a pile of blankets. As the breeze off the Waking Sea sharpened, Bronwyn thought he had the best of it.

"So, my Warden?" Zevran asked. "What do you expect to

find in this mysterious, lost fortress? Ancient tomes? Forgotten wisdom? Weapons of virtue? Personally, I hope it is gold: a great deal of gold."

Bronwyn laughed. "I'd love to find a great deal of gold! Unlikely, though. The place was sacked during King Arland's siege, I believe, and it's unlikely that the attackers would have left any gold behind. Books, however... records of the Wardens... maybe a few magical items of no apparent worth to someone not a Warden... I think that's the most we can hope for."

"What about a country estate?" Carver teased, rather enjoying the day himself. "If the castle isn't such a ruin as the Warden outpost down south, maybe it'll be a place to get away to in the summer!"

"We'll see," Bronwyn smiled. Very likely the roof had collapsed, but perhaps there was something there: some outbuilding or cottage or other. Everything seemed to indicate that Soldier's Peak had been a sizable foundation. Soren knew a bit about masonry, and could tell her what could be repaired, and what would have to be rebuilt from the ground up. A little castle of their own would be very nice, but how serious repairs were to be paid for was anybody's guess.

What she really hoped for were indeed books and lore, and more urgently, perhaps on a dusty shelf in some decrepit cupboard, those vials of Archdemon blood.

They passed the ruins of Thymney at Forlorn Cove, and

rested the horses and oxen, gazing down to the sea. There was wreckage on the beach, and Zevran wandered off to do a bit of salvaging. Curious, Cathair and the dwarves followed him. No one found anything of particular value, but Cathair picked up a small piece of driftwood of unusual beauty. Bronwyn allowed him to stow it in the wagon.

"I shall use it to make a carving," Cathair explained in his dreamy way. "Carving is very soothing. I shall not destroy the natural shape, but enhance it."

Leliana approved. "Everyone should have a hobby."

They passed a few cottages and farmsteads. Up on a bluff was a stone house with a long staircase carved into the living rock, leading down to a dock. A very pretty fishing boat with striped sails was moored there. The boatmen stared at the passing company, their faces grim and their hands out of sight.

"Smugglers," was Zevran's opinion. "They fear we are the law."

"Ha!" Carver snorted. "I haven't seen much law anywhere north of Denerim!"

Bronwyn smiled ruefully, thinking of all the looting she had done. "They could be worse," she said. "They might be wreckers as well: putting out a light during bad weather, and luring in ships who think they've reached Amaranthine City. For all I know they're wreckers at Breaker's Cove. We'll want to be discreet in asking questions."

"My only question," Toliver muttered, "will be 'where do they keep the ale?'"

"Could we eat soon?" Leliana wondered. "Could we eat on the beach? That would be very nice."

There was a general consensus that eating soon would be entirely appropriate.

"We'll stop at the next stretch of good, *deserted* beach we see," Bronwyn promised.

This part of Amaranthine had never really recovered from the Orlesians occupation and the later Rebellion. Decaying piles of wood and stone marked the sites of formerly prosperous hamlets and farmholds. Amaranthine had born the brunt of the original Orlesian invasion, and the invaders had been ruthless in gaining a foothold. Bronwyn remembered Father and Rendon Howe discussing the matter on many occasions. Most common people wanted peace above all. Why had the Orlesians been so wantonly destructive? Had they restrained themselves even a little — had they proved benevolent masters — had they not sent a mad dog like Meghren to be king — they very well might have succeeded, and Ferelden might be an Orlesian province right now.

But the Orlesians had been greedy and stupid... and cruel. They had not *wanted* to restrain themselves. What they *did* want was to turn Ferelden freeholders into trembling serfs. It had amused them to hear of Ferelden nobles enduring Meghren's humiliations and torments. Their cruelty had been their undoing. Had people not been so desperate, they never would have risen in support of the

dispossessed Rebel Queen Moira. If Meghren had been a decent king, Maric would never have had a chance, even with Rowan and Loghain at his side.

"*In fact,*" Father had said, "*If Meghren hadn't allowed wholesale plundering and murder, it's likely that Loghain would today be a shrewd, respected farmholder, and not Teyrn of Gwaren. Driving people off their land drove them to banditry or rebellion. If Meghren had had a full set of wits, he would have snatched up Rowan himself and made her his Queen.*"

"You're very quiet, Bronwyn," Leliana said.

"I was just thinking about the power of dynastic marriages."

More ruins, a picnic lunch on the beach, with yet more rabbits courtesy of Anders and Morrigan. Scout had got one himself, but was not inclined to share.

Then more riding along the coast, accompanied by the music of the surf; more cottages, more ruins, more fishing boats. By mid-afternoon, they reached the tiny village of Breaker's Cove. At least Bronwyn told a man outside the single public house that it was Breaker's Cove, and he agreed with her.

The little tavern was called The Wardog Inn, and was about the size of a kennel. At least the ale was good. The innkeeper was taken aback at the size of the Wardens' party. Pallets and blankets were spread in the two small guestrooms, and the Wardens counted themselves lucky to have a roof over their heads for the night.

"And don't go telling people our destination," Bronwyn

ordered. "That's Warden business."

They left at first light, only stopping long enough for bowls of thin porridge. It was dim and overcast, the low clouds a flat expanse of iron in the sky. The winds vexed the sea beyond, and the surf roared up foaming onto the docks.

"It's not far," Bronwyn told her people, "but it will be mostly uphill."

Levi Dryden had a map of sorts, but was not perfectly skilled at reading it. The mouth of a tunnel was found, and torches lit. They dismounted and led the horses. It was pleasant to be out of the sharp wind, but confusing in the smoky darkness. At length, Bronwyn tactfully relieved the man of his map, oriented herself and kept her people moving until they saw a glimmer of light ahead.

They emerged into the splendor of the mountains, and to a steep grade, which forced them to lend a hand pushing the wagon. They turned a corner, sweating and cursing, and then there were gasps.

"Maker!" cried Levi. "Look at the size of that fortress!"

"Not bad," Hakan remarked to Soren. "There's some good stonework there. Must have hired dwarves."

Bronwyn stumbled, gaping. Bigger than Vigil's Keep, bigger than Castle Highever, the towers of Soldier's Peak pierced the sky. Its bulk spread over the summit, imposing and... intact. The air was fresh, the sky pellucid, and the castle seemed realer than real.

"I can't believe it!" she burst out. "Some broken shutters,

here and there, but even the outbuildings are still sound!"

"Magnificent!" breathed Aveline. "This is the greatest castle in Ferelden!"

"It's old, too," Jowan told them, "Really old. It was built by Commander Asturian in the Glory Age, three hundred years before King Calenhad united Ferelden. All the northern teyrns contributed to it, because Asturian arrived just after the end of the Second Blight, and it was fresh in their minds."

Levi Dryden, from his vantage on the wagon seat, said, "A hundred Wardens held off the whole army for over a year! In the end they were starving. Otherwise, I reckon they could have sat here forever, thumbing their nose at the King!"

"The terrain is too vertical for siege engines to be effective," Bronwyn muttered to herself. "This is an amazingly defensible position. A hundred men held it for a year? I believe it now."

The Wardens gathered in the gateway, some punching each other in excitement, some sizing up the edifice with warier eyes.

Leliana said, "It might not be so nice on the inside. There was a battle here, after all. It is unlikely that the victors tidied up afterward."

Anders chuckled at that, but Morrigan said softly. "Be cautious. Too much blood has soaked into the earth. The Veil is thin here."

As if in response to her words, misty figures coalesced before them: the past relived for all of them to see. Carver



SOLDIER'S PEAK



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reached out hesitantly to touch one of the figures, but his hand went through the unheeding phantom.

"Don't, Carver!" Leliana whispered. "Watch!"

A big man in plate armor shouted at his men to fall back. The royal army had made an assault, and had failed. The soldiers looked...frightened.

"—and so we starve them out, then!" the nobleman snarled.

Abruptly the vision blinked out.

"Did everyone see that?" asked Carver, "Or am I losing my mind?"

"Yes, to the first question," said Morrigan. "To the second..."

"Everyone saw it," Bronwyn affirmed. "Astonishing. Is there some way to exorcise such spirits? A steady diet of them might be inconvenient and distracting."

"Not as distracting as *that*," Zevran remarked.

From the earth of the courtyard, skeletal figures were rising, bones assembling in swift order. Hanging from the fleshless shoulders were ragged Grey Warden tabards. With an eldritch howl, the skeletons lifted their blades, and charged.



CHAPTER 22

LAST MAN
STANDING

RONWYN HAD SEEN THE LIVING DEAD BEFORE, WITH ZEVRAN IN THE ELVEN RUINS.

Others had fought ferocious phantoms in Orzammar. For the rest, these were enemies, in arms against them, and they fought back against the creatures, freezing them, hacking them apart, smashing them down, ending them. Not all the skeletons wore the insignia of the Grey Wardens. Others wore the rampant mabarais of the crown of Ferelden. Though they had fought each other long ago, the dead were united in their hatred of the living. On the steps, leading to the castle door, a skeleton used an antique crossbow with formidable skill. Bronwyn threw up her shield before her and slammed the thing back. Carver's sword swung down and beheaded it. Whatever evil enchantments animated the creatures, beheading them seemed to be effective.

"More of them!" Morrigan shouted, pointing behind them to a slope near one of the towers. One of the dead

was casting spells. Scout bayed at the attackers, and barreled toward them, knocking them flying. There were archers among them, too.

Once these unquiet spirits were put to rest, the Wardens ranged over the big courtyard, poking into outbuildings, peering into lofts. They tried the door to the nearest tower: a tall, freestanding structure connected at its top to the castle by a stone bridge. The door did not budge.

"Probably barred inside. Doesn't look like the king's men got in here," Carver said.

Anders took another look at the tower. "There might be a magical barrier, too," he said thoughtfully, "hidden behind the door. That's subtle."

Aveline looked uneasily at the castle's arrow slits. "I would half expect ghostly archers to shoot down upon us."

"Fine with me that they're not," grunted Soren.

Everyone agreed with that.

"Clear here!" called Toliver from a doorway. "This was the smithy. It's all over dust, but the tools are still sound. Not even very rusty!"

"Something or someone has cast some serious preservation magic over the place," Anders told Bronwyn. "It's the only thing that explains the condition of the castle and courtyard."

"If the spells wore off," Bronwyn wondered, "Would everything collapse into decay?"

Anders shook his head. "Doesn't work that way. If the spells wore off, the usual processes would take over, sort as if the

battle happened that day." He thought a little more. "Except the spells weren't cast the day after the battle. Maybe months or a years later, which would explain the skeletons."

"I concur," Morrigan agreed. "Powerful magic has been done here. The preservation spells themselves are not malevolent. Neutral magic, if you will."

Cathair wandered about, curious and disapproving. "Do not humans dispose of their dead? Why were all these bodies left to rot under the sun and rain?"

"It's a puzzlement," Bronwyn agreed. "We are told that King Arland's forces triumphed, and the Wardens were exiled. That clearly is not the full story. The Wardens seemed to have been killed, rather than exiled, and the king's forces did not remain here long enough to burn even their own dead."

"I found the spring house!" Carver called, coming around a corner of the castle. "There's a spout that faces the stables. I think another one is on the other side of the wall inside the cellar of the castle. They had good water."

That was practically an invitation. The water bubbling out of the bronze griffon head was cold, clear, and fresh. They took turns drinking and refilling their canteens.

"Carver, water the horses before we enter the castle," Bronwyn ordered. "Levi!" she shouted. "Unhitch the oxen and bring them around to the watering trough!"

The trader had hidden in the wagon during the fight. Now he peeked out from the sheltering canvas, trembling.

"Is it safe?"

"For now. Out here," answered Bronwyn. "Who knows what we'll find inside?"

The man edged over to her, nervous and fearful. Bronwyn wondered why he was here. Why not give them the map and wait for them at Breaker's Cove? He had said something about wanting to redeem his family's honor. He wanted to find historical evidence that Sophia Dryden was no traitor, but the innocent victim of the tyrannical King Arland. Even if King Arland had been a tyrant, that in itself was certainly no evidence that Sophia had not rebelled against him.

With the Arling of Denerim vacant, did he hope to put in a claim for it? Sophia Drydan had been Arlessa of Denerim before she was made a Grey Warden and her children disinherited. The arling had eventually served as a dowry at the marriage of a royal princess to one of the Kendells. The Kendells, according to Cousin Leonas, were far from extinct.

Bronwyn thought nothing could be less likely than the Drydens being reinstated to the Landsmeet. Too much time had passed; too much opprobrium had been heaped on their name. Even if Sophia were found to be as innocent as a spring lamb, there was little, realistically, that could come of it. Perhaps the trader would find a scholar to write a revisionist history of the period. The question was: who would read it, or act on it if they did?

After their rest, they opened the heavy double doors. The doors were unbarred, and opened easily, without even squeaking. The Wardens stepped into a high-ceilinged, chilly entrance hall, its rafters meeting at a sharp angle at the ridge line. Faded banners hung from the ceiling, a little shabby and threadbare, but still colorful. Dusty benches lined the plastered walls.

And abruptly before them was another vision. They gathered, pushing for the best view, as misty figures in Grey Warden gear met in council: a Dalish elf, a dwarf, humans; axemen and hammermen and swordsmen; archers and mages.

One mage, whom the others called Avernus, was reporting low morale to a slender woman in splendid plate armor, whom he called "Sophia."

Levi, on the fringes of the group, leaned over with a quick intake of breath.

Yes, Sophia Dryden: last Warden Commander in Ferelden before the return of the order twenty years ago. The edges of the woman were blurred, but her voice was clear and powerful.

"Men, I won't lie to you. The situation is grim: our forces outnumbered, our bellies empty, and our hearts are sagging. But we are Wardens! Darkspawn flee when they hear our horns. Archdemons die when they taste our blades. So are we to bend knee to a mere human despot? No! I, for one, will never give up! I, for one will never surrender, just to dance on Arland's gallows..."



It was a powerful appeal to their courage, but a counsel of desperation. Bronwyn scowled. This woman had led the Wardens to death and disaster. A charismatic leader, but perhaps not a very prudent one. And one of vaulting ambition, from all accounts.

The vision faded to nothing.

"That was quite the speech," Anders said cheerfully. "Sounds a bit like you, Bronwyn, though I don't care for the part about the gallows. Don't get us hanged, all right?"

"Or lead us in some heroic last stand in which everybody dies," Zevran added. "It sounds good in a song, but it must be very uncomfortable to experience."

"For me, too," she agreed, with a wry smile. She jerked her chin at the arched portal before them.

Carver and Toliver moved to either side and gave the door a nudge. It, too, swung open easily.

"Demon!" shouted Jowan.

The big, dark common room was occupied by three demons, in fact. One was the horrid apparition called an Arcane Horror: powerful in magical offense, but comparatively fragile. Morrigan sneered elegantly when it at last collapsed to dust in front of the fireplace. The Wardens moved carefully about the chamber, looking for clues and treasure. There was a door on either side, and another opening directly opposite the entry way, but that was unusable due to the remains of hastily-constructed barricades.

Left or right? Bronwyn considered the exterior she had



seen, and thought that the door to the left would not be as complicated as the other.

It was complicated enough. More of the walking dead attacked, one of them very powerful and aggressive. Once again, the mages' freezing and immobilization spells were essential. Some of the skeletons shattered to bits, leaving the leader to be mobbed and smashed.

"A barracks?" Aveline wondered, looking about. "A training room? "

"Both," decided Carver. "Which would *not* be conducive to sound sleep."

"And no privacy at all," Leliana added, disapproving.

It was a very large, high room on two levels. At entry level, there were archery targets and weapons stands, along with tin bathtubs and a table with the remains of its last card game. Up a short staircase was a gallery along the length of the room, filled with bunkbeds, trunks, and cracked chamberpots. There had been a battle here long ago, too.

"The bunks aren't in bad shape!" Toliver said cheerfully, sitting on a lower one and bouncing a little.

"If you don't mind sleeping on dead guys' mattresses," snarked Carver.

"I don't think I'd keep the bunks in here," Bronwyn remarked, thinking to herself. "I'd have to see the rest of the castle, but perhaps this should be a training room only, with the level above for seating and observation. It's rather nice, really, and in bad weather very practical."

"You sound," Morrigan said, "like you are ready to move in and take up housekeeping."

Bronwyn nodded. "If the demons can be destroyed and the Veil repaired, this could be immensely useful. If the rest of it is in this condition, it wouldn't cost a fortune to make it habitable."

"I want to see the bedchambers first," Leliana muttered. "The Compound is so pleasant in comparison."

"Not as many skeletons littering the floor, certainly," Cathair agreed.

They moved back into the big common room. Morrigan used a mild concussive spell to shake ancient soot and leaves from the chimney. Part of the old barricades were used to lay a fire. In a short time, the blaze was taking the worst of the chill off the air in the room.

Carver found a scrap of parchment, which was, interestingly enough, a note from someone who appeared to be an ancestor of Arl Wulffe, begging Sophia Dryden for help against King Arland.

Sophia,

Arl Ruahn and his entire family have been slaughtered, even the children. The Ruahn line is no more and the arling belongs to the crown, for now. Arland believed Ruahn was plotting against him. Ruahn criticized the king's spending on Wintersetend — that is all. It was an idle word, spoken out of turn. The king goes too far. His brain is filled with madness and he clings to the crown like a drowning man clutches at a straw.

Sophia, I beg you, help us. If nothing is done, more will suffer.

Your humble servant,

— Wulffe

"Told you!" Levi said smugly. "Old King Arland was a terrible tyrant, he was."

Everyone had a sip of water and a bit of food, and then it was time to move on.

"Door," Bronwyn ordered.

This led to a long hall, running parallel to the common room, and several doors led off from it. Blessedly, there were no demons or walking dead awaiting them.

The first door led to the kitchen: a large, big one, too, and well lit by high windows. A few human bones were scattered around the room, but nothing manifested from them.

"We should do something about these bones," Aveline muttered.

Bronwyn heard her. "If we are successful in clearing out the demons, we'll collect all the human remains, take them outside and burn them in a single place. We'll find a way to mark it too, and perhaps eventually put up a memorial stone."

Anders helped Morrigan clear this chimney as well, while Toliver poked into piles of sacks, crocks, and crates. Everything was empty. The Wardens had been living on air, at the end.

The door on the same wall at the far end of the hall led down some steps to a lower level. Once again, there were no demons here. No human remains, either.

"I don't think the king's men ever got this far," Jowan

said slowly. "I think they killed all the Wardens, or thought they had, and then demons might have driven them off."

"I think you're right," Carver agreed. "There's a lot of stuff here. Dusty and dirty, but usable."

"It's interesting," Jowan mused. "I think that anything that looks particularly shabby or dilapidated already was like that. Maybe the Wardens hadn't been keeping up the place very well."

"Possibly," Bronwyn considered. Very possible, if the order was in bad odor with the King. Sophia had been forced to become a Warden in order to remove her as Arland's rival. Then Wardens went and elected her Commander. That must have stuck in the King's craw. Maybe the clash was inevitable, and maybe the Ferelden Wardens had been feeling his wrath in little ways before the outbreak of overt war.

She touched Jowan gently on the shoulder, to get his attention. "You know what we're *really* looking for," she whispered.

Jowan nodded, and Anders, nearby, gave her a wink. They had been privately briefed about their need for Archdemon blood. The Wardens could have hidden it anywhere.

They moved, alert and cautious, from room to room. They found the barracks. First there were twelve smallish rooms, each containing a pair of bunkbeds. Four even smaller rooms held a single bed each. Two big rooms held six bunkbeds. Around a corner and down some rather rickety stairs, they found the storage cellars, a clothing workshop, a still room, a wine cellar filled with shattered bottles

and long-drained barrels, and finally the spring house, which, as Carver had guessed, did indeed have a spigot on the inside of the castle. It worked, too, and the water ran clear after a minute or so. Down yet more stairs were dungeons, amounting to a pair of stocks, a whipping post, and three cells. Unsurprising, of course, but completely empty.

Bronwyn walked back upstairs, collecting her thoughts about her find. There was so much more than she had expected or dared hope for. There was potential here: a lot of potential. She glanced at an open cupboard of linens in puzzlement.

"Why haven't the rats got into everything?"

"No rats," Anders declared. "No mice. No vermin of any kind. Part of the spells that were laid down. Now that we've opened up the place again, we might think about getting a cat. I'd like a tabby, myself."

"It's a fine place," Hakan said to Soren. "Better than anything the Legion ever gave us."

"Very nice indeed," Bronwyn said, "but we'd best get back to the demon-infested main keep."

"Joy," sighed Zevran.

They stepped back into the hall, and across it was the last door: a door badly damaged by heavy blows. This was opened cautiously, and Bronwyn instantly got a very bad feeling. It was the ravaged ruin of the library, and it had seen plenty of fighting, judging from the scorch marks and jumbles of bones. Tables and chairs were overturned, and the pillars were scarred by swords and axes. Books



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were scattered everything. Nearly incinerated, a large tome lay open on the floor. Jowan reach out a tentative hand, and instantly triggered yet another vision.

A greying man in mage's robes was writing furiously into a large codex. Muffled shouts and screams filled the air, and an ominous, regular, booming noise shook the stones. The man's assistant, a young female mage, frantic with terror, begged him to hurry.

"The door won't hold, Archivist!"

"Almost done. The truth must be told."

"What does it matter now?" the girl moaned. "We're dead."

The man kept on writing, his face strained and intent. "Our grand rebellion! So close! And to die here a stillbirth..."

"We never should have done it!" the girl cried. "Wardens aren't supposed to oppose kings and princes!"

"Should we stand idly by and —"

With the crash of a forced door, the vision blinked out, and in its place rose up Rage Demons, blazing like pillars of fire, bitterly aggrieved at their fate. The Wardens fell back. Scorching fire licked at their armor and crisped their hair. The mages shouting out freezing spells, but yet more of the demons emerged, rushing at them vengefully.

Everyone was burned, some of them rather badly. The demons were put down, and the mages performed healing spells. There was general interest in the book collection: some of it looked very old and valuable. The chairs and tables were righted, the floor cleared, and a staircase



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leading up beckoned them on.

They first found a little mezzanine, which Bronwyn liked the best of any room she had yet seen. It featured a little fireplace and a very dark and dirty portrait, which in archaic letters was labeled as that of Commander Asturian. It would be a very pleasant sitting room, once the grime was scraped away.

A few steps took them up to the second floor proper, which at first glance appeared to be entirely wasted space. A large dining table was arranged in a corner, but the big open area seemed otherwise empty. There were plenty of high windows in the walls, but most of them were tightly shuttered. The Wardens moved through the dim interior, some of them, like Leliana, already picturing partitions and improvements.

"Stop." Morrigan whispered. "Against the wall. A spirit mirror. And there on the floor... That part of the room was used for magical rituals."

"Summoning circles," Jowan squeaked. "It looks like some lunatic was summoning dem —"

They were in the middle of yet another vision, and this was the most violent and frightening of them all. Levi shrieked, and flung himself away. King's men and Wardens cut and slashed at each other, and another element had been introduced.

"Make them pay for every inch, men!" shouted Sophia, her blade flashing. "Avernus! We need you!"

The mage's arms were lifted, as he recited an incantation in Arcanum. Demons boiled out of the summoning circles, falling upon the king's men, ripping and tearing at the screaming, horrified soldiers.

"More, Avernus!" Sophia cried, wild with battle. "More! Whatever it takes! Press them! Press them now!"

A soldier screamed in a demon's grip. Not sated, the demon lashed out, slashing open a Grey Warden's belly. More demons fell on any warriors within reach, caring nothing for their allegiances, but only that they were living prey.

"No!" shouted Avernus. "I command you! Attack the King's men only!"

A demon drifted toward him, and a deep, gurgling voice issued forth.

"So much death... so much suffering... and... oh, yes... blood! The Veil is torn. Your soul is mine, Avernus!"

"Acolytes," cried Avernus. "Retreat!"

The mages scrambled up the stairs. Some were caught by demonic talons, and dragged down. In the midst of the slaughter, Sophia Dryden still stood, fighting to the last, her face a mask of pride and despair.

"Avernus!" she shouted. "Avernus!"

They hardly knew where the vision ended and the demons began. A Hunger Demon surged toward them, feeding off the spirits of the walking dead. Its single eye glowed red as flame until Cathair put an arrow in it. Scout worried at an ankle, while the rest of them hacked at it. It

threw out sudden bursts of raw power, knocking them aside, but with every surge it grew weaker, and eventually lay on the stones, rapidly deliquescing.

"Raising demons!" Levi said, discontented. "I thought my family was better than that."

Bronwyn cast him a look, biting back the retort that rose to her lips. Obviously they were not.

"It was life and death," Jowan consoled him.

"It was interesting, though," Anders remarked. "That mage Avernus called the junior mages 'acolytes.' That's the old Tevinter term for apprentice mages. Maybe the Grey Wardens have some other Tevinter customs."

"Probably," Jowan agreed. "Whether we wish to admit it or not, it's perfectly obvious that the Grey Wardens were a Tevinter creation. Just as the magisters who caused mankind to be cursed by darkspawn were Tevinter, so were those who developed the darkspawn's greatest enemies."

"The Chantry —" argued Leliana.

"Nope." Jowan cut her off, rather cheerfully. "The Chantry gets no credit at all for the Grey Wardens. The Grey Wardens predate the Chantry by hundreds of years. They predate the formation of the Orlesian Empire. We've been around before anybody."

"Not quite," Cathair disagreed, his voice suspiciously gentle. "The elven realm of Arlathan, destroyed by those very magisters, predates you all, and by a very great deal."

Jowan was briefly embarrassed. "Yes. Well. That's true enough."

"I don't think we need any summoning circles," Leliana said primly. "I think this entire floor needs to be completely gutted and remodeled into private bedchambers. Five... maybe six!"

Bronwyn sighed, thinking of their shrinking coin. Probably the little barracks rooms, after a good scrubbing, would have to serve. There were more than enough beds there for all her Wardens, and she would feel not the least shame in claiming one of the little private rooms for herself.

The next door they found opened on another staircase.

Anders murmured, "I don't think the king's men got past the demons."

They opened the door.

"— and neither did the Wardens," whispered Bronwyn.

Another handful of walking dead shambled toward them, all clad in filthy griffon tabards. These were frozen, beheaded, and the stilled bones kicked into a corner.

"Oh, what a lovely chapel!" cried Leliana, happily distracted from death-dealing.

The large room was devoted to a beautiful statue of the Prophet, set on a big dais and surrounded by votive candles. Personally, Bronwyn would have put a council chamber here, but Leliana was not the only one admiring the statue.

"Quite the looker, wasn't she?" smirked Anders. "I mean, she was a barbarian. How do we know she wasn't as ugly as a tusked wild boar?"

Morrigan snickered, but Leliana was shocked beyond words.

Bronwyn felt it was only reasonable to assume the Prophet had, indeed, been comely. "If she had been ugly as a tusked wild boar, Anders, a great warlord like Maferath would not have taken her to wife, and other people — and people can be so shallow — would not have followed her, no matter how pure or noble her nature. We know from the record that she had a lovely and ensnaring voice. It was a source of great power for her. I think it's very likely that she was beautiful enough for people to take notice of her and hear her out."

"That's reasonable," Toliver spoke up. "That makes sense."

"Actually, it does," agreed Zevran, preening slightly. "The beautiful do have certain advantages."

"But we don't *have* to worship that goddess of yours, do we?" Soren asked. "'S'not *required*, is it?"

Before anyone else could say anything, Bronwyn replied, "Absolutely not. All Grey Wardens have a right to their personal beliefs and traditional customs."

"What if they are Chasind?" Morrigan inquired, with a touch of malice. "'Tis *their* custom to eat human flesh!"

Exasperated, Bronwyn snarled, "They'd better not try to eat *mine*. Now, come on!"

The room they entered next was occupied.

Bronwyn halted, staring stupidly at the back of quite a corporeal figure in splendid plate armor. The room was large, and had the look of a study: a reading stand by the fireplace; books on sagging shelves; a broad and

well-appointed writing table, littered with parchment and maps. He — no, she, from the hair — turned slowly, and Bronwyn stepped into the room, sickened at the sight. Not a skeleton, but surely another of the walking dead, she thought.

"Is that — ?" gasped Jowan.

" — Sophia Dryden?" whispered Carver.

"Grandmother?" croaked Levi Dryden.

Then the creature's mouth opened, and it spoke; and Bronwyn knew that no human spirit dwelled behind that blackened, rotting face.

"Come no farther, Warden!" the demon commanded in a hoarse, unnatural voice. "This one would speak to you."

Scout growled at the thing.

The demon growled back. "Get that annoyance away from me!"

"Quiet, Scout," Bronwyn said softly, her hand on the mabari's head. What new devilry was this?

"Why should I speak with you?"

The demon cackled its triumph.

"Because the Peak is mine! I am the Dryden. Sophia. Commander. All of those things."

"Sorry, Levi," muttered Anders. "Your grandmother's become a demon."

"Either that," the trader choked out, "or she's really let herself go."

Leliana shook her head. "I would not speak to it. It will

utter nothing but lies."

"Silence your fledglings!" the demon raged at Bronwyn. "They should be meek... subservient... quiet. This one would propose a deal."

Bronwyn spoke carefully, trying to master her disgust and loathing for the entity that had stolen Sophia Dryden's body. No one, however ambitious or misguided, deserved such an indignity.

"You cannot possibly give me anything that I would want... other than your immediate death."

"Fool!" snarled the Sophia-Demon.

It rushed on them, sword in hand, fighting not like a demon, but like a mere squatter inhabiting a body it had stolen. The body showed some skill with a blade; but without Sophia's quick wit and powerful will, it really was only a puppet. Other skeletons rose from the floor. Levi fled the room, while the Wardens engaged the creatures. Bronwyn chose to fight the Sophia-Demon herself, battering her down, parrying her attacks, always a move ahead of her opponent. The Keening Blade was a big sword, and a bit longer than Bronwyn's last weapon, but it obeyed her like her very flesh.

Scout fought at her side, distracting the demon, nipping at its legs, snapping at its elbows. The thing tripped, and Bronwyn laughed sharply, kicking in to backheel the thing and bring it crashing to the floor.

"No!" shrieked the eerie, inhuman voice. Bronwyn's sword wailed its deathsong as it came down, beheading the ani-

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mated corpse. A brief, frenzied thrashing of the decapitated body – a rush of foul air – and the corpse lay still at long last, the splendid griffon-chased armor still gleaming.

All around the room, the walking dead were falling. A skull, sent on its way by Carver, whizzed past Bronwyn's face and crashed into the wall, cracking plaster into a fine white powder. Another of the creatures scabbled behind the writing table, savaged by Scout. Bronwyn dashed to help and kicked the skeleton's ribs apart.

She stumbled, fearfully startled, as her booted foot went completely through the wall, shattering plaster and laths together. Zevran had come up to her side, and caught her, saving her an embarrassing pratfall.

"And stay down!" shouted Leliana, finishing off the last of their assailants. "What's that?" she asked a moment later, staring at the hole in the wall.

"A hiding place!" Zevran shouted. "I knew the Wardens must have treasure somewhere! They concealed this, so that their enemies would never find it. Quick! Let us see!"

Eager hands tore at the thin false wall, widening the hole.

"There is a chest in there!" Bronwyn cried. "And more than one!"

Hakan and Soren used their axes to chop away at the remaining lath. The plaster had hid an alcove built into the stonework. A large iron chest was revealed, and on the shelves above, two smaller metal boxes. Everything, of course, was locked, and no one wanted to hunt for keys.

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Between them, Leliana and Zevran picked the locks, first succeeding with the smallest of the metal boxes. Opening it with fingers trembling with excitement, Bronwyn cried out in relief at the array of fragile glass vials, carefully packed in goose down. Two... four... there were two dozen of them!

"What are those?" asked Hakan, craning past the taller bodies.

"Potions!" Anders lied genially. They had agreed that the truth would not do in the presence of Levi Dryden. "Special Warden potions. The First Warden won't send us any."

Morrigan rolled her eyes with a superior, knowing smirk. Bronwyn saw the witch's face, and frowned. Had Anders blabbed to her about the Joining potion, or was this something she had knowledge of from Flemeth? Very likely the latter. The idea that Morrigan had special, secret information about the Wardens rather dampened her joy. What else did Morrigan know that she had never revealed?"

"Yes... well... please have a look at them and see if they're still viable."

Anders took the box, and he and Jowan moved it carefully to the other end of the big writing table. Their faces intent, they began casting dark blue spells over the box's contents.

Leliana handed her the next box: it was wide and flat, and in it was Warden correspondence and recruiting records. Important in the days of Sophia Dryden, but not of much moment now. The tithing rolls would make inter-



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esting reading, Bronwyn supposed.

With more effort, the lock on the big iron chest was defeated. Zevran stepped away from the chest, with a bow and a sweeping gesture. the Wardens crowded forward, wanting to see.

Bronwyn took a breath and opened the chest. At first, her only impression was of rather smelly brown leather, and then she realized that she was seeing moneybags. Good sized ones, packed down together into the chest.

"Open them up!" cried Soren, losing control of his curiosity.

Bronwyn reached for a sack, and found it heavy. She untied the cord and poured the contents out over her hand. A river of gold sang sweetly, shining coins falling from the mouth of the bag in a torrent of treasure. They pooled on the tops of the leather bags, clinking: Tevinter coins and Orlesian coins; coins from Nevarra and from Rivain; plenty of Fereldan coins, stamped rather carelessly with the crowned profile of a scrawny man with a nose like an axblade. Cries, squeals, moans rose from the assembled companions: the sort of noises heard more normally in the privacy of a bedchamber at crucial moments. Toliver briefly described the Maker performing an unnatural act on Andraste, and Leliana was too numb to raise a hand to him.

"Is it all gold?" Hakan squeaked. "All of it?"

"Can I help count it?" asked Anders.

Cathair stared, enchanted. "It really is very pretty. Beautiful."



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There was a brief, reverent silence.

Dazed, confronted with something beyond her wildest hopes, Bronwyn tried to collect her thoughts and take a guess at how much was in the chest. Perhaps not all the bags contained gold, but before her from only one bag was at least a hundred sovereigns. The Grey Wardens would eat and drink and cover their nakedness for the foreseeable future. Reluctantly, she pushed herself away from the chest and shut the lid.

"We don't have time to gloat over this," Bronwyn insisted. "Come on. Now. We're going now. We still have a castle full of demons to deal with. We can count the gold after that's done."

"I could stay and..." Levi tried to offer. Bronwyn gave him a look.

"Not for the world would I deprive you of the knowledge you've come all this way to find," she said coolly. Not that she thought he could carry that big iron chest down the steps on his own; but it would be easy enough to stuff his pockets and boots with gold, and make a run for it. Perhaps he even imagined he had a right to it.

Carver gave the trader a mild nudge and too-bright smile. Levi whimpered a little and let himself be hustled along, out the door. There were deep, melancholy sighs as Bronwyn shut the door to the room behind them.

"Pull yourselves together," she ordered.

The other door off the chapel opened to the outside. Bronwyn was a little surprised to feel the sharp moun-

tain wind in her face. It cleared her head of gold-fever somewhat. A stone bridge was before her, leading to the freestanding tower.

She had seen the bridge before, but from the ground. They were up pretty high, and a few of the walking dead noticed them and headed their way. Cathair picked them off before they reached their side of the bridge. One of the skeletons toppled over the side of the bridge, far, far, down onto the rugged slope of the mountain. Bronwyn wondered if the bridge should have safety rails.

"I still don't think the king's men got this far," Anders insisted. "So where do the dead come from?"

"Clearly," Morrigan replied, "they died of wounds or were killed by the demons, and then possessed by them."

"I suppose that's possible," Anders admitted, looking sick. "I've seen just about all of them I can stand."

To their surprise, the door at the other end of the bridge was neither locked nor barred. They opened it slowly, and were rushed by a few more of the skeletons. Everyone had a good grasp of how to destroy the things now. The creatures were frozen and beheaded within seconds. They then had a moment to look about them.

It was an antechamber, probably serving somewhat as a protection against the high winds. They pushed open the door on the far wall, and instantly Bronwyn had the feeling, however absurd, that this place was inhabited. It seemed to be a study of sorts. A short of flight of stairs led

downward to a door. Another door was directly in front of them. Books lined the wall. A small lute rested on a shelf. Books and parchment were piled on a wooden table. Potion vials were neatly arranged on a wooden stand.

"No dust," Aveline said, gripping her sword more tightly. "No dust on *anything*. Someone's been here."

Bronwyn's senses tingled oddly. "You're right," she said. "There is a Grey Warden in the next room."

With excited trepidation, she opened the last door, and led her companions into a vast and lofty space. It was cold here, and looking about it was not hard to see why. A large window at the end of the room was broken.

"What is this place?" whispered Leliana.

Anders peered at a square hole in the floor which held an iron cage filled with bones. "Some sort of... workroom?"

Jowan breathed in awe. "The most elaborate I've ever seen. There's nothing in the Circle like this!"

"Come," Bronwyn said, and walked toward the end of the room. The floor was raised there, overseeing everything else in the wide chamber, and a living Grey Warden was there, busy at a worktable littered with measuring devices and glass flasks and tubes, his attention on his studies.

He sensed their presence, however.

"I hear you! Don't disrupt my concentration."

An old voice. An old, old voice. It matched the man before them: nearly bald, his heavy eyebrows turned white with

age. His task done, he looked down at them with quizzical detachment. Old yes: but still tall and straight.

"He's a mage!" Jowan whispered in excitement.

"Really?" Carver snorted. "You think?"

Cathair remarked, in all seriousness. "The robes and staff would indicate that Jowan is correct."

"He's not just a mage," murmured Anders. "He's *that* mage. That mage we saw. Avernus. Only a bit longer in the tooth, so to speak."

Avernus, after a brief assessment, spoke to Bronwyn, whose armor was unquestionably the grandest, and who, besides, was standing in front of everyone else.

"Even now the demons seek to replenish their numbers. Are you to thank for this welcome if temporary imbalance?"

"We've been killing the demons and the undead we have found here, yes." Rather astonished, she took a breath and plunged on. "You are the Grey Warden Avernus? Alive? After two hundred years?"

"I am indeed Avernus," the mage replied. "And I am alive, though only just. My magic can do only so much. Over the past year I have been plagued with dreams and visions. My end cannot be far off."

"Perhaps it is the Blight you dream of," Bronwyn said. "We dream of it, too."

Avernus's surprise was manifest. "Blight? There is a Blight in Thedas?"

"There is a Blight in Ferelden," said Bronwyn. "It began

in the south, when the darkspawn began swarming up at Ostagar. We fought them there, and brought the invasion to a halt; but we expect it to break out again, somewhere else, and even more furiously. We have come to reclaim Soldier's Peak for the Wardens."

"An admirable goal," Avernus approved. "So the Grey Wardens have returned to favor in Ferelden? That is good to hear. You command this detachment?"

"Forgive me," Bronwyn said, remembering her manners. "I am Bronwyn Cousland, Commander of the Grey in Ferelden. With me," she pointed to each in turn, "are Wardens Anders, Jowan, Leliana, Aveline, Cathair, Hakan, Soren, Toliver, and our friends Morrigan and Zevran. You will assist us in exorcizing the castle. then?"

"Cousland, eh? Extraordinary! But yes, of course, I have lived for this hour. To cut the demons off forever, I shall unravel the summoning circles I made so long ago. While I do so, waves of demons will come through the Veil. You must dispatch them."

"About those summoning circles..." Anders drawled. "Was there some reason you thought summoning demons was a *good* idea?"

Avernus sighed, setting his papers in order. "I did so at the commander's behest —"

"Sophia Dryden?" Levi squeaked out.

The old mage glanced at the trader and raised a brow. "Yes. At Sophia's command. We were desperate. Only twenty

of us remained, and the King's army was breaking down the door. It was a last hope, but a false one, as I am sure you know. Those of us who survived the king's soldiers fell prey to the demons who turned on us. Sophia herself was taken by the demons. I alone survived."

"We will speak more of this later," said Bronwyn. "Right now we must cleanse the castle."

"Very true," agreed Avernus. He stepped quickly down from the dais, and set off towards the door to the bridge, surprisingly spry. Bronwyn joined him, her thoughts in awed confusion. The stories this man had to tell!

"But how is he still alive?" Toliver whispered to Aveline. "It's been two hundred years!"

"There's only one way," Anders muttered, looking suspiciously around the room. "Blood Magic."

The back of Jowan's neck turned delicately pink.

Wave after wave of demons emerged from the summoning circles: Rage Demons, Hunger Demons, Ash Wraiths. Avernus intoned the incantations, and the rest of the Wardens destroyed the invaders from the Fade. Having some idea of what would happen, Bronwyn had carefully positioned her people so that the archers and mages would have a clear field of fire before the others closed with the demons. The mages watched Avernus, very impressed — in Anders' case, reluctantly — with the old man's abilities. The last of the demons was the most powerful: a purple-fleshed Desire Demon. She

fell at last, and then followed a last incantation and a curious sucking sound as the Veil was securely sealed. The arcane symbols etched in the floor vanished.

"Well!" Carver spoke up. "That was bracing! Do we get lunch now, or what?"

"I'm starving!" Leliana agreed.

"All right," Bronwyn said, "Since you brought it up, Carver, I want you to go down to the wagon with Levi, and bring back some provisions. We can eat in that little place down the steps over there. I didn't see any bones. Toliver and Aveline, go help them. Keep your eyes open for anything strange. Morrigan and Anders, please clear the chimney and get a fire going." She turned to Avernus. "You and I need to talk, but after something to eat. You are, of course, most welcome to join us."

"My dear Commander," said the old man, "it is too long since I subsisted on anything other than Strengthening Potions. Real food might well kill me, but I thank you for the invitation. I shall be at your service in my workroom whenever you are at leisure, and will be happy to answer all your questions. I have made many discoveries in my long life, and I think some of them will be of interest to the Wardens and of use to you." He strode away, staff in hand.

So, lounging on dusty chairs and stools, they consumed bread and hunks of smoked mutton in front of the cheerful fire. There was much speculation about the total amount of the gold in the iron chest, and Hakan began a betting

pool for the one whose guess came closest.

"Listen to me," Bronwyn said. "This is all very well amongst ourselves, but I want each one of you to swear an oath you will not tell anyone about this treasure. That means *anyone*: fellow Wardens, Chantry priests taking a confession, blood relatives. *Anyone. No exceptions,*" she said, with a hard look for Leliana and then for Jowan. "If word got out about this treasure, we'd have bandits down on us, and noblemen refusing to pay their tithes. That gold is going to refurbish this castle and pay your wages. And maybe give us some extras."

"I wish we could buy a griffon," muttered Carver.

"A *pair* of griffons would be better, mate," Toliver advised. Carver nodded thoughtfully.

"If only we could," Bronwyn sighed.

"Are you going to tell Teyrn Loghain?" Morrigan asked pertly.

"No," Bronwyn said instantly. She raised her right hand. "It's Warden business. I, Bronwyn Cousland, so swear."

She made each of them swear individually. Morrigan and Zevran would probably keep the secret, but Bronwyn's eyes fixed on Levi Dryden, and she wondered how much it would realistically take to buy the man's silence and keep it bought. He had not found what he sought: exoneration for Sophia Dryden. If anything, he had confirmed her treason, and worse, had learned that she was complicit in Blood Magic and sorcery. He looked very disgruntled.

After they were fed and rested, it was time to apportion tasks.

"There's not all that much we can do today," she considered. "But for decency's sake we should take Aveline and Cathair's words to heart and collect all the remains we can find. Leliana, I'm putting you in charge of that. I want you to find some place on the grounds that's suitable for a memorial someday. Pile up the bones there and we'll gather later for the fire. Any gear or good armor, like that set on Sophia, I want you strip and store in a single place. Morrigan," she turned to the witch, who looked disgusted at the thought of searching for remains, "would you please work in the remains of the library? Shelve the books lying about — except for that damaged chronicle — and try to get some idea of what's in them, and how the shelves are arranged — if they are."

Morrigan was considerably mollified by the assignment.

"And the horses and oxen need to be taken somewhere to graze. Later we'll count the gold. We'll want an exact tally, and we'll need to write it down. At sunset we'll have the funeral fire. I'm going to talk to Avernus now —" Bronwyn began.

"But not alone," Anders said instantly. "I'm going with you."

Jowan grimaced. "He's right, Bronwyn. We don't really know Avernus, other than that he's a really powerful Blood Mage. He could do things to you that you wouldn't know about. Anders and I should be there."

"Besides," Anders added. "We're your magical advisers, so I think we should be there to advise you if the old man talks about magic."

That was true enough.
Carver sniped. "You just want to get out of picking up bones."
"That, too," Anders agreed equably.

"A Cousland?" mused Avernus. "It is rare for someone from one of the great families to join the Wardens."

"I was conscripted," Bronwyn told him. "I was conscripted because of the Blight. I certainly never volunteered to be a Warden, but here I am. Most of the Wardens were killed in the Bloomingtide Battle against the darkspawn, including Warden-Commander Duncan. Only one other junior Warden and I were left, and we have been trying to rebuild the order ever since. For that matter, the Grey Wardens were only readmitted to Ferelden twenty years ago, during the reign of King Maric."

"King Maric," Avernus repeated the name. "I take it from the way you speak of him that he is the late King Maric. Who is king now?"

"Well..." Anders snarked. "*That's a long story..*"

Bronwyn flicked him a repressive look. She did not want to talk politics right now. "Maric's son, King Cailan, was killed last month in the Battle of King's Mountain. He left no heir. The kingdom is currently under the regency of his wife, Queen Anora, until a Landsmeet is held. That is scheduled for the sixth of Haring. Meanwhile, the Blight continues. The Archdemon seems to have left the south through the Deep Roads, and we do not know where the

bulk of the horde is. I have sent patrols to the known Deep Roads entrances to see if they can detect any activity. We were ourselves going to Drake's Fall tomorrow."

"That is the entrance we used for our Callings, yes," said Avernus. "I cannot say that I know of any activity in the north, but Soldier's Peak is built on a granite foundation, and thus is secure from the darkspawn."

Jowan found that interesting. "Is that why the site was chosen in the first place?"

Avernus was pleased with him. "Indeed it was. That, and it was considered desirable to have a base by the sea for communication and for importation of fine weapons and arms, which were not exactly much in evidence in Ferelden in those days."

"So..." Bronwyn nodded. "A secure base, and very well preserved. You cast those spells, I take it."

"Most of them," he admitted. "The demons also did their share, for their own reasons. I did not want the Peak to fall to pieces over my head, after all! If nothing else, I was resolved to preserve it for the future — if there was one." He sat back in his chair, looking at her. "You no doubt have questions of your own."

"Many," Bronwyn agreed. "Our companion, the trader Levi Dryden, brought us here, hoping we would find evidence that his ancestor, Sophia Dryden, was innocent of the charge of treason that sullied the family name. However, it's clear that she did indeed defy the king. Can you

tell us something of what happened?"

"So much for our grand rebellion," sighed the old mage. "It seemed so pressing then, but the kingdom lives on and has forgotten us. Arland ruled with fear and poison. Sophia's noble friends begged for her help, so we met with Teyrn Cousland. With him on our side we had a chance of success. A truce was declared, and the parties met, but it was not to be. He was killed, and we were undone."

"Cousland!" Bronwyn exclaimed. "My ancestor... er... " She ticked off the family genealogy in her mind, hearing Aldous' voice reciting the tale of years. "Kurgan Cousland. There is no record indicating that he was killed in battle."

"Not in battle," said Avernus, with an ironic smile. "Why in battle, when a waiting axe behind a door would serve as well? I last saw Teyrn Cousland's decapitated head on the meeting table with an apple in his mouth. You lost many family members that day. Arland's butchers slaughtered enough to make them – pliable. And that was the end of that. The Wardens stood alone, and perished."

A long silence, as they digested the sad tale of old wrongs.

"So," Jowan spoke, a little uncertain. "You've been alone all these years, but it looks like you've been doing research."

"I have." Avernus granted him a little wintry smile. "And I have learned much. With trial and error, my experiments have yielded results beyond my dreams."

Bronwyn looked about the vast workroom. "What was the purpose of your experiments?"

"To stop the demonic tide, of course, but originally to make the Wardens even more powerful. Our joining ritual is crude. The darkspawn taint has power, yet all it is used for is to sense the creatures. Much more is possible."

"Blood magic?" Anders asked, his voice rich with disgust.

"Come, my young brother Warden. The very Joining itself is the darkest of Blood Magic. There is great strength in blood. Disregard the Chantry's lies for the children's tales they are. They know nothing, and invent rubbish to conceal their ignorance. Nothing is forbidden the Wardens. Honorable surrender is not an option when fighting darkspawn."

Anders did not look convinced, but Bronwyn held up her hand to quiet him. "To make the Wardens more powerful in what way?"

"Why, in every way. To make us stronger, faster, more dextrous. To improve our stamina, self-healing, and concentration. To reduce the chance of death in the Joining—I believe by a large measure. The physical toll on the Wardens was to be ameliorated. You will have noticed, obviously, that I have not experienced a Calling. That, too, was one of my goals – and Sophia's."

Bronwyn sat up and stared at the man. The Calling was a burden so dreadful, so unspeakable, that anyone who could prevent it had her instant and undivided attention. Jowan gave her a quick, excited glance. Anders was frowning, but he was listening, all the same.

"I certainly do not deny," Bronwyn said, "that the Call-

ing seems a particularly horrible rite, as practiced by the Grey Wardens. To die alone in the dark of the Deep Roads, overwhelmed by darkspawn... And to experience worse than death, if one is a woman. In fact, it seems absolute madness, after what we have seen of Broodmothers, to deliberately send women to replenish the darkspawn."

Avernus was intrigued. "You have *seen* a Broodmother? With your own eyes?"

Anders looked away with a sigh, not liking that particularly memory. Bronwyn did not flinch from it. She pointed first at the scar on her cheek, and then at her unnaturally green eyes.

"I received this – and these – during an encounter with a Broodmother. They spit poison. Anders saved my vision, but the color remained."

"Fascinating," murmured Avernus, leaning in for a closer look. "It seems that I, too, have many things to learn."

Bronwyn's mind was already on his research. "Tell me, Avernus... this improved Joining potion of yours... It apparently works on those who have already taken the standard formula?"

"As you see."

"And does it relieve other problems? For example, we are given to understand that Wardens are infertile. Does the potion –"

"– Remove that obstacle to conception? Yes, I am certain that it does. While the Wardens in general look upon their infertility as a convenience, Sophia found it irksome. She hoped to

have more children after she had deposed King Arland."

Anders and Jowan were looking at Bronwyn, and even without the aid of Blood Magic, she could read their minds.

"Can you make this potion for us?" she asked. "For all of us? I have forty Wardens under my command."

Avernus smiled again. "Forty-one, I believe, counting me, Commander. But yes, I can make all you want with sufficient ingredients. I have four sample doses, but require more supplies to distill it in quantity. There is a supply of Archdemon blood here in the castle. I have some here in the workroom, and there is more secreted –"

"We found that," Bronwyn assured him. "The need of it brought me here in the first place."

"Indeed? I shall also need some fresh darkspawn blood, and – this might be a sticking point – a good measure of the blood of a Warden."

Bronwyn did not hesitate. "I would gladly shed my blood to save myself and the other Wardens from the Calling."

"My blood," Anders interrupted. "Not yours, Bronwyn. My blood."

"Or mine," Jowan offered. He smiled weakly at Avernus. "You don't need it *all*, do you?"

Avernus shrugged, "There was a time... but no, I shall need no more than you can safely spare."

"You did experiments on Wardens, didn't you?" Anders asked, full of suspicion.

"I did, and I do not apologize for it. Where did you think

the Wardens came from in the first place? The comforting fairy tales would tell you it was a band of heroic volunteers, daring all for the salvation of Thedas. The ugly reality, I believe, is closer to this: a band of Tevinter mages, desperately trying to undo the disasters wrought by their fellows, sacrificing thousands of slaves in thousands of horrifically failed experiments. Through their efforts, they finally created the weapon – the superwarrior – known as a Grey Warden. The truth can be an terrible thing, but it is not as terrible as a Thedas overrun by darkspawn.”

By the end of their conversation, Bronwyn asked Avernus to make out a list of things he needed, and gave him a conditional promise to get a relief party up to him before Firstfall. Then there was the matter of the improved potion. She was willing to take it herself, and immediately, but once again, Anders and Jowan restrained her.

“I’ll try it,” said Jowan. “I’ll take it now, and we’ll see how I perform on it, all right? All right?” he asked, turning to Avernus. “That’s reasonable, isn’t it, to have a field trial?”

“Quite sensible,” Avernus allowed. “Record your impressions for me. I shall add them to the research notes.”

A vial was presented, and Bronwyn and Anders watched, tense with worry, as Jowan downed it. He winced, and bent nearly double. Bronwyn came forward to support him, horrified that he might be killed. Instead, after a moment, he straightened and took a deep breath.

“Not so bad,” he said. “Not so bad as my Joining. I feel... different.” “Different?” Avernus scoffed. “That is rather *vague*, isn’t it? In what way different? Be precise.”

Jowan looked up at the ceiling, thinking. “I feel very energized. I feel ready for anything. My mind is very clear... very alert... very sensitive to all impressions. I don’t know if my vision is improved, or I’m just noticing things. I can feel my magic in a much more present way... like I could shape it with only my fingers.”

Avernus was nodding, pleased, and took up parchment and a quill. He asked Jowan to cast some shielding and healing spells. Anders seemed impressed. There was some technical discussion that went completely over Bronwyn’s head. Jowan did not seem about to drop dead.

In short, when Bronwyn left the old mage’s workroom, her head was spinning with possibilities.

“Why were you so determined that I not contribute my blood to Avernus for his experiments?” she asked her companions.

Anders exchanged an uneasy glance with Jowan.

“For the same reason we didn’t want you to meet with him alone. Bronwyn, we don’t know this man. Warden or not, he’s a dodgy old blood mage. If he had your blood, he could use it to control you, and as you are a Very Important Person – and likely going to be more Important yet – that seemed a supremely bad idea.”

“Ah, so it is no myth that blood mages really can control minds?”

Jowan looked pained. “It’s not quite as simple as that. A

lot of it depends on the subject's own will, and the will-power of the mage. He might not be able to put ideas in your head, but he might be able to give you a nudge to feel certain ways about ideas that were presented to you. Anyway, you should be careful of your blood. Even..." he blushed, "your moon blood."

"That's true," Anders agreed, unembarrassed. "I've heard of laundresses being paid for ladies' linens by ill-wishers. Queens should watch out for that."

Faintly alarmed, Bronwyn said, "I'll pass that bit of advice on to Anora."



Her people had been quite diligent in her absence. It was remarkable how the removal of scattered, decaying human remains improved the appearance and general ambiance of the Peak.

"Bones were everywhere!" Leliana told her. "We have had such a time, finding all the little pieces!" She made a face. "And all the brooms are dirty!"

"We used some of the empty crates," Aveline told Bronwyn briskly. "Filled them up and pushed them along. Put them on timbers to carry them between us. It went quickly once we got into the rhythm of it."

"You've done well."

Carver said, "I hobbled the horses and left them and oxen out on the high meadow not far from here. We'd better herd them into the old stables for the night after we

have the funeral."

"Good thinking."

"Can we count the gold now, Bronwyn?" Anders pleaded, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet. "Can we?"

"Yes, we can. We should."

Each bag appeared to contain a hundred pieces of gold. Teams were arranged and assigned bags to make absolutely *sure*. There was swearing as people lost count and started again. Jowan found some dirty parchment and dug out a lead pencil he always carried. He set about making a tally.

Altogether there were fifty-four bags of gold. Fifty-three contained one hundred sovereigns each, of somewhat varying purity and weight. The fifty-fourth bag was the odd one, with only thirty-two pieces of gold in it. There was also a bag of gems and jewelry, which included a heavy gold seal ring embossed with a double griffon. Soren won the betting pool.

"All right," Bronwyn decreed. "Five thousand, three hundred thirty-two sovereigns. We can maintain the order, fight the blight, and restore Soldier's Peak. A good day's work. In celebration of our success, I grant each of you present a reward of twenty sovereigns, payable *right now*."

This decision was a popular one. The coin was paid out, and the final tally of the Wardens' treasure noted down as five thousand ninety-two sovereigns. Everyone seemed perfectly pleased, with the exception of Levi Dryden. Twenty sovereigns was insufficient compensation for the

loss of his lifelong dream of exoneration for a revered ancestor. Bronwyn resolved to talk to him privately when they were back in Denerim.

"Why isn't there any silver?" Carver wondered.

Zevran gestured at the number of chests, some of them empty and open, in the room. "Much was likely spent just before the siege in an effort to buy up supplies. The rest was not sealed away, and anything resembling coin was snatched. We found some silver on the bodies, remember, and we have certainly not found all the bodies of those who died... or retreated with the king's army."

"And on that note," said Bronwyn, "Let us give the dead we found to the fire."

That was done, with decent respect. An attractive spot had been chosen, in a place that might once have been the castle garden. The sunset splendor of the mountains was a fitting setting for the last rites of Sophia Dryden and her Wardens. Leliana recited the Chant of Light, and sang THE BALLAD OF AYESLEIGH.

It was windy in the twilight, and the mages watched the fire carefully, lest it catch the grass and trees alight. Bronwyn asked for some bottles of wine from their supplies, and these were passed around. The Grey Wardens and their friends drank deeply, the firelight turning their faces to gold.

"Anyone have anything to say?" Bronwyn asked.

To her surprise, Carver Hawke spoke up.

"You know what this means, don't you?"

"No... I don't," Bronwyn said, wondering what he was getting at. He was clearly a bit drunk. "What does that mean?"

"Really," Carver insisted, waving his wine bottle. "This is big. They need to rewrite all the history books. We won."

"Carver, *who* won?" Leliana asked, bewildered.

"The Grey Wardens totally won the Battle of Soldier's Peak! We did. We won. We did not lose. We remained masters of the field."

Hakan and Soren looked at each other, squinted, and then nodded agreement. "He's right," said Hakan.

"Just how do you reckon that?" Toliver asked, bewildered. "I mean, you did see the dead bodies everywhere, didn't you?"

Bronwyn began to see Carver's logic, and chuckled almost against her will. She took the offered bottle from Jowan, and downed a long swallow, trying not to choke.

"All the laws of war," Carver pointed out, "say that whoever is last on the field is the winner. The 'Last Man Standing' rule. The king's troops left. Avernus was still here and still alive. Masters of the field, that is."

"And they didn't get the treasure, either," said Jowan, with a slow, delighted grin.

"That's right!" Carver lifted his bottle to the crackling fire in salute, smugly triumphant. "Totally masters of the field. Not sacked. No serious booty taken. Grey Wardens won. We won! *Yes! Grey Wardens!*"

CHAPTER 23

WARDENS
ASUNDER

DOES THE CUTE LITTLE MAGE OBJECT TO MY QUESTIONS? Are its diminutive feelings wounded?"

"No, Shale," Tara sighed. "It's fine.

After all, I've been asking you questions, too."

"Oh, good. My world no longer totters on the edge of the abyss."

The western expedition was moving far more quickly, now that they had reached the Imperial Highway west of Redcliffe. A detachment of the Legion of the Dead was waiting for them near the entrance at Lake Belannas, ready to support them in their exploration of the Deep Roads. The Wardens would be two days later than planned, but the Legion had been warned to be flexible. And there had been so much to learn at Honnleath...

Shale was nothing like Tara had expected. Nothing like anything anyone could have expected. A golem with free will? With a mind of its own and a sarcastic turn of speech? With no particular love of mages, due to its long enslavement by the mage Wilhelm?

At least it called her the "Cute Little Mage." That was

better than being the "Abrasive Mage," though it described Velanna in a nutshell. Tara found Velanna rather difficult, and Tara was an *elf*. Velanna was far nastier to the humans in the party, as nasty as she dared to be, even after Astrid had given her a very stern talking-to.

Astrid was simply "Warden." to Shale. Unsurprising, since Shale clearly looked on Astrid as the leader of the expedition. To be honest, Tara did too. Astrid knew what she was doing: whether setting up camp or devising battle tactics.

They planned to pass through Redcliffe, but only long enough to pick up supplies at the store and have a meal at the tavern. Tara had no particular desire to pay court to Arl Teagan or to stay at his priest-infested castle. The Arl had been generous enough, but Tara believed that the Grey Wardens' welcome would be rather cooler, if they appeared before the Arl led by an elf and dwarf, rather than by a Cousland. Tara had had enough of his condescending servants, too.

Besides, the village was in a frenzy preparing for the Arl's wedding, scheduled for Satinalia Eve. The words "dear Arlessa Kaitlyn – one of our own" were on everyone's lips, and the air was filled with sentimental sighs and tiresome praise to the Maker and Most Holy Andraste for the life and health of the Guerrins. Tara hoped that any child the new Arl and Arlessa produced did not become an abomination, run rampant, and slaughter the villagers. Apparently, there was nothing like a wedding to shorten people's memories.

Most embarrassingly, the presence of Shale attracted attention. The villagers crowded up, shouting, "A show! A show!" Apparently, never having seen a golem before, the folk thought Shale was part of some sort of traveling minstrel troupe: most likely one tumbler sitting on another's shoulders, both concealed by a costume. And Aeron's lute was the finest musical instrument most of them had ever seen. Definitely a troupe of minstrels, something few had ever experienced. That they were heavily armed conveyed nothing to the villagers' minds – other than that the roads were indeed unsafe. Dogs barked; children squealed and pointed.

"Another flea-bitten village of drooling peasants," snarked Shale. "Delightful. How it recalls to me the happy bygone days at Honnleath. Do order me to squish a few of their heads, won't you?"

"No squishing," Astrid said curtly. She raised her voice. "We are Grey Wardens!"

"Oh, see the funny little woman in armor," bawled out a hulking laborer. "All dressed up like a Warden! Come on, darling! Cut us a caper!"

"Really? No squishing?" Shale murmured. "None at all?"

Astrid gritted out, "Let me think about it."

"– Look at the tattoos on that one!"

"– That's a nice lute that one's carrying! Give a song, minstrel!"

"– Reckon they're here for the wedding! I wouldn't mind getting to know that one better!"

"Have I ever told you," Velanna said loudly to Tara, "that

I find humans physically and morally repulsive?"

Most of the village trooped up behind them to the tavern, gawking. Quite a few shoved their way inside, and stood over the Wardens while they ate, speculating on what 'acts' they could hope to see. The innkeeper shooed them out.

"Let my customers eat in peace!"

Not as stupid as most, the innkeeper, Bella, grasped quickly that these really were Grey Wardens, and not circus performers. She was friendly enough, and gave the Wardens a free round of drinks. (Shale coolly declined the offer.) She asked about the army at Ostagar and the struggle with the darkspawn. Her sentimental sighs were saved for poor King Cailan and brave Teyrn Loghain. She asked after some other soldiers, who, she said, had helped her during the battle here. Tara did not know the names, but Aeron and Liam did, and could assure the pretty redhead that they were healthy and uninjured.

Griffith and Walther were sent out to purchase supplies, since they looked "normal" to these uneducated folk. They were back shortly with what had not been gathered up already for the wedding and the Satinalia celebration to come: oats and smoked fish, and a single stone bottle of Chasind Sack Mead. Bella made up the difference out of her own stores, and was well compensated for it.

Leaving Redcliffe was awkward in its own way. Astrid went out, and quietly informed the excited townsfolk that they were mistaken.

"We really are Grey Wardens on patrol."

This news did not go down well, where it was believed. Most simply thought it was part of the show. The Wardens hefted up their packs and stalked out, up the hill and out of town, still trailed by hopeful peasants. When the Wardens reached the village outskirts, and it became clear to the people of Redcliffe that they really were leaving, there was a wave of disappointment and anger. A few rocks were thrown.

"Well," drawled Shale, "That was a delightful interlude. When is our return engagement? I can hardly contain my impatience."

"This sort of thing never happens to Bronwyn," Tara said bitterly.

The steward of Gwaren was not easily persuaded of Danith's claims to be a Warden, either, despite her letter of introduction from Teyrn Loghain. He looked at it for a long time, scrutinizing the seal for forgery. Finally convinced, he admitted the Wardens and found decent quarters for them in the lower Keep — certainly not in the luxurious quarters set aside for distinguished guests. Danith did not much care. The rooms were adequate, and her own chamber was not unlike the simply-furnished room she had occupied at the Warden's Compound. It was a place for rest and a meal.

The elves received some odd looks, but no outright insults. Prudently, they wore their armor at all times, after a brief, tense confrontation when Nuala had been taken for a housemaid. Niall, too, as a mage, was subject

to stares and whispers.

No matter. They would be out of here tomorrow, resupplied with food. The Deep Roads entrance was near the city walls. They would descend, travel a few miles, then return and start their journey north. The thought of seeing Keeper Marethari again... of seeing Junar and Ineria and Master Ilen and old Hahren Paivel filled Danith with excited, nostalgic longing. She wanted another look at those ancient ruins, if she could manage it. They needed to be conceded to the Dalish as soon as possible: put in their possession past dispute.

"Warden?" A servant knocked at her door. Danith opened, and look warily at the human. The woman said, "Some elf asking for you at the servants' door."

Danith regarded her blankly. She knew no one who might ask for her. This shemlen city was smaller than Denerim, and for that reason not so oppressive. Dirty and smelly, of course, and full of squat buildings and loud-voice shems. Not very interesting to her, actually.

"Take me to this servants' door," she finally answered.

An elf in poor city garments was awaiting. When he saw Danith, garbed in her armor, he blinked and stared. Then he looked closer.

"You're Dalish!" he blurted out. Then, uncertainly, he asked, "Aren't you?"

"I am Dalish," she answered. "I am Danith of the Grey Wardens. To whom am I speaking?"

"Er... I'm Kieyll," he stammered. "You're really Dalish! The hahren heard there were elven Grey Wardens in town, and I was sent to invite you to the Alienage. We didn't know you were Dalish."

"Does that mean that we are not welcome?" Danith asked, becoming more and more annoyed. Did she want to visit a dirty and depressing community of flat-ears? On the other hand, perhaps some of them would have the sense to leave and find the clans, if they knew they would be welcome. Perhaps it would be best to direct them to Ostagar, to urge them to mix in there and become acclimated...

"Oh... of course not! I mean... the hahren said to invite you. For supper. We eat earlier than the shems. I'm to bring you there."

"I have two elven companions with me," Danith said, her face impassive. "I shall summon them, and tell the other Wardens that we are going out. Tell me about this hahren of yours."

The hahren's name was Indrianni. She was a woman of middle years, her black hair beginning to thread with silver. Her eyes were black, too, and sparkled with life. She welcomed Danith, Steren, and Nuala very kindly to the Gwaren Alienage.

It was small and poor: smaller than the Alienage of Denerim. As half the population had not been sold as slaves, there were more people here. Chickens clucked underfoot; neat little gardens were filled with yellow and orange

squash. A big Vhenadahl tree spread out over the center of the courtyard, its waxy leaves brown along the edges.

"If the weather were fairer," Indrianni said, "we would eat out of doors. Come inside, welcome guests. We long to hear of the deeds of the Grey Wardens, and of our cousins among them."

Danith nodded stiffly. Fair words: one could hardly ask for fairer. Indrianni had glanced at their faces, seeing the *Vallaslin*, but not commenting on it like a bumpkin.

The food was simple but plentiful, and decently prepared. These people spoke of Andraste and the Maker. They had forgotten the Creators, but they remembered a little of the old ways. Danith could tell them that the war against the darkspawn was going well. The darkspawn had been defeated at Ostagar, and now the Wardens were patrolling the country to make certain that none had got away. Steren glanced at her, but Danith saw no reason to terrorize these innocent people by informing them that there was a nearby door to the underworld: a door that might be all that kept back a black tide of death.

They spoke of the horrible news of the Tevinter slavers, and the city elves asked how badly the Denerim Alienage had been affected. Danith disliked the subject, but could repeat some of what she had learned.

"The Teyrn of Highever drove the slavers out, and killed the shemlen lord who was their confederate. Nearly half the Alienage of Denerim was sold, and the Alienage of Highever was completely destroyed."

Murmurs of grief and horror rose, but they had already heard much of this. Danith was only confirming the rumors.

One of the older elves declared, "At least we need fear nothing of that sort. Teyrn Loghain will protect us."

"Elves can also protect themselves," Danith told him. "According to the king's will, land will be given to the Dalish for a homeland. Our city cousins will be welcome there, when the war is over."

"To live like a wild beast in the forest, eating raw meat and berries..." the man said, clearly horrified.

"We are wild beasts?" Danith said, with ominous calm, pushing back from the table and rising to her feet. "If that is your opinion of us, I am astonished that you would invite us into your fine city house. Come Steren; Nuala. We did not fight the darkspawn at Ostagar to be insulted by flat ears."

"That was rude!" Indrianni hissed in the old elf's ear. "Stay, I beg you!" she implored Danith. "We are all elves, after all."

Danith stayed, but the evening never warmed up after that, Indrianni asked her questions, and Danith gave her the basic shape of the news.

"The land will probably be north of here, in a stretch of the Brecilian Forest, centered around an ancient building that was once a center of elven culture. There is talk of founding a town nearby. I have been there. Some repairs will be necessary, but there is much of beauty in it, and it is larger than Gwaren Keep."

They did not believe her. They did not believe that elves could have built anything to rival the largest building most of them had ever seen. She could see it in their closed faces. They did not believe that she had been presented to the Queen, though they admired her silver cloak pin that had been the Queen's gift.

What of her story did they credit? They believed that the three strangers were indeed Grey Wardens, as they had been admitted to the Keep, and as Danith was wearing a griffon-embroidered tabard of fine cloth. Since they were Wardens, it was accepted that they had seen the famous Girl Warden. They were willing to believe that Danith had seen the Queen, and they asked after her. Some of the older elves had seen Anora in her youth, for some had served at the Keep in the days of Teyrna Celia ("Maker rest her sweet soul.") It was some comfort to see that a few of the younger folk, crowding by the door or peering around the corner, did not look so incredulous. A few beautiful, precious children gazed on her, eyes enormous. There was still hope for them, if they could be got away from this vile slum.

The adults, however, were hopeless. The darkspawn were only a fable to them, as they lived their downtrodden lives within city walls, the only tree they knew the vhenandahl in the Alienage. It was hard to believe that people like Tara, like Adaia had come from this kind of background. Of course, the Denerim hahren had not been so ignorant.

They left early. Danith did not talk at length of the Grey

Wardens, nor did she repeat the story of the Hero Garahel, which she had learned by heart and had intended to share. Perhaps another night, or another group of elves would be more suitable. She had never imagined that she would be eager to leave the company of elves, in order to return to the castle of a shemlen nobleman; but at the moment she felt she had more in common with Loghain Mac Tir, warrior against the darkspawn and friend of Maynriel and Thanovir, than she did with those who shared her blood and the elegant shape of her ears.

Their fellow Wardens were in the small chamber that had been given to the Wardens' use for meals and council. Idunn and Ketil were playing that game with a checked board and carved pieces that dwarves and humans found of endless interest. Everyone was sitting around the table, looking over the dwarves' shoulders, and praising them or urging new strategies.

Niall looked up and smiled. "Did you have a good time at the Alienage?"

"I had always heard that they were horrible places," Steren replied briefly. "But now I can speak from experience, and give my own opinion."

"Which is?"

"They are horrible places. The flat ears called us wild beasts and all but called us liars when we spoke of the Dalish land grant."

"Well, we believe you," young Quinn said cheerfully.

"And my mum says not to mind name-calling. People call me 'bean-pole' and 'carrot-top,' but I reckon they're just jealous. And they haven't even seen the halla! Then they'd *really* be jealous!"

"That is true," Nuala said softly, rather mollified. "And to speak more of the halla, Danith, it would be best if we left soon. I mistrust the servitors in the stables."

"We leave tomorrow," Danith decreed. "At first light. We shall go directly to the Deep Roads entrance, and when finished there, we shall turn north at once. Now explain to me this game called 'chess' again."

Levi had to be dealt with, sooner rather than later. On sober reflection, Bronwyn decided to leave the treasure at Soldier's Peak under the watchful eye of Avernus. She took some of the Archdemon blood, and a purse of a hundred sovereigns. There was cloth to be bought for more Warden tabards, and embroideresses to be paid. There was a payroll to be met, and yet more impressive weapons to be commissioned from Master Wade.

And on the march home they could not guard the chest every moment. There was first the detour to Drake's Fall, and they were forced to leave the wagon and horses behind, and make the last mile entirely on foot.

Drake's Fall was an old Tevinter fortress: established in the days of their power as a base for the equally profitable trades in dragon bone and human flesh. The land around



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it was nearly uninhabited these days, and in fact the Wardens came across no other people on their march to the sprawling edifice. The weather had turned to cold rain, and a mist lay over the ground, partly concealing the bones of ancient dragons thrusting up through the earth. There was money to be had in Drake's Fall, had one the nerve to dig in the haunted hills and ravines. The Grey Wardens did not lack nerve, but they were too pressed for time. Perhaps on another occasion...

"A graveyard of dragons!" Morrigan exclaimed. "Few and far between in Thedas!"

Rendon Howe had talked about renovating the ancient castle and giving it to Bronwyn as a dower house. Another reason to give thanks that she never let herself be talked into a marriage with his son Thomas. Soldier's Peak, given time and coin, could be made liveable: she was not sure the same could be said for Drake's Fall. It was not designed in anything resembling a normal way: it was more like an enormous prison, with long descending staircases and inescapable rooms far underground where no doubt the dragonbone and slaves were stored until they could be shipped. There had been trade with the dwarves, too, which was why there was an entrance to the Deep Roads there. Everything was an absolute shambles: ceilings collapsed in places, pillars toppled, floors cracked. It probably could be restored, but restored to what? It was the ancient abode of Tevinter magisters, and looked it. It might do as



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a militia base. Transforming it into a home would be far more problematic.

There was no furniture in the castle. A few trunks and chests were tucked away, filled mostly with rubbish and occasionally with small, exquisite objects or curious crystals. In one of the chests, they found an old square Tevinter gold solidus, stuck by unidentifiable goo to the side. Leliana used the tip of her dagger to pry it loose. What remained were fragments of a forgotten past. No one had lived here in many years.

The entrance to the Deep Roads was found, deep in the cellar, and then carefully unsealed. Hakan and Soren had learned the protocols in their time with the Legion of the Dead. There were no marks on the underside of the seal to indicate the the darkspawn had actively attempted to force their way out. The stone-and-metal hatches were marked with runes of great virtue. Bronwyn made notes, and a copy of the rune on the Drake's Fall entrance. The dwarven name was Kal Tunsha, and a small trading outpost had been located there: an offshoot of the big nearby thaig Kal'Hirol.

"There's *something* down here," was Anders' opinion, after slipping down the narrow spiral stairs by the hatch. "Not strong or close, but something."

"To the south?" Leliana guessed.

"It would be logical," Bronwyn agreed. "Kal'Hirol is that way, and we know it was overrun by the darkspawn long ago."

"Not much of anything, I think," said Jowan. "Nothing like enough to come swarming up. That's... good, isn't it?"

They followed the the tunnels for about a mile, not sensing very much. The Taint here was old. The junior Wardens sensed nothing at all.

A mile was enough to establish that there was no dangerous activity nearby. They climbed to the surface, carefully resealed the entrance, touched the rune, and were off, in cheerful pursuit of Levi and the horses.

There was no sign of darkspawn in the Gwaren Deep Roads at all. None.

Danith had heard quite of bit of the story of this entrance from Maynriel, who had served with Loghain during the Rebellion against the Orlesians. Loghain, the old king, and a portion of the Legion of the Dead had traveled by way of the Deep Roads across Ferelden, all the way from West Hill in the northwest to Gwaren in the southeast. They had done this to evade the Orlesians, who Maynriel thought were the worst of shemlens, aside from the Tevinters. They did not admit to enslaving elves, though their customs allowed them to treat elves as slaves in all but name. The Dales, after all, had been in what was now Orlesian territory. It was the greed of the Orlesian chevaliers, coupled with the fanaticism of the shemlen Chantry, that had led to the invasion and destruction of the Dales: the land granted the elves by their own Prophet.

So Loghain had led the army through the Deep Roads in those days. Whatever they had done had scoured this

end of them clean.

Danith ordered Idunn and Ketil to unseal the entrance, and they peered down, down, trying to make out anything by the stray shafts of sunlight that could penetrate the opening. Much of the Deep Roads, she had learned, was illuminated by the ancient lamps of the dwarves that, if not utterly smashed, burned forever. Since she sensed no immediate threat, she led her party to the wide and pillared space that marked the southeastern terminus of the dwarven kingdom. Stone houses remained, crumbling and deserted.

"Gwaren means 'Salt-Marsh' in the common speech," Idunn told them. "This used to be an important trading post."

"It's a fine, big place," whispered Quinn reverently.

"Never thought I'd see this end of the Deep Roads," muttered Ketil. "'S not bad, is it? Aren't we supposed to feel darkspawn? I don't."

Danith reached out, trying to feel what she had felt that ghastly day when facing the Broodmothers.

Nothing.

"I feel no darkspawn at all," she admitted. "Perhaps they have not come this way since the days of Teyrn Loghain and the Legion of the Dead. Perhaps the Archdemon is not interested in this place."

To her relief, there were none of the loathsome signs of a breeding ground: no tendrils, no spongy matter, no bulging, pulsing sacs. Nor were there the other common dangers of the Deep Roads, about which she had been warned.

No chittering deepstalkers attacked them, and the only spider webs they saw were either very small, or very dusty and old. Of the giant species of spider there was no sign.

Idunn tapped the copy of the map copied in the Shaperate. "It's not much good any more," she confessed. "The darkspawn dug a lot of tunnels here."

"Chart what you can. We'll stick to the original Deep Roads for now. We might as well go in a little farther."

Quinn grinned broadly. "We could walk all the way to Ostagar, if it's all like this! Never get rained on, either!"

They went far indeed, far enough that they grew weary and camped there in the Deep Roads. According to the map, they were within a day's march of where the Roads forked, north to the Amgarrak Road, and west to Ostagar. While there seemed to be no threats, and no sound other than the distant drip of water through stone, not everyone was comfortable with underground life.

Maeve whispered to Danith, "How can dwarves stand to live like this, with tons and tons of stone overhead? It could collapse at any moment!"

Danith really, really wished that Maeve had not said that, for she felt exactly the same.

Niall overheard them and whispered back. "Think of it as an old castle with a really high ceiling. Then it's not so nerve-wracking!"

Maeve, uncomforted, muttered, "The ceilings of old castles could collapse at any moment, too!"

Nuala sighed and put her arm over her eyes, breathing slowly and evenly to ward off panic. Steren took her in his arms and talked very softly, recalling the spring sky, and the stars twinkling through new leaves.

Aron Kendells made his first visit to Bryland House shortly after the departure of the Couslands from Denerim. Clad in his best clothes, freshly washed and closely shaved, he still did not quite meet Habren's standards for a nobleman.

"He's such a *bumpkin!*" she tittered to her maid afterward. "Such a clodhopper! I confess I did not expect him to be such a brute – to be so utterly clownish. Did you see the way he bowed? The size of his boots? I expect they'd look more normal if they were completely covered in mud! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Her father was not so put off by Aron's lack of courtly polish. The reports he had about the big, strong-featured young man in front of him told of hard work, careful use of the resources at hand, no vicious habits that had made for talk – no drinking bouts, no whoring, no careless spending – not even when he had first inherited his nice little freehold. Granted, there were also reports that he was a stony-hard bargainer, and capable of holding a serious grudge.

Wanting to understand something of his personality, Bryland had also inquired into how the young man treated his younger siblings. There was some tension between him and the younger brother, who disliked being ordered about – very normal, of course. The two

young sisters, one twelve and the other nine, were at the Chantry school in Oswin, scrambling into a bit of education. Bryland liked that. Chantry school education was not cheap, and it showed a nice concern for the girls. Besides, if they were going to be living a very different kind of life now, they needed proper preparation for it.

"A pity you didn't bring your brother and sisters," he said genially, ushering the tall young man into his study. "I'd like to get to know them."

"Someone has to look after the farm," Aron replied, his square-jawed face impassive. "The cows need milking, and the girls need their schooling. If something better to comes to me, there'll be plenty of time for them to come to the city."

A good, frank talk ensued. In fact, Bryland was a bit taken back by how matter-of-fact the young freeholder was. The Arling of Denerim was a great prize: the Arl of Denerim was a great man in Ferelden.

"If it's rightfully mine," Aron said briefly, "then it's right that I claim it. I'd be a fool, else. Nobody takes what's mine away from me."

All very proper, Bryland granted, but he pointed out the contentious nature of the Landsmeet. There would be others looking with greedy eyes at Denerim. An unknown young man might require support from influential friends to put his claim beyond dispute. Bryland explained that he was just such a friend, and made his price for such influence explicit. Aron must take as his wife Habren Bryland Kendells, Dowager Arlessa of Denerim.

Aron Kendells frowned thoughtfully at that.

"I saw her at the door when I arrived. A very fine-looking young lady. A widow, though. I don't care for another man's leavings."

Bryland did not permit himself to express his dislike of this very crude way of speaking, when Habren's prize was just within reach.

"The marriage was not consummated. The attack took place at the wedding feast, where Arl Urien was fatally wounded."

Another thoughtful frown followed, and then a slow nod. "All right. I'll take her. Should we wed before or after the Landsmeet?"

"Before," Bryland told him, with limpid mildness. "If you're married to Habren, no one will seriously challenge your confirmation. The wedding will, of course, be very quiet, given that Habren will not be out of mourning until next month."

"Quiet is fine with me."

"It's very important that you become known to the rest of the Landsmeet. We'll start small. Perhaps a dinner tomorrow night, and then, in a few days, the Satinalia ball at the palace. You can attend as my guest. There will be a number of events leading up to the marriage of Teyrn Loghain and Lady Bronwyn Cousland. It would be wise to make yourself known to those two individuals. Their goodwill is important to you."

Bronwyn had her talk with Levi Dryden is a private little

chamber at Vigil's Keep. They would be back in Denerim in two days and she would be busy then. Better to do it now. The trader was very unhappy. He had gone looking for vindication, and instead found out that Sophia Dryden was guilty of everything she had been accused of, and more.

"All I wanted was to clear our name. Reckon that will never happen, now."

"Perhaps..." Bronwyn looked at him with some sympathy. He had led her to a fortune in gold and information, and deserved some substantial reward for it. "Perhaps it would be best to set the past aside and focus on the future. Nothing can be done to rehabilitate a woman who lived two hundred years ago; but what happened is old news now, forgotten by most. Devote yourself to making your family's name honorable by your own deeds, and let the past bury the past."

"We're traders now, we Drydens," he said, dejected. "Our family's belief that we were wronged... it gave us strength to make something of ourselves. Still, we're not warriors. My cousin Mikhael is a blacksmith."

"Is he skilled?" Bronwyn asked.

"Mikhael? First-class. Loves his work. Makes a fair living, but with all the competition in Denerim..."

"The Wardens could use a blacksmith at the Peak," Bronwyn remarked. "I would like to see your cousin's work, but if he is as skilled as you say, he could have a permanent position with the Wardens. And we'll need a sutler, too.

Wardens fight, and cannot spare the time for carting supplies back and forth and arranging repairs..."

"I could do that!" Levi burst out. "I could bring the family up there and settle in one of the outbuildings. Get the forge going, and set up a nice little shop..." he paused, his brow anxious. "Need some capital to fix everything up, but I can make that twenty sovereigns go pretty far."

"And I was certainly going to pay you for all your time and trouble," Bronwyn told him, liking this more positive attitude. The Peak would need work, certainly, and it would be best to have some of their own people established there. "Another fifty sovereigns. I would strongly advise you to stay away from the mages' tower, however. Warden Avernus would not care for intruders!"

Levi's eyes were the size of trencher-plates. "No fear! Wouldn't dream of going near that old devil! We'll keep the little ones away, too."

"I think that's best. The main thing is to give the castle a good cleaning and get some supplies carted up there. Get the ground floor fit for habitation. Perhaps one of your relations can do a bit of carpentering, too? Good. I'll want to post a few Wardens there, once they report in from their patrols. Toliver says that the blacksmith shop has lodging above it. And the building next door to the stables might do for a sutler's store." She had another idea. "I know some other people I might send up there as guards. It might be best to see if you could settle in before winter.

Do you think it possible?"

"Possible?" he was on his feet, arms waving, his sallow face flushed with excitement. "O' course! We Drydens... we're *tough*. I'll talk to the family as soon I get back. Possible? I should bloody well say so!"

It would not be a large dinner, but the guests were a list of powerful Landsmeet figures. The absence of the Couslands and Arl Nathaniel did not mean there was no social life in Denerim.

Leonas Bryland had great hopes of this evening. Habren would spend time with Aron Kendells, which he had decided was a very good idea. Habren might want to be an Arlessa more than anything in the world, but her father also wanted her to be happy. Aron Kendells was in many ways a very respectable young man, but Bryland was not at all sure that he and Habren were compatible.

Wulffe would attend, along with his eldest son Rothgar, called to Denerim for the purpose. It was a shame that the younger boy must stay at home, but with so much chaos, Wulffe was uneasy leaving it all to a steward. Bryland felt the mild rebuke, and admitted to himself that he had been gone too long from South Reach. But there was so much to do: the war, the darkspawn, the Orlesians making trouble, Habren's woes, the King's death, the Landsmeet. Everything needed to be *settled*.

It was awkward planning such an affair without Werberga, too. He had sometimes been exasperated with his

sister, but he could see now how much work she had done for him. It pained him that he would never have the chance to express his gratitude to her. Now he was being hounded by servants about menus and decorations, about Satinalia gifts and quarterly wages. Habren was too distressed by the tragedy on the seventh to take hold as the mistress of the household.

Another reason to keep the guest list to the minimum. The Queen, Loghain, Wulffe and young Rothgar, Habren, Aron Kendells. On looking at the list, Bryland became uncomfortably aware that it was rather heavy on the masculine side. A number of the nearby banns had gone home to celebrate Satinalia. Who could he invite to balance the table?

Who but those charming ladies from Highever House? Mistress Bethany had visited a number of times, making certain that Lothar was perfectly well. If he was not mistaken, she was coming today.

"Down, Killer!" Corbus commanded. "No paws on ladies' dresses!"

Bethany enjoyed her visits to Bryland House. The little boys were always happy to see her. Their tutor was less enthusiastic, but perfectly polite. They talked, they played with the adorable puppy. In fair weather they practiced archery in the courtyard, and when it rained they drew, and built castles with elaborate building blocks. The Arl, when he was available, was the most affable of hosts, always calling for refreshments, and even joining them

in the boys' schoolroom.

The loveliest presents had been sent to her: thankful gifts from grateful well-wishers. A gold and ivory inkstand, a bolt of rose velvet, a brooch set with emeralds. From the Arl had come a beautiful silver goblet, chased with a band of running mabaris. Mother had the rose velvet made up for Bethany immediately, loving the rich color and silky texture. It was being kept back for Satinalia, when they were invited to the feast and ball at the Palace.

Lothar's shoulder was perfectly fine now, but somehow there was always another invitation. The Arl was concerned about Bethany's safety, and thus always sent a servant to escort her to and from Bryland House. Lately, the visits had included Charade, once Bethany had told them what a fine archer her cousin was, and how she had protected her father when they escaped from Kirkwall.

Lady Habren was not present at these gatherings. The Arl said she was in deep mourning, and staying mostly in her own apartments. Bethany was very sorry for her, unable to imagine how she would feel if her bridegroom was killed the very day of their wedding. It was so tragic. Something like that had happened to one of Carver's fellow Wardens, but he hadn't given Bethany all the details. They lived in terrible times.

Today the Arl dropped in on them, smiling, and mentioned that he was holding a dinner for the heir to the Arling of Denerim.

"Just a few friends," he said easily. "I don't want to drive

the fellow away. It occurred to me that it might be a pleasant thing for you ladies, cooped up alone at Highever House. I'll call on your mother, Lady Amell, and invite her later today. It was remiss of me not to make myself known to her before, but we've all been desperately busy."

"I'm sure my mother would enjoy it very much, my lord," Bethany said.

Charade refrained from rolling her eyes. Probably, they'd never hear the last of how they had dined with "our friend the Arl of South Reach."

Leonas Bryland was as good as his word. In the course of his busy afternoon, he stopped at Highever House, and asked to see Lady Amell. Once ushered into her sitting room, he made his bows and extended his invitation, looking with surprised pleasure at the woman before him.

He should not have been surprised by her good looks. Her daughter and niece were remarkably pretty girls. Perhaps he had only expected a pleasant woman of a certain age. Instead, he was introduced to a woman whose face was still sweet and youthful, and framed with prematurely silver hair. Her manners were charming, her gown elegant, and her mild, well-bred voice commanded the servants with ease. A noble Marcher lady... Bryland began a rapid revision of his personal plans. Once Habren was married, he really must have someone to order his household and act as hostess. And if she were as kind to

his boys as her daughter was...

He was looking forward to the dinner very much.

The Dowager Queen of Ferelden and the General of her Armies were in private council. While the Couslands pacified the north of the country, there was much to do elsewhere.

"Tonight should be interesting," Anora remarked. "I hope for Arl Bryland's sake that his dinner for the prospective Arl of Denerim goes well."

Loghain snorted. "The dinner for his daughter's prospective husband! He certainly hasn't wasted any time."

"Habren expects to find purpose in her life by marriage. She certainly isn't the first young woman to feel that way."

Loghain took the broad hint. "I suppose I can assume," he said, "that you have decided to pursue an alliance with Fergus Cousland."

"There's no need to look so cross about it, Father," Anora said, with a hint of impertinence. "You suggested it. I happen to think it a very, very good idea."

"It's a good idea as long as you keep your head and don't make more of it than it is!"

"That is to say," Anora said, her pretty face hardening. "that you would prefer I feel nothing for him and treat him as a dupe rather than as a spouse! Is that your intention with Bronwyn?" With conscious dignity, she collected herself, sat down, and smoothed her skirts. "I've had quite enough of dupes, Father. I believe a partner would be far more agree-

able... and efficient. I have reason to believe that Fergus is attracted to me and respects me. That is an excellent basis for a serious relationship – far better than basing a relationship on the friendship between my father and his!"

Those words cut deep. Loghain sighed and turned away, looking out the window. "You didn't always despise Cailan."

"No," she agreed. "I didn't. I didn't allow myself to look at him objectively, since he was my destined husband. I refused to acknowledge all the ways that it was bound to go wrong. I closed my eyes to his womanizing and his fecklessness and his self-absorption. I persuaded myself that they were irrelevant, since no matter who he slept with, I would always be Queen. But, as you see, Father, that's not exactly how it played out. I should have learned my lesson when he and I were children. Whenever anyone dangled something new and shiny before him, he forgot all his old toys. And so it was with our marriage."

"I know," Loghain said wearily, "that it became a state marriage. But Cailan did feel something for you."

"Not much, and not for long," Anora said, the words opening old wounds. "He was perfectly willing to get rid of me in order to be an Emperor. He had to know that I would have to be killed, and that you would have to be killed. How do you think I feel, realizing that the last time he was in Denerim, he was already planning my disposal? He didn't care. But Fergus Cousland climbed the Chantry to save me, and carried me out in his arms. Can you actually picture

Cailan doing anything of the sort? Successfully?"

"I take it, then, that you've reconciled yourself to being Teyrna of Highever."

"And Chancellor of the kingdom, if that offer still stands. Have you told Bronwyn?"

"She did not seem averse to the idea."

Loghain said nothing more about that. Who could foretell the future? He had made his share of predictions, and most had not played out as he had hoped. Anora should accept that they were all playthings of Fate. What if Cousland got Anora with child? She, too, when presented with something new and splendid, might set aside her former ambitions.

"Have you and Cousland settled it between you?"

"Not yet. Father, I've been widowed for less than two months! I've given considerable thought to the matter. By the statues of the kingdom, any child of a widowed queen born within a year of the king's death is deemed to be the King's. I suppose I could have tried that with some strapping servitor, but it would have blow up in my face like one of your dwarven lyrium bombs."

She paused at the shocked, revolted expression on her father's face. Did he still think of her as a child? Or did he imagine she would have seriously considered such a scheme? Such an ugly, *stupid* scheme?

More mildly, she said, "Fergus and I cannot marry until the beginning of Guardian at the earliest. But yes, we will speak, and speak plainly to one another on his return. Let

us set the matter aside for now."

There was much else to consider. There was the matter of the raid on Gherlen's Halt. When the news had first come, there had been little Loghain could do about it. Now however, he had decided to strengthen the garrison. Haglin had arrived in good time, and his rescue of the garrison had thoroughly rehabilitated him in Loghain's eyes.

The Empress must know by now – or would soon know – that her schemes earlier in the month had failed. Loghain lived, and Bronwyn lived. Anora lived and was still Queen. The Landmeet had been savaged, but the attack had stiffened their resistance. The Chantry's Orlesian agents were locked away in Fort Drakon. No one would dare put forth a pro-Orlesian policy at the Landsmeet.

Winter was almost upon them. Historically, the Orlesians had never launched a winter offensive. They relied so much on their horses that snowy mountain passes were impenetrable. Furthermore, they would not risk their warships on the Waking Sea at this time of year. No doubt they would send more agents, but Ferelden was safe from a major assault for at least a few months.

Perhaps he should go out to the border. Not now: that was impossible. But as soon as he was married, or perhaps right after Satinalia. he should take a look at the fortifications himself. In the meantime, he would send out reinforcements, plenty of supplies to see the border forts through the winter, and some of Dworkin Glavonak's

fierce new inventions. They should work as well against Orlesians as they did against the darkspawn.

Bronwyn wanted to talk to her brother about his evident attraction to Queen Anora. She had wanted to talk to him ever since her eyes were opened to it, but she was very uncomfortable with the subject.

Oriana had been killed in early Bloomingtide. Fergus had lost his son and heir, darling little Oren. Ordinarily a year would be considered the minimum period of mourning, but of course Fergus needed an heir, and as soon as possible.

And the King was not two months dead! Anora had every reason to be angry at her late husband, but few others knew that, and many would be shocked if she immediately took up with another man – even one who had rescued her in such a heroic and romantic way.

And while she rather liked Anora, Bronwyn was not sure she would be the kind of wife that Fergus needed: she certainly would be nothing like Oriana: sweet, refined, bringing him specially brewed herbal tea of an evening. Anora was an educated, intelligent, cultivated woman, yes: but she was also calculating, proud, and fiercely ambitious.

Of course, being Teyrna of Highever might satisfy some of that drive to power, but it would be power shared with Fergus, who would not leave it all to her, as Cailan had.

There was also the essential qualification. Could Anora give Fergus an heir? She had failed to produce a prince of

Ferelden. While that might indeed be attributed to some lack of Cailan's, it was still something to raise concerns.

Last of all, and deeply, deeply troubling: did Anora feel anything for Fergus, or was she simply seizing on the future heir presumptive to the throne in a preemptive power grab? The thought of Fergus trapped in a loveless marriage was beyond painful.

On the ride from Vigil's Keep, she finally forced herself to speak. Behind them, Adam Hawke was in conversation with Nathaniel Howe about the harbor fees on Marcher imports. Bronwyn took a deep breath and said, with pitifully false ease, "So... you and Anora?"

He grinned at her, seeing through her in an instant. "Could be. We'll have to see. It's early days yet. She's a splendid woman."

"I agree. As long as she makes you happy. It's just that..."

He raised his brows, "What?"

"She and Loghain are so close... so much in each other's counsels. Occasionally I wonder if there's room for anyone else."

"He seems to have made room for you. I think Anora can be similarly flexible... with the right encouragement."

"That sounds vaguely indecent."

He laughed. "I hope so!"

The dwarves had made an efficient camp on the shores of Lake Belennas. Tents were erected, latrines dug, and food prepared. Nonetheless, no one was particularly happy or com-

fortable. In Orzammar, there was no such thing as weather. Up on the surface, there seemed to be nothing else.

A sentry gave a shout.

"They're coming!"

"Not before time," growled the commanding officer. A motley group of Wardens came over the crest of the nearby hill, led by an elf and the woman who had once been the daughter of the King of Orzammar.

"You were supposed to be here on the *twenty-third*, Wardens!" Rodyk, Captain of the Legion of the Dead, gave the late arrivals a hard look, which melted into a gape of awe at the sight of what was towering over the dwarves, the elves, and even the humans.

Astrid smirked. "Sorry for the delay. We took a detour, and now we have a golem!"

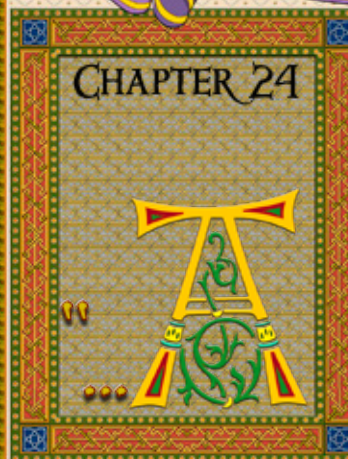
Crystals glittering in the noonday sun, an army in itself, Shale lumbered forward, stopping only inches from the shocked and intimidated dwarves.

"Am I expected to take a bow?" Shale asked. "Make a speech? Yes, it does seem to expect something of the sort. At least it probably does not expect us to perform death-defying tricks, like the village idiots of Redcliffe."

"Yes, he does," Tara said airily. "Maybe not tricks, but definitely things of the death-defying persuasion. Everybody expects that of Wardens."

CHAPTER 24

SATINALIA



AND TEYRN LOGHAIN SENT WORD, WANTING YOU TO REPORT TO HIM AS SOON AS POSSIBLE."

Bronwyn, elated to come back to Denerim the day before Satinalia and find so much done for her, kissed Mistress Rannelly's rosy, withered cheek.

"Dearest Rannelly, you are a queen amongst housekeepers. I really tore my hair, worrying about the Satinalia gifts."

Bronwyn dashed out to the courtyard and then round to the steps leading to the upper palace. What a relief! Rannelly had seen to everything just as she wanted: gifts for the Compound servants, gifts for the Wolf clan, and gifts for the Wardens, all already purchased and beribboned, and waiting in her room to be presented tomorrow.

Certain gifts she had seen to herself. For Loghain, who quite simply had everything he could ever need or want, she had commissioned the carving of an exquisite little dragon, left over from a piece of Flemeth's flayed bones. It looked quite jaunty with a little bow of green ribbon tied around its long red neck. It was a frivolous gift on the sur-

face; not so frivolous after a moment's thought.

It was, after all, customary to give sensible, useful, or expensively decorative gifts to servants or friends who were not on the same footing in society. Among the aristocracy, it was considered more appropriate to give pretty or amusing trifles.

For that reason, in Amaranthine, she had snapped up the ridiculous Black Fox chess set for Fergus. How many times as children had they acted out that rascal's adventures?

Anora's gift required more care and tact. Bronwyn was not certain that Anora's sense of humor was equal to Highever-style presents and pranks. She must be indoctrinated in it, but carefully. Therefore, Bronwyn dug into her chest of loot and selected something she had found in Orzammar: a little dwarven figurine representing a paragon, cast in silver. It was of the Paragon Varen, the one who had discovered that nuggs were edible, so there would be an anecdote to tell about it, in her note enclosed with the gift. A plump crystal nugg stood by the paragon's left foot.

For the rest of her noble friends she had other keepsakes and oddities, amethyst geodes, curious boxes of malachite, silver paperweights in the form of mabarais, of bears, of horses. And of griffons, of course.

But all these would be given tomorrow. Now she must see Loghain, and then dress for the Satinalia Eve service in the Cathedral. Her new green gown, she supposed, so she could wear the more vivid, festive red one tomorrow.

Scout trotted in ahead of her, tail wagging, glad to see

Loghain. Scout had always liked Loghain. As was typical, Loghain greeted the dog and gave him a scratch behind the ears before turning his attention to Bronwyn. He granted her a slight smile and a grave kiss.

"You look well. You found everything you were looking for?"

He led her to the settee by the fire. It was all infinitely preferable to him interrogating her from behind his desk. He even poured her some Antivan brandy. That was very welcome. The last days in the saddle had been cold. She took a warming sip, and told her story.

"Surprisingly yes. And more. The fortress was not a crumbling ruin, but in fairly good condition. No, I don't mean it was currently the abode of foreign infiltrators. The demons had preserved it with their magic. We slaughtered them and the mages repaired the Veil. The castle is no longer magically preserved, so now we'll have to maintain it in the ordinary way. With a modicum of coin and effort, it can be made quite habitable. It might be very useful as a training garrison, since it's not far from that entrance to the Deep Roads in Amaranthine. I must look up the exact land grant that was attached to it. I dare say it's not much, but it would be nice to have pasturage for our horses, at least."

"Hmph!" Loghain was not pleased at the idea of giving the Grey Wardens so much as an acre of Fereldan soil. He wondered what Nathaniel Howe would think of it. Any territory held by the Grey Wardens would be his loss.

"And what about that Archdemon blood of yours?"

Bronwyn felt very smug. "Found it! The old Wardens had hidden it behind a wall. While we were scouring out the demons, I put my foot through the place. They had the Archdemon blood preserved there, along with their old correspondence and recruiting records. The latter are of interest only to antiquarians now, of course, but I plan on reading it all. I'd love to know if the First Warden then was as distant and unhelpful as his successor today."

"As you say, of antiquarian interest only. You've made it clear that the head of your order will not lift a finger to aid us. The question is, to what degree will he seek to *harm* us?"

"I don't think he will at all. Not directly anyway, since that, too, would require effort and resources. He might not mind if someone else did, of course."

"What about the Deep Roads entrance?"

"Nothing going on there. We sensed darkspawn, but only faintly. They haven't used the entrance to reach the surface. It can be marked off the list of possible dangers, at least for now. So what's happened here since I've been gone?"

"Politics and more politics, of course. The night before last we met the Kendells claimant for Denerim."

"What did you think?"

Loghain's face soured. "I suppose he'll do. For those who think blood is everything, he'll have to do."

"You were unimpressed."

"I was unimpressed. Not a fool, but not someone raised to administer our capital city. I should be the last one to

denigrate a Fereldan freeholder, but I'm not sure the fellow will have much interest in urban problems. He has ... "

Loghain paused, brows knit. "no ideas. No great plans. It's just another sort of farm to him, with profits to be wrung from it. Bryland is backing him, but only because Kendells has agreed to take on Habren."

"Ugh! Poor fellow."

"I know that you dislike her, but possibly 'poor Habren.' The man has a hard look to him."

"Maker!" Alarmed, Bronwyn sat up straight. "You don't suppose he's another Vaughan, do you?" Briefly, she thought about her schemes for improving the Alienage, and hoped that this stranger would not hinder them... or follow in the footsteps of his predecessor.

He dismissed that with a wave of his hand. "No. I wouldn't say that about any man without knowing him better. He's a respectable, hard-working farmer, from all accounts. I'll say this, he looked Habren over like a brood mare at a horse dealer's. He all but examined her teeth —" He broke off, with a harsh laugh. "Well, for all I know, he did that, too. They sat next to each other and talked a bit. He might have managed it then."

"He'd do better to examine her temper, rather than her teeth! Still, it sounds like he'll do his best, and not simply squander his tax income. What about the rest of the family?"

"We don't know. He didn't bring them with him. The little girls are in school. The younger brother is back at

the farm. I told Kendells that the Landsmeet will want a good look at them, as they're heirs presumptive. He didn't like it, but agreed to send for them. Complained bitterly about having to hire a tenant to farm the freehold. Mind you, in his shoes I wouldn't care for it, either."

He could have said more. In point of fact, he did not like Aron Kendells at all. Had he grown vain in his old age? It had rankled a bit, just the least bit, when the man was presented to him and showed not the merest hint of being impressed. That had not happened to Loghain in a long, long time. The man was not impressed much by any of them, other than obviously noting Anora's physical beauty, and the prettiness of the young girls at the table. Instead, his manner reminded Loghain once again of a horse dealer... or perhaps more of a shrewd card player, assessing the other players for weaknesses, noting their 'tells,' pursuing his own advantage with no regard for the rest of the world.

How could he explain to a daughter of the Couslands, the descendant of generations of high nobility, that he did not think a man like Aron Kendells — a man whose only claim rested in an accident of birth — belonged in the Landsmeet at all? He was a sound freeholder. Well and good. That gave him no qualifications whatever to rule Denerim. He had no ties there... no love for the city and its people. In fact, like many Bannorn peasants, he had a real antipathy toward city folk. Loghain knew all about that, and had grown up with such ideas stuffed in his head,

until the Rebellion had knocked them out of him.

Aron Kendells did not care about Denerim, nor did he feel any responsibility toward it. He would collect his rents and his taxes and not a copper would escape his eye. He would vote his personal interest in the Landsmeet, never considering the greater good. Maker knew that the Landsmeet already had too many nobles like that. All in all, though it disgusted him to admit it even to himself, he would rather see a rank opportunist like Adam Hawke in the Landsmeet than Aron Kendells. Hawke, at least, had risked himself in battle for the country's welfare. Kendells had the look of a man who never risked anything.

Perhaps he was being too particular. Perhaps he had become snobbish as well as vain. Kendells was an outsider, and a fresh eye might well see much to scorn in Denerim. The man had not been indoctrinated in the fine art of courtly bootlicking, after all. Even if he became no more than a tight-fisted, hard-working landlord, he would be superior to many in the Landsmeet. Loghain had no illusions about the Fereldan nobility. For every Rendorn Guerrin, sacrificing wealth and security for his country's freedom, there was a Rendon Howe. For every Rowan or Bronwyn, there were a dozen empty-headed Habren Brylands, good only for spending coin.

Bronwyn's voice roused him from his thoughts.

"Was anything interesting said over the dinner?"

"What? Oh, the usual rubbish. The guests were more

interesting than the conversation. Bryland thinks a lot of that Hawke mage girl, you know. Actually invited her to dinner, along with her mother and her cousin. I hadn't met any of them before. They're all extremely good-looking."

"I agree. A remarkably handsome family. The girls, especially, are very nice — very decent. It's bold of Bryland, accepting a mage on a social basis. And I thought I was the radical!"

"The Hawkes are certainly on the rise. Habren was very haughty with them, but I got the distinct impression that Wulffe was encouraging his son to pursue the cousin."

"Charade?" Bronwyn thought that over. "It's true there aren't a lot of appealing marital prospects of suitable age, unless Rothgar marries someone very young and waits a few years. But no: Wulffe is greedy for grandchildren and wouldn't like that."

"Bryland seemed to be doing his best to show the girl in a good light. He had his young boys brought in to meet us after dinner, probably to show Wulffe how good the Hawke women were with children. And they were: I have to grant that. It seemed sincere, too."

"I hope he understands that Charade hasn't a dowry. She and her father lost everything when they left Kirkwall. At least that was my understanding."

"With her cousin proposed for the city of Amaranthine, perhaps Wulffe feels he can get something later." Loghain snorted. "And thus, he's likely to support Hawke for the bannorn for just that reason!"

Bronwyn began laughing, carelessly draping herself

over Loghain. Her thick long braid of dark hair trailed down across his hand and over the arm of the settee. Amused but puzzled, Loghain gave the braid a tug.

"It's not all that funny."

"No," she said, wiping away tears. "It's not. Carver will absolutely go raving mad if his brother is made a Bann. Lots of sibling rivalry there. I feel for him, but it's just too ironic."

"I've never understood sibling rivalry at all. I always wished for a brother. Surely they understand that they're stronger together!"

"I don't suppose you do. You're an only child, aren't you? And the father of an only child. I love my brother very much, but I can tell you that from the day you are born, your siblings are the first, most ferocious competition for everything precious in life. It's bitterest in childhood, but even after, it can sink its claws into you. I've often wondered if Fergus and I would have been such good friends, had we been closer in age, or had I been a son."

"You must be good friends, or he would not have yielded you the throne so readily."

"There's something in that, certainly; but also the fact that Fergus really and truly has no desire to be king. If it were something that he wanted — or if he disliked me and wanted to thwart me — then things would be even more chaotic than they are at the moment."

A relentless pounding awakened Anders and Morrigan

in the first light of dawn. Morrigan opened one eye to assess the time, and then groaned and buried her head in the pillows. The noise continued.

"Come on!" shouted Carver Hawke. "Breakfast!"

"Carver," groaned Anders, "stop knocking right now or we'll curse you. The sun isn't even up."

"It's Satinalia!" Carver whined, thumping the door again. "Everybody's got presents!"

A pause. Morrigan sat up in bed. "'Tis a consideration indeed..."

"Too right it's a consideration," Carver announced. "Come on!"

Zevran emerged from his quarters, not a hair out of place.

"I thought you were going to have breakfast with the charming ladies of your family."

"I am," Carver replied, unabashed. "I want to have breakfast here, too. We're going to have pancakes! I can smell them."

Most of the junior Wardens were already assembled in the Hall. Aveline had not yet made it down, not particularly excited about celebrating her first Satinalia since her husband Wesley died. The rest were gleefully poking at the piles of gifts, trying to guess what lay under the traditional red scarves.

"Pancakes?" wondered Soren. "D'you suppose they'll have nug in them? I love nug pancakes."

"Not a chance," Hakan growled. "Haven't seen a nug since we left the Deep Roads. They'll probably put some sort of surfer *fruit* in them instead."

"Fruit?" quavered Soren, probing the horror. "They'll make us eat *fruit*? Did we sign up for that?"

"Berries," said Jowan, sitting comfortably on a bench, rather excited about the holiday. "They're really *little* fruit."

The dwarves' expressions indicated that no fruit could be small enough to suit them.

But in the end, there was something to suit everyone. When the problem was explained, Mistress Rannelly saw no trouble whatever in ordering the cook to make some pancakes with sausage in them. They still seemed foreign and exotic to the dwarves, but quite toothsome. Especially with spicy sauce.

"Anything left for me?" wondered Leliana, drifting sleepily into the Hall. The Satinalia Eve service at the Cathedral had been rather prolonged. She noticed a big steaming crock on the table and gave it a sniff. "Oh! *Soufflé de maquereau*! How marvelous!"

"This is Orlesian?" Toliver asked suspiciously. "I thought it was Feast-Day Fish!"

"It is." Bronwyn sat at the head of the table, and reassured him. "It is. Fluffy and delicious mackerel pudding. Leliana just told you what the Orlesians call it in their language."

Zevran immediately spooned himself a helping. "It smells divine. The sliced hard-boiled eggs are a delightful garnish. We have something a little like this in Antiva, but it is not so light." He took a bite. "Ah! But it contains Antivan pepper, all the same! Delicious!"

Cathair tried some, and politely did not spit it out. "It is very..." Words failed him. He poured cream into a bowl and submerged a thick slice of apple bread in it.

Aveline arrived at last, rather surprised that everyone was up so early when they had been told they could sleep in. Her fellow Wardens eagerly helped her to everything on the table.

"What about presents?" Carver complained.

Bronwyn pointed her spoon at his heaping platter. "Eat everything on your plate first. Then presents. Then everyone gets paid for the quarter."

A pleased murmur rose up. Carver turned his attention to his plate.

"Oh. Right, then."

There was a pause in the conversation, broken only by the sound of diligent, contented consumption. Bronwyn began with porridge, because she had been trained to fill up with porridge before taking any of the richer foods. It was very good porridge, too, with butter and salt, just as she liked it. Scout liked porridge, too, though he generally needed his muzzle wiped clean afterwards.

Then the red scarves were whisked away, and there was a general dive into the presents. Most were very simple: clever folding knives and traveling gaming sets; pencils with little cases and drinking flasks; holiday hand puppets and scented soaps.

Bronwyn smiled over her own charming haul. She loved anything scented, and Leliana had even found her some scented candles tinted green, which she liked very much. Morrigan had created a wonderful pomander filled with dried herbs and flowers. Cathair had carved her a deli-

cate little figure of Mythal the Protector out of fragrant whitewood. The most amusing present was from Anders, which was a hairclip as wide as her hand that concealed a tiny dagger. She said nothing about the presents that had been delivered to her private room: the gifts from Fergus and Loghain and her fellow nobles. Fergus had sent her "your very own grappling hook." Bryland had sent her a pair of miniature portraits of Bryce and Eleanor Cousland, based on a group painting at his Keep that had been made at the end of the Rebellion. Anora had sent her an exquisite windharp of crystal and silver wire, to be hung in a window. Loghain, in a fit of wry humor, had sent her a cookbook: *MOTHER BLANDULA'S COMPLEAT HOUSEKEEPER*. Bronwyn had laughed, and considered thumping him over the head with it. On the other hand, there was a very interesting section in it on camp cookery...

"There's going to be a puppet show in the Market," Carver told them, in a weirdly high voice. One of his presents was a Kiveal the Trickster puppet, and he was using it to annoy Aveline. "Around noon. Everybody should see that!"

"Have fun however you like," Bronwyn said, "As long as no one dies or is seriously hurt. And don't go anywhere alone! I'm serious about that. Be back at sundown to change for the feast."

Leliana looked up from the pretty dancing slippers given to her by Bronwyn, and asked, "Who do you suppose will be the Fool?"

Bronwyn's hand paused over a flask of very nice perfume. At home in Highever choosing a Satinalia fool was as simple as someone getting the silver coin in their slice of pudding. At the Palace feast, it, like everything else, was political. No one wanted to risk labeling the Queen a fool.

"The Fool will be Pol Pollen, the professional puppeteer and clown," she told them. "He will come in when the pudding is served and put on a show. He's a well-known Fereldan entertainer, and his people have been carefully vetted. The musicians, too, will be searched for anything resembling weapons. They'll be lucky if they're allowed eating knives."

Carver snorted, "Nobody wants anything like the Dead Arl's Wedding to happen again."

"Exactly. I've got to get my presents delivered to everyone —"

Zevran said, "I would be happy to deliver the little girl's gifts to the Alienage."

"I shall go with you," Cathair volunteered.

"Thank you. You can ride on the cart I ordered," said Bronwyn. "The chest with her name goes to little Amethyne, but I am sending the Alienage some provisions to improve their cheer, since they have no Arl to see to them. Valendrian is also due the money for the child's keep. If the two of you will deliver it, that will be one less thing for me to worry about. Carver," she added. "I have presents for Highever House, but I'm going there, too. Perhaps in an hour or two. You can help me carry them. All the rest of my gifts are being sent by courier."

"Er..." Jowan hesitated. "Leliana and I have presents for our friends there, too."

"Wonderful!" Bronwyn said. "Then I'll have lots of help. I'll be there for quite a bit of the day. Everybody's invited as soon they can make it. You should all try Highever Holiday Punch."

"What's punch?" Hakan whispered to Aveline.

"It's a drink," Aveline told him. "It's served in a big bowl."

"Sometimes it has *fruit* in it," sniped Jowan.

"Ewww. But why did do they call it 'punch?'" the dwarf persisted.

The well-traveled Anders smirked, "Because, my little friend, that's what it packs. A punch."

The dwarves took that in. Soren shrugged. "Sounds... good. I can pick the bits of fruit out first, can't I?"

Bronwyn then got everyone paid, and hoped that wherever they were, her Senior Wardens were paying everyone else properly, too.

At least everyone here was happy with their gifts. For her Wolf people, she had asked Rannelly to put together a variety of leather flasks, folding knives, and silver spoons for the men. For the women, there was a huswife apiece: a sewing kit comprised of thimble, a measure, two good needles, small scissors, small reels of black and white thread, and a little pincushion with a dozen straight pins. These had also been given to the Warden servants, and were regarded as treasures. Rannelly explained to Bronwyn that any woman

with such an object had the means of self-support.

So they were regarded when she distributed the gifts at Highever House. Bronwyn was glad to learn that Fergus had been generous with them as well. In a few days she would get her ex-werewolves together and find out how they felt about going north to serve the Wardens. If they were amenable, it would solve some her problems with Soldier's Peak.

The second breakfast at Highever House was fairly hilarious, as Fergus had already mixed the punch, potent and fragrant, in a huge silver bowl. There was more hilarity, when the dwarves grasped that the bowl was for everyone to *share*, not an individual portion. They soon discovered that a goblet or two was quite strong enough for holiday cheer.

"Lady Bronwyn! May I speak to you? In private?"

Bronwyn found Lady Amell bearing down on her, and smiled. She hoped the Hawkes realized how fortunate they were to still have their mother; and that their mother was so affectionate and devoted to each one of them

"Of course. I believe my old room is vacant at the moment."

It was not only vacant. Bronwyn was disturbed to find it nearly empty. Of course with all the people staying here, much of the furniture had been moved and rearranged. The ladies could at least sit in the window seat and have a chat unheard. Leandra Hawke, now Lady Amell, was fidgeting, wringing her hands in distress.

"I hoped to ask your advice on a personal matter of great importance. The most extraordinary thing has happened!"

Bronwyn smiled. Wulffe had no doubt given his son a push. Charade was quite a pleasant girl, and would no doubt —

"I have had an offer of marriage!" Leandra confessed.

Bronwyn blinked, trying to rearrange her thoughts. This woman was as old as her own mother. And someone had asked for her hand?

"You... yourself... have had an offer?"

"Yes! It was so utterly unexpected... not unwelcome, of course, not that... but such a surprise! I have not even told my children. I'm not sure how they would react." She reddened like a maiden. "I'm afraid they would laugh, at first. But then..."

"First of all, I suppose it depends upon the gentleman. Do you like him?"

"Yes! Well... I hardly know him, but he has been such a good friend to our family. And considering his position, one would not like to refuse him..."

Bronwyn stared at her, wondering who the woman could possibly mean. Who was so prestigious as to not be easily refused? Loghain? He was promised to Bronwyn.

"Who is —"

"Arl Bryland. The Arl of South Reach!" Leandra burst forth. "He came to here yesterday and made his offer. A handsome one. He understands that I have... no fortune. He understands that all our estates in Kirkwall were lost. He does not care that I am probably too old to give him more children, and said very kindly that three were quite enough for him to manage. He thought I would be a pleas-

ant companion and a kind stepmother to his sons. And I would... I mean... they are darling little boys..."

Still too surprised to compose a rational reply, Bronwyn tried to make sense of this new development. She imagined Loghain's reaction, and nearly burst out laughing. If he thought the Hawkes ambitious before, what would he think now? This marriage, on the surface such an unexceptional union between two pleasant, middle-aged people, was rife with political implications.

Leandra Hawke, Lady Amell, would become Arlessa of South Reach. That changed *everything*. With Bryland as his stepfather, there was no longer any doubt that Adam Hawke would be made Bann of Amaranthine. Nor was there any question that Charade Amell, even without a dowry, would be considered a suitable match for the heir of West Hills. Honors and titles would fall to the Hawkes-like dominoes. From penniless peasants and adventurers a few months ago, they would abruptly become one of the most influential families in the kingdom. Clearly, Lady Amell understood this at some level, which was why she was more or less asking for Bronwyn's permission. For that was what this was all about, it seemed.

And Bethany. Mistress Bethany Hawke, a mage outside the Circle, would become the stepdaughter of one of the most powerful men in Ferelden: one who had declared her free of Chantry control in the Queen's name. Marrying her mother would wave a red battle flag in the Chant-

ry's face, and declare to all Thedas Bryland's surprisingly radical stance on the issue of Chantry control of mages.

Not thinking so deeply on the matter, the Landsmeet likely would approve the marriage automatically, thinking it of little consequence, since Bryland already had heirs. The Chantry, however, thinking three steps ahead as they generally did, might actually refuse to solemnize it. Would that do them harm or good? Bethany was popular with a lot of influential Landsmeet members, even a devout woman like Bann Alfstanna. Refusing to allow her mother to marry would look to them like petty spite. The Chantry in Orlais already seemed opposed to Ferelden, but they could not easily use such an event to raise indignation in other nations. If the Arl of South Reach were actually to marry a mage, yes, perhaps: but not the *mother* of a mage.

Was the marriage a good thing for the people involved? Personally, she could see it being very nice for Cousin Leonas. Maybe not so nice for Leandra herself once she got to know Habren.

Habren! *Andraste's nightgown!* There were no end of stories about wicked stepmothers, but Habren would likely be the wickedest stepdaughter of all time. Bronwyn hoped that Bryland intended to wait until Habren was out of the house and settled before introducing a wife into his household. There was a place to begin.

"My cousin is a wonderful man, and I am sure he would be a kind and considerate husband. Did he say when he

would like to marry?"

"Oh, of course after his daughter's wedding. He has so much on his mind. With her gone, he'll have no one to help him with the boys and the household, and of course he'll be lonely. And he lost his sister, as you know, in such a cruel way so recently. Now his daughter will be marrying. I'm sure he'll miss her very much."

"Cousin Leonas loves his family deeply, and I am sure he would not offer marriage to a woman without some sincere regard for her. He could, after all, simply engage a housekeeper. That he wishes to give you his name and his rank is a profound personal compliment."

"I know it is!" The woman absolutely glowed, and looked years younger than her age. "I had never thought of marrying again after losing my dear Malcolm, but this... he's such a fine man, and so very kind. I'm sure my children would respect him as they should."

"Yes, I believe they would." Why not? They were sensible people. Not only was Arl Bryland a decent man in himself, but he was the gateway to a life of power and wealth for them.

Except for Carver. He was a Grey Warden, and would not personally profit from the marriage. However, Bronwyn could not see Carver giving his mother any difficulty if she wished to marry. Or did she? Even grown children could be difficult if they thought a beloved parent was being replaced. And boys could be possessive of their mothers, just as daughters were of their fathers.

Bronwyn considered it. She saw no valid reason to oppose the marriage. If Cousin Leonas fancied this woman, why should she take steps to thwart him? His sister had done enough of that over the years. In fact, it would be a bad idea for Bronwyn personally, since he was one of her strongest political supporters. She needed to tell Loghain about this — very soon — but did not like the idea of interfering in the personal lives of a grown man and a grown woman.

"As soon as you can," she advised instead, "I think you should gather your children — and Charade, too — together, and tell them your plans. Better to clear the air at once and find out if they have strong feelings against it."

"Then you don't think it... a *bad* idea."

Should she warn her about Habren? Bronwyn's conscience gave her a hard nudge.

"For you and the Arl personally? No, not at all. My cousin has been alone too long. The boys might be thrilled to have a maternal figure in their lives. They have evidently taken to your daughter, and might well be happy to acknowledge her as a sister. Lady Habren, however..."

The glowing face dimmed briefly. The nudge of conscience renewed. Habren could be so *very* nasty. Bronwyn was convinced that this marriage would enrage her.

"I think you must be prepared for some jealousy there. Forgive me for speaking plainly. After being so doted on by her father, it might be... difficult... for Habren to accept that he has affections for any lady other than herself. Of course, she

will be married by then and distracted. Nonetheless..."

"I think I understand. Poor girl. Of course it would hard for her. You don't oppose it yourself?"

"No. Not at all. I'm sure you'll be a good wife to my cousin. You realize, surely, that you will have heavy responsibilities as Arlessa, but I know that the Arl will do his best to help you. You should visit South Reach as soon as possible and get to know your new vassals."

"How exciting it will be!" Leandra's glow was in evidence once more. "He is such a good and pleasant person! So manly and brave! His house in town is so charming, and there is so much to do! He suggested the end of Firstfall, It will be a very quiet ceremony, but I feel I can hardly wait!"

She touched Bronwyn's hand in a moment of affectionate, grateful enthusiasm, and then excused herself. Bronwyn was left in her echoing empty room, musing over this new upheaval.

Loghain was suspicious of the Hawkes, but could not say anything publicly against the marriage. He would not dare raise the issue of Leandra's *déclassé* status, and the fact that she had been living on a little farm in Lothering with her commoner husband for the past twenty years. Loghain had married a commoner himself, and Teyrna Celia had had no trace of the noble Marcher blood that Leandra Hawke could boast. The fact that the lady had no dowry to bring the marriage was a matter between bride and groom. With the difficulties with the Chantry,

Loghain would be the last man to bring up the fact that the lady had given birth to a mage.

Someone would, of course.

Zevran grinned at Cathair, enjoying the celebration swirling around them. They were the most popular men in the Alienage today.

The carter, paid extra for working on Satalia, helped unload the cargo, and then smartly snapped his whip and was away from the knife-ears as fast as his ox would move. Valendrian came out of his house, and threw up his hands in astonishment at the bounty before him.

Bronwyn had based her gifts to the Alienage on what her father had traditionally given the Highever elves. Had she asked, she would have found that Arl Urien had never been anywhere as generous... and Bann Vaughan had always expected a certain quid pro quo in exchange.

Thus, the cask of ale, the hams, the keg of salt fish, the big fruitcake, and the heavy bolt of blue wool were looked upon as the serendipitous gifts of the Maker. Valendrian did his best to attribute them more specifically to the kindness of the Girl Warden; especially when he was given the quarterly maintenance for Amethyne, and the wonderful chest was taken into his house to be opened and exclaimed over.

The little girl, when not interrogated by a tall and terrible shemlen lady, was talkative enough, excited about her music lessons with "Mistress Zoe;" and thrilled to have

a chest of her very own, inscribed with her name, which she could spell out for them very proudly.

"And it has a key!" she said, examining that bronze object in wonder. "I have a chest that *locks!*"

Zevran explained to her that she should open the chest, because it had rattled a little and might have something inside. The womenfolk crowded around, urging her to have a look.

And then there were cries of excitement at the contents. Zevran reflected on how little, how very little it took to make a child happy. For that matter, how little it took to inspire gratitude in these poor people.

A redhaired girl named Shianni quickly tied the green hair ribbon to the end of the child's long plait, and the effect was much admired. Red mittens were declared to be the last word in winter fashion for a little elven girl. The new green stockings, however, were judged too pretty to wear.

"I should wear them to my lessons," the little girl pleaded. "I should look nice for Mistress Zoe."

Cathair was curious about the cup-and-ball toy. For that matter, no one else knew what it was, so Zevran demonstrated.

"That's clever, that is," said one of the women. "If my man could put his hands on a bit of wood, he could whittle one himself for the children. I can always find a bit of string somewhere."

At the sight of the little tambourine, its drumhead painted with a red and green dragon, Amethyne was struck speechless. Then she snatched it up and was off,

dancing out the door, rattling and jingling.

"Children love music," Cathair observed, "Almost as much as they love to run about and make a noise."

Bryland looked gravely at himself in the mirror, and decided he would have to do. Leandra would not mind his greying locks, since she had gone grey herself. He took a breath and strode out of his private apartments. He must gather up his guest. It was time for Aron to meet the rest of the Landsmeet present in Denerim.

Alas, Habren was waiting for him just outside her own door. "I thought we couldn't go to the Ball! I thought we were in *mourning!*"

"Habren," he said, his voice deliberate and calm, "I have to go. Aron needs to be introduced to the Landsmeet members here in Denerim. He won't be confirmed unless they know him."

"Then I should go, too!"

"No," he said, calculating the distance to the doors leading to the guest wing. He kept walking. "You're a recent widow. It's not possible."

The expected explosion was all he had dreaded. Habren ran after him screeching. "Then you shouldn't go either! How can you go and leave me here? Nobody cares about *me*. If I'm in mourning, so are you!"

Quite suddenly he snapped. Turning, he stalked up to her, and snarled. "I wasn't married to bloody Urien! I'm doing this for *you*, you little fool. Now go to your room and bloody *shut up!*"

He was relieved to see her shocked into silence, and then ashamed. Quickening his pace, he left the family wing and gave strict instructions to his guards.

The Satinalia Feast and Ball was held in the Landsmeet Chamber. The long open space left plenty of room to dance, and the raised galleries on either side provide a vantage point both for the musicians and for people who wanted to watch rather than dance, or play cards without distraction.

Anora thought it looked quite nice, and not at all as overdone and decadent as the decorations for Arl Urien's wedding. Of course, the decorations were the same ones that had been put up, year after year, since long before she had come to Denerim. They still looked quite splendid, thanks to the assiduous care of the staff.

Red was the theme, of course. Red and harvest gold. Knowing that Bronwyn was going to wear red, Anora had opted for a gold gown, which became her better than red would have, and attracted quite a few eyes; most especially the warm brown eyes she most wished to attract. Fergus was looking quite handsome himself. Like his sister, he was wearing red; but in his case it was a red and gold doublet. They would lead the dancing tonight, and would make a handsome couple. Anora was ridiculously fluttered at the prospect; fluttered as she had never been as a young girl.

Bronwyn's stunning headpiece had roused the spirit of competition in her. She was wearing it again tonight,

and it really was a lovely bit of jewelry. Anora had gone through her own jewels at length, and eventually found some pearls that she put to good use. One string was twined through the braided mass of her chignon, and another was fastened over her brow, with a tear drop pendant in the middle. She quite liked the effect. She would be Queen for only a little over a month now, and wanted to look the part until the very last moment.

"You could not look more beautiful, Your Majesty," Fergus said softly. She smiled in response, unable to moderate her expression. She was just able to restrain herself from taking his hand. It would not do, not with so many eyes upon them.

"Thank you. Perhaps it is the pleasant evening. I find myself in astonishingly good spirits, and I expect the dancing to be more agreeable than on the occasion of Arl Urien's wedding."

"Yes, not being shot at should certainly enhance the general festivities. The guards are on the alert. You should have no unpleasant surprises, unless I tread on your toes when we dance."

She laughed, her eyes surveying the cheerful crowd. "Look at how soliticitous Leonas Bryland is of those Hawke ladies! He's quite taken them under his wing."

"Leonas isn't one to forget a service — especially since he owes his son's life to Mistress Bethany. She's a very sweet girl, and a formidable mage from all accounts."

"There's that, of course, but it's clear that he likes them personally. Of course, they are all remarkably attractive,

and rather raise the whole average of good looks here."

"The broad-shouldered young man in the sober doublet... is that Aron Kendells? He looks rather disapproving. Or is he simply feeling out of place?"

"Possibly a bit of both. It must be all very new and confusing for him. I'm sure the Arl will introduce him to you later. Or sooner, it seems," she said, as Bryland and his party approached.

"Your Majesty! Your Graces! My lords, ladies and gentlemen! Dinner is served!"

The first course, an appetizing array of lighter delicacies, was set before the guests, to loud appreciation.

Bronwyn studied the noisy room from her vantage point at the high table. Her Wardens seemed to be in good spirits. Loghain was placed next to her, of course. She leaned close and smiled mischievously. "Did you like your little dragon?"

"Very much," Loghain answered blandly. "A formidable guardian for my private papers. Did you like your cook book?"

"How very amusing. No recipes for dragon in it, though. I shall have to substitute ingredients. I noticed there were some blank pages at the end for the creative housekeeper."

"While you're at it, you can devise something to be made from nug. Anora was amused by the little Paragon."

"Oh, there are heaps of recipes for nug. I'll pick the brains of my dwarven Wardens, too. One of them was talking this morning about nug pancakes, though I shuddered a bit. In my

opinion, nug tastes like an unnatural union of pork and hare."

"Really? I didn't think it was all that bad. I was starving at the time, of course, which might have prejudiced me in its favor."

Bronwyn laughed. Loghain thought she looked very pretty. Red was certainly her color. "I'm glad you wore that gown again. How did you come by it? One of the quartermasters in camp?"

"No. This is the gown that Teagan gave me. Yes, really. He was in the process of giving away a great deal of Isolde's vast wardrobe to my friends and his betrothed, but nothing of Isolde's fit me, so the maid's found an old gown of Queen Rowan's. It was lovingly packed away with sweet herbs, and had hardly been worn. With a few alterations, it was as good as new. I wear this cape with it since bare shoulders are no longer in fashion."

Loghain looked at her in silence throughout this speech, his face unreadable. "Rowan's gown? I... see."

Bronwyn glanced at him from the corner of her eye, sipping her wine nonchalantly. She hoped the fact that the gown had once been the property of the late Queen Rowan did not make Loghain dislike it.

Loghain's relationship to the Queen had been the subject of some speculation within her family. While Bryce Cousland had fought the Orlesians himself, he had spent little time with the forces directly under Maric's — which was to say Loghain's — command. Everyone knew that the King, Queen Rowan, and Loghain had been inseparable

during the Rebellion and had saved one another's lives on many occasions. However, when the usurper Meghren was killed and Maric took the throne, Loghain had quickly departed to his new teyrnir in Gwaren, and had stayed there for years. In fact, he had remained there until after Queen Rowan's death. At that point, he had gone north to support the grieving King, and Maric had demanded his nearly constant attendance ever after.

Had there been some sort of ill-will between Queen Rowan and Loghain? Had she commanded him to absent himself from her presence... and from that of the King? She was the daughter of an arl, and Father had wondered if she had resented Maric's friendship — his near brotherhood — with a jumped-up freeholder. No one could question Loghain's brilliant military gifts, but it might be only human to feel some resentment of the closeness between the two men. Mother agreed with Father, and got a rather unpleasant, disapproving look on her face when she spoke of King Maric's friendship with Loghain.

Once, at the breakfast table one day, she had even voiced her opinion. Bronwyn remembered it as taking place around the time that the betrothal between Cailan and Anora had been made public.

"One can hardly blame the Queen for wanting Loghain out of their lives once she and Maric were finally married. And for all that, she was never happy. Never!"

Father glanced at Bronwyn and Fergus, as if thinking this

was a conversation they did not need to hear. "Eleanor, that's all in the past, I'm sure. And once the Queen was dead, Maric naturally turned to his best friend..."

"Well, I think it's disgusting. It all fits, Bryce. And then nothing must do but they must seal the bond by the marriage of their children!" She subsided, seeing his anxious frown. "But I see your point. And of course none of this is Anora's fault. She's a wonderful girl. There's nothing to be done about it now."

At the time, Bronwyn had been most interested in her share of the events: the fact that she would not have to marry the heir to the throne, because Anora Mac Tir had already gobbled him up. It had not disturbed her unduly, since she was only eleven years old, and thought the idea of marriage to anyone perfectly revolting.

While she loved and revered her parents, Bronwyn now felt they had been a little narrow-minded in disliking the King's friendship with Loghain. They were proud of their noble lineage and their ancient heritage. That was understandable. Bronwyn was proud of it, too. However, she had now had the opportunity to meet and make friends with people from all races and degrees, and many of them were very fine people — better than many with a title and a Landsmeet vote. Loghain had risen to lordship and honors in Ferelden, not because he was the king's friend, but because he, more than anyone else, had driven out the Orlesians and restored the true king to his throne. These were mighty deeds, and deserved the noblest rewards.

Loghain spoke softly, quieting her concerns about her clothing's past provenance.

"It's a splendid gown, though I'd rather see what it looks like by firelight in your private room."

She pressed his hand, and whispered. "Then you will come to me? You will come to me tonight?"

"Nothing could keep me away. We can slip out later at the end."

"Not until you've danced with me at least once!"

"I suppose that's fair." He turned away discreetly, but the side of his mouth that Bronwyn could see was still smiling.

Voices rose around them, excited and pleased. The minstrels played a fanfare, and the herald announced the start of the dancing.

Anora, with Fergus as her partner, led the train of dancers with an opening pavane, stately and slow enough not to stifle conversation. Bronwyn and Loghain followed just after.

"I hope you will be satisfied," he said, rather grimly. "Not even a great deal of wine changes my opinion of dancing as a bloody silly thing to do."

"It's good exercise," Bronwyn disagreed, with a mocking smile. "And actually, you dance quite well."

"I'm not about to make a fool of myself doing *anything* badly. I can get through a pavane all right, but after that, I'll have to leave you to the gilded youth of Ferelden."

"What about the antivanel?"

"I am *not*," he growled, "going to be seen with *bells* on my wrists."

A long series of dances followed, and Bronwyn had

partners for them all. A revolve with Bryland, a gathering dance with Bann Sighard's son Oswyn, a corrento with Rothgar Wulffe. Nathaniel surprised her by asking her to join him in the Miller's Dance. It suited him, slow and melancholy as it was. She remembered watching him dance when she was a young girl, and admiring his dancing. They matched well as partners. Nathaniel said little as they danced, but she was glad they were recovering a little of their old ease together.

Afterward, circles were formed for the antivanel: women in the inner circle and men around them, and the bells jangled in a delightful, ear-splitting racket. The circle widened and the set finished with the wild dance, punctuated with kicks, appropriately called a "brawl."

Another course was served, and the guests, feeling they earned some refreshment, plunged their knives into the hapless roast geese with abandon.

"Here," Loghain said, handing Bronwyn a cup of wine. "You look like you need it."

"I feel wonderful," she declared, smiling. All the same, she took the cup. "Did you see my cousin Leonas? He danced with Lady Amell three times!"

Loghain had noticed. It was always very interesting and informative to watch Landsmeet members while dancing. He had noted Wulffe urging his son to dance with the Hawke cousin, and had noted that the young man seemed to like the girl well enough. He had noticed the way Fergus

and Anora looked at each other over a dance floor. He had noticed all sorts of flirtations and guarded hostilities. He had noticed Nathaniel Howe's grave partnering of Bronwyn. He had certainly not missed Bryland making an ass of himself over the Marcher lady.

"I saw," he replied. "He's seems... infatuated."

Bronwyn leaned close and whispered. "He's asked her to marry him! Yes! The lady told me herself this morning and was concerned that I would disapprove. I didn't, of course, though I thought it only decent to warn her about making Habren jealous."

Loghain stared at her, brows knit together, taking in the various consequences of an Arl of Ferelden marrying such a woman. "The Chantry won't like it much. Nor will all the ladies who had set their caps at Bryland over the years. And you're right: his daughter is going to be a problem."

"It could get very nasty."

"None of our business of course... unless someone makes it our business."

They ate quietly, for the moment lost in thought. Loghain scowled, a little put out at the undeserved good luck of the Hawkes.

There was a stir among the musicians. The herald and the seneschal had a brief conference, and the herald rapped his staff on the floor once more, giving notice that the entertainment was about to begin. Voices stilled, and all eyes were on the side door.

With a blare of trumpets (one of which played a wrong

note loudly and repeatedly) and a thunder of drums, Pol Pollen made his entrance, wreathed in evergreen, his gaudy doublet padded to make him look even fatter than he was. At his heels lumbered a big mabari: grizzle-jowled, battle-scarred, and sublimely bored. A sprig of evergreen decorated his stained and studded collar.

Scout sat up, ears pricked, staring intently at the dog. Perhaps there was something in this 'entertainment' business after all.

"Behold the crowned king of the festival!" bawled the Fool. "And his faithful hound, Grump."

Amidst applause, the musicians burst forth in a march, and the official fool paraded through the ranks of the amateurs, juggling the traditional nuts and sweets, then tossing them to the guests. A troupe of dancing girls, wearing headpieces — not Orlesian masks — to suggest deer, bear, badgers, birds, rabbits, and wolves, followed in his wake, trailing bright red scarves.

Loghain caught one of the walnuts on the fly, and ceremoniously presented it to Bronwyn. Others, lacking his dexterity, scrambled on the floor in undignified enthusiasm.

At the foot of the tables, the Fool halted and spread his arms wide. His dog looked up at him quizzically.

"Right!" He bellowed. "We all know why we're here!"

A cheer.

"And to celebrate the day, Grump and I plan to amuse ourselves with the noble sport of hunting!" He looked

about him, puzzled. " — if I can find my bow."

And assistant appeared, and with an elaborate salute, presented the Fool with a ludicrously outsized bow and matching arrow. Laughter rose up.

With supercilious assurance, the Fool sneered at the guests. "A big man needs a big bow! And now, amidst the lofty crags and swift-flowing streams of our native land, I take bow in hand," he slapped his padded belly, "to earn my supper."

Lutes and drums struck up, and the Fool, bouncing ponderously on the balls of his feet, began to sing in a powerful, gravelly bass:

*In Darland's time the hunt was fine, and the birds did sweetly sing.
Then Orlesians came, and all the game became the right of the king.
But Fereldan lads saw sport to be had, and swift to poaching turned,
And so in that way have we even today our pleasant supper earned.*

*One for the partridge, two for the hare, and three for the buck and doe,
The hunting of the usurper's game shall feed us through the snow.
One for the partridge, two for the hare, and three for the buck and doe,
The hunting of King Meghren's game shall feed us through the snow.*

*Seeking deer or hare in the greenwoods fair, the chevaliers do ride.
But rebels few are a-hunting too, though cleverly we hide.
Time and again come Meghren's men chasing poachers 'round hill and dale
But our prey we've shot and we'll not get caught as we lift our cups of ale.*

*So there's one for the partridge, two for the hare, and three for the buck and doe,
The hunting of the usurper's game shall feed us through the snow.
One for the partridge, two for the hare, and three for the buck and doe,*

The hunting of King Meghren's game shall feed us through the snow.

*Men say that port is the finest sport, that poaching's far too cold
And they pass the year drinking fine dark beer or else some whiskey bold.
But they'll find that wine is the thief of time and ale is a bitter foe
And the Fereldan man has no better friends than his arrows and his bow.*

*One for the partridge, two for the hare, and three for the buck and doe,
The hunting of the usurper's game shall feed us through the snow.
Oh, it's one for the partridge, two for the hare, and three for the buck and doe.
The hunting of King's Meghren's game shall feed us through the snow!*

The audience joined in on the last chorus, and the Fool bowed to cheers and more applause at the end. Bronwyn glanced at Loghain and saw him smiling, perhaps remembering simpler — if equally dangerous — times.

There was a comic dance, as the Fool, armed with his mighty bow, attempted to shoot the forest creatures. All but one of them fled, leaving the smallest and prettiest of them — the Rabbit — cowering before the Fool and his dog.

"Mercy, Ser Fool!" She batted her eyes, and lifted her hands in graceful supplication. "You wouldn't shoot me, would you, dear, kind, brave Fool? Think of my poor grey mother! Think of my eight fluffy little children! How will they learn to steal carrots, without their mother's tender care? Think of your own mother, Ser Fool! Would you want some terrible huntsman to threaten her?"

"My mother!" The Fool paused, and sniffed enormously, wiping his eyes. "My sweet, darling mother!" He produced

a huge red handkerchief, and blew his nose like a trumpet. "Oh, memories so tender of years gone by! I can't do it, Grump! I couldn't hurt a *mother!*"

The dog sat down and stared up at his human, all but rolling his eyes.

"I know... I know!" whimpered the Fool. "But it seems so *cruel*. Why can't we live in peace together? Why can't we just... *get along?*"

"Oh, Ser Fool, put aside your bow!" pleaded the Rabbit. "Spare me, dear Fool, and let us be friends!"

"I suppose I could..." the Fool hesitated. "but *should* I?"

"Of course you should," the Rabbit urged. "A new dawn will dawn for man and rabbit! Set aside your bow, and let us clasp hand... and paw... in fellowship!"

"That's a fair offer," the Fool granted. "But... unarm myself, in a forest? Surrounded by enemies? Is that sensible? Would... for instance... *Teyrn Loghain* approve?"

"No!" Loghain replied, very distinctly.

A surge of laughter. Wulffe slapped the table, guffawing. Bryland laughed uproariously, turning to Leandra Hawke and her daughter to see their amused expressions.

Grump glared at the audience, and then back at his master, uttering a deep low growl. Scout, now quite interested, gave a short, sharp bark. Bronwyn hushed him, and scratched his ears.

"It's just a story, Scout!" she admonished him in a whisper.

"Give me your bow," the Rabbit implored, eyes full of

cunning, "I can hold your bow, while you open the wine-skin you carry. We will drink to our new alliance!"

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt..." the Fool considered. "For once, in a way..."

Grump lay down on the floor and put his paws over his eyes. There was more laughter, loud and prolonged. The Fool turned his back, fumbling with the stopper, while, one by one, all the wild beasts crept out from the doorway and surrounded him.

"I've got it!" he shouted. "Here, dear Rabbit, try some of this — *Maker's elbows!*"

The beasts lunged at him, and wine spurted out in a blood-red arc. Merry music crashed out again. Lords and ladies nearly slid from the benches, laughing helplessly, as the Fool fled in four-quarter time from the badgers, wolves, and furious bears, squirting wine on the downbeat.

After the cheers died down, the bows were taken, and the rewards paid with a generous hand, another course was brought out, and the guest settled down to serious eating. Down the table, they could hear Arl Wulffe booming out a proposal.

"There's many a true word spoken in jest. A hunt! A hunt is just the thing! Get us all out, get a little exercise... get some of those boars the farmers have been complaining about. I'll host it, too. What about it, Rothgar?"

His son Rothgar, tall, impossibly gangly, and with a wry

sense of humor, agreed. "If we're not drenched or frozen, Father, we'll have a splendid time!"

"'Drenched or frozen,' indeed! What a pack of sweet young damsels lads are today! Let's see — can't put it on in less than five days... need that much to organize the servants. I've got a hunting lodge not far from the city that might be large enough..."

"If you mean Stonycroft," Fergus put in, "it marches with mine. Rackley Fell. On the approach to Dragon's Peak. That would give us a wide hunting field."

"That's very handsome of you. How about the eighth?" asked Wulffe. "Give me enough time to get everything ready, and still give *someone* — " he positively winked at Bronwyn — "time to get the dirt out from under her fingernails before her wedding."

Anora did not particularly care for hunting, but she knew that Fergus did, and so raised no objections. Bronwyn was as eager as her brother. Loghain agreed that the boars up in the fells were becoming a problem.

Besides, he really liked smoked boar.

There was more dancing, for those who still had legs to dance. Loghain became engrossed in Wulffe's plans for a hunt, while Bronwyn danced and danced some more. She only smiled when young Lord Oswyn attempted to partner her for the faveline, and fell flat on his face instead.

A quick galliard followed. Bronwyn danced it with

Anders, who had somehow learned to dance in the intervals between being rounded up by the Templars.

"What a handsome man!" commented a noble lady to her friend. "One of the Wardens. I declare that I wonder if Bronwyn did not choose her Wardens for their looks!"

Loghain looked up at that, and watched the dance to the end. He did not mind if Bronwyn danced with her Wardens, but there were those who knew that Anders was not only a Warden, but a mage.

When Bronwyn sat down again, flushed and happy, he inquired, "Whatever would the Grand Cleric say?"

She laughed, and was about to make an arch reply, when a servant approached and bowed. In a low voice, he whispered. "Beg pardon, my lady. I was sent to give this to you without delay."

Bronwyn took the proffered parchment, opened and read it, and blew out a breath.

Warden-Commander —

I have found a worthy subject for your proof. A child lies dying. Come to see me early tomorrow.

Muirin,

Grand Cleric of Ferelden

Bronwyn looked up from the parchment, her face a mask of false brightness. "Invoking the Grand Cleric seems to have drawn her attention. She wishes to meet with me tomorrow." She nodded to the servant. "I shall be there. Inform her Grace."

CHAPTER 25

A PRIESTLY
CONCLAVE

PLEASANT AS HOLIDAYS
WERE, WHEN THEY WERE OVER,
THEY WERE OVER. The glow

from the Satinalia Ball and a private, intense celebration in her room did not survive the cold light of morning. Bronwyn felt wrong-footed, not having sufficient time to plan her next move.

She had told Loghain that the Grand Cleric wanted to talk more about the Queen's healing, which was perfectly true. About the sick child and the upcoming test, she said nothing. It was quite bad enough that the Grand Cleric knew about the other Ashes, and no doubt would have witnesses present, who would then also know. There was just time to put a word in the ears of her chosen companions.

Leliana, of course. If she did not come, there would be questions. She had already done her worst, and was somewhat repentant. And she had been present, both at the gaining of the Ashes, and the Healing of the queen. Anders and Jowan must be there as well. Jowan had caused this ridiculous affair, and Bronwyn was not going to let him

sleep in when she had rise early on the day after Satinalia and be examined by the high clergy. Anders was coming because she wanted this test subject examined by a competent Healer first. Perhaps this was all a trick.

Zevran she would not bring with her, nor would she disclose his name or that he had journeyed with her. Leliana had told the Grand Cleric that there were other pinches of the Ashes, but not the names of those in the party. That would not be all that difficult to discover, but Bronwyn wanted to protect Zevran and Tara from Chantry scrutiny as long as possible.

They met for breakfast, glum and shadowy-eyed, all wearing their Warden tabards. Bronwyn dug into her porridge without conversation.

"Perhaps we should bring that golden bowl again," Leliana suggested gently, after a long uncomfortable silence. "It would not do to put the Ashes of our Lady in cheap crockery."

"I'll bring it," Bronwyn agreed. "Though the Chantry might not like it. They'll probably want to examine it, too, for traces of magic."

Anders spoke from around his mug of hot, strong tea. "Probably have a Templar do a Cleanse. With my luck he'll Smite us all for an encore."

"Leliana," Bronwyn said, very sternly. "Do not volunteer any more information. Do not give the exact location of Haven. Do not give the numbers or names of the others in our party. I don't want them hunted down like rabbits for those Ashes."



DENERIM CATHEDRAL

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A submissive nod. Bronwyn hoped Leliana's obedience would hold.

It had rained very late in the night, dowsing the embers of the Satalia bonfires. A heavy haze hung in the air. The smell of wet wood permeated everything, even dominating the odors of spilled ale and vomit. A few late revelers had failed to take their holiday home, and were sprawled under eaves or propped against walls, snoring.

The walk seemed long, almost unending. Bronwyn took her preferred route over the East Gate Bridge and then to Gate Street, walking past Highever House. She gave it a salute, and felt a boost of confidence and self-assurance. Fergus was there, still sleeping. He seemed to have had a very good time at the ball, and had not had too much to drink, which was always a good thing. No doubt he had wanted the Queen to think well of him.

Her head was still spinning from all the new ideas of the day before. Cousin Leonas would marry. That young freeholder would likely become Arl of Denerim. Charade Amell might marry the heir to the Arling of West Hills. The ant hill had been kicked apart, and was putting itself together in an entirely new way.

Her own impression of Aron Kendells was better than Loghain's. Compared to Vaughan, he was a breath of fresh air: serious, willing to put his hand to the task, not mired in tradition. His demeanor toward Bronwyn was respectful, and she got the impression that he, too, was not perfectly

satisfied with Denerim as it was. Of course, who knew what would come of that? For that matter, who knew what would come of his marriage to Habren? They seemed an ill-assorted pair to Bronwyn, but she agreed with Loghain's view that this young man would brook no nonsense.

The Grand Cleric Muirin took her place in her chair of state in her council chamber. She tugged her fur cloak closer about her shoulders, despite the roaring fire. Somehow, she had never felt well and warm since Gertrude had dosed her with that horrible potion.

Perhaps she was cold because she was afraid. Oh, yes: very much afraid. Afraid that today's test would fail; more afraid that it would succeed. Afraid for herself, too, as shameful as it was to acknowledge. It was entirely possible that Val Royeaux had judged her an inadequate tool and had marked her for disposal.

Before her were a dozen reliable members of the clergy. Not all were close friends. Not all were Fereldan patriots. That was her intention, since she wanted the most objective, reasoned analysis of what they would see today.

Mother Perpetua was present, of course, now her deputy here in Denerim, since the demotion and incarceration of Gertrude. Rosamund, now confirmed in her priesthood, had replaced Heloise, who, alone in her cell in Fort Drakon, was no longer smug and superior. Mother Boann, her sweet face concerned, was here as well.

Sister Justine, their curator, was essential to the investigation, of course. Her clerk, Sister Rose, was here to transcribe the conclave's proceedings. Revered Mother Damaris had come from South Reach, and Revered Mother Eudoxia from Lothing. Revered Mother Juliana, tiny and withered, had sailed all the way from Gwaren to attend. Revered Mother Hannah of Redcliffe had been invited, but had not come. It was possible that the summons had not reached her in time, or that events in the south made her presence impossible. Hannah would regret missing this.

The Revered Mothers of Highever and Amaranthine, currently under scrutiny for their collaboration with Arl Howe and his Tevinter blood mages, were not present. It was possible that within the year both would be demoted and relegated to a cloister.

Templars were also in attendance. Tavish had been imprisoned, too, for his reckless disregard for the guests at Arl Urien's wedding. It did not seem that he was a partisan of Orlais, but Gertude and Heloise had found it too easy to use him for their purposes. Muirin was considering elevating Ser Bryant of the Lothing Chantry to the rank of Knight-Commander. He was admired not only for his devotion and skill at arms, but for his compassion and good sense. She had asked him to accompany Mother Eudoxia, and to attend the session.

No one could reasonably accuse Ser Rylock of compassion, but neither could anyone question her devotion to

the Chantry and her high-minded rejection of political intrigue. Muirin had a specific role for her in mind. Ser Irminric and Ser Otto were also present, worthy knights both, and deeply devout. Their role in the release of the Queen would make them particularly acceptable to the Warden-Commander.

Knight-Commander Harrith, of course, was also in attendance. Muirin sighed inwardly, looking at the man. Well-born and well-connected, certainly, and because of that, this rather sleazy fellow had been promoted over the heads of better holy warriors. There was talk that he was involved in unauthorized lyrium dealing. That he had been recommended for his promotion by the Revered Mother of Amaranthine did not speak well for the woman.

"I have called you together for a high purpose. It is entirely possible that here, today, in this place, we will witness a true miracle."

Hope, excitement, skepticism were before her in the persons of the priests and Templars she had chosen. Everyone had heard the rumors, and some more or less garbled version of the truth. Muirin snuggled down into her furs, wishing that this had not come in her time: not the Blight, not the young King's death, not the upcoming struggle for the throne, not the frightening possibility of an Exalted March. She thought with rueful resentment of dear Wealtheow, her predecessor and mentor, who had managed to rule over the Fereldan Chantry from the fourth year

of Maric's reign to the year before his disappearance: an enviable, uncomplicated period of peace and stability.

More especially, she had no desire to deal with what she must face today: the very difficult and challenging claim of a miraculous event. Muirin knew that miracles were inconsistent with the modern world as ordered by the Maker. Andraste, indeed, had performed wonders a thousand years ago, but she was the Bride of the Maker and His Prophet. After her death, the Maker had once again turned his back on his erring children. If they, by exercise of their free will, diligently pursued their duty, and spread the Chant of Light to every corner of the world, he would forgive. Until then, they were on their own, in the cold and the dark.

Nonetheless, she must face the challenge, and for that purpose, had yesterday been forced to make the ugliest choice of her priestly career. She was not at all sure, when she stood before the Maker someday, he would be very impressed with her.

But here was Bronwyn, whom she had known as an adorable little girl, the daughter of her dear friend Eleanor Cousland, claiming to have found the Prophet's remains, and to have healed the Queen with them. What would Eleanor say, if she knew what Bronwyn was up to? And arrogating the holy powers of the Prophet to herself was far from the whole story. The girl had essentially declared herself Commander of the Grey... in the absence of any superior in the order. Now, if rumor was true – and Mui-

rin's own analysis of the political situation was correct – Bronwyn was reaching for the crown itself.

Wardens were not supposed to hold worldly titles. That was a basic tenet of the order, but Muirin knew her history, and knew that there had been exceptions over the order's long and storied past. Duncan – with whom she had never got on well, especially after his conscription of Maric's bastard son Alistair – had been very wrong to conscript a Cousland. Technically, he had had the right, but Couslands liked to make their own rules; and while Bronwyn, from all accounts, had performed splendidly in her role as leader of the Wardens, it was clear that she still thought and acted as a high noble of Ferelden. So much for Duncan, and his penchant for collecting his betters' children.

Everyone was here and looking at her in suppressed impatience. It was time to tell them all.

"Bronwyn Cousland, Warden-Commander of the Grey will be here soon, and I have arranged a test, hoping that she has put her hands on the true Ashes of the Prophet."

"But it was claimed, Your Grace," Sister Justine said, confused, "That the Ashes were used to heal the Queen."

"I questioned Lady Bronwyn at length. She claims to have found the funerary temple of the Prophet in the Frostback Mountains. One of her party accompanied her to see me. Leliana is her name, and until a few months ago, she served as a lay sister in the Lothering Chantry. She is also of Orlesian extraction. She let slip that each

member of the party, after surviving certain ordeals, was rewarded with a pinch of the Ashes from the Urn."

A murmur of wonder, a brief exchange of significant glances.

Mother Juliana of Gwaren, too old to be afraid to speak her mind, piped up harshly.

"How many in the party? How many pinches of Sacred Ashes will be up for sale by every charlatan from here to Rialto Bay?"

"I do not know the exact number. It was not large: Bronwyn, Sister — now Warden Leliana — an ex-Templar named Cullen." She managed a faint laugh. "Presumably Bronwyn's large, loyal, and formidable mabari, though I find it hard to believe he was given a pinch! Beyond that I do not know. Ser Cullen was killed after securing his pinch of Ashes, in a battle with a dragon."

"The Prophet's Ashes and dragons to boot!" sniffed Mother Damaris. "Quite the adventure!"

"I knew Cullen," Ser Harrith said. "Young and idealistic. A splendid swordsman. I had no idea he'd become a Warden."

Muirin said, "He was conscripted at the Circle Tower when Bronwyn also conscripted a pair of mages, and where she recruited yet more mages for the army. The conscriptions were with the consent of Knight-Commander Greagoir. He knew of Ser Cullen's death, having received a letter of condolence from Bronwyn. She said nothing of Ashes or dragons in it, but said that Cullen died most bravely in the performance of his duty."

"Lady Bronwyn," Ser Bryant began — er — the Warden-Commander — came through Lothing several months ago, and did a great deal to calm the people and put them in the way of defending themselves. She did not strike me as one who would invent a story to inflate her own importance."

"I agree," said Mother Eudoxia of Lothing, "though ambition can play tricks on one's wits. Lady Bronwyn would not be the first to sincerely believe a falsehood."

Mother Boann had been brooding in silence, and but then looked up, "We must be careful how we behave to her. Right or wrong, she might well be our queen in a little over a month!"

That was something to consider, certainly, and a brief silence fell over the conclave. The Chantry was already in a bad odor with the Crown, insulting a claimant would be, at the very least, imprudent.

"Can we not hear the whole story from her own lips," said Mother Juliana. "and judge for ourselves?"

"You shall hear it," the Grand Cleric assented. "You shall hear every word. But before that, we shall have the test. The consequences of that, as I am sure you can see, will very much determine how we shall proceed with our examination of her. I told Bronwyn that extraordinary claims demand extraordinary proof. After suitable search, we found a number of mortally ill individuals whose conditions did not yield to magic. While Lady Bronwyn was patrolling for darkspawn in the north, I sent to the Circle for assistance. With Templar supervision, a powerful mage

examined a dozen sick persons brought before him. After his best efforts, three remained uncured. They are even now at the point of death. After due consideration, I had one of them brought here today. Bronwyn will bring forth her Ashes, and we shall see what virtue they possess."

Choosing which one might live had caused Muirin considerable anguish. How to choose between an ailing mother, a young man long a suffering invalid, and a dying little girl? In the end, Muirin had chosen the child, because she thought that if Bronwyn were to be urged to make a sincere test of her supposed cure, her heart might be most softened by the little girl, perhaps seeing herself there. All three were poor commoners, which was unfortunate. It would have been better to have available a subject of more famous name, or someone of greater importance to the nation. These three, however, were what the Maker had put before them.

Another factor inclining Muirin toward the little girl was that she was a child of the Chantry, and could be brought here without raising false hopes in a family or even giving rise to rumors. Prudence and discretion were best.

A soft knock at the door roused them from their whispered gossip.

"Your Grace, the Warden-Commander is here, and with her Wardens Leliana, Anders, and Jowan."

"Admit them at once."

The Grand Cleric was not pleased to hear that Bronwyn

had brought that blood mage Jowan, who had participated in the ransacking of the Cathedral and who was obviously a Libertarian of the most radical stripe. On the other hand, she had brought Leliana, who loved the Chantry. Perhaps Bronwyn, too, was trying for balance.

The Wardens were shown to a table in the middle of the room. It put them clearly in view of the priestly council, whose members were arranged in a semicircle in front of it.

"Be seated, Wardens, if you please."

Muirin called the conclave to order and greeted the Wardens formally, apprising them of her purpose today.

"Yes, Your Grace," Bronwyn replied clearly. "It was plain that you meant to make a test of the Ashes today. I brought them. And this." She laid a small, translucent gut packet on the table before her. From a bag slung over her shoulder she removed a footed bowl of pure hammered gold.

"Is that the bowl that was used to administer the Ashes to the Queen?" Muirin asked.

"It is."

"We will need to examine it for inherent, runic, or applied magics."

"I have no objection."

That was done by Ser Irminric and Ser Otto, who turned the bowl round and round and upside down. Ser Rylock performed a Cleanse, and after some pondering, asked Otto to perform one as well.

"I think there's something here," muttered Irminric, "but

it might just be residue."

"Nothing malevolent, certainly," said Otto.

"If there is any trace of magic," said Mother Perpetua, "the bowl cannot be used for the test."

"Very well," Bronwyn shrugged. "I shall simply place the Ashes in the child's mouth with my fingers. Mind you, she might well want a drink of water afterwards."

The Grand Cleric gestured to Sister Justine, who took a plain cup from a cupboard, and filled it with from the silver ewer near the priests.

"Perhaps," suggested Ser Bryant, "the Warden and her people wish to check the water and cups for anything untoward."

"Well thought on," Bronwyn said and immediately took the cup from Sister Justine and drank it down herself. Jowan and Anders winced visibly, which curiously troubled the Grand Cleric. Had it really come to this, that Eleanor Cousland's child would suspect her of using poison?

Bronwyn then set down the cup, and her challenging gaze swept the room. "I seem to be alive. Pour another cup, if you please, Sister Justine, and let us set it right *there*," she smiled wolfishly, "where everyone can see it."

"One last thing, Your Grace." It was Ser Rylock, her huge dark eyes gleaming. "Let us consider the possibility that Lady Bronwyn was able to infuse common ashes with some curative powers herself."

Leliana spoke up, bewildered. "But how could she do that?"

Anders and Jowan exchanged a grim look between them. They had foreseen this being raised, even if Bronwyn had not.

"Perhaps," Ser Rylock suggested, her voice deceptively mild, "Lady Bronwyn has sufficient *magic* to accomplish it? Could it be that she is a secret mage?"

Bronwyn stared back unflinchingly. A disgusted disclaimer from her would be insulting to her Warden mages, who had fought at her side, and were now sitting here, doing their best for her.

"I am no mage," she said clearly.

Anders rudely snorted a laugh. "Secret mage, indeed! Secret from her, too!"

Rylock did not rise to the bait. "That is not an unknown scenario, *Warden*, despite your ignorant laughter. It has happened that magic manifests in later life. I believe this examination would be incomplete without considering the possibility."

"Bronwyn," the Grand Cleric said gently. "We are not saying this to insult you, but we must consider all possibilities. Ser Rylock will perform a procedure used to suppress magical ability. If you are not a mage, it should not inconvenience you."

"You mean a Smite, Of course I know about them. Cullen did them all the time to disable darkspawn mages. They're very useful. A Smite never knocked me out of a fight. Do your worst, Ser Templar," she said to Rylock.

"Er..." Anders got up and started backing away. "You

don't mind if Jowan and I step aside right now, do you? I'd like to be functional for the rest of this party."

"I think a known mage should be within range," Mother Eudoxia suggested, "so we can be absolutely certain it was a full-power, effective smite."

Ser Rylock grimaced, not sure whether to be offended at the idea that she would do less than her best, or to be pleased to have a mage to discipline.

"I'll stand with the Commander," said Jowan, carefully not looking at anybody. "If I'm knocked out, Bronwyn will still have Anders to rely on, who's a better Healer than I am."

Anders burst out in anger. "So Jowan will be struck with a Smite. What will you do to get rid of the rest of us, I wonder? Then you'll all be looking beady-eyed at Bronwyn to judge her. Well, you know what? If she has to stand up to it, I think one of you priests who's so hot to find something wrong with her should be tested too, right with her and Jowan!"

"We are not the ones on trial here!" Rylock railed back at him.

"Oh," Bronwyn said, raising her brows. "I'm on trial? Actually, I think Anders' suggestion has merit. You all speak of a Smite as proof positive of being a mage, but have any of *you* ever endured one? No? It's a sensible idea. You can see from the priest's reaction what a normal, proper, unmagelike response *should* be, and judge me the better for it. Sister Justine: you're young enough not to be

injured by a Smite. Do you dare face the test with me? If you do not, then I can assure you that you have no chance whatever of passing the tests to which the Guardian of the Urn of the Sacred Ashes would subject you!"

"Who is this Guardian?" Mother Juliana demanded. "Are you saying that there is a secret order protecting the Prophet's remains? Grand Cleric —"

"Grand Cleric!" Ser Rylock said, very angry. "This is a trick to manipulate me into easing back on the Smite. Well, I won't!"

"Nobody expects *that*," Anders sneered.

Muirin raised her hand for silence. "First the tests! Then the story! Sister Justine, do you, as a gesture of good faith, agree to endure the Smite with the mage and the Warden-Commander?"

The mild-mannered curator stared at them all in dismay. "I suppose... it's not dangerous, is it? I mean, we're told it doesn't really *hurt* mages, so it couldn't possibly do me any harm..."

Mother Boann spoke up, swiftly and urgently. "Grand Cleric, Sister Justine is frightened. I will endure the test in her place."

"No!" Sister Justine squeaked. "I mean, no thank you, Revered Mother. I'm not afraid... really... I'll think I'd like a drink of water, first..."

They waited while she gulped down the water hastily. Then she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and walked over to Bronwyn, glad that her robes concealed

her shaking knees. It was a very intimidating experience. The Warden-Commander was so very tall, and the blood mage was standing within inches of her. Ser Rylock was glaring at them all in a very hostile and unpleasant way. She was reeking of lyrium, too, and Justine, in that adrenalin-charged moment, made instantaneous connections among various facts she knew. Mages needed lyrium. Templars needed lyrium. The Templar in front of her was going to cast a Holy Smite, which was really, really, really like having a spell cast on her. What were spellcasters? Mages were spellcasters. The syllogism was already forming in in her head.

Casting spells makes one a mage.

Templars cast spells.

Templars are mages.

No! That couldn't be right! Ser Rylock drew her sword and raised her left hand on high, while light swirled around her. It brightened unendurably and then burst forth, with a distant boom. Startled, Justine cried out as the the light swept through her bones like a high wind, leaving dizzy, dull nausea in its wake. She put her hand over her mouth.

The mage was slumped on the floor, vomiting; the stink of it sharp above the scent of lyrium. Ser Rylock looked triumphant: enraptured, even. Sister Justine's stomach knotted again. She glanced up at the impassive Warden-Commander, who quietly asked, "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Fine," Justine managed weakly, a little frightened

at her own reaction to the Smite. Had it just been the bright light, or was she a mage? It had made her feel a little sick, but the Warden-Commander had not changed color or her stern expression. Justine babbled, "Mind you, it's not a very nice experience. Do mages always get sick like that? Does he need help?"

"Yes," the other mage, Anders, said coldly, shouldering her aside. "He'll be sick and weak for an hour, even with care. Was that entertaining enough for this crowd?"

"Anders..." Leliana pleaded.

"Don't!" Anders snarled. "Don't tell me everything's fine. You can see that we're nothing but animals to them."

"Come on, Anders," Bronwyn said, tugging on his sleeve. "Help me get him over there. He can rest for awhile, and then we'll help him home. Cast a Rejuvenation on him."

Anders preened, his gaze ranging the room in an obnoxiously smug way. He cast the spell instantly, with a show of perfect ease.

"Now, sit," Bronwyn growled at him softly. He grimaced, but obeyed.

"So," Bronwyn said, turning to the Grand Cleric, "Is everyone satisfied that I am not a mage? And for that matter, that Sister Justine is not a mage? Though I will point out, Sister, in the interest of scholarly precision, that Holy Smites do actually hurt mages. That's the point."

"It was very disagreeable," Justine declared, feeling uncommonly bold. "Ser Rylock must be a very powerful Templar."

"I find the test conclusive," the Grand Cleric decreed. "Bronwyn Cousland, the Warden-Commander of Ferelden, is not a mage. Does anyone wish to register a dissenting opinion?"

A silence.

Bronwyn tensely waited for someone to say something, but no one did. In fact, she had found it as unpleasant as Justine had, but had not dared express any discomfort, lest that be pounced on as proof of her magical nature. In the heat of battle, a Smite could be shrugged off; in this uncomfortable cockpit, with every eye on her, it was not so easy to dismiss the nasty sensation.

The Grand Cleric cleared her throat. "Then let us move on. Mother Boann, is the subject ready?"

"Yes, Your Grace. She is in the private chapel next door with her escort."

"Then, Revered Mother, admit the subject, the mage, and the Templar supervising him. While you are doing that, I will explain our preparations to the Warden-Commander."

She turned to Bronwyn. "We sought out cases of illness that did not respond to magic. One individual was chosen. Her illness is not magic-related, to anyone's knowledge. It is not the result of a demon or a curse, but of a natural defect of the body. She will die, and very soon. There is nothing that either loving care or magic can do for her."

Mother Boann returned shortly, followed by two grey-beards whom Bronwyn knew.

"Knight-Commander! First Enchanter!"

Anders smirked, while Jowan shrank away, wishing he was strong enough to crawl away and hide under the table. Sure enough, First Enchanter Irving and Ser Greagoir entered the room, followed by a litter carried by two lay brothers. On the litter lay an unconscious child, dressed only in a white linen shift. The litter was set on the floor and the brothers dismissed.

The child was appallingly thin, her bony arms drawn up around her head. A soft, thin, unending whine issued from her throat.

"She cries even when unconscious," Mother Boann said sadly. "She seems to be in great pain."

"What is your opinion, First Enchanter?" asked the Grand Cleric. "Can the child be healed by magic?"

"I have attempted it repeatedly. I do not believe it to be possible, Your Grace," said Irving. "The tumor in her brain is resistant. With a heavier dose of certain potions, I could relieve some of the pain..."

"And very likely kill her!" Ser Rylock erupted. "This innocent child will die in the Maker's good time, and go to him unsullied!"

"So the First Enchanter says it can't be done. Do you mind," Anders asked, with a hint of acid, "if I at least try?"

"Do so," the Grand Cleric. "Do so now. By all means, do your best."

"Warden Anders," Knight-Commander Greagoir declared to the assembled company, "is the finest Healer the Circle has produced in the past ten years."

"Ooo, compliments!" Anders snarked. "Maybe I wouldn't have run off if I'd known you cared!"

He subsided at Bronwyn's grave expression, and when focused on healing, he was, as always, perfectly serious. His face turned intent and watchful; blue fire crackled through his fingers. He laid them on the child with great gentleness, and the magic boiled up and around, in a superb display.

But to no avail. The child continued to moan. Frustrated, Anders tried again. And again. Sweat streamed from his brow and dripped from his nose.

"Anders," Irving urged him firmly. "Stop. Tumors are vile things, and brain tumors the worst of all."

"I can almost get it," the young mage said, face strained. "I can *feel* it!"

"Enough!" said the Grand Cleric. "I feel this is a sufficient demonstration that the tumor will not yield to spells. Warden-Commander, I wish you to try the Ashes."

Bronwyn rose, and took up the packet of Ashes. She looked at the suffering little girl, her stomach turning again, not from the Smite, but from the horror of such a fate.

"What is this child's name?" she asked.

Mother Eudoxia was puzzled. "What difference can that possibly make?"

Some winced at her insensitivity. The Grand Cleric did not, though she felt it herself, and knew such an answer would rouse Bronwyn's ire again. Eleanor had been hot-tempered, too.

"I think I have a perfect right to know everything about

this child," Bronwyn shot back, holding back the tide of anger and contempt. "I am giving my *life* for her."

The Grand Cleric took a breath, and raised her hand in protest, but Bronwyn pressed on ruthlessly.

"Yes. I am giving my life for her. Because I am using the Ashes to cure her, I will not have them on the day when I am grievously wounded or ill. Therefore... I will die because she lived. I do not begrudge her that life, but I will not let the exchange pass unremarked."

"You can use my Ashes..." Leliana urged softly. Bronwyn glared her into silence.

"Where is this child's *mother*?" she asked abruptly. "Why is she alone among strangers in her last hours?"

Mother Boann answered, her voice soothing. "Her name is Demelza. She is a child of the Chantry. And she is not alone."

"An orphan?"

The Revered Mother hesitated, being an honest woman. "No. She was... given to the Chantry by her family."

"Why? Was she crippled or incorrigible?"

Ser Bryant did not much like the truth himself, so he gave Bronwyn a soldier's stare. "She was... accepted to satisfy a debt owed to the Templar grange of East Ryecombe."

Anders muttered to Leliana, "So much for there being no slavery in Ferelden! No wonder they want her healed."

The Grand Cleric interposed, trying to remain in control of the proceedings. "We really must move on to the

business at hand, Bronwyn. Will you, or will you not, attempt this test?"

"Yes!" Bronwyn replied. "But first... you ask me to prove my words... to prove my good faith," she said to the priests. "Very well. I am here, submitting to your tests and your disbelief. On the other hand, you offer me nothing, even begrudging me a few questions about this child. You do not risk the danger that I do in sacrificing these Ashes. You did not earn these Ashes as I did, by fire and sword, yet you claim the right to dispose of them at your convenience in order to satisfy your curiosity."

She looked at them each in turn. "I think an exchange is order. We should receive some benefit for this sacrifice... other," she sneered, "than the privilege of not being called liars."

"What do you want, Bronwyn?" asked the Grand Cleric wearily.

"I want Mother Clarine and her minion Sister Polycarp recalled from Ostagar. I want them to submit to questioning about the late events of the seventh of Harvestmere. While we welcome the spiritual comfort of the Chantry, we do not appreciate interference in strategic planning. Mother Clarine very nearly cost us our victory in the Bloomingtide Battle. Her trouble-making *has* cost us countless lives. Out of bigotry and spite, she had murdered an innocent mage, sent here under my orders to serve the Queen. In short, I want her out of this war."

"She will be recalled," the Grand Cleric agreed. "But I wish

to make clear that I do not think her an Orlesian sympathizer."

It was true. The Grand Cleric did not think Clarine party to these sinister foreign plots. She did recognize that she was a narrow-minded, dogmatic woman, who tended to see Blood Magic wherever there were mages.

Bronwyn had more to say. "And furthermore, I don't want my mages harassed or second-guessed. They have risked their lives to save this ungrateful country, and they deserve — if you absolutely *cannot* manage respect — at least a measure of peace."

Rylock drew an angry breath, but was silenced by the Grand Cleric's sharp look. Muirin said, "The Chantry Treaty with the Wardens is quite clear on the issue of immunity."

"For obvious reasons, I require that you do not reveal the existence of other Ashes to anyone who absolutely does not need to know. I would prefer that my people not be pursued like animals by every bounty hunter in Thedas!"

"I think it would suffice to record that there were some Ashes remaining after the Queen was healed," Muirin agreed. "That there were additional doses need not go farther." She looked around the room. "I charge you, on your obedience, to say nothing of additional Ashes."

Bronwyn was not satisfied, but there seemed little she could do about it. "That will have to do, I suppose. Finally, I want you to send this child to me. I am about to buy her life with my own, and therefore I should have some say in her future. She may well be happy with her life as a servant —"

"A lay sister –"

" – of the Chantry. If she is not, I shall see that she lives as she likes. Do you agree to this?"

Grand Cleric Muirin breathed a long mental sigh of relief. She had feared that Bronwyn would storm in, demanding liberty for every mage in Thedas. Her requests were moderate, all things considered.

"If the child is healed, she is yours."

"Very well, then."

Bronwyn kicked a footstool over to the litter on the far side of the child from the examiners. She wanted them to see exactly what she was doing. She opened the packet, and touched the Ashes, feeling once again their curious, magical heat. She took a breath.

"An interesting feature of the Ashes is their inherent warmth, as if they had only now been raked from a fire."

"Really?" Muirin was intrigued. "May I?"

At her gesture, Bronwyn brought them over to her. Muirin touched them very carefully with the tip of a finger and then gasped. Bronwyn's face was a study in grim satisfaction.

"That's... extraordinary..." Muirin said. "Sister Rose, annotate the minutes with the observation that the Grand Cleric touched the Ashes and confirmed that they are indeed very warm."

A pause, and a sudden, almost eerie transformation in the room's atmosphere. The air crackled with anticipation. The priests were silent. Irminric and Otto looked at each other in

wild surmise and hope. Ser Bryant swallowed. Ser Rylock was perfectly still. And Ser Harrith was shaken – albeit slightly – out of his customary boredom. The two old men, Irving and Greagoir, exchanged a swift, uneasy glance. Everyone wanted to touch the Ashes, but no one dared to say so.

"Go on, Bronwyn," said the Grand Cleric. "Administer them to the child."

"Demelza," Bronwyn murmured, fixing the name in her mind. The child was not a mere experimental subject, after all, but a *person*.

She pulled the stool up and sat close to the little girl. Demelza's eyes were squeezed shut, all her muscles rigid from the onslaught of ceaseless pain. Carefully, Bronwyn touched the pale little mouth, and the moans grew louder. Scooping up most of the Ashes with her left fingertip, she managed to work them past the child's lips. The sensation must have been unpleasant. The child squirmed and cried, running her tongue over her teeth. That was enough, evidently.

With a sudden sharp cry, the girl sat up, clapping her hands to her head. Just as suddenly, she collapsed back on the litter, her breath coming in sharp little pants. The she exhaled slowly, and looked up at Bronwyn.

She asked, "Who're you?"

Bronwyn smiled at her, and gave her a wink. "I'm the Girl Warden!"

A gasp ran around the room. Leliana's face lit up in joy, and she lifted her hands up to the Maker. Anders shouted

"Ha!" and pounded the table in glee. From his place on the floor, Jowan smiled in rueful relief.

The girl sat up again, and began rebuking Bronwyn in a voice copied from her priestly guardians.

"That's a story! Telling stories is very, very wrong. If I tell a story, I have to sit on a high stool in front of the class wearing the "LIAR" placard all day long!"

"Demelza, dear," Mother Boann asked, "How do you feel? You were so sick!"

The child considered that. "I feel fine," she said, matter-of-factly. "I don't feel sick any more. May I have a drink of water?"

Smiles of wonder were breaking forth. Sister Justine raced to the pitcher and nearly dropped the cup, filling it. Bronwyn took the cup from her and gave it to Demelza.

"Just drink it down." She lowered her voice. "And don't spit, whatever you do. The Grand Cleric is watching. Just drink it all down."

"Yuck."

"Shhh..."

First Enchanter Irving and Anders were both trying to edge forward to examine the girl. The Grand Cleric nodded in permission, and another round of puzzlement and wonder began.

Demelza, it seemed, was well. And not just well. She was in *perfect health*. She giggled when Anders insisted on looking her mouth and complimented her on her perfect, pearly teeth. She was embarrassed when Mother Boann

led her around to all the priests and Templars in turn.

"I don't have anything on but my shimmy!" she objected in a loud whisper.

"No one minds, dear," Mother Boann reassured her. During Demelza's long illness, Boann had forgotten the child's deplorable forthrightness.

"I'm cold!"

Bronwyn bit back a laugh, and gave the Grand Cleric a naughty smirk instead. Muirin sighed inwardly, remembering that look from years gone by.

"Fetch the child some clothing, Sister Justine."

The archivist was not happy to miss any part of the discussion, but actually, nobody was uttering much of anything other than pleased and wondering exclamations and general praise of the Maker and His Prophet. Ser Rylock had fallen to her knees in frantic, ecstatic prayer, and was oblivious to anything else going on around her.

Irminric and Otto smiled at each other, knelt, and joined their soft, deep voices to that of Ser Rylock.

By the time all the priests and Templars had seen the child for themselves, Sister Justine burst into the room, red with running, her arms full of clothing and with a pair of little shoes slipping from her grasp. Bronwyn helped her get the child dressed.

"Arms up," she ordered.

"Are you really the Girl Warden?"

"Yes. Turn around."

"You're all grown up. I thought you'd be a little girl, like me. Or maybe like Luadhin. She's the proctor of my dormitory. She's thirteen."

Bronwyn turned her face away, suddenly realizing that she really was grown up. Somehow, between death and the darkspawn, everything in her that felt like youth had slipped away. It made her sad, somehow.

Demelza whispered, "Why am I here? Why is everybody so excited?"

Mother Boann whispered back, "You were very sick, dear. We thought we were going to lose you, but Our Lady Andraste healed you herself. We're going to have a prayer now and thank her!"

The Grand Cleric's prayer was long and rambling, and needed considerable revision and polishing later on, when the final record of the meeting was composed. Demelza grew restless, and had to be stopped from fidgeting.

Muirin knew she was hardly making any sense at all. Her mind was in distressed confusion. She had read many books, and had always longed to have seen the miracles of the great old days – longed to have seen the Prophet with her own eyes, and to have defied her enemies at her side.

Well, now she had seen a miracle, and she realized that it was just as complicated a matter as it had been in Andraste's day, when the Tevinters denied her and called her witch and demon, and burned her at the stake.

She would send her report to Val Royeaux, detailing the

events. Had it happened anywhere but in Ferelden, the Divine might even have lent the story some credence.

Divine Beatrix III, however, would never believe in anything good or marvelous coming out of Ferelden: not with the political situation as it was. The Divine was almost certainly – to some degree, at least – involved in Gertrude and Heloise's plots. She might even have given them their orders. Muirin had known, when the late King Cailan had first approached her about the possibility of dissolving his unfruitful marriage, that there was going to be serious trouble in Ferelden. She had also had hints from abroad that the King was looking westward for a new alliance. If the Empress had decided to conquer Ferelden by marriage, how angry and vengeful she must now be. The peace plan had failed. That she attempted it implied that she still wished to possess this land. And the Divine, Orlesian to the core, still regarded Ferelden as a rude, barbarous, and rebellious province of the Orlesian Empire. Muirin had experienced for herself the patronizing remarks, the little contemptuous snubs on her visits to the Grand Cathedral.

No, she would not believe Bronwyn had found the true Ashes. It was pointless to send Muirin's own favorable report to her, because it would simply make her angry, and probably of yet more a mind to set Muirin aside and put one of her own people in the position of Grand Cleric. Would she dare? In the current climate, could she imagine that Ferelden would tolerate it?

Of course she could. She would expect Fereldans to submit, like good little serfs... like the serfs in Orlais. Muirin's report would be denounced as ignorant heresy, and Muirin along with it. She would be disgraced and demoted. Worse things might even befall her. Muirin pictured them all too vividly, and was very, very afraid.

All the same, it had happened. These were the true Ashes. They had been found. They had virtue. The Divine might rule the Chantry, but Andraste was at the Maker's side, judging them all. If Muirin was any kind of priest, she must testify to the truth, and let the consequences take care of themselves.

Boann returned little Demelza to the astonished novice mistress, Sister Fidalma, with the amazing news that Andraste had worked a miracle on the child's behalf. The other girls who had not seen Demelza in several weeks gathered around her, curious and not particularly awed, since this was, after all, *Demelza*, and they knew she was no better than any one of them.

Upstairs, there was more excitement. Wine was served, and Bronwyn urged to tell every detail of the story of her quest.

There were certain things that were absolutely none of their business. She had previously impressed on Leliana that they would say nothing about the notes obtained in Denerim. They were not even supposed to have been in Denerim at the time, after all. Let the clergy believe that

they had obtained the notes in Haven, along with Genetivi's other books and papers. Nonetheless, the story had to begin with one Brother Ferdinand Genetivi.

Sister Justine had known her fellow scholar Brother Genetivi well. She had even known that he was interested in the Urn, and she remembered being quizzed about him on occasion after his departure. Understandably, she was grieved when Bronwyn, not wanting to stretch the matter out, informed them that the good brother was dead.

Bronwyn told them of a chance meeting at the Spoiled Princess Inn, which all of them knew. A new name had been written on the map, and a warning had been given.

Then Bronwyn found it necessary to tell her auditors about the secret poisoning of Queen Anora, which raised considerable disquiet. The guilty party had confessed, and implicated a known Orlesian agent, who was also now dead. Jowan was asked to confirm that the poison had resisted magic. Wynne's name was raised, and some hard looks given. Irving sighed, and put his face in his hands. Greagoir looked nearly as sad.

"Everything I was being told," Bronwyn said, "indicated that magic could not cure the Queen, who was vital to the kingdom's stability. The only possibility that remained was the last, unlikeliest one: to seek out the Ashes. Of my Wardens, Leliana here and Cullen, once a Templar at the Circle, were the first to volunteer for this mission."

She glanced at Knight-Commander Greagoir, and saw

the brief, pained, guilty look.

Then she launched on her story, expanding on the bones of the tale she had given the Grand Cleric. As these people were willing to believe her, she found it easier going. They were disgusted, of course, when they heard of the male priests and of the attacks on the party. They were grieved to hear of the books and notes belonging to Brother Genetivi found in the village shop.

Bronwyn said nothing of the other items they found: most particularly not about the fine Antivan boots that Zevran had appropriated. Bronwyn had come to the conclusion that they, too, had been the good brother's. He had been a rather small man. It was not surprising that a fairly tall elf could wear them.

"We looked over the books and notes," Bronwyn went on, "and among them was one entitled *FLAME AND SCALE: THE SECRETS OF DRAGON CULTS*. There was a bookmark at the chapter dealing with dragon worship. Among other things, it mentioned that such cultists often raise dragons, and drink their blood, becoming incredibly strong and aggressive, after the manner of dragons."

Murmurs of shock and horror rose, and grew louder.

"We fought our way to the Chantry," she told them, "and had words with Father Eirik. He spoke with reverence of Andraste, but despised us for our ignorance. He mentioned a sacred trust they must protect."

Leliana fidgeted next to her. Bronwyn supposed she was

dying to tell them that the priest had also been a mage. Bronwyn gave her a stern look. That complication would only distract the clergy.

So she told of the fight in the Chantry, and how they took a prisoner. She told of the secret room that she believed to have been Brother Genetivi's sad prison. Then how they had taken a strange key from their prisoner and found a vast and magnificent complex within the neighboring mountain.

"It was immense and awe-inspiring!" Leliana seconded her. "And I have seen the Grand Cathedral!"

There were quite a few questions about this temple, and if it was there that they found the Urn. The brief answer, of course, was 'No,' and Bronwyn tried to keep things in their proper order. They had fought cultists, but also demons, and finally...

"You were attacked by dragons –" old Mother Damaris repeated, now a bit skeptical again. "How big?"

"In the caverns, we found no mature dragons," Bronwyn said firmly. "However, a swarm of dragonlings is easily as dangerous as a pack of wolves. We were attacked by such swarms several times. The cultists were indeed breeding dragons. We also were attacked by mature drakes, and killed four of them in all. They are much bigger than a warhorse, and while they cannot fly, they can certainly flame."

"The remains would be valuable," Ser Harrith spoke up. "Very valuable. Were you able to retrieve them?"

"No. The bones still lie there, for all I know. We traveled

by horseback, and one of our horses was killed. We took some gold, and some of their sacramental objects — " she nodded at the golden bowl, gleaming innocently at her left hand — " but our situation was never one that would permit us the time or leisure to dress out any dragonkind!"

Her throat was dry from talking, so she took a long swallow of wine.

"The caverns led all the way through the mountain. There's no need to describe all the adventures we had or all the dangers we faced. Near the end of the caverns however, we came up a large party of the cultists; and their leader, Father Kolgrim, rather than attacking us instantly, actually spoke to us."

"*Ranted* at us, you mean," muttered Leliana.

"He did, in fact, use a manner of speaking that could only be described as 'ranting,'" Bronwyn agreed. "I'm sure he had been drinking dragon's blood for years. He claimed to be a priest, but was clad in armor and carried a huge doubled-bladed axe. His tone was loud and hectoring, but he was attempting to communicate. He said he wanted to give us a chance to redeem our sins. Since we'd done so brilliantly fighting our way through to him, we might be just the people he was looking for."

"He spoke only to you," Leliana corrected her. "You were the only one who interested him. He recognized you as a hero. And a hero was exactly what he needed."

Bronwyn glared at the faint smiles around her. "Be that as it may, he had a proposal for me. It was then that we

learned that the Urn was not far at all: in fact, only across the valley floor to the nearby peak. The funerary shrine was there, but the cultists could not access it. He raved on about the glory of a 'Risen Andraste,' and that she could not ascend to her full glory without the destruction of her earlier incarnation. He wished me to defile the Ashes by pouring a vial of dragon's blood on them, after which she would rise in her new form 'in fiery splendor' and rule the world."

"It's always about ruling the world with that sort," said Anders to Jowan.

"You refused, of course!" cried Ser Irminric.

Bronwyn shook her head. "Not in so many words. There were only a few of us and a great many of them, and it was not a good place to be trapped. I thought I'd have a better chance in the open. I told them I wanted to see this 'Risen Andraste,' and that I needed a pinch of the Ashes for healing. Kolgrim told me that I could have the pinch and then defile the rest, and then join them as an honored sister. And I asked him why he hadn't done all this himself. His story astonished me."

Her audience leaned closer.

"He told me that they had tried to enter the shrine, but that it was protected by an immortal Guardian who would not listen to their new revelation. This being drove off or killed any cultists who set foot in the shrine, but that I, whom he did not know, he would take for a pilgrim. It seemed the wisest thing to play along with this madman, and in the

open, I believed we could make a break for the shrine. After all, we really were pilgrims, and this immortal Guardian could certainly be no worse than dragon worshipers! And so, this Father Kolgrim led us out to meet Andraste, so he could explain to her to let us pass and pave the way for Her Glory. Cullen thought we were being taken to see some sort of ridiculous idol. How wrong he was."

"It was a dragon," croaked Knight-Commander Greagoir. "Their Andraste was a dragon."

The priests could not find words to express their horror.

"A vast, terrifying, and very healthy High Dragon," Bronwyn confirmed. "It was fully as large as the one killed near Ostagar. It seemed to enjoy Kolgrim's groveling flattery. The man even wore a special horn to summon it. This horn," she said, unslinging her trophy and laying it on the table in front of her for their inspection. "It is, in fact, the only dragon relic we retrieved."

The dragon horn was passed around and wondered over. Harrith's fingers lingered over the gold fittings.

"After sufficient cringing from the cultists, the dragon flapped up to a high cliff overlooking the valley and we were sent past it to a distant portal. That was the entrance to the actual shrine of the Prophet, and the location of the Urn of the Sacred Ashes."

Bronwyn noticed that Ser Harrith was scribbling his own notes. Perhaps he thought that if he could put bits and pieces of description together, he could find the place

for himself. She wished him luck.

Now she came to the part of the story that made her particularly uncomfortable. Yes, she met the Guardian. He knew their names and all sorts of things about them. Yes, he seemed to be an immortal man, rather than an insubstantial spirit. No, they had not learned his name, only that he said he had followed Andraste when she had lived in the world. Everyone wanted to know every word he had said about the Prophet. Bronwyn indulged them, and then went on with her narrative.

"The Guardian told us quite a bit about the village and the temple. According to him, the founders of Haven were among the Prophet's most faithful disciples, who spirited away her Ashes to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Tevinters. For many ages they lived isolated but worthy lives. However, a few generations ago, a dragon made its appearance, and an ancestor of Father Kolgrim's used the opportunity to stage a coup, claiming that the dragon was the true Andraste, and killing all who dared speak against him."

The interest and scandal this aroused so distracted them that she was able to avoid mentioning the intrusive questions that had hurt each of them. She said only that he had warned them of the Gauntlet, which was a series of tests to judge their worthiness.

"And the first test consisted of riddles, asked by phantoms of the past."

"Riddles?" asked Sister Justine. "What kind of riddles?"

Who asked them?"

They wanted to know everything about those silly riddles, down to the exact wording. Sister Rose wrote it all down industriously. They were intrigued by the appearance of Archon Hessarian, but most of them were not pleased to hear that Thane Shartan had been among the questioners. Bronwyn was unsympathetic. Just because the Divine had excised Andraste's elven friend Shartan from the Chant of Light, it did not follow that Andraste herself had forgotten him.

"And then," she forced herself to say, wincing, knowing that if she did not mention this Leliana would, "Then each of us met someone important in our lives, spoke to them, and was given an amulet."

"Who did you speak to, Lady Bronwyn?" asked Mother Perpetua.

"My father, the late Bryce Cousland, Teyrn of Highever."

"What did he say?"

Bronwyn was not going to tell them that. The remembered voice filled her whole consciousness, drowning out the whispers around her.

"... I must warn you, my child: you reach for an earthly crown, but the kingdom you must conquer is the kingdom within. That is the one realm that will be yours in eternity."

Leliana saw her face, and said hastily. "I saw my old bardmaster, and she mocked me for risking myself as a Grey Warden. We do not know with whom Cullen spoke,

but he had an amulet like ours." She pulled off the curious token and passed it around. "And then we had to fight our phantom doubles. That was a strange challenge, and harder than you might think!"

Bronwyn let Leliana babble cheerfully of the chasm, and dither on in praise of Bronwyn's resourcefulness. The priests wanted every detail of the chasm and its curious runestones. They seemed convinced that there was another, more appropriate solution than Bronwyn's.

"And finally," Leliana went on, "we had to remove our clothes and walk through a wall of fire. Afterward the fire died down and the Guardian said we had walked the path of Andraste, and like her, we had been cleansed. It was the most wonderful sensation!"

"Not everyone who got that far survived," Bronwyn said quietly. "We found charred human bones there, and later disposed of them decently."

She let Leliana do the talking about the Urn as well. Leliana, of course, described it in minute detail, rhapsodizing over the glory of the event, the beauty of the inner shrine, the divine heat of the Ashes between her fingers. Bronwyn felt not the least desire to speak of it at all. Being here was becoming odious... insupportable... to her.

"And then, Lady Bronwyn... what happened afterward?"

They had come to it at last, and Bronwyn told them briefly of the hot, furious confrontation with the outraged Kolgrim, the brutal fight that had ensued, the brief celebration at their

safety and triumph afterward, and then the horror as the dragon swooped down on them. She reported the battle as objectively as possible – as dispassionately as possible – her voice breaking a little only when she told of Cullen distracting the dragon and paying the ultimate price.

"...and he was dead before he struck the ground..."

There was the rest. The bomb lodged in the wing joint, the dragon's soaring flight and the fireball that ignited it; a terrible, driving fall to earth, and then how they had slain the injured beast.

"And that's the end. We held a funeral for Cullen and mourned him. He died, you must see, a worthy Warden and a very gallant gentleman. We also found where we think Brother Genetivi was... given to the dragon."

Sister Justine gasped, hand to her mouth.

"Then we went back to the Chantry to rest. The villagers did not dare attack us. The next morning we rode down from the Chantry, and I told them their false god was dead, and that they must never murder travelers again. And then we left."

She was so tired. She felt she could sleep forever. She felt that she would like to sleep forever. In a dull haze, she answered what questions she could. Anders broke in, and told the priests that he was going to cast a rejuvenation spell on her. Ser Rylock did not like it, but was repressed. Bronwyn felt a great deal better afterwards.

The clergy continued to ask questions, and would never

have let them go, but the Grand Cleric, at least, could see that Bronwyn had had enough for them for one day. Bronwyn and Leliana were praised and thanked, and another prayer was offered. Then Leliana rose, and taking her own little packet of Ashes from an inner pocket, laid it before the Grand Cleric.

"If Bronwyn cannot have her Ashes, then I do not want mine either. Besides, I find that I think about them all the time, and how to have them at hand if I am in danger. I am sure you will find a good use for them. So I give them to the Chantry freely, and of my own will."

"Don't be a fool, Leliana!" Bronwyn hissed.

"No," Leliana insisted. She curtseyed to the Grand Cleric. "Take them, Your Grace. They are too great a burden."

They left, helping Jowan along. It was quite clear that the clergy wanted possession of the golden bowl as well, since they believed it had absorbed some of the power of the Ashes, but Bronwyn was too upset to be generous. The bowl was packed away in her bag, and the Wardens said nothing until they were well out of the Cathedral and in the open air of the Market District.

"Leliana! How could you let them have your Ashes?"

"It was for the best," Leliana insisted. "I feel better already. I don't know if I could ever have used them anyway. It is so morbid... so indecent... to consume part of the Prophet."

There was something in that, Bronwyn granted. If it had been anyone but the Prophet, the priests would have

been horrified at the idea of devouring human remains.

"What do you suppose they'll do now?" Jowan wondered. Anders give him a sip from a flask and he stood straighter.

"Talk a lot," Anders snarked. "Then talk some more."

"I hope they talk for a very long time," Bronwyn said darkly. "I hope they talk until it's quite impossible to do anything until spring. The Grand Cleric will feel obliged to report this to the Divine. Even with a swift ship, the Divine will not receive her report for at least fourteen days — much longer, if the weather is bad. With any luck, by the time the Divine reads it, there will be heavy snow in the Frostbacks, and an expedition this year will be impossible."

"What if the Divine doesn't believe the Grand Cleric?" Leliana worried.

Bronwyn had thought about that. "The Divine will never admit to believing the Grand Cleric. However, she'll still want to investigate. After all, it would be a splendid excuse to send an army of Templars over the Ferelden border!"



CHAPTER 26



DANGEROUS LIVES

E'RE STUCK INSIDE AGAIN, Walther complained, sleet dripping from his cloak. "It's coming down even harder now."

The common room of the Spoiled Princess Inn was a cozy hideaway from the weather. Tara and her party had arrived here on Satinalia Eve, and had taken the two rooms available, waiting for word from Astrid.

Walther shook himself at the threshold, reminding Tara of a dog — but not one as well-trained as Bronwyn's Scout. He and Griffith had gone fishing, and he smelled like it. He tracked in sludgy clumps of melting snow, which rapidly became dismal little puddles. His string of lake trout spread their doubtful fragrance through the smoky room.

Felsi, the dwarven barmaid, snapped her towel in his face and snarled at him. "Wipe your boots on the mat, you great slobbering bronto! And take those stinking fish to the kitchen."

"Hey!" Walther protested without much heat. All the same, he made a great show of clomping back to the ragged mat and meticulously stamping his boots clean.

The door opened again, and Griffith nearly tripped over Walther.

"Better wipe your boots," Walther muttered. "Felsi's on a rampage again."

The maid wasn't having any of that. "Try not leaving your filthy smallclothes lying on the floor when I go to do up your room. Then I won't tell the countryside that Wardens are pigs."

Brosca, Sigrun, and Jukka looked up from their game of knucklebones, sniggering. "Some Wardens are pigs," Sigrun agreed, elbowing Jukka.

"Pigs are good," Jukka replied, in sober judgment. "That roast pig we had yesterday was *really* good. Better than roast nug any day."

Tara raised her voice in command. "No leaving of smallclothes on the floor... or on chairs... or on the bar. That's an order. Wardens who behave like pigs will be roasted like them."

Mild chuckles. Everyone was too sleepy and too mellow for much excitement. The thing about a proper holiday, Tara reflected, was that you needed another holiday to recover from it.

"Fishing was good, though," Griffith said humbly. He and Walther tramped off with their catch, and there was discussion and debate in the kitchen.

Tara sat back, resting her eyes from her book. Everybody seemed happy enough. Darach was industriously mending the fletching on an arrow. He glanced at Tara

and gave her a brief smile, and then was engrossed again in his craft, only remarking. "Trout is good. Baked in the ashes is best, but lightly fried in butter is good, too. It is a shame, my friends, that you have not tasted halla butter."

"Mmmm, *butter*," Brosca murmured, the word lingering on her tongue. "I hope whatever we get for supper has lots of butter in it. I never tasted butter until I made it to the surface. Let's pity the poor blighters below! No butter for them."

Tara spared a thought for Astrid, spending her holiday in the Deep Roads. Of course, a dwarf wouldn't mind being underground, but there was a horrible world of difference between the city of Orzammar and the Deep Roads. At least Astrid had Shale with her. Tara was not looking forward to her own stint in the Deep Roads. Personally, she was absolutely thrilled to be sitting in a cozy little tavern, with a mug of good ale and an interesting book.

She had just enjoyed her first Satinalia in freedom — at least that she could remember. She had carefully paid everyone their wages, and she had laid out some of the company's coin for a tasty feast. They had all got incredibly drunk and noisy and it had mostly been fun. Also odd, and lonely in some ways. She would have liked to have spent the day with old friends like Jowan and Anders... and Zevran, of course.

A shame Zevran wasn't with her, but he was probably having even more fun in Denerim. It's not like they would have any private time together, with everyone crowded

three or four to a room here at the inn. Luckily, the bed in her room was made for humans, and Tara, Sigrun, and Brosca fit on it quite nicely as long as nobody moved. Anyway, Zevran would be at Bronwyn's wedding, and she would not, worse luck. He could tell her all about it someday. The sooner Astrid joined her here, the sooner they could head north to that West Hill place.

They had meant to go spend some coin in the village today, but everyone was too sleepy and too hung over to get up before noon. They had spent a lazy day instead, possibly the laziest day Tara had ever known. It was rather... delightful, in its own way. Darach had gone for a long walk by the lake and gathered a basket of delicious little honey quinces for a snack; and Griffith and Walther had tended to the oxen and finally gone fishing. The dwarves had played games and gossiped. Tara had done nothing... blissful nothing.

Tomorrow. She'd get back to work tomorrow. If the weather let up, they'd go to the village and stock up a bit. Maybe buy a trifle or two with the coin burning holes in their purses. Jukka needed his boots repaired. No one had had time or coin to put together much in the way of gifts for Satinalia, but Tara promised herself that if soap was to be had, she would buy everyone under her command a cake. And order them to use it.

They'd been lucky on the march along the Lake Road. Even the hungry wolves had kept their distance, though their distant howls at night had made Tara long for a big brave dog

like Scout. Bronwyn had warned her of bandits and darkspawn stragglers, but the worst they had encountered were some bold beggars, a charlatan selling fake magic books, and a pair of dour Templars going the other way.

The Templars narrowed their eyes at Tara, apparently knowing who she was, but she smirked at them and tapped the griffon on her tabard.

"Grey Wardens! Saving the world since 890 T.E.!"

Her party had backed her up with ironic cheers until the Templars were out of sight. She didn't let her friends see her shiver. You never knew who was behind those big bucket helmets.

Musing by the fire, Tara wondered if the Templars were on their way to Redcliffe. Probably. Redcliffe Chantry was still understaffed when she was last there. Or maybe the Arl wanted some Templars at the castle to protect his fancy chapel. Or maybe they were invited to the wedding. Such a lot of weddings. Tara hoped that the Arl of Redcliffe's wedding was nicer than the Arl of Denerim's had been. Rumor said Arl Urien was dead. Tara thought it couldn't happen to a more deserving fellow. The Alienage elves had told her he was a swine, even before he begot and raised Vaughan to be an even bigger swine. Bronwyn's cousin had had a lucky escape.

"Another round, Warden?" the innkeeper asked. He was a nice man, Tara thought. He had been nice when she had first come here after Bronwyn recruited her, too.

"Sure. Why not?" She lifted her brimming tankard. "Here's to leading dangerous lives... tomorrow!"

A very savory smell was drifting out to them from the kitchen. It seemed that the trout would be fried.

"Mmmmm, *butter*," Brosca sighed happily.

Quinn's great strength had proved most useful. Danith was pleased with him.

Even more useful was Niall's magic. He, with Keeper Marethari and five mages from related clans, had joined in cleansing the burial chamber in the vast temple in the depths of the Brecilian Forest. The torn Veil was repaired and the spirits laid to rest. The werewolves had been annihilated on their last visit. The dead dragon was found and its bones were even now in the capable hands of Masters Ilen and Valanthorn, being turned into the finest of elven weapons. Even the giant spiders were no more.

Danith felt that the entire trip had been worth it for this. Had Bronwyn intended it when she sent Danith on this mission? Perhaps so. If that was the case, then Danith was obliged to her, and would think better of her wisdom and her honor in future. The temple — or palace — or fortress — was enormous, and they had found yet more chambers in the upper levels. Some glazing even remained in a few of the windows, the glass now turned an opalescent pale purple with age. The clan had slain and exorcized the restless spirits there.

"It will need work," Marethari sighed, looking about her

at the elegant decay. "It will take much work. It will be the work of generations before all this is restored to what it once was, but such secrets are here! I have found whole shelves of books in the ancient tongue. This can be our place of council! This can be our refuge! Rooted here, we elvhen can again grow strong!"

The Dalish did not work in stone, but that, too, must change. Her dwarven Wardens, Ketil and Idunn, looked about them, muttering and nodding. Neither of them were masons, either, but dwarves always knew about stone. And it would not be impossible to persuade dwarven masons to seek employment here and teach some young elves their craft.

First of all, the place needed a good cleaning. The boy Quinn labored willingly with many of Danith's clan, removing ages of filth and debris from the upper chambers and halls of the temple. The next order of business would be to destroy those great tree roots that were prying apart the great edifice. Elves revered trees, but these wayward roots were in the wrong place, and taking what was not rightfully theirs.

The clan had decided to winter here. There was good hunting in the vicinity, and plenty of room for everyone. Even the halla could be protected. The clan could continue their work of cleaning and purifying the place; disposing decently of the ancient bones, and plying their crafts in safety and comfort.

No darkspawn had been seen east of the White River.

The clans were discreetly patrolling near the bridges at the Brecilian Passage, and had seen little darkspawn activity. The resistance at Ostagar had been effective enough to prevent the darkspawn from spilling much past the occasional raids near Lothering. Dalish scouts had clashed with the monsters in the Southron Hills, but the darkspawn had been few and scattered. All in all, the war was going well.

Danith stalked through the long corridors, peering into dusty chambers not yet attended to. Memories were everywhere: some proud, some rather disturbing. She had not behaved well here, and when she had paid her Wardens yesterday, she had conscientiously not paid herself. Bronwyn had punished her lightly, after all. Danith knew she herself would not have been so lenient with a shemlen who had betrayed her. Besides, the stoppage of pay was no burden. Danith was not short of funds, what with the plunder she had amassed in her time as a Warden. Nonetheless, the memories here were a punishment of sorts, and an admonishment to do her duty in future.

Shemlen, it seemed, made a great deal about Satinalia, feasting and giving gifts. The Dalish traditionally made more of the coming of spring, but they were not farmers, as the shemlen were. Niall, as a mage, had never had coin or opportunity to give or receive presents, but Maeve had knit socks for everyone in her spare time. Maeve joked that it took more time to knit socks for Quinn's big feet

than for all the rest together. The shemlen woman could not be much more than ten years older than the boy, but she tended to mother him, nonetheless.

Knitting was a curious art, and one not practiced by the elvhen, but the socks were warm, and Danith expressed her thanks by giving Maeve a pretty silver amulet she had found on a darkspawn. The shemlen worship of the woman Andraste meant nothing to Danith, but Maeve valued such things. The dwarves, too, seemed to like the idea of a holiday to celebrate their accomplishments and their newly won coin. In the end they had put together a little festival of their own, and everyone had given and received something. It was a good way to bring the band together. In a way, they were Danith's clan now, and she was their Keeper. She must look after their spirits as well as their bodies.

It would be pleasant to stay here, forgetting the war; forgetting the rest of the world. They could be safe here, cleaning and repairing the great temple; telling stories and singing songs; hunting and fishing and gathering. Danith was tempted to settle down here, where one could be a snug as in a spider's cocoon.

For that very reason, they must leave soon. There was much to do. She had achieved part of her mission: she had explored the Gwaren Deep Roads entrance; she had made contact with her clan and others, and had received reliable intelligence that the darkspawn had not penetrated into the Brecilian Forest east of the White river; she had

reconnoitered at the temple and confirmed that this place would be the one most suitable for the Dalish homeland.

However, Bronwyn wanted her to make her way to Denerim, to join her there at the Compound, unless the weather made it impossible. In all honor, Danith could not claim that. While the weather was turning cold, there was no reason they could not move on to Denerim. Before she did that, there were matters at hand.

Most importantly, there was more scouting to be done west of the river, where Danith had encountered darkspawn herself, long before she was made a Warden. After assessing the degree to which they had infiltrated, she could give Bronwyn a much better picture of the general security of the southeastern portion of Ferelden. And there was another matter than gnawed at her.

This great temple was not the only elven structure in the Brecilian Forest. Last spring, when out hunting with with her dear Tamlen, Danith had found the mysterious cave that led to a hidden structure very like this — though much smaller. It was there she and Tamlen had unleashed an ancient horror that had taken Tamlen from her and nearly cost her own life as well. It had forced her from the clan, to live on in exile and as a Grey Warden. Deep within an inner chamber, Danith and Tamlen had found a large and curious mirror. Occasionally, Danith wondered what had become of it. Perhaps she should find out.

"The mirror, Keeper," Danith said finally, coming to her

for a private word one evening after supper. "The mirror that took Tamlen..."

Concerned and not pleased, Marethari looked at her doubtfully. "What is it that you wish to know, da'len?"

"What became of it? We tried to smash it, and I remember nothing more."

"The mirror was Tainted, da'len," the Keeper replied gently. "It was full of darkspawn poison. I think it had been there a very, very long time. Perhaps it was set as a trap, and then forgotten. Or perhaps..." she smiled faintly. "Perhaps it had been there for many ages, a useful tool of the elvhen, and then the darkspawn happened on it and corrupted it. Yes," she mused. "that is most likely."

"Is it still in the cave, Keeper? I had thought to look at that place again, since it is on the other side of the river and we found darkspawn there at the time. However, I must warn my people to take care near it."

"It is... gone," Marethari confessed, her clear eyes grown shifty and reluctant. "It was in our camp for some time, but later I hid it away. It attracted too much attention of the worst kind."

"Who would want a broken mirror?" Danith laughed.

"Merrill."

Seeing Danith's astonishment, Marethari looked away in shame. "I sent Merrill to Ostagar to get her away from the mirror. She was taking an unhealthy interest in it. She had found a reference to it in one of our few books pre-

served from the time of the Dales."

"Tainted mirrors?" Danith objected, all at sea amidst the Keeper's obfuscations.

"It is an artifact of ancient Arlathan," Marethari whispered, staring deeply into the fire. "It was an eluvian."

"I have never heard of such a thing."

Speaking very softly, Marethari told her an astounding tale. Eluvians had been only one of the many wonders of the ancient empire of the elvhen. Much of what they were used for had been lost to history, but some knowledge had survived. Among other, secret things, eluvians had been used for communication over vast distances. An eluvian in distant Arlathan could have communicated with the one in the Breilian Forest with just as much speed as it took Marethari and Danith, seated here together, to exchange words.

"But they are lost," Marethari mourned. "Only this one has been discovered in all these long ages, and it is broken and defiled."

"What did Merrill want with it, then?" Danith asked, puzzled. "It is useless."

"Merrill believed that it could be repaired, and untold wonders would be revealed. She means well, but talked too much of it. She even wanted to take it to Ostagar with her, but I managed to persuade her at the last minute that it would be completely shattered by such a long journey. She had brought it to camp to study it — a piece of hideous recklessness on her part. Once she was gone I tried

to destroy it with fire, but failed. The enchantments are powerful. So, with great care, I took it to a remote part of the forest and buried it deep in the earth." She smiled wryly. "And planted a tree over its grave. Thus passed the last known eluvian of the elvhen. Merrill will never forgive me, but it is for the best."

Danith sat back, considering. Part of her longed to see that wondrous mirror again, and was deeply disappointed that she would not. She almost asked the Keeper where the mirror had been buried, and then, with a trickle of fear, wondered if that was the evil magic of the thing, tempting her as it had before. She must think no more of it.

"It is well," she said briefly. "The hidden place will make an excellent camp for hunters, especially in inclement weather. If the spirits are indeed gone from it, we should let the clans know of its existence. While it would not lie within the borders of the realm of the elvhen, our scouts and hunters will still range far and wide. Since we found darkspawn there once, I will take my party there, and we will scour the land for more signs of them." She gave Marethari an odd, sad smile. "Perhaps I met yet find Tamlen."

"Tamlen is lost, dal'en," Marethari said, touching her hand gently. "Lost."

The Wardens departed the next day, looked back wistfully at the marvelous temple, and headed west. It was one of those brilliant autumn days of cool, still air and radi-

ant sunshine. The halla stepped daintily on the carpet of fallen leaves, and the Wardens grew cheerful with the pleasant walk. Danith noted how much better Niall was keeping up. The unhealthy layer of white flab she had noted in many of the Circle Wardens was now lean muscle, and he seemed happier, fitter; more his own man and less a poor prisoner of the priest-folk.

Life was easy, and game plentiful. Even the dwarves were learning the lore of stream and tree; which animals were good to eat, and which should be avoided. They camped, and journeyed on. They did not take the wide dirt road that led to the town of South Reach, but instead plunged into the forest, following a game trail south. This narrow path was often used by the Dalish, as they passed quietly through the trees, evading the shemlen villages. Danith had a written pass which gave her and her Wardens the freedom of the Arl of South Reach's castle, but she would go there only if she must.

Her preference was to explore the trails, seeking out darkspawn; then to see the little hideway with eyes unclouded by fear and pain, and finally, when she had done all she could do, to turn north, and make for Denerim overland by the lesser backroads. Enough people traveled on the West Road that word would spread if darkspawn were seen there. Better to discover what might be lurking in secret.

A time-worn but excellent bridge spanned the White River east of South Reach, just below The Falls of Cormac.

It was a place of astonishing natural beauty, and Danith took great pleasure in leading her Wardens here. They stopped to eat their midday meal under a sheltered slope, a fine view of the falls before them. Their halla cropped the verdure with graceful content. White spray diffused the light into soft glints of color. The rushing water boomed as it crashed down and swirled under the bridge. The air was chill, but still full of life. Danith loved this spot.

"My clan camped in this place early last spring," she told them. "It is not far from here that I encountered darkspawn and found an underground dwelling of the elvhen."

"It still sounds very strange," Steren remarked, "for the elvhen to live underground."

"I think it's clever," Maeve spoke up. "You said it was accessed by a cave. Caves have the same temperature year round. If you didn't want to spoil the countryside, but wanted a snug place to live, why not construct it in the most sheltered way? In the Southron Hills, where I'm from, people often build their homes into hillsides, and roof them with sod, so you can hardly tell there's a house there."

"I've seen those sod houses!" Quinn waved his enormously long arms in excitement. "One had goats browsing on the roof! The place was covered with clover and meadowsweet."

Idunn shrugged. As a dwarf, all of this made sense. "Obviously, it's smarter to live underground, even if it's just underground. Those ancient elves were supposed to be

smart, so it follows that they would build smart, too.”

Ketil shrugged. Living underground was so obviously logical that there was no need to belabor the point.

The conversation struck Danith deeply. There was much in what they said. The great temple to the east was not entirely below ground. A handsome dome rose imposingly above the trees crowning the structure. In addition, there was a large wing on the south side that was three levels in height. Most of that wing had not been explored when she was here with Bronwyn, for the door was concealed and had only been located when Marethari had had the time to walk completely about the entire structure and consider ways in which the inside did not match the outside. Then, after painstaking search, doorways had been revealed and opened. Most of these new chambers and passages were unhaunted, but were instead the lairs of birds and mice. Many were bright and airy, and might be most pleasant abodes in warm weather. The ones at the topmost levels were open to the sky, the roofs having collapsed long ago.

However, the greater part of the structure was underground, safe from weather and insulated from great variations in temperature. One was used to the idea that an important building must be a tower, for that was the way the Tevinters built. But perhaps the elvhen of old did not think that was necessary or beautiful, and created buildings that harmonized with the natural world, rather than flaunted their domination of it. It was... a *pleasant* thought.

At the temple, the clan had taken up housekeeping in the big entry chamber and the rooms opening from it. There, they would be sheltered against the fiercest winds and heaviest snows. Summer grass was being dried and stored for the halla, even though the resourceful creatures could subsist well on tree bark in the cold of winter.

The hidden place she was seeking west of the river was entirely underground, with some openings among the rocks cunningly arranged to permit light. She remembered seeing sockets for torches and brackets that appeared to be some sort of fixture for more illumination. Danith knew that the dwarves had created underground lighting that burned for ages. Perhaps her elven ancestors had also devised such wonders.

She needed to see the place again: the place where Tamlen had disappeared and her old life had been taken from her. She needed to see if the darkspawn were still there, or if they had left traces of their passing. She needed to be sure — if there was the least possibility — that she had done all she could do to find out what had become of Tamlen.

The underground place had other uses as well. Word was out about the elven temple, but the shemlen did not know about the other, smaller place Danith had discovered. The shemlen Chantry would come prying eventually, making the same sort of trouble that had ultimately caused the loss of the Dales. The Keepers were taking council about that. There were old magics that could be used to

hide part of the Dalish lands. Not all of them, Marethari advised: let the priests think they had seen everything, but protect the temple and deflect their attention to the deep forests. They would wander round and round, convinced that the Dalish were few in number, and living exactly like the animals they hunted. If they found the smaller place, they might think that that was the ancient temple, and go home, satisfied and contemptuous.

She thought the mouth of the cave was graven in her memory forever, but it was not so. Fortunately, she had spoken at length with Marethari, who had not only come to rescue her when she was injured, but had returned there twice. After striking the false path a number of times, she at last struck on the true one, and soon found the curious opening in the earth. It was late, and the sun's rays slanted at a low angle. The forest murk was close around them, and little light penetrated into the cave mouth.

"Is this it, Dantih?" Niall asked, anxiously peering into the depths. "It looks like a hole in the ground."

"That's what a cave *is*, mageling," Ketil grunted.

Danith smirked at Niall, and sniffed at the air, but smelled only old mold and dust.

"Yes. This is it. I am certain. It is growing dark, and the halla need tending.. Let us camp here tonight, and explore in the morning. We need to examine this site for darkspawn traces, anyway."

Marethari had assured her that they had burned the Taint where they found it, but Danith would not be easy until she done it for herself. Black scars here and there showed where Marethari's fires had cleansed. Now at the beginning of Firstfall, the forest was no longer lush. Many trees were entirely bare of leaves, and after careful search, a few near the cave revealed threads and blots of Taint that might before have been concealed by foliage. Niall carefully seared this away, hoping not to kill the trees altogether, but to prevent the slow decay of Taint.

"The Deep Roads are foul from the darkspawn," Danith said. "Black and foul. We cannot let the Taint take this great forest, as it has the Deep Roads."

Ketil demurred. "The stone of the Deep Roads isn't Tainted. You can't Taint stone. The Taint grows on the lichen on the rocks, you see, and builds up in creeping strands," he explained. "And if blood is spilled or flesh hacked, it grows there, too. All this wood is in a lot more danger than any stone."

"All the more reason to cleanse it thoroughly," Danith said primly, thinking back to the underground building. She was of two minds about seeing it again. It was where she had last seen Tamlen. Filthy spiders had lived there, and evil spirits. Yet while haunted and dirty, it had not shown the kind of Taint they had seen in the Deep Roads near Ostagar. For that matter, the entrance at Gwaren had been thick with crackling black dust of old and rotten

Taint, but she had seen nothing of that marring the little underground elven dwelling. Some elegance remained, like the fine bones in the face of an aged beauty.

So they searched the area carefully, brushing branches aside and poking through dead leaves and fallen trees. After a while they grew thirsty, and Quinn and Maeve were sent to fill everyone's canteens in the nearby stream. Danith returned to her examination of the forest, hearing their laughter and horseplay from afar. Her eye was caught by a jewel-like beetle, scuttling busily up the bough of a beech trees. It was a harmless creature: its green carapace iridescent and shining. Danith reached out to pick it up, thinking to show it to her friends.

Steren sniffed the air and quickly lifted a hand in silent warning. Danith caught it, too, hardly noticing as the insect made its escape. Half scent, half some nameless sense tingling at the back of her thoughts, she knew that their enemies were upon them. She thought with horror of Maeve and Quinn, gone to the stream for water...

"To arms!" she shouted. Dwarven voices ceased in the tents, and Ketil rolled out onto the stony ground, already drawing his weapons.

"Move!" growled Idunn, stumbling over him. The dwarf woman crouched, sword and dagger clenched in white-knuckled tension. The air moved and rippled, and a horrible chuckling rose up behind them. There was an ominous pause, and with a loud and horribly musical cry of "Hoon!

Hoon!" the darkspawn revealed themselves and rose up to claw at them.

"Shrieks!" screamed Idunn.

"They're all shrieks!" Nuala screamed back, stabbing one of the monsters in the eye with an arrow.

The knowledge that all these creatures had been born of an elven woman made them even more horrible to Danith. Grotesque, pointed ears rose up like horns from their skulls. They did not run, like elves, but bounded like monstrous hares. They did not even carry weapons or wear armor, but fought like beasts, with fang and claw.

Danith brought down one, or nearly. It thrashed and screeched, pinned to the earth, until Ketil swung his axe.

Creators! They were surrounded. There must be six of the creatures, barreling toward them, rearing up, claws extended — A blade clove one of creatures' brain in two. It fell, and Quinn was revealed, canteens still slung over his shoulders.

Niall had been too shocked to respond at first, but he was fighting now. He froze a pair of the shrieks into bizarre statues of ice. Maeve, running up, shattered one to bloody shards. One by one, the creatures were brought down and destroyed, still hooning.

The last of the shrieks was smaller than the rest, and clothed in ragged leathers. His gait was different, too... not the loping beast-charge of the shriek, but more man-like. It was running at her. Danith took careful aim and sighted down the shaft... The creature paused, staring at her.

"Lethallan," it croaked.

Shocked stupid, Danith lowered her bow and stared. The creature came forward, walking like a man, hands outstretched. Danith scrambled back from the thing – the dead thing – the blackened and foul, hairless and white-eyed thing.

"Lethallan," it pleaded.

"It speaks!" Steren shouted. "It is an... elf!" His pause made his words almost a question, but who could recognize one of the elvhen is this pitiful monster?

Danith, tempted to hope, came forward. She had survived. Perhaps...

"Tamlen?" she whispered.

"Back, monster!" shouted Nuala, planting an arrow deep between the creature's feet.

It cringed away, hiding its ruined face with unnaturally long fingers. "Danith, *lethallan*, do not look upon me! I did not know it was you in this camp!"

"Friend of yours?" Idunn asked outright, ready to strike him down.

Danith stared the more, her worst fears realized. She had been saved. Why not Tamlen?

"Tamlen..." she managed. "I can help you. Cure you. There must be some way."

Bronwyn had told them the formula for the Joining potion... what was it? Darkspawn blood... Niall had some lyrium... surely she could get to Denerim... Bronwyn must have the Archdemon blood...

"No," came Tamlen's distorted, muffled voice. "There is no hope. Nothing can help me. I hear the song now, and it is my only comfort."

"The song?" Quinn whispered to Maeve. "Does it mean the Archdemon's song? Is that a darkspawn?"

"It's a ghoul," Ketil grunted, his axe still raised. "It happens to dwarves, when they get the Taint in them. They start looking like darkspawn, and then they go crazy. Never saw an elf ghoul before, though. Better to kill it, Danith. It'll spread Taint, and it's likely to turn on you in a flash. Once they start hearing the song, they're the slaves of the darkspawn."

"He's right," Idunn agreed, sturdily backing up her friend. "You'd be doing him a favor. I'd rather be dead than a ghoul."

The Wardens hefted their weapons. Without a sound, the ghoul fled, rushing silently back along the forest path toward the stream.

"Tamlen!" Danith cried, racked with grief. Hardly conscious of herself, she dashed after him, forgetting her companions, forgetting everything.

"Danith, wait!" shouted Niall, trying to follow. A branch hit him in the face.

"Come on!" Quinn roared, sprinting away.

Danith raced ahead, wanting to find Tamlen, talk to him, help him; but hardly knowing what she would do if she caught him. The bare branches formed an endless

tunnel, keeping her from Tamlen. She crashed through them, calling his name. Her Wardens chased her, puffing and shouting, but she paid them no heed.

The trees thinned out near the stream, and she saw him at the bank: his back turned to her, crouched, trembling. She slowed her pace and put out her hand to touch his shoulder.

"Tamlen..."

Like a snake, he struck out at her with a dagger in each hand. Her reflexes were good enough to evade the right-hand stab, but his left-hand dagger slashed her across her ribs, grinding against them. She screamed out in pain and surprise. He lunged at her again, his eyes mad, his teeth bared in a snarl. Danith stumbled backwards, and fell, her breath knocked from her, blood slicking her belly. Tamlen shrieked in triumph, and reared back to strike.

And in that instant, Niall's hex turned him to ice, and he became a moment of violence frozen in time. A second later Quinn's greatsword cut him in two. The bottom half fell to the water's edge. The top half, spurting blood, collapsed forward, arms outstretched.

"Well struck!" bellowed Ketil. "That was a mighty blow indeed!" He slapped the boy on the back, like a proud father.

"Niall!" Maeve shouted, "Danith's hurt!"

They crowded around Danith, concerned and sympathetic. Nuala fetched water, and the wound was cleaned and mended.

Idunn patted her on the shoulder. "An old friend of

yours, wasn't he? That's hard. We see it in the Legion from time to time. Too much Taint, too many darkspawn, and a friend turns ghoul. It's never easy. I know."

"His name was Tamlen," Danith whispered, not wanting to look at the horror nearby. "He was of my clan."

Steren gave her a serious, compassionate glance. "His body is Tainted, and must be burned. You must rest, while we see to it."

"I shall build up the fire," Nuala said softly, "and make us all something to eat."

Niall finished his healing, and Maeve helped Danith clean herself, her hands gentle. Quinn and Steren were moving the... body away to some flat rocks, talking quietly to Niall, who would destroy its Taint with fire. Tamlen would be free and could go to the Creators cleansed. Burning tears flowed freely, and Maeve put her arm around her, holding her fast. Never, in her strangest dreams, had Danith imagined being helped and comforted by a shemlen woman.

But they had all stood by her: shemlen, durgen'len, and elvhen alike; stood by her when she had lost her head and her judgment; spoken kindly to her and not blamed her. They were all her true clansfolk and friends, and Danith swore she would not fail them again.

It was not so bad, being in charge, Alistair reflected. At least not this time. Aside from Ser Cauthrien, nobody Alistair was particularly in awe of had remained in Ostagar, so there

was no need to be embarrassed. And he had lots of help.

Petra and Emrys were better at sums than he was, and they saw to it that he got everybody paid on Satinalia. Better yet, they actually toted up the amounts and made the proper entries into the account books, so nobody would think Alistair was stealing from the Wardens. It was very convenient.

Satinalia had been tremendous fun. They had made puppets and put on a show. Perhaps the most fun was the look on Sten's face, as he sat in the audience watching the Adventures of Black Fox. Maybe it was the quality of Alistair's Orlesian accent as he portrayed the wicked lord of Val Chevin. Oghren wasn't the only one to get completely and utterly stinking drunk. A lot of the garrison had, actually.

He half-sang to himself, "*When Loghain's away, the Wardens will play...*"

All the cellars under the great complex of buildings at Ostagar had been thoroughly cleaned out. No horrors remained there. Alistair had led an expedition to move along the Deep Roads where they could access it at the Blightwound. Aside from a few blind tunnels, they had encountered no darkspawn in the five miles they had traveled north, nor in the three miles they had gone east. They had found the actual Ostagar access point, which for some reason the darkspawn had not used. Asa thought that perhaps the tunnel there was too narrow and the rock too hard for the horde's convenience. And besides, they had given Ferelden a much nastier surprise emerg-

ing in force out of sight.

Right now, more darkspawn were to be found in the mountains and forests overlooking the fortress. The creatures seemed to be impervious to snow and cold, but Petra insisted that couldn't be entirely true, because freezing spells worked on them perfectly well.

It had been Nevin's brilliant idea to try to hunt darkspawn in the mountains while wearing snowshoes. Actually the hunting part had been super. There was absolutely no problem hunting darkspawn through the snow while wearing snowshoes. The problem, as Alistair put it later, was *fighting* darkspawn while wearing snowshoes. It was tricky. They were lucky that Petra was an absolutely brilliant mage, and that Adaia had brought along enough bombs to blow up all of Ostagar.

As it happened, the bombs had also caused an avalanche, but that had been all right too, since most the snow had fallen on the darkspawn and the Wardens had dug Sten out in time. The Qunari hadn't been very pleased though. Spoilsport.

And tonight, the snow was so heavy and the wind so bitter that there was no question of going anywhere, snowshoes or not. There was nothing to do but sit by the fire and play chess. Or not play chess, since Alistair was a terrible chess player. Emrys, having a gentleman's education, could play the lute a bit, so they all sang songs and got drunk again.

Asa rose to her tiny dwarven height, and announced, "I will now teach all you ignorant sods a good dwarven song.

A traditional song. 'Nug Pancakes!'"

"Ewww!" groaned Adaia. "Somebody squashed a nug?"

"Hey!" rumbled Oghren. "Nug pancakes are tasty!" He leered. "Oughta give 'em a try, cutie!"

"Ewwwwwww!"

"Let the dwarf recite her traditional lore," Sten demanded. "it would be less insipid than the conversation."

Asa stared at him owlishly. "All right! Just for that... I will!" She took a deep breath, and then began chanting in a loud, nasal whine:

"Nug sits in the mud

Nug wiggles his ears

You catch the nug, he slips away!

Nug gets to live another day!

Nug sits in the mud

Nug wiggles his toes

You hook the nug, he slips away!

Now the nug runs off to play!

Nug sits in the mud

Nug wiggles his nose

You tickle the nug, he laughs away!

Now the nug sits on my plate!"

Petra, not nearly as drunk as most of them, rolled her eyes. "It sounds like a nursery rhyme!"

"It is a nursery rhyme!" Oghren guffawed. "So what?"

They all laughed themselves silly... well, all but Sten, and he looked like one the novice masters at the mon-

astery: tolerant of holiday idiocy, but looking forward to making their lives hell tomorrow.

Adaia, on the other hand, looked incredibly pretty: dressed in her nice gown, her dark gold hair shining richly in the candlelight. She saw Alistair looking, and leaned over to kiss his cheek. At the moment, he couldn't imagine anyone with whom he'd rather be snowed in.

The long dark of the Amgarrack Road was one of the more grueling experiences of Astrid's career. She was deeply glad that she had the support of Rodyk and his Legion veterans. While the Road was not actively defended by the darkspawn, there were pockets of them everywhere, popping out from side tunnels, ambushing them a half dozen times in the course of every march. There was no doubt in her mind that Tara would beat her to the meeting place, unless things had gone disastrously wrong on the surface. Astrid cherished every rest stop. Grey Warden stamina was a fact, but it could be challenged by constant combat.

Shale had proven its worth a hundred times over. Not just because it had a golem's strength and resistance to damage, but because its mind was whole and unimpaired, and it could fight cleverly, attacking at just the right moment. Astrid had not heard of independent golems, but in her opinion they were definitely the best kind. And her admiration was not one-sided.

"It seems to me that it is superior to most squishy creatures," Shale remarked to Astrid. "It must come of superior origins."

"I am an Aeducan, and the daughter of a king of Orzammar," she replied. "I suppose that might be considered 'superior' in some circles."

"Perhaps that explains it." Shale allowed. "At any rate, its fighting is most satisfactory."

There was another new ally, too: a man she had once known fairly well. She wondered why he was here, but supposed that he would tell her in his own time why he had chosen to travel the Amgarrak Road.

Darion Olmech was a notable scholar, not a warrior. He had chosen to march with the host of Orzammar in order to document their achievements. The Shaper of Memories would want detailed records of the events, of course, and Darion was not the only scholar traveling with the army. He was curious about Shale, and often questioned the golem at length. He had also struck up a friendship of sorts with Aeron, who had an encyclopaedic knowledge of songs and stories from Ferelden, Orlais, and the Free Marches. The two of them exchanged lore at every stop. It was very entertaining.

They were at it again. Aeron was reciting an old tale, rhythm and music in his voice.

"...When Luthias grew to manhood, he became known for his charisma and bravery. While shorter than his fellow warriors, Luthias was stronger and doughtier than any warrior in the tribe. When Luthias was still a young man, Mabene sent

him to the dwarven city of Orzammar to negotiate an alliance. Mabene's tribe had come into conflict with other Alamarri, and he needed as much help as he could get.

"Luthias was unable to convince the dwarven king to aid his tribe, but fell in love with the king's daughter, Scaea. Luthias and Scaea fled the dwarven realm and returned to his tribe. Scaea taught Luthias the art of fighting without pain, the berserker state known as the 'battle wrath,' and with it, Luthias became a renowned warrior..."

She would like to hear more of the story, but the rest break was over. "Wardens! Legion!" Astrid shouted, "Prepare to move out!"

"I'll tell you what happened later," Aeron promised Darion, under his breath.

"What was that story you were telling?" Astrid asked.

"The Tale of Luthias Dwarfson," Aeron told her. "A very old Alamarri legend."

"Was this hero really the son of a dwarf?"

"No. Just short."

"It ends badly, does it not?"

Aeron grinned at her. "It's a heroic adventure! Somebody always dies."

"Not if I can help it."

Hunting was the most exhilarating of sports, in Bronwyn's opinion. Nothing less could have coaxed the high nobility of Ferelden out in questionable weather to race and chase about the lower reaches of Dragon's Peak.

Decimated as their numbers were, they still made a brave display: tents with the colors and arms of the Crown and great houses of the land; splendid horses in brilliant trappings; a mob of servants assuring that their betters would enjoy the simplicity of outdoor life without lifting a hand to anything other than a weapon or a wine goblet; and the lords and ladies themselves, in their finest riding array.

Bronwyn needed a day to investigate the rumored blood mage hideout, but had not had a moment to herself. She was pulled from one place to another: first with fittings for her wedding gown, then with arrangements for the feast at Highever House. She must attend meetings of the Crown Council. Her Wardens needed her guidance, and Loghain demanded her attention. And every noble in the city seemed to be seeking her favor and inviting her to banquets and balls and salons. A traveler from foreign parts, seeing all the festivities, might never guess that this nation was at war with unnatural ancient monsters, and threatened by its nearest neighbor. Despite the whirl of gaiety, Bronwyn had plenty of serious business to think about.

What was she to do with Leliana? Bronwyn was fond of her. Leliana was brave and skilled and a delightful companion. Because of her, Bronwyn had learned of a deep and sinister conspiracy against the security of Ferelden. However, Leliana was fanatically devoted to the Chantry, and could not be kept from telling them everything. She was incapable of seeing that she was doing wrong or causing

trouble by doing so. Bronwyn was now extremely sorry that she had brought her to Denerim. She should have sent her off on one of the patrols, and let her fight darkspawn, which, to be honest, Leliana did extremely well.

Well, she must think of something. Jowan had also annoyed her, but she had already decided that Jowan would return to Soldier's Peak and act as a liaison and assistant to Avernus. She would send him immediately after the wedding, with a pair of new Wardens, a wagon train of supplies, and perhaps the Wolfs. Jowan had shown no ill effects from Avernus' potion – rather the contrary – and Bronwyn was inclined to ask for her own dose.

But Leliana, Leliana, Leliana! What to do? Perhaps she should send Leliana to Soldier's Peak as well, and put her in charge of refurbishing the place. That was the sort of work her bard would do well, as long as she was given a budget and orders not to exceed it. Yes, perhaps that was the thing to do. It would get her away from Denerim altogether. Leliana would be sorry to miss the Landsmeet, but Bronwyn did not want her talking to every priest, brother, and Templar in Denerim.

Today was meant to be a day of pleasure, and Bronwyn determinedly put her Warden issues aside. When had she last gone on a great hunt like this? Not for over a year, and that was just a family hunt in Highever. She sighed, and put her parents' faces from her mind as well.

Arl Wulffe's little hunting lodge at Stonycroft was

too small to house his guests, and Fergus' neighboring manor was even smaller, so they had fallen back on the common expedient of bringing tents. Dinner would be served indoors – at least for the nobles. Bronwyn hoped the weather would not disappoint them.

She was dressed for hunting in elegant hunting leathers, brown highlighted by green dagging at shoulders and hips. She was carrying her sword and dagger, of course, but had also brought a bow and arrows, in addition to a cylindrical case containing a number of Master Wade's special spring-loaded spears. It would be interesting to see what they did to a charging wild boar. Slung across her shoulder was Kolgrim's magnificent dragon horn. It should do splendidly in the hunting field.

Scout was excited and restless, obviously eager for action. Everyone in Denerim was spoiling him with treats, Palace and Compound alike, and he needed to work off the excess smoked sausage with a long run on the mountain.

Another party was arriving, their herald carrying the South Reach ensign. Habren's shrill voice rose up from the riders, complaining to her maid about her hair. Of course Habren would insist on coming along. It happened that the day for which Wulffe had arranged the hunt was just beyond her prescribed thirty days of deep mourning. Arl Urien, it seemed, was utterly forgotten. Life went on.

The Hawkes were nearby, talking in low, excited tones. Fergus had found horses for them, and even Leandra

would ride part of the way, though she had not promised to keep up with the hunters. They all looked very nice. Bronwyn noticed, with a hint of amusement, how Leandra was fussing over Charade, whose prospects were almost as shining as her own. Had Rothgar approached her? Carver was here, blooming with the notice his good looks attracted, no doubt happy not to be compared today, at least, with his absent brother Adam.

Fergus emerged from the largest of the Highever tents, smoothing his hair.

"Is that the Queen?"

Bronwyn smirked at him. "No. South Reach. You can practice your courtliest bows on Habren. We can only hope her betrothed will not be jealous."

"Who's that with them?"

Bronwyn looked, recognizing all but one of the party. Cousin Leonas had brought his three children, and was accompanied by Aron Kendells. Riding beside the prospective Arl, on a rather middling horse and accompanied by a mabari, was unquestionably the handsomest young man Bronwyn had ever seen.

Really.

Bronwyn had known quite a few handsome men in her life. Most of her relations among the nobility were good-looking. The nobility, in a sense, bred for looks and courage, just as kennelmasters bred mabari for the same qualities. For that matter, many of her Wardens were

remarkably handsome men.

This young man, whose golden hair rippled back from his brow, whose clothes did not *quite* fit him properly, was quite another order of being.

Fergus grinned at her, whispering, "Don't stare."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You were staring. I saw you. I'll bet my jaunty hunting chapeau that that's Aron Kendells' younger brother!"

"Holy Maker!" Bronwyn felt herself blushing, and then burst out laughing at herself. "I'm glad I saw him before he saw me!"

"And you must think of your own betrothed," Fergus reproved her virtuously, shaking a finger in the manner of their old tutor Aldous. "Don't let yourself be led astray by a pretty face!"

The South Reach party stopped to chat with acquaintances on their way, and so the Couslands were prepared and Bronwyn moderately in command of herself by the time Bryland brought his family and guests to their tent to greet them. Cousin Leonas and Lady Amell actually blushed, conscious of their situation. Bronwyn gathered from the expressions on the faces of the children that they had not yet been informed of their elders' plans. The Bryland boys were happy to see all of them, and complained about Killer being left at home.

"He's too young, boys," Bryland said, for what sounded like the hundredth time. "He would only get hurt. Next year."

Habren whispered something to Kendells, probably telling the younger brother the identity of the people before them. Without permitting Arl Bryland to make the proper

introductions. Aron Kendells gestured to the handsome man behind him.

"My brother Kane," he said carelessly.

Kane Kendells' white and even teeth showed to advantage in a broad smile.

"My lord teyrn. My lady."

Bronwyn felt like laughing again. The young man's voice was as alluring as his looks. He bowed gracefully, while his brother looked on with ill-concealed impatience. Habren regarded the younger Kendells as she would a nicely underdone lamb chop, and seemed ready to eat him up. Fergus and Bronwyn exchanged brief, discreet glances. No wonder Aron Kendells had not been eager to bring his brother to Denerim.

Scout, for his part, liked the stranger's mabari bitch. She had a lovely chestnut coat.

More horses thundered up the road. Anora arrived with Loghain, and the talk became lively and general. Bronwyn smirked at her brother, who was admiring Anora's long legs, nicely displayed in her hunting leathers and high boots.

Oh, dear. Loghain was glaring at Fergus. Bronwyn nudged her brother, who raised his eyes to Loghain's, and gave him a limpid, innocent smile.

More dogs joined them, baying and jostling. Wulffe waded into the midst of them, greeting everyone affably, talking to the huntsmen. They had a scent and a trail, and word of a big sow not far from the lodge.



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"All right!" he roared. "Your Majesty, I pray you do us the honor of leading us out!"

Anora smiled graciously, though Bronwyn suspected she had no great love of hunting. She rode well, however, and looked very attractive on horseback. They set off at a good pace, horns blowing and dogs baying.

Bronwyn winded her own horn, and the music of it echoed off the mountainside. She dug her heels into her horse and followed the hounds.

They would not ride the boar down, of course. Once the dogs had it cornered, it was customary to dismount and finish off the beast with swords and spears. As usual, the hunt all too soon dissolved into chaos: huntsmen galloping hither and yon; dogs distracted by rabbits or taking what they imagined to be shortcuts.

And, as always, some of the participants vanished for most of the day, trysting rather than hunting. They generally made their appearance hours later, very disheveled, with stories of falls and twisted ankles and lame horses.

Loghain seemed as inclined to hunt as Bronwyn, so they stuck with the bulk of the pack. Quite early on, they lost track of Anora and Fergus. Loghain's lips thinned noticeably. Bronwyn forbore to laugh at him. She was having too good a time. She blew a Highever call on her horn, so Fergus would have some idea where she was.


Up a rocky slope they scrambled, and then were in the bracken. A group of riders detached from the main body



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and began shouting. Scout barked, and took off in pursuit. Laughing, Bronwyn spurred her horse after him. Loghain smiled at her enthusiasm and followed. It was shaping up to be a splendid day.



Well, this is a splendid day, thought Anora. The sun was shining, the air was fresh, and she had for once escaped her tiresome retinue of bodyguards and servants. She and Fergus had turned off down a little narrow path which led them away from the bloody-minded hunters. The horn calls and shouts and barking were fading, and they rode peacefully among tall fir trees.

Fergus cocked his head listening. "That's Bronwyn! She's off after her quarry, I expect."

"It was very thoughtful of Arl Wulffe to plan this escape from our usual daily tasks. My father enjoys hunting, though he rarely has time to indulge himself."

Fergus grinned knowingly. "And you? You don't enjoy hunting? Your appearance would suggest the contrary. I have never seen such a splendid huntress."

She blushed, knowing that she had made an extra effort for him. "Well, a queen must appear like a queen, after all. I do enjoy riding and I don't mind shooting fowl." She gave him an arch look. "In fact, I'm quite good with a bow. As for this sort of hunting? Well... let's see what the day brings. Too often overdressed nobles ride out to hunt boar and succeed only in catching colds."

He shouted a laugh, and startled a flock of magpies from their trees. They rode on, smiling. After a time, Fergus decided it was time to speak.

"Your Majesty... Anora... it is no small pleasure for me to have you to myself at last."

"Indeed?"

Oh dear, she was being coy, like some dithering milkmaid.

They rode very close, their knees almost touching. Anora risked a quick glance at him, and found him looking at her, steadfast and kind. Cailan had never looked at her in such a way.

He asked, "Have you decided what you want to do after the Landsmeet?"

"My father has suggested that I stay on in some administrative capacity. Perhaps even Chancellor.. "

"I did not ask what your father planned. What do you want to do?"

Live life! Have a child! Be loved!

She did not speak her thoughts, but instead replied, "I suppose that depends on what is offered me."

He reached out and caught at her reins, halting both the horses.

"Then let me make my offer. I cannot express how much I admire and love you. When I found you alive at the tower chapel, my blood rejoiced as it never did before. My heart, my hand, all that I have is yours, if you will do me the great honor of accepting them."

No man had actually ever asked her to marry him. It

had all been... arranged. For that matter, it had all been arranged before she had ever met her future husband. She tried to control her face, but some painful hope must have seeped through, for Fergus went on.

"I am no king, but I am an honest man, and I will love and honor you as an honest man loves and honors his wife. We will have a good life together... or as good as the two of us choose to make it. So tell me, lady... will you have me?"

She mastered herself, and said, "It is too soon for any public acknowledgement. People would talk if I did not mourn Cailan for at least a year."

"Let them talk. I was thinking of Guardian."

A wry, helpless laugh escaped her. "And so was I."

He clasped her hand in his. "And so it begins! We think alike, in spite of all the world!" His brown eyes crinkled in a smile, and he pulled her closer. "Do not think me overbold if I seek a pledge of your good faith."

The kiss surprised her. It surprised her that he would dare, and then that she should like it so very much. When he broke it, her lips sought his again, and the kiss deepened, warming her blood.

"Your Majesty!" Riders were pounding down the narrow lane, coming into view. It was Anora's royal bodyguard, their voices smugly joyful that they had found their royal quarry. Anora and Fergus moved away from each other a little, and Fergus dropped her hand reluctantly.

"Your Majesty!" the captain burst out. "We beg your

mercy for failing to keep up with you!"

"That's quite all right, Fenton," Anora said graciously. "I have had the protection of Teyrn Cousland."

There was nothing to do but rejoin the hunt. Fergus led the way, following the distant horn calls. Hunters flashed through the trees ahead of them like shadows. A riderless horse, wild-eyed, came at them at a dead run and plunged into the forest beyond.

"No one ever said that boar-hunting was a *safe* sport," Fergus remarked. He urged his horse forward, wondering if someone needed help. The trail was narrow, and they rode for some time before they entered a small glen, hemmed in by dark evergreen.

"Man down!" shouted the captain, pointing.

The party moved forward. Fergus saw what the captain meant. Someone was slumped behind a rocky outcropping. A *red* rocky outcropping. Fergus dismounted and beckoned to the captain to follow.

Aron Kendells had not had a very lucky hunt. He lay in a pool of blood, quite dead, arms and hands bitten, his face bruised nearly black. There was a deep stab wound in his belly. The captain whistled.

"Reckon a boar tusked him, poor gentleman! What a shame! The beast mauled him right fierce."

The ground was certainly trampled. Horses could panic when a boar charged. A pity the man had not had his own mabari to fight at his side. It looked, in fact, as if most of the trampling had been done by a horse, since there

were hoofprints on the man's hunting leathers, but that was not that surprising, after all.

Fergus was about to order the men-at-arms to take up the body, when he remembered the conventions, and that he had no right to order the Queen's men to do anything.

"Your Majesty," he said instead, "if it please you, some of your men should take him back to Stonycroft Lodge, and some others should seek out his brother. It will be heavy news."

"Of course," Anora agreed at once, thinking quickly. "We had best return as well, to offer what comfort we can. Lyde, you and Roark search for Master Kane Kendells. Tell him that his brother has met with a misadventure, and escort him to the lodge. Then find Arl Wulffe and let him know. Arl Bryland should be notified as well, as the Kendells are his guests."

One of the guards dismounted, and the bloody corpse was put over his saddle. Slowly, they headed back in the direction of the Lodge.

Anora glanced over to Fergus, sorry that such a happy occasion would be marred by a death. She refused to take it as an omen, or anything else so silly. If people *would* rush about chasing dangerous animals, such things were bound to happen.

Denerim's succession was once again in question, but the man had heirs. His good-looking younger brother was here, and no one knew anything against him. Very likely the Landsmeet would accept one young Kendells cousin as easily as they did the other.

Fergus' eyes met hers, and she could see that he under-

stood her. They rode a little ahead of the sad procession, talking softly of other, happier, things.



HABREN, DOWAGER ARLESSA OF DENERIM

CHAPTER 27

SECRET ENEMIES

ARVER HAWKE STROLLED INTO HIGHEVER HOUSE, WONDERING WHAT WAS ON HIS MOTHER'S MIND. He thought he could guess.

Charade had made a good impression on the Wulffe family. For that matter, he had, too. They'd had a wonderful time hunting together. Afterward, they had done a bit of shooting, and Charade's skill with a bow had won due praise. Arl Wulffe thought she was a fine girl, and the heir, Rothgar, seemed to agree. Wouldn't it be something if Charade were an Arlessa someday? She'd do well, Carver predicted. Charade had good sense, and deserved better luck in life than she'd had so far.

And that Kendells fellow had got himself killed. Carver had never met the man to speak to, and so hardly cared one way or the other, but he caught the gossip in the town about Habren Bryland. People were wondering if she was under a curse. A few were even wondering darkly if she was some sort of Black Widow, leading men on to their doom. Very likely Arl Bryland would rope in the pretty boy younger brother, and then the gossips could talk

about the girl who had been betrothed to *four* different men in the course of the year.

The servant showed him upstairs to the parlor his mother used, and he found Mother and the girls already there, solemn as Chantry novices. There was tea, and there were pastries, so it couldn't be too bad. He kissed them properly, chose the biggest and creamiest of the pastries for himself, and then flung himself onto the settee by Bethany.

"My darlings..." his mother began, and stopped. She seemed very nervous. "I've had a letter from your brother..."

Bethany was alarmed. "Is Adam all right?"

"Oh, yes, yes... perfectly all right. He's working terribly hard, of course, but he's doing well, he says. Actually, his letter was a reply to mine. I had written to him, asking his advice on a personal matter, and I decided to call you all together, too, just as soon as I had word from your older brother."

Carver grinned at Charade, and waggled his brows.

This is it! Arlessa Charade... well, Lady Charade, for some years yet, probably...

Bethany held Charade's hand tightly, but Charade herself only lifted a hand in protest, proclaiming her complete ignorance of what her aunt was getting at.

Leandra cleared her throat. "Your brother gives his blessing, and so I thought I should speak to you all immediately, so you can think about this and let me know if you're uncomfortable with it..."

Her voice trailed off again. She blushed.

Bethany asked, "Uncomfortable with what, Mother? What's going on?"

"Well..." Leandra took a sip of her tea, set down her cup, and folded her hands. "The fact is that I have received an offer of marriage." She sensed their lack of comprehension, and added, "For me. Arl Leonas Bryland has asked me to marry him."

"Mother!" Bethany practically shrieked, first startled; then very, very pleased. "What an honor! He's such a nice man!"

Trying to conceal her intense disappointment, Charade smiled and said, "How wonderful!"

Carver's jaw was still hanging. Mother was going to get married again? But... she was old!

She seemed to be happy about it, but Carver couldn't imagine why. She'd be an Arlessa, and that was something she'd like, but to be married, with all that entailed... Surely, at her age, she didn't want to go through all that again... did she?

Leandra was blushing again, and smiling, pleased at the girls' responses. Their patent approval loosened her tongue. "He asked me before Satinalia. He was so very kind and noble in his ideas. He understands that I have no money —"

"We're not beggars!" Carver snapped.

"Of course not, darling. That's not what I meant. But you must understand that ordinarily a man in his position would expect a sizable dowry. Arl Bryland said he was too rich to care about that, and what he wanted was a pleasant companion and friend, someone who could help him with his responsibilities and be kind to his little boys —"

"Oh, I know they'll love you!" Bethany cried.

Leandra had a very odd look on her face. "And... he thinks me quite... beautiful. He said so. He likes my looks and my gentle manners. I think he has been very lonely for a long time. And so have I."

"It sounds like you've already made up your mind," Carver growled.

Leandra looked at him gravely. "I know what I would like to do," she agreed, "but I will do nothing that makes any of you unhappy. However, if you are going to object, you will have to explain exactly why."

Bethany stared at him, exasperated. "Well?"

"It's just..." Carver flailed for a reason. "What if... he's not nice to you?" he managed, sounding lame even to himself.

"Oh, my darling!" Leandra murmured, coming over to put her arms around him and hug him. Even the girls relented.

Bethany crowded in, to rub his back and reassure him. "Arl Bryland is nice to his whole family, and so patient. I know he'll be nice to Mother."

Carver, still at sea with the idea of his mother being married to a man other than his father, wanted to ask, "*But what if he expects to have sex with you?*"

But he did not dare. Not surrounded by all these women. He absolutely did not dare. They would probably scream at him and flay him alive. Besides, the Arl was old, too. No doubt it was a non-issue.

"I just want you to be happy," he mumbled, wincing at

all the smothering affection.

"I will be," Leandra assured him, bright-eyed. "Think of it! My own home again! And Bethany safer than ever! I know the Arl will be a kind step-father to her, for he always speaks so highly of her. And then, too, I can do so much good in such a position."

"You can do so much good for *Adam*," Carver grunted. To his annoyance, no one heard the snark, but took his remark at face value and agreed with it and thought it very fine and proper. "Anyway," he added, "you'd better tell Teyrn Cousland about it. You've been staying here as his guest, and Adam's his man. You owe it to him to tell him before it gets out."

"That's so true!" Leandra said, much struck by Carver's good sense. "It would never do for him to think I had done anything behind his back. I shall request a moment of his time as soon as he returns from the Palace today!"

"Oh, Mother!" Bethany sighed happily. "When is the wedding? You'll need a new gown!"

"We thought the second of Haring. Yes, I know, that it's not much time, but it needs to take place before the Landsmeet. I'll certainly order a new gown, but the wedding will be very small and private, with only the immediate family. Lady Habren's wedding is the day before, and of course, that will necessarily be very quiet, too."

Charade and Bethany could not repress their smirks. "I should hope so!" Charade laughed. "The Arl can't very well host *two* big weddings for her, two months apart!"

"And she already got the wedding presents," Bethany giggled. "And since she hasn't returned them, she'll need to be married to justify them!"

"All right!" Leandra frowned. "That is just the sort of talk that has to stop, right now. Lady Habren suffered a terrible tragedy. Now she's lost Aron Kendells, and will have to enter into an arranged marriage with a man she's known for all of two days..."

"But a *gorgeous* man!" Bethany put in, pretending to swoon. Charade punched her lightly, laughing. Carver snorted. He'd seen enough of Habren Bryland to have her pegged as a haughty little minx with an unjustified sense of her own importance.

Leandra did not smile, and Bethany hugged her. "I'm sorry! We won't laugh at awful Habren and her collection of dead suitors. She hasn't been very nice to us, but maybe that's because of everything that happened."

"No doubt," Leandra agreed, mollified. "Let's give her a chance. Think of what she's suffered, after all!"

"I can't believe you're going to marry that *pauper*!" Habren shrieked. "She's nobody! She's nothing! She married a commoner and lived in a hovel for years! Her daughter's a *mage*! Everybody knows that!"

Bryland waited for the screaming to stop. It went on for some time, so he used the opportunity to think over his situation. Kane Kendells had already agreed to marry

Habren on the first of Haring, in place of his late brother. Habren was very pleased by that, approving of the younger brother's handsome looks and good manners. Bryland thought those manners rather overdone and even a little vulgar, but the boy seemed willing to learn: far more willing, in fact, than his brother had been.

"I'll send for my little sisters right away!" young Kane had declared. "They should be at the funeral, and then with me. They hate that school, anyway. I know they need an education, but don't they have people to do that at home?"

Bryland had assured him that tutors were to be had, and that his family feeling did him credit. On further, private consideration, Bryland thought that the little girls might be appropriate playfellows for his own boys. It was never too early to teach boys how to behave nicely to the opposite sex.

At any rate, Bryland was certainly determined to wed the woman of his choice, and that marriage would be utterly impossible with Habren still under his roof. There was nothing for it but to accept Kane and give him his brother's inheritance. The two would marry and take up housekeeping at the Arl of Denerim's estate as soon as Kane was confirmed in the arling. The day after Habren's wedding, Bryland would marry Leandra and bring her home – first to his townhouse here in Denerim, and then, after the Landsmeet, to South Reach, so she could get to know his people there. It would be a new epoch in his life, and one he was looking forward to with considerable anticipation. For a short time before the

Landsmeet confirmations, Leandra and Habren would be thrown together, but with luck, that would be no more than five or six days. Surely they could all survive that.

After Habren grew tired of screaming, and fell into her usual sulk, Bryland briefly told her how it would be. She would accept Lady Amell, the descendant of an ancient noble Marcher line. She would be polite to her. Habren's other option was that Bryland would *not* marry, and thus would need Habren to remain at home with him and act as his hostess. She did not care for that idea? No? Then the marriages would take place: first Habren's, and then his on the following day. She would attend that wedding and behave properly. If Habren were rude to the Arlessa of South Reach after their marriage, she would only cause political trouble for herself and her husband, and make herself look ill-bred.

The news of his impending nuptials received a much better welcome in the schoolroom. The boys were thrilled at the idea of a mother of their very own to come and live with them, and also that Bethany would be their sister and live with them, too. And Charade could help them with their archery, since she was so good at it. In fact, they thought it all so wonderful that they did not quite understand why the ladies were not brought home to them that very day. They scampered about the room, accompanied by Killer's excited yips, planning which rooms would be nicest for the girls, and what would be the best wedding presents they could make for their new mother.

Bronwyn warned her Wardens that she wanted them up very early the next morning. If she was going to look into that rumored blood mage hideout, she needed to do it tomorrow. It was the only time before her wedding that was not totally scheduled to the minute. And after her wedding... She sighed, feeling briefly overwhelmed. After the wedding, she knew, she would be busier, if anything. Furthermore, if she waited much longer, the mages might have moved, or they might get wind that they had been discovered.

Carver was bursting with his news, and no one had told him it was a secret, so he sidled up to Bronwyn as they were all turning for the night and whispered, "My mother's getting married! To Arl Bryland!"

Bronwyn did not dash him by telling him she knew all about it, and had been approached to give her permission.

"Really? How wonderful! I hope they'll be extremely happy together."

"I hope so, too." The young, strong-boned face was anxious. "He seems all right, but it's my mother, you know."

"My cousin is a very nice man who loves his family. I know he would never ask a woman to marry him without feeling respect and affection for her." Tactfully, she said nothing about his occasional drinking bouts. Perhaps they would not occur so often, if he had a new interest in life. And then too, he was not one to become quarrelsome when in liquor, but cheerful and loquacious... until

he passed out on the floor.

Carver seemed reassured, and Bronwyn patted his back and bade him goodnight.

She did not expect Loghain this evening, as he had a late meeting with some people from Gwaren. Instead, she would have her room to herself, and could turn in early... another reason for going out on the hunt tomorrow. And she was in a mood to enjoy her private little room, since it would not be hers much longer.

In five more days, she would be married, and work was already underway to convert some rooms in the Palace adjoining Loghain's into her own private apartments. Bronwyn had never been one to fuss over housekeeping or worry much about fashion, but it was rather exciting to be asked to choose amongst colors and fabrics for her hangings, to judge if her splendid new bed was comfortable, and to tell the seneschal what furnishings she required. From Highever House, Fergus had sent a wide, low chest of rosewood that had been their mother's. It stood on legs carved to resemble a dragon's, and could serve for seating as well as storage. When Bronwyn opened the chest, her mother's scent suffused the room, recalling things past.

Most probably, she would be the new rooms less than a month. If the Landsmeet granted her and Loghain the throne — as planned — they would be moving into the royal apartments. Therefore, it would be foolish to waste too much time and effort on temporary quarters. However, Bronwyn felt she

must make the gesture: first of all, in order not to seem arrogantly overconfident of her election; and second, because she felt it was quite important to keep her role as a Warden separate from her role as Teyrna, and possibly Queen.

As a Teyrna, she needed to choose a personal maid. Bronwyn accepted that this was essential. She certainly had no time to mend her own gowns and clean her own shoes, and without help, her hair would be less than impressive. After some thought, she chose one of the compound maids, Fionn, whom Mistress Rannelly told her was the best at keeping secrets. She was also an excellent seamstress and handy with an iron. Bronwyn would be moving back and forth between her roles, and Fionn would have the flexibility to manage that. As a Warden servant, she had also absorbed some squiring skills, and knew how to serve a lady warrior. Bronwyn knew enough about her own hair to tell the girl what she wanted and how to achieve it.

Fionn was quite pleased at her elevation and increase in pay, and also with the prospect of her own private room, which was a cubbyhole behind Bronwyn's temporary office. It even had a tiny round window, which was a refreshing change from the dark servants' quarters in the Compound's lower levels.

At any rate, Bronwyn would soon be bidding farewell to this nice little room in the Wardens' Compound. In future, the locked desk in the study would do for her administrative work, and she would be in and out every

day, keeping contact with her Wardens. After the Landsmeet... if the Archdemon did not make an appearance and throw the world into utter chaos... she would have to plan a campaign against the darkspawn, based on the intelligence her patrols were gathering. She hoped that Danith, at least, would report in this month.

Enjoying the luxury of time to herself, she washed in the plentiful hot water, admiring the rich lather from her new cake of lavender soap. Satinalia had come just in time. She slipped into a fresh nightshift, and then into bed, trying to compose herself for sleep, unsure if she was ready to blow out the bedside candle or not.

She turned her head, looking at the candle...

...and quite abruptly, the candle was a a fire, burning in her heart. She was in the Deep Roads, searching, searching... Tainted hands scrabbled at stone, burrowing a new path for her. She moved on, up the tunnel, and stood on a jagged stone, overlooking a precipitous drop. Red-hot lava flowed sluggishly below her. Above was the high ceiling of a huge cavern. Stalactites glittered, reflecting the fire. She sighed deeply, and the flames of her breath licked at every corner, brightening the darkness to sudden day...

Bronwyn blinked, the light of the single candle dazzling her eyes.

I must have fallen asleep...

Clumsily, she propped herself up on an elbow and blew out the light. The shadows closed around her like soft grey

blankets, and she was asleep in a moment.

She opened her eyes to dim grey light. There were faint noises coming from the Wardens' Hall, the usual noises of the servants laying out breakfast. Bronwyn swung her legs off the bed, got up, and dressed quickly. Scout grumbled sleepily and shook himself. Bronwyn opened the door for him, and he trotted off to make his own ablutions.

Had she slept badly? She could not remember awakening in the night, but perhaps her dreams had disturbed her, for she was in a rather sour mood. Her dreams about the darkspawn were so jumbled and distressing that she had no desire to remember them, but something had obviously set her off.

She found the key to her correspondence box, considering having another look at the recent letter from the First Warden. She must compose an answer to him. Not now, though. She must have breakfast and be on her way. Later.

It was truly alarming to remember that without the intervention of Riordan and Fiona, not only would she and Alistair still be the only Fereldan Wardens – at least until Avernus made more of his potion – but that they would have absolutely no idea how to slay the Archdemon. They would not know the central vital role of the Wardens, and it was not beyond the realm of possibility that they could have made the situation even worse than it was. Exposed to the darkspawn, but not yet Joined, their recruits might have contracted Taint and died. Danith

would certainly be dead by now. Their resistance to the horde at Ostagar would have been compromised, and perhaps the onslaught would have continued and finally broken the defenses there, sending the darkspawn north in a sea of Tainted murder.

So. The First Warden was *not* her friend, and certainly no friend to the people of Ferelden. In fact, he was behaving very much like an enemy.

The available information sent them to a shabby building in an unsavory part of South Docks. The building was tallish, but the entrance to the upper levels was accessed by a decrepit staircase. According to the notes, the hideout was on the ground floor. This part of the building had its own door at the center of the front wall. A brief reconnaissance revealed small windows on the right and left sides of the building. Both were shuttered from the inside. There was nothing to do but knock at the door for some time. Then Leliana demanded alms, claiming to be a representative of the Chantry.

"Which I am," she excused herself. "Sort of."

Zevran snorted, already at work on the lock with his high quality set of picks.

The door yielded at last, and was opened carefully, everyone getting out of the way of a possible crossbow bolt from the interior. None came, nor were there any indignant complaints. Only a faint odor of must and decay floated

out of the doorway. Bronwyn gave Zevran a nod, and he slid inside, clinging to the shadows.

Because the windows were tightly shuttered, the only illumination was from the fire on the hearth. Bronwyn looked around her, a little mystified. A family lived here, or had until recently.

It was a better house than many commons in Denerim could boast. Yes, it was only one room, but the room was broad and long, occupying the entire ground floor of the building. The walls were dingy, but plastered, and the floor was good oak. An alcove, screened with some old rugs, gave decent privacy to those who used the basin or the tin tub. In the corners at the end of the room there were two beds: a large one to the left, and a small one to the right. On the small bed was a rag doll, and beside it a toy horse.

One could call it a well-kept house, but for the layer of dust over everything. Whoever lived here, lived here no more, but had left everything, including the books, their clothes, and the moldy food on the table. Well... perhaps *not* everything. They might have had to leave abruptly and travel light, and taken a chest or two with them, but they had left a great many things that most people would wish to keep.

Perhaps they had taken the books they cared for, since in the middle of the far wall one of the two bookcases was completely empty. Zevran frowned, and walked over to examine it. He sneered.

"Sloppy – very sloppy. Very confident, too. See here."

"A door frame!" Leliana said softly.

Bronwyn could make out the lintel easily enough. The empty bookcase concealed the doorway from a casual observer at the front door, and perhaps that was all that was needed.

Anders whispered, "These could be apostates with a child, or a family whose child turned out to have magic. They must be terrified. We can't do anything to hurt them!"

"I can't allow them to hurt us, either," Bronwyn replied. "Desperate people can be dangerous. All right. This is what we're going to do. Mages forward. Stun or paralyze anyone behind the door. That way they won't be damaged and we can talk to them. No, Anders, I won't inform on a magical family. Carver, you'll vouch for me, won't you?"

Carver grinned at Anders. "Love to."

"Toliver and Aveline: move the bookcase away from the doorway as quietly as you possibly can."

"Hey!" Soren objected in an rumbling undertone. "Don't forget the dwarves! We're short, not children!"

"It only takes two to move that bookcase," Bronwyn told him impatiently. "Or would you prefer that I do it all myself?"

The bookcase was moved, and a door revealed. Zevran brushed Bronwyn's hand aside, and pressed lightly on the door. It moved easily, on oiled hinges. The elf raised his brows.

"Not even locked!" he whispered. "Are they mad?"

Leliana peered through the crack. "Not so mad. There is a staircase going down, and traps on the steps."

"Slowly, then," Bronwyn mouthed.

Leliana slipped through the door and bent to disarm the first trap. Then she managed the second: difficult work in the shadows. The last trap was further down, and a step squeaked loudly.

"Who's there?" demanded a gruff, foreign voice.

"Move!" Bronwyn hissed. Leliana pressed herself flat to the wall, while Anders dashed down the stairs, followed by Jowan and Morrigan. Grunts, curses, and flashes of light followed. Bronwyn shouldered her way in front of Carver and galloped down after her friends.

No terrified apostate family here. Instead, she saw a Qunari mercenary in heavy plate armor, a man-at-arms in light plate, and two archers. They were all bent on killing trespassers. A mage in exotic robes was clearly the leader.

"Take him alive!" she ordered. Jowan avoided a hex, and managed to paralyze the mage, surrounding his captive with glittering light. In the close quarters of the cellar, it was difficult for the mages to cast without harming their friends. It was work for knife and hand-axe. Morrigan managed to freeze the big Qunari, and he was hacked down. The dwarves charged in at the archers, and Bronwyn hardly blamed them for dealing summarily with them. The man in light plate was a good swordsman, but there was no room for fine fencing here. He went down under a pile of Wardens, and when he grabbed at Leliana, trying to snap her neck. Cathair slit his throat.

That left only the mage alive. Bronwyn looked him over, puzzled.

"Tevinter," Anders informed her. "Those are Tevinter robes." His face fell into uneasy lines. It occurred to him that maybe, just maybe, they really had stumbled on a nest of blood mages.

The mage stirred, and bared his teeth like a dog. He twitched his fingers toward his fallen staff, and Aveline trod on it hard. He glared at them.

"Fools. This is the last house you should think of robbing."

"We aren't robbers," Brownyn said, frowning at him.

"Who are you?"

The mage saw Scout and sneered. "I don't answer to dog-fucking Fereldans. Get out of here and you might live to see another day."

"Bastard." Toliver touched the tip of his sword to the man's neck, but Bronwyn restrained him.

"You're Tevinter?" she asked. "You're a long way from home. What are you doing in Ferelden?"

"Minding my own business!" he shot back. "What are you doing... Warden? he said, jerking his head at her griffon armor. Suddenly he snorted a laugh. "You're the 'Girl Warden,' aren't you?' his tone slurring contemptuously over the title. "A puffed-up little barbarian princess. They'd dig deep in their pockets for you in Minathrous." He looked at her a little closer, "or they would have before your face was spoiled. Pity, that. Turn around and walk out of here and go fight some darkspawn. You'd have a better chance against them."

"Am I totally confused?" Zevran asked, with an air of

wonder. "Do I not see a unarmed man lying on the floor, with eleven... no..." he bowed courteously to Scout, "twelve warriors surrounding him? It seems to me, my friend, that it is you who are at the disadvantage."

"Well," the Tevinter chuckled, licking at a trickle of blood from his lip, "that's what you think... *Na via lerno victoria!*"

Darkness enveloped them: a choking, nauseating darkness. Disoriented by sudden blindness and — yes, deafness, too, Bronwyn groped out for her smirking enemy, stumbling. She tripped and fell, sprawling on the floor, hitting her chin. She thrashed there, hardly sure what was up or down, almost helpless.

Abruptly, the hex dissipated, leaving a ringing in her ears.

"Stone preserve us!" snarled Hakan from somewhere behind her. "That was sodding scary! What happened?"

Soren chuckled rather nastily. "Dog got the bastard."

Bronwyn sat up and Scout trotted over to her, whining in concern. Two yards away the savaged body of the mage lay torn and bloody on the floor. Scout licked his chops, and sat down to scratch an ear.

Morrigan dusted off her robes, and regarded Scout with new respect. "A dog does not need eyes or ears, as long as he has his nose. That was very clever, Mongrel. I salute you."

Scout barked back cheerfully.

"'Tis a lesson to us indeed," Morrigan continued, with a meaning look to Anders. "There are times when a different shape can overcome temporary incapacity. I should

have thought to change. A lesson I shall not soon forget!"

Bronwyn got to her feet, rubbing her bruised chin. She stared down at the dead mage, furious and rather embarrassed.

"We'll still need a prisoner. I want to know how this place came to be."

"Easier said than done, Bronwyn," Jowan said, determined not to play by the rules anymore. "If we come across any other mages as powerful as this one, we'll have to take them down very quickly, and keep them disabled."

After the rest of the party picked themselves off the floor and satisfied their anger by stabbing the mage's corpse a few times, Bronwyn told them to pull themselves together. She did so herself with some effort, looking about her.

It was a well-equipped guard room, complete with armor and weapon stands, gaming tables, chairs, benches, and water barrel. The room was well-lit with sconces set into the wall.

"A Qunari mercenary," Soren said, kicking at the huge body. "They don't come cheap."

"They're all first class, and that's a fact," Toliver agreed. "Best quality armor and weapons."

"And a hired Blood Mage," Aveline said with distaste.

"Since this is a guard room, with such expensive guards," Bronwyn mused, "clearly they were guarding something of value." In the far wall was another door. She gestured at it. "Something behind *this*."

Zevran and Leliana were systematically searching the

bodies, with the aid of Toliver. The dwarves joined in, obviously willing to do their bit along those lines.

"The mage had a key," Zevran said, holding the object up to the light. Bronwyn nodded, and Zevran went to the door and unlocked it as quietly as possible. He pushed the door open and stood on guard, flicking a glance into the interior.

It was empty. Another large, well-lit stone room was revealed: the walls plastered, the ceiling coffered with black oak. Everything about this secret cellar spoke of boundless coin, first for the materials, and then for the workers who would build this and never disclose its existence. The room was packed with barrels and crates of supplies: foodstuffs, blankets, fine linen, dried herbs, and weapons. One crate was marked in bold letters, which Bronwyn could not translate.

"Arcanum," Anders said, "It says, 'fragile,'"

"'Fragile?'" Toliver quoted, "Does that mean, like... 'fragile?'"

Morrigan snorted. Bronwyn glared at her, "Yes, Toliver, it does indeed mean 'fragile' in the King's Tongue."

"Let's see what's inside," Jowan suggested. The crate was pried open, and wads of wool padding set aside.

"Glass tubes?" Soren sneered. "And empty! Those aren't big enough to hold a proper drink!"

"These aren't meant to be drunk from," Anders said absently. "...I hope. Look... there are some corks packed in here, too. These are phylactery vials." He explained, "For holding blood. As in for doing blood magic," he clarified for

the dwarves. "You could fill them with other potions, I suppose, but these definitely look like phylactery vials to me."

"Let's move on," ordered Bronwyn. "I think at this point we can safely say this is not the hiding place of a harmless family of apostates."

Carver grumbled, "My family of apostates never had this kind of coin!"

Another door, another storage room. There were even rugs on the stone floor: ragged, but better than most common homes could afford. Some had gone to great expense to equip this... what to call it? Hideout? Base? And it did not look new. This had all been here for years.

The next door opened into a kitchen, with half a dozen guards, also wearing fine armor and carrying excellent weapons. Hesitation would be fatal. The Wardens stormed in and overcame the surprised men fairly quickly.

Leading off the room was a big dining hall, partly on the same level, and partly on a mezzanine above. Archers, a pair of mages, another Qunari, and more men-at-arms came running around the corner. One of the men shouted to another who ran for a door behind him.

"Don't let him get away!" cried Anders. "He'll give the alarm!" He shot off an ice spell, catching the man in flight.

That didn't sound good. 'Giving the alarm' implied that there were more guards here: a lot more. And it was impossible to fight this many men without making considerable noise. Luckily, the rooms were so large that Carver had

plenty of fighting room to swing Yusaris. Scout knocked a guard down and seized him by the throat.

"Try to take a prisoner!" Bronwyn shouted. "Who *are* these people?"

But the strangers had no intention of doing anything but fighting to the death. They were superb professionals, and true to their code. Or they were superb professionals, completely in thrall to blood mages. Either way, they were formidable. The Wardens took them down, but with wounds to themselves. They paused to catch their breath and then to look in wonder at the place. Anders and Jowan set about casting healing spells.

The room they were in was nearly as big as the Wardens' Hall, though the coffered roof was much lower. Long tables were laden with haunches of beef, with baked and smoked fish, with rich meat pies, with fine white bread, and with platters of baked red apples. Pewter cups were set on the table, and pitchers of chilled wine sweated with coolness.

"Hunh!" Toliver grunted. "Maybe I should have joined *this* outfit!" Aveline boxed his ear with her gauntlet. "Just sayin'," he mumbled, by way of apology.

"Oil paintings! Fine carpets!" Jowan marveled. "Chandeliers!" He looked closer at a statue in a corner. "A Tataroki!" He moved on to a spindly, bat-winged, six-armed image. "An Ultius," he said, and then translated, "A spirit of vengeance. Someone here is deeply into the occult."

"Of the bad sort," Anders added.

"Takes all kinds," Hakan said, more interested in the food



on the table. "Almost enough here for the whole Legion!"

"Looks good," Soren said, sniffing at a pitcher. "Not poisoned, is it?"

"We're in the middle of a battle," Bronwyn explained kindly. "And you had a very good breakfast."

"That's true," the dwarf replied, unabashed, "but I vote that when we clear out this lot we come back here and collect some rightful plunder."

"We'll see," Bronwyn said repressively, and then could have headslapped herself for sounding exactly like her mother. "Come on."

"Let's be careful," Jowan advised, "Surely somebody's heard us coming by now."

The next door opened on a broad corridor. Several doors led off of it. Bronwyn really did not want to get boxed in and surrounded. She gestured to Jowan and Zevran to check out the door to their left, which was closest. Zevran opened the door and the two men stepped a little inside. There was no sound of resistance. In a moment, the two were back, and Zevran was breathing in her ear.

"Another storeroom... and full of riches! Silk carpets, Antivan wine jars, fine robes, golden girdles!"

Smugglers? This theory made some sense. Smugglers running a well-financed operation might well afford this kind of set-up, with the accordingly fine guards. But something did not quite fit...

A dark head showed briefly in the doorway ahead and



to the right, and spellfire flashed from a staff.

Bolts of sickening, crackling pain rattled Bronwyn's bones. Anders darted out, running low, and fired a spell back at the mage, disrupting the hex. Bronwyn stumbled back, and abruptly vomited on the meticulously clean floor. A handful of mages and soldiers rushed them, and were knocked down by Jowan's shouted curse. The door at the end of the corridor crashed open, and an archer shot at them. Cathair snarled something in Dalish, and put an arrow in the man's eye.

"Watch out! A trap!" cried Leliana, as the Wardens surged forward, engaging the defenders, who were struggling up from the floor.

Bronwyn shoved herself forward, shouting. "A prisoner! I need a prisoner!"

Carver found himself facing a big man, with a handsome, intelligent, foreign face. He surprised his foe by slamming his sword pommel into the man's jaw, and then kicking his legs out from under him.

"Get him!" Carver yelled to Hakan, "He looks important!"

Hakan kicked the man in the head and rolled him up against the wall, out of the way. Then the dwarf roared in pain, caught by a blood mage's spell that heated his blood. He clutched at his head, wailing in agony.

Jowan, firing spells left and right, felt himself still brimful of power.

Is this effect of the new Joining potion? he wondered.



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A glancing blow laid his forearm open. Impatient, he chose the line of least resistance. He let the blood trickle into his hand... felt the force gather and build...

The mage crouched behind the door shrieked as his head exploded. An echoing silence followed.

There were a lot of injuries, and everyone was fairly unsteady. Anders peered behind the door to the right-hand room. "Maker's breath, Jowan! What did you do to him?"

Jowan was tight-lipped, partially healing his own forearm. That spell had really worked well, and he was not at all tired. Was this old Avernus' potion, or his improving magical ability? "I wanted him to stop. I just wanted him to stop right away!"

Hakan grunted weakly, leaning against a wall. "Good on you! I felt like I was being boiled like a nug!"

Anders frowned, but concentrated on rejuvenating Bronwyn. Her view on the matter was unequivocal.

"Anything goes with these people. They're dangerous, and we're going to put a stop to them. And now we've got a prisoner."

"He's pretty much out of it," Jowan said, "A broken jaw and a cracked skull."

"See that he doesn't die, and keep him unconscious until we have time for a chat," Bronwyn ordered. She found her canteen and took a long drink, trying to dilute the horrible taste in her mouth. "Let's check these rooms out."

Cathair slipped past her, right behind Zevran. The two



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of them paused and Cathair uttered a low cry. Impatient, Bronwyn pushed forward into the room. A bloody altar stood against the wall, framed by those odd, attenuated figures of Fade spirits. Then, over Zevran's shoulder, she saw the bodies on the floor.

"What is this?" Carver gasped, "Some sort of chapel?"

"Maker save us!" cried Leliana.

"Yes." Anders said, pushing forward and looking around the room in disgust. "It's some sort of chapel... to the nastiest spirits of the Fade. And they require sacrifices."

"There's no time to examine the room," Bronwyn said, her eyes sliding from the flayed body on the floor and the dismembered torso nearby. She had seen skinned carcasses of animals of course, but never a human. The face, its muscles revealed, was particularly disturbing. This had been a person.

"And there are the phylacteries, over there by the altar!" Morrigan declared, pointing to an elaborate stand. She was resolutely determined to show no distress at the sights in this room. To do so would be a weakness.

"It's not just blood magic," Jowan whispered to Bronwyn. "The Chantry talks about that all the time, but blood magic can have all sorts of uses. This is ritual Death Magic. It's powerful, malignant stuff. Rituals are also frowned on by the Chantry, unless they're the one doing them. They take time to set up, but you can do amazing things with rituals..."

"Later," Bronwyn replied softly. "Tell me all about it later, Jowan. Right now we have to survive this. This is mon-



strous, and from the looks of things, it has been going on for a long time."

She tugged on Carver, who was still staring at the skinned corpse in horror.

"This wasn't the darkspawn," he whispered. "Men did this."

There was a great deal more to explore. The room at the far end was a dormitory and scriptorium. The bunks were clean and neatly made with good blankets. Diligent pupils were pursuing their studies here, for on the writing desks were notes in progress. Life was going on, in this underground palace of horrors.

The corridor took a sharp turn and Leliana moved forward cautiously, finding a pressure trap to disarm under a thick silk carpet. This... *compound*... was a good description... had elaborate defenses that could be armed at a touch. Bronwyn hoped they found all these traps before setting them off.

A door led from the handsomely planked and carpeted portion of the building to a somewhat ruder structure. Here the floor was fitted stone, though the walls were still plastered and the ceiling coffered. More fine rugs lined the way, no doubt to muffle the noise of booted feet. A L-shaped corridor led around a bend. Leliana and Zevran searched for traps. Cathair watched them carefully, wanting to learn this new skill.

Ahead, they could hear alarms and raised voices, and startlingly, the excited barking of dogs. Scout lifted his ears, but Bronwyn gave him a stern look. There was no



need to reveal their numbers and kind to the enemy.

They eventually discovered that the enemy had three dogs: sturdy, loyal, and strong mabaris. It was cruelly sad to put them down, but the beasts were all too willing to fight for their masters. There were more traps, and a barricaded inner hall that the mages and archers cleared with grinding patience.

High yips burst from a side room that reeked of dog. Scout dashed away to see, and Bronwyn chased him, muttering curses. The kennel, of course. One of the cages was full of mabari pups: four in all, from their size newly weaned but still in the adorably fluffy stage. Scout barked them into quivering submission, though they whimpered for their dam, now dead in the corridor of traps. More plunder, Bronwyn thought, and more valuable than anyone not Fereldan could guess. Carver was already grinning goofily at the pups.

"Later," Leliana said, pulling him away.

Nor was that the end: they fought their way through a storeroom, and then found themselves in a long practice room, also barricaded and well-defended by blood mages and what could only be Tevinter soldiers. These Tevinters shouted orders and replies back and forth in their own tongue: too fast for their own mages to understand them. This room really was as big as the Warden's hall: long enough and high enough for arms and archery practice. A large number of weapons and armor stands were ranged



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along the walls. The mages there were prepared, and not shy about using fireballs, even though they were underground in a wooden building. Either they were suicidal or supremely confident. It was very satisfying to see the looks of surprise and dismay on their faces as they died.

Another large room followed: and this was like a tavern or a private club, a big comfortable room with a long bar and barrels of ale; with tables and games and musical instruments, and pictures of lovely naked elves. Bronwyn realized with a start that all their enemies so far had been men. There were no enemy women in the compound at all. Still, this place was quite the home away from home, furnished as well as many a nobleman's mansion. A comfortably cushioned settee stood before a big fireplace. Like some other parts of the compound, it had a fine planked floor. At the end of the room were two doors. The door to the left was locked, but Zevran had it open in trice.

This empty room was the large and handsomely appointed bedchamber of a very wealthy man. The bed was wide and made up with silk sheets. The elegant desk of northern spicewood had a locked drawer. There was no time to go through it now, but Bronwyn promised herself a long examination of any documents here.

"A potions cabinet!" Anders said, very eagerly pointing out a curious piece of furniture in a corner. It had at least sixty small drawers, presumably for storing herbs and minerals. It too was locked.



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"It's almost like a secret Circle," Jowan muttered, reading over some notes left on the bed. "They're studying, doing research, while they do... everything else."

"Better food here than *our* Circle," Anders snorted, "and far plusher accommodations."

"If you don't object to a spot of flaying and dismemberment," Carver snapped.

"Let's go," Bronwyn said, thinking longingly of the secrets to be discovered here, "We still haven't met whoever is in charge of this enterprise."

"I bet he's slimy," Carver said, "I bet he's slimy and he has a goatee. I'll bet anything he does."

"Shhhhh..."

Zevran put his ear to the door at the end of the room.

"Silence. I hear nothing. This definitely does not lead to outside."

It was an small, carpeted anteroom. Praying that the door leading from it was the last, Bronwyn pushed it open. Brilliant candlelight made her blink. This room was also set for a feast, though a grander one than in the guard's mess room, and it was adorned with arcane statues and symbols. A long table shone with silver and gold. Bronwyn felt like a country bumpkin, intruding on a nobleman's feast. And the host in question... was, indeed, a man with a goatee. He looked them in indignant contempt, already lifting his staff.

"I know not how you have survived thus far, but you shall not... survive... this!"

Her own mages began casting, trying to disrupt the

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man's massive curse. Meanwhile his lackeys launched an attack: a Qunari, another big Tevinter, and a young mage. The Wardens broke into smaller teams and set about dividing and conquering. The warriors were strong, but not as strong as dragonslayers. The young mage went down to the joint efforts of Morrigan and Aveline.

"Don't kill him!" Bronwyn shouted.

A lightning storm erupted in their corner of the room by the door, and Bronwyn led her Wardens out of it at a run, rushing the bearded mage. A bubble of light closed in around him, protecting him from hostile magic. It did little, however, to protect him from edged weapons. The shining sphere thickened, and in response, Jowan pushed out a dark cloud of malevolent energy. Goatee was astonished and rather horrified, without time to effectively rearrange his plans. He was obviously too powerful and too dangerous to allowed to live. He stumbled, stunned and white-eyed, and Bronwyn sheared his head off. The body collapsed to the floor, and the head rolled under the table. The man's magic evaporated slowly, leaving her weary and sick. And terribly hungry and thirsty. They must have been fighting non-stop for over an hour.

"They've got wine here," Soren remarked into the exhausted silence. "Looks like good stuff. They're all set up for a party."

"And for rituals. Dangerous rituals," said Morrigan. "Spirit mirrors, demonic idols, defiled statues of ancient archons... and more phylacteries. Undoubtedly where the

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Chantry got the idea in the first place."

"And another door," Bronwyn said, trying not to sound exhausted. Maker, would this never be over?

This door, however was the way out. It led up a long flight of stairs and to a heavy, metal studded locked, barred, absolutely-the-last door. It opened out into a narrow alley, and stepping around a sheltering bit of masonry, Bronwyn found herself in Alewives Lane only yards from the docks. The smell of salt air blended with the odor of stale piss. The door they had emerged from would appear to the rest of the world to be a cellar door of a dockside tavern, **THE CONDEMNED MAN.**

"All right," she said, "I know where I am, now. Carver, I want you to take a message to Teyrn Loghain. Get him here – only take him to the other entrance. I want him to see just how extensive this is. Let's go back downstairs and I'll write out something for for you."

Parchment and ink were not hard to find. Bronwyn swept silver spoons aside as she sat at the elaborate table to write to Loghain. The other Wardens explored the wonders of the room, some of them mightily impressed. Anders and Jowan tested the food and drink for poisons or potions. Morrigan, superficially blasé but bursting with curiosity, focused on the magical elements here.

"These phylacteries appear to be labelled," she said, "and here is a fine one." She pointed to a vessel of swirled and molded glass. "A line is through the name, indicating,

perhaps, that the donor is dead. As indeed he is, for the name is Rendon Howe."

They barred the door to the dockside, briefly stuffed themselves with the food and drink that the mages had determined was safe, and then began a systematic search of the compound. Carver and Aveline set off to find Loghain. It would no doubt be some time before he and his guard arrived, but they had plenty to do.

Bronwyn decided that their prisoners could sleep for a bit longer. She wanted to get a better handle on what was here.

Their three mages could all read the Tevinter script. In the grand... council chamber... Bronwyn called it mentally, Jowan acted as scribe, noting down the names as Anders and Morrigan read them off. It was a frightening assemblage of important figures, along with other people whose names Bronwyn did not recognize at all. Some people were dead, and lined out, and those phylacteries were kept on a separate shelf. Jowan explained that the blood of the dead could still be used for some rituals, such as summonings.

The Tevinters, perhaps by bribing or bullying servants, had somehow gathered blood from Arl Urien and his son Vaughan, from the commander of the city guard and a number of his lieutenants, from priests and Templars, from the now deceased Bann Ceorlic and his surviving widow Lady Rosalyn, from a number of minor banns from the Bannorn. And of course from Rendon Howe.

To what extent were these secretive people, with their human sacrifices and blood magic, culpable in the massacre of her family? Bronwyn feared that the whole story was forever beyond her reach. Had they twisted Howe to their own ends, knowing that her father's agents would have warned him about the slave trade? Or had the seeds of treachery and murder always been there? Had the murder of her family anything to do with these people at all, or was that Rendon Howe's independent nastiness?

Perhaps they despised Fereldan barbarians so entirely that they simply did not care about consequences. Perhaps they were here only to grab what they could, not troubling themselves to know much about the country, other than the best way to rape it.

Morrigan and Anders went to the blood chapel to decipher the names on the phylacteries there. Bronwyn, with the help of Jowan and Leliana, set about rifling the leader's desk. Everyone else was given guard duty, either watching the prisoners or waiting for Loghain in the upper room. Anders was told to begin examining all the stored foodstuffs and the meal in the messroom, and see if it was fit to eat. If so, she would confiscate much of what they had found here.

"I'm surprised," she remarked, "that Howe's phylactery was here. Surely they could not control him from so far away as Denerim?"

"It doesn't work that way," Jowan tried to explain it to her, steepling his hands and moving into lecture mode. "Your

blood is your blood. A blood mage can use your blood *anywhere* and it will affect you. Proximity doesn't much matter, though it's true that some spells work better if the mage casting has seen you and knows what you look like. I guess we're lucky these phylacteries weren't sent home to Tevinter. It's just like how the Chantry can use your phylactery in Denerim to find your location anywhere. Mind you, I would guess that the farther you are, the more general the direction it would give. Probably across the Waking Sea it would be too vague to be of use. But it would still indicate that, for example, you were alive somewhere in the Free Marches." He gave her a serious look. "However, if they were simply trying to make you amenable to suggestion, or make you sick, they could perform that magic *anywhere*."

Rather alarmed, she went on with her work. At least no one had found a phylactery with her own name on it.

As she pulled all the papers out of the desk and searched for secret drawers, she wondered if everyone stationed at the compound had been caught by her invasion. Perhaps some were running errands. It would be a good idea to keep watch on this place, and see who turned up.

Not only were there letters, notes, and obvious account books in Arcanum, the Tevinter language, they were also in some sort of shorthand code. Jowan thought he could unsort the matter in time, but the Tevinters had not wished to be obvious. The Wardens worked diligently, finding caches of coin and other treasure. Toliver brought

them more food and drink. It was very good. After some time at this, Bronwyn heard a noise coming up the hall. Loghain sounded angry. He would not like her putting her life in danger a few days before their marriage.

"*Maker's Breath!*"

Jowan disappeared from the room at a run, leaving Bronwyn to her fate. Loghain stormed in, took her by the shoulders, and gave her a shake.

"You could have been killed!"

"I'm perfectly all right," she insisted, giving him a smiling kiss.

She made light of her danger and her injuries, since they were healed and invisible now. Before Loghain could draw breath for another attack, Hakan arrived with the news that their prisoners were awakening. Jowan was waiting anxiously on the fringes of the group, scuttling along at Bronwyn's side, wanting to tell her how to protect herself.

"The soldier is no trouble, now that he's bound. It's the mage I'm worried about. We can drain the his mana. In fact, it's the only safe thing to do. He doesn't need a staff, or even his hands untied. He could bite his tongue and if he drew blood, he'd have something to work with. You need to be *careful*, Bron... er, Commander."

The soldier grinned at them insolently, and pretending not to speak the King's Tongue, though that was a lie, since he had cursed them fluently when they were fighting. He was sent to Fort Drakon, and Bronwyn did not envy him

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his fate there. They would get quite a bit out of him eventually, she believed, but it would take time. And then he would certainly be executed. She was, for obvious reasons, not going to conscript him.

The youngish mage, whose name was Justin, was another matter. He talked volubly in Arcanum, as soon as Jowan told him that the Blood-Boiling curse was no secret to him and that he, Jowan, was prepared to use it. He was too alien for Bronwyn to comprehend, and his poor grasp of a mutual language made it difficult to find common ground. What Jowan did express to her was the fellow's feeling that he had fallen off the edge of the civilized world. This was supposed to be a lark, a year of adventure and apprenticeship among the barbarians that would be useful in making his way back home in proper society.

He could tell them that the Tevinters had been established here for the past fifteen years. Loghain, outwardly impassive, was shocked at the news. He wanted to know how all this — he gestured around him — had been paid for, and was told that after the initial investment, it had paid for itself. Many people came to Denerim: travelers from foreign lands; lads and lasses fresh from the countryside, hoping to make their fortune; deserters from the army hiding in Ferelden's largest city. Approached the right way, they could be duped and lured away. The unpromising goods were used to keep the Tevinter's magic strong; and the likely specimens stowed aboard one of the Tevinter's ships. A ship was always at

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hand, since there was, after all, a Blight in Ferelden, and the Tevinters might need a means of escape. When a ship was filled with cargo, it was sent home. A highly profitable trade had been going on for many years. After a glare from Loghain, he divulged the name of a fine ship currently riding at anchor in the harbor, and of its captain, an enthralled Marcher from Kirkwall.

The Blight, of course, had provided the Tevinters with an unparalleled opportunity. There would be refugees, displaced persons — whole families — who would be most vulnerable. Magisters Caladrius and Magorian, working together, had raised the stakes considerably, obtaining at great risk phylacteries not just of harbor captains and inspectors and city guards, but of noblemen. Their analysis of the high noblemen indicated that Rendon Howe was the most dissatisfied and volatile of the lot; the most vulnerable, if nudged, to break the bonds of law and custom. Arl Urien, too, was greedy and fond of intrigue. His son enjoyed harming elves. There was much to work with here. Blood was collected from shaving cuts, from wounds taken in the hunting field, sometimes from slipping into their rooms when they were sleeping off drunken bouts.

Loghain was tempted to beat the arrogant little twit bloody, but he was not worth his time. They continued the questioning. When pressed, Justin said that they had not quite expected Arl Rendon to lash out so violently against his overlord, but they were delighted to make use of it.

Enslaving the entire Highever Alienage and a good portion of the one in Denerim was a coup beyond all their hopes. All the Tevinters – everyone but the disposable thralls – would be made men for life. Justin spoke of the great wealth he himself had earned, and hinted – clumsily – that he would be willing to share it if the mighty Fereldan chief would look aside and let him go his way.

That insulting bit of condescension was met with a stony stare. Loghain then asked about the leader of the expedition – the one who had sailed from Amaranthine

They were told that yes, Caladrius had escaped Amaranthine just ahead of Fergus Cousland, and had sent a small ship to Denerim to apprise Magorian of his hasty departure. Yes, of course Caladrius would return, most probably in the spring. Or, if the voyage was particularly profitable and Caladrius had retired, another from the The Fereldan Venture Company would come in his place.

"He might be lying..." Bronwyn began, but Loghain silenced her, and pulled her out of the room with him.

"He might be lying," Loghain said softly, "Or he might be shamming ignorance of our language, looking for any advantage. He doesn't quite seem to have grasped that he's going to be executed for his crimes. He doesn't quite grasp that he's committed any crimes, for that matter."

He would be a very dangerous prisoner, in Jowan's opinion, and it was best to get the most from him now, execute him, and rely on the papers to tell the rest.

"I notice that you're not raising the issue of conscription," Loghain remarked.

Bronwyn thought of the flayed corpse in the bloody chapel. She shuddered. "Not for anything!"

They had Jowan interview him alone, listening outside with Anders. Most the conversation ended up being about the minutiae of spells and how the Tevinters went about disposing of the bodies of their victims. Most of the time, bodies and body parts were secreted in barrels, which were then dumped out to sea in the offshore current. Justin had no idea what had become of the family who had been living on the ground floor of the entry. People were allowed to live there from time to time for verisimilitude, and if they grew too curious they were escorted into the compound and put to good use before they were eliminated or taken to be sold. Occasionally residents of upper stories met the same fate.

It appeared that the early morning attack had served its purpose in capturing all the important members of the coven – above all, all the mages. A few enthralled servants and some of their contacts were roaming free. With the destruction of their phylacteries, they would revert back to "normal" – whatever that was – and either wander away or seek vengeance.

To Bronwyn, the realization of the extent to which a foreign power had infiltrated Ferelden was in every way horrible. Orlais had always been the enemy, but it was rather

frightening to learn that there was another, secret foe lurking behind the scenes. She had been naive to think that politics and commercial rivalry stopped for a Blight; that the nations of Thedas would unite against a common threat. The Tevinters clearly could not care less if Ferelden was destroyed, as long as they could steal people's minds and reap the rewards of their vile slave trade. The Crows, for that matter, had not scrupled to attack a Grey Warden, and the Orlesians were as hostile as ever, though the hostility was masked. Like an Orlesian bard, with courtly manners.

Father had warned her about this, one day when she had asked if some of the Marcher cities were Ferelden's "friends."

He had made her stand right in front of him while he stared her in the eye, and he had dismissed such a foolish notion.

"Nations have no 'friends,' pup. They may have allies, but each nation has a secret life of its own: its own goals, aspirations; its own prejudices and its own values. And they have them all the time. While you are engaged with enemy, another nation uses your distraction to gain what it wants, whether that means stabbing you in the back or not."

"But wouldn't that be dishonorable, Father?"

"The honor of a nation is to SUCCEED, pup. And to survive. Life is not some moral practice yard where you exercise your personal virtue. A leader owes it to his people to keep them alive and well. Smile at your rivals, because it confuses them, but do not be deceived when they smile back."

Loghain was not smiling at the mage. He had got what

he deemed of value from him, and wanted to move on.

"Leave us, Warden," he said to Jowan. Jowan glanced at Bronwyn, and when she gave him a slight nod, he bowed and hurried from the room.

Without giving the Tevinter mage time to be terrified and thus lash out, Loghain quietly dispatched him with a dagger. The young man had only time for a disbelieving, high-pitched squeal before he stretched out on the floor. Bronwyn grimaced, not much pitying a professional slaver, torturer, and murderer, but tired of death.

"I'll assign some guards here," Loghain said thoughtfully, quite unaffected by killing the mage. "They'll arrest anyone who seeks entrance. And we'll want to translate all the papers. I'll have some wagons brought so we can clean the place out: bodies and plunder both. I'll lead a party to that ship the mage told us about. There might be captives there."

"We need to find out who all the people named on the phylacteries are," Bronwyn added. In fact, some of her people had recognized additional names already. Toliver knew the name of the owner of The Condemned Man. That name on a phylactery label explained why the man might be complacent about the entrance to a den of blood mages located in a side door of his establishment.

"And we need to do something about these!" Carver appeared at the doorway, giving Loghain a cheeky half bow. Loghain was in no mood to be offended, since four puppies trotted into the room, sniffing. They were curious

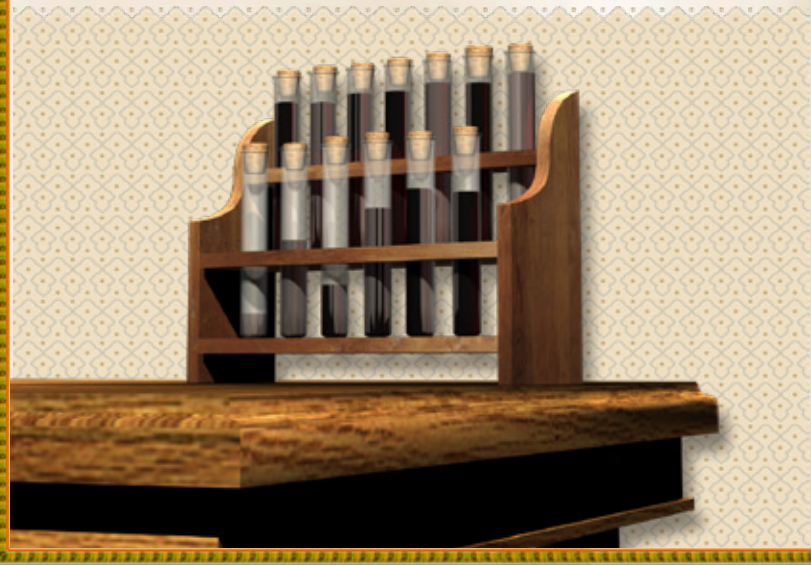
about the dead body, but Scout herded them away, toward Bronwyn and Loghain.

"They had trained mabarais to serve them?" Loghain asked, taut with anger. The boldest of the puppies came up to him, pawing at his knee.

Bronwyn smiled faintly at the sight. "I suppose it's not surprising. After all, according to the story, Tevinter mages bred them originally, but the dogs met the Alamarri and defected to them!"

Scout seemed to have nothing against the innocent puppies. Carver said, "We had to kill three adult mabarais. These little fellows seem friendly enough."

"So they do," Loghain relented, gently picking up the intrepid puppy. "So they do."



CHAPTER 28

BORDERS
YET TO BE

IVE SHOCKED AND APPALLED PEOPLE LISTENED TO BRONWYN'S DESCRIPTION OF THE SECRET TEVINTER BASE UNDER

DENERIM. Loghain was still appalled, but no longer shocked, and actually was uncommonly relaxed at the moment. A happy puppy was flopped on his thigh, enjoying an ear-scratching. Loghain was debating whether to name the puppy Amber or Brandy. Either name suited her color. Such a nice little girl. It had never occurred to him to try to imprint on a mabari after losing Adalla so many years ago, but the puppy had her own ideas, and had cried so piteously when he tried to leave her behind that he had relented. Scratching a mabari's ear was remarkably calming. He listened to Bronwyn's story, able to distance himself a bit from the horror of it.

"My father..." choked out Nathaniel. "My father was enthralled by blood mages?" The anguish on his face made the others look away. "I should have known! He



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never would have done those terrible things of his own free will. Haglin wrote to me, warning that something was wrong... If only I'd come home sooner!"

Loghain said, "We don't know that you could have helped. It appears that they had their claws into him for some time. And he wasn't the only one. Urien and Vaughan, Ceorlic and his wife... Rosalyn's phylactery was destroyed, and Bronwyn's mages tell us she should be free of that infernal influence now. We've kept all the phylacteries of the dead as proof, and written down the names of the living victims."

There had been other phylacteries in the leader's room: ones not ready for use. Some had small amounts of blood in them, some were empty. The role of names was much of the Landsmeet, and at the top were the Queen and Loghain. The Queen's phylactery, indeed, was a quarter full. Loghain had been furious to see that they had blood from him as well.

Some incomplete phylacteries had been tossed aside in a box. Among them was Bryce Cousland's. No longer worth pursuing, and not enough blood for a ritual. Jowan had shown it to Bronwyn, with a sympathetic look. She had taken it and put it away with her things, unable to decide what to do with it. Her own phylactery was new, empty, and not even labeled correctly. She hardly knew whether to be insulted or relieved. Someone had labeled a phylactery for Fergus, but it too was empty.



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Cailan's was almost complete. That opened up such frightening possibilities that everyone flinched from thinking about them.

"Should we share this with the Chantry, do you think?" wondered Fergus. He was not sure how he felt about all this. Nothing could excuse Rendon Howe, in his opinion.

Leonas Bryland made a sound of disgust. "I see nothing to be gained by sharing *anything* with that lot!"

"I agree," Bronwyn said at once. "If we tell the Chantry anything at all, we'll end up having to tell them everything, and that underground hideaway needs to be kept as secret as possible. The mage we questioned thought that more Tevinters would be coming in the spring, and it would be a good thing to snap them up before they can do further harm." She added, "Besides, I honestly don't know what practical help the Chantry would be. We destroyed Knight-Commander Tavish's phylactery, and that of Mother Calendula. There were some other priests and Templars among the phylacteries, too: mostly those assigned to mission work in South Docks. The Tevinters, I suspect, wanted to curb the Chantry's interest in their comings and goings. I would never have known about them at all, if Ser Friden's mother had not come to me and given me his notes. Unlike his superiors, I was not being influenced by the magic of those who murdered him."

"Very well," Fergus said, "I agree. We won't share this with the Chantry. The main question, as I see it, is: what

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can we do about – and to – the Tevinters? This kind of vicious, predatory crime calls for retaliation. At the very least, we need to make sure the Tevinters smuggle no more human contraband out of Ferelden.”

“Maker!” Wulffe rumbled in agreement. “It sickens me, thinking of those poor people.”

“The Denerim harbormaster was under their control, but no more,” Loghain said, “As was the captain of the FADE SPIRIT. Unfortunately, while his phylactery was destroyed, he was still under the influence of long suggestion, and he and his crew resisted us when we boarded the ship. In his hold we found fifteen people. Some had been prisoners for months, and were being kept alive and docile by the mages’ arts. When they were recalled to their senses, some of them were... distraught.”

That was understating the matter. There was the anguish of the woman who realized that her children were dead, of the man who had lost his wife, of the wife who had lost her husband... It was a grim thing to witness. Of course they had been robbed of everything, too. Some had relatives or friends to go to, some were alone in the world. Loghain passed out substantial alms to them, and advised the women, at least, to go to the Chantry for further help. They seemed to think they had been drugged, and Loghain did not tell them the whole story.

He had impounded the ship, laying down the law to the bewildered harbormaster. That man was not so resistant.

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Loghain supposed it might be because his phylactery had been used mainly to make Tevinter ships of no interest whatever to him. It took some time before the man could even acknowledge that such a ship as the FADE SPIRIT was tied up in Denerim Harbor.

“Infamous!” Anora said, fuming. “Infamous!”

Bronwyn’s teeth showed white in a bitter smile. “They really despise us, you know. They regard us as savages, only good for exploiting, unworthy of respect or regard. One of the Tevinters told me that I’d fetch a good price in Minathrous. If we sent a strong letter of protest to the Chief Archon, he would only laugh. There are, however, some things we *can* do. Not only should we be careful of the Tevinter ships leaving this country, we need to alert the harbormasters of all the deep water ports to notify us of the arrival of any of them, lest they find somewhere else to burrow in.”

“I agree,” Anora nodded. “The letters will go out this very day.”

Nathaniel roused himself to ask, “And who is to say they haven’t already?”

This was an alarming thought, and everyone in the room gave it some consideration. Fergus wondered about the Tevinters’ efforts in Highever. They had already abducted the entire Alienage. Would it be worth their while to maintain a continuing presence? He would have to look into it. Loghain, aware that he claimed the only untouched Alienage in Ferelden, thought that he had best have his people keep a close eye there. Having made such

a profitable haul, the Tevinters would be eager for more.

Scout rose up ponderously from the floor and went over to Loghain; first to sniff at Loghain's new puppy, and then to lay his jaw on Loghain's knee to claim his rightful share of ear-scratching. Loghain smiled, and indulged him.

He said, "I've ordered my men to keep secret the existence of the Tevinter lair, and Bronwyn has done likewise with her Wardens. The place will be kept under close guard, and anyone attempting to enter it will be detained and questioned. I'm sending for a dozen of the mages serving in the army, some of whom will assist in this duty."

"Meanwhile," Bronwyn said, "There are certain things we can do to protect ourselves from undue influence. My Warden mages have warned me to be very careful with my blood — any blood *at all*," she said, with a pointed look at Anora, who paled a little. "Blood mages can reconstitute blood from cloth bandages, and can use, it seems, even the amount that would issue from a shaving cut."

"We'll need to give our laundries some scrutiny," Bryland said, bemused. He then smiled slyly, "I'll have to tell my new wife."

This was news to Wulffe, who wanted to know everything, approved heartily, and then slapped Bryland on the back, laughing.

"You old dog! I should have known you were a-courting when you dressed up like a fancy-man for Satinalia!"

The air of anxiety and horror dissipated entirely: there was

general talk about weddings and inheritances. Nathaniel Howe remained on the fringes of the conversation, brooding over his father's wrongs, but clearly feeling somewhat validated that a beloved parent should be proved not a villain, but a victim.

Fergus met Bronwyn's eye, rather skeptically. Personally, he had never much liked his father's friend, and thought Rendon Howe enough of a swine in himself to dream up most of his crimes. Still, a man could conceive of things in the shadows of his soul that he would never actually do in real life. Very likely Rendon had needed no more than a push.

However, if the push had made the difference, the Howes could be excused to some degree. Nathaniel had done them no harm and seemed comforted by the revelations.

Bryland claimed everyone's attention when he said, "And what about Teagan? Has anyone heard from him? I sent him word of Habren's marriage and my own. Surely he'll be coming to Denerim soon!"

"And he's been told of Bronwyn and Loghain's wedding," Fergus said. "I've had no reply. I presumed he was already on his way." He shrugged. "It's a good seven-day journey from Redcliffe to Denerim at the best of times."

Bronwyn had a quick, dreadful image of Teagan going to Ostagar to collect Alistair and force him to come to the Landsmeet. Surely he would not dare? Surely Alistair would not be bullied into deserting his duty? She made



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herself smile at Wulffe, who was speaking, and attend to him. Teagan might not even know where Alistair was at the moment. He might think that Bronwyn had brought him to Denerim with her.

She wondered if he would arrive in time for her wedding. He was no fool, and would understand what the wedding between a Cousland and the Hero of River Dane meant. No doubt he would disapprove. Well, too bad.

"And what news from the Wardens?" asked Wulffe.

"None, I'm afraid," Bronwyn replied. "I'm hoping my Dalish Warden comes before the end of the month. She was told to scout Gwaren and the Brecilian Forest. She should be able to tell us about South Reach and the eastern bannorns. The others were sent west, and may not come for some time, especially if they encounter resistance in the Deep Roads, or the weather turns bad. As to the Wardens abroad," she smiled, dismissing them, "they seem to know nothing, either."

She had put off replying to the First Warden for so long that she had decided not to bother to write to him at all. What good would it do? He had more or less cast her off anyway, and firing back denunciations would waste her time. He was not going to help her, and she was not going to grovel, and that was the end of it.

Instead, she had written to Nevarra, Ansburg, and Antiva, from whom she had received civil letters, and informed them of the horde's curious withdrawal. Since



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the Battle of King's Mountain, the darkspawn had not been seen in large numbers, aside from the nesting ground near Ostagar. As to where they had gone, she knew no more than anyone else.

Fergus was recovering his good humor, despite news of blood mages and Rendon Howe's partial exoneration. Bronwyn gathered that he and the Queen had come to some sort of understanding, though he had not shared the particulars. It would be silly to plague him about it. Fergus fancied Anora, and really, Bronwyn could not think offhand of any woman in Ferelden who would suit him better. Nor would it be practical to send him tramping off abroad to find another foreign beauty. Besides, Anora, too, seemed much happier in the past few days. Despite finding Aron Kendells' mangled body, their hunt had been most satisfactory.

Nathaniel asked Bryland, "And what of Kane Kendells? Does he seem... adequate?"

Bryland spread his hands. "Habren certainly fancies him. The lad is fond of his sisters — sent for them right away. He's eager to learn — not so aloof as his brother." Bryland was inclined to prefer the younger fellow. No such words as "*another man's leavings*" had crossed the lad's lips. That alone was an improvement. "I can't say much more. I introduced him to Biggert, Urien's seneschal, and they talked quite a bit. And the lad's a good horseman, at least."

"Better than his brother, I hope," grunted Wulffe.

They were all reminded of the fact that Aron Kendells would be given to the fire tomorrow evening. The pyre was already prepared in the courtyard of the Arl of Denerim's estate: ironic, given that the man had never had the opportunity to live there. Nonetheless, all had agreed that it was a suitable place to hold the funeral, as the man had been the heir presumptive, and was unquestionably a Kendells. The Kendells seneschal had been contacted, and all the preparations were in place.

Bryland said, "I was hoping the girls would arrive today, but no such luck. Faline is twelve, and Jancey only nine. Kane thinks they're not happy at that Chantry school, and wants to find them a tutor so they can live with him."

Bronwyn left the meeting reminded of Chantry schools and their pupils. Had the Grand Cleric forgotten her promise to Bronwyn regarding the child Demelza? Bronwyn decided that she had, or that she was stalling for some reason. She sent a polite note to Mother Boann, informing the priest that she, Bronwyn, would be quite at leisure to see the girl the following morning. It was not exactly true, since she was really quite busy, between arms practice and the Queen's Council. In the evening she would have to attend the Kendells funeral. Nonetheless, she could spare some time for the little girl saved by Andraste's Ashes.

Thus, mid-morning the next day, Mother Boann came calling at the door of the Warden Compound, leading the

little girl by the hand.

Neatly dressed in a Chantry pupil's robe, and with hair washed and braided, she made a very different appearance than when Bronwyn had last seen her. The child curtsied to her stiffly, and in stilted tones, repeated the words she clearly had memorized.

"I thank you, Lady Bronwyn, for saving my life. I am forever in your debt."

"You're very welcome, Demelza. Why don't we all have some cake? My housekeeper made some especially for your visit."

Bronwyn, relying on memories of her own youth, could not imagine a little girl immune to the charms of cake. She was not disappointed. Cake and milky tea were evidently rare treats at school.

"I missed Satinalia," Demelza said sadly. "That's when we have cake."

Mother Boann said gently, "You'll have cake on First Day."

"That's a long way away!" the child objected. "This is good," she told Bronwyn, and then poked at one of the cakes. "Why is that one dark?"

"It's flavored with chocolate. That's a kind of spice that comes from the far north."

"I like it. We only have honeycakes at school, but they're good, too."

"Are you happy at the school, Demelza?"

The child shrugged. Mother Boann was scandalized.

"Answer Lady Bronwyn properly, child!"

"Yes, Lady Bronwyn. I like it."

That was hardly a satisfactory answer. Bronwyn persisted.

"What do you like best about school?"

Demelza scowled adorably, in deep thought.

"I get to be clean, and I don't have to feed chickens. I'm afraid of roosters. They're mean! And pigs bite."

"So, if you could do whatever you wanted to, would you go home, or stay at the school?"

"Stay at school!" Demelza said forcefully, with a nod at each word. "I didn't like it at home. Nobody hits me as hard at school as they did at home, and I'm not all over muck all the time. And I have shoes."

"I don't like being dirty or being hit either. And shoes are good," Bronwyn agreed. She had imagined the child brutally torn from a happy home, but apparently that was not quite the case. "What is your favorite thing to do at the Chantry?"

Demelza opened her mouth, and then looked guiltily at Mother Boann. In a resigned monotone she said, "My favorite thing is to hear the Chant of Light in praise of Our Lady."

"Yes, yes, of course," Bronwyn said, with sharp glance at the priest, who, to give her due credit, blushed slightly. "Aside from your religious duties, what do you like? Do you like music? Are you in the choir? Or do you like reading? Do you like learning to embroider vestments?"

Demelza clearly found the idea of singing in the choir very funny. "They'd never let me sing where anyone could hear! All the notes sound the same to me. I like my friends.

I like reading. I'm a very good reader."

"It's true, my lady," said Mother Boann, "She's learned quickly."

"Would you read to me?" Bronwyn asked. She drew a book from the shelves and offered it to the child.

"I know this!" cried Demelza. "That the 'ADVENTURES OF BLACK FOX!'"

"Why don't you read me a little? Please?" Bronwyn asked.

Demelza considered, and then asked, "Do you mean 'just-read,' or 'really-read?'" She clarified. "That's when you do all the voices."

Bronwyn blinked. "Oh, 'really-read,' by all means."

"All right!" The child's voice throbbed with drama as she began.

"Now it was told before how two hundred sovereigns were set upon Black Fox's head, and how the Lord of Val Chevin swore that he himself would seize the naughty varlet. But the knights of Val Chevin knew more of Black Fox and his doings than the their lord did, and many laughed to think of serving a warrant upon the bold outlaw, knowing well that all they would get for such service would be cracked crowns; so that no one came forward to take the matter in hand.

"Thus a fortnight passed, in which time none came forward to do the lord's business. Then said he, 'A right good reward have I offered to whosoever would serve my warrant upon that knave Black Fox, and I marvel that no one has come to undertake the task.'"

Demelza's voice had dropped alarmingly to a gruff bass. Bronwyn nearly laughed aloud.

"Then one of his men who was near him said, 'Good master,

thou wottest not the force that Black Fox has about him. Truly, no one likes to go on this service, for fear of cracked crowns and broken bones."

Now she was speaking in a broad Bannorn accent. A moment later, her voice was the blustering villain's once more.

"Then I hold you all cowards,' said the wicked lord. 'And let me see the man in all Val Chevin that dare disobey the warrant of our sovereign Emperor Pherelon, for, by Andraste's blood, I will hang him forty cubits high! But if no man in Val Chevin dare win my bounty, I will send elsewhere, for there should be men of mettle somewhere in this land.'

"Then he called up a messenger in whom he placed great trust, and bade him saddle his horse and make ready to go to Arlesans to see whether he could find anyone there that would do his bidding and win the reward. So that same morning the messenger started forth upon his errand..."

They let her finish the little story, with the chevalier outwitted, and Black Fox triumphant, as usual.

"You read very well, Demelza," Bronwyn praised her. "And you're right: 'really-reading' is much better than the other kind. If you didn't have to go home, and you could do anything besides being in the Chantry, what would you like to be?"

"Oh, I'd be a lady, and do nothing, like you," Demelza replied at once.

Mother Boann nearly spit out her tea, and remonstrated at once. "Demelza! Lady Bronwyn works very hard to pro-

tect all Ferelden."

The child looked guilelessly at them both. "I didn't mean that. I mean," she kindly explained to Bronwyn, "you don't have to do what people tell you."

Bronwyn only laughed. "Even I have to do my duty, Demelza. So you like getting a good education... Once you've finished, you may decide to take orders in the Chantry, but there are many other things you could do. What do you say to becoming a lady-in-waiting? You would only have to do what I told you to do."

"Would I dress like a lady?"

"Yes. You would help me with my clothes and sometimes you would read to me."

"That sounds nice. I'd better work on being the best reader in all Ferelden!"

Aron Kendells' funeral was an odd affair. Aside from the spectacle of Habren holding hands with the brother of her late betrothed, it was all very political. Ironically, aside from the boar hunt, this was the best opportunity for Kane Kendells to put forward his claim.

He certainly was winning over the women. Loghain watched the debacle, unable to turn his eyes from awfulness of it all. Unseemly as it was, Kane Kendells, on the basis of his handsome face, had probably won enough votes tonight to make him Arl of Denerim. Anora managed to keep her dignity, and Bronwyn seemed to find it

all mildly entertaining. Lady Amell had eyes only for Bryland, and her sister and niece were discreetly snickering at Habren and her swain. Every other lady at the funeral however, seemed to be afflicted with the desire to be either the handsome lad's sweetheart or mother.

Mothering him was silly and sentimental, but not as revolting as the women who flirted with him. Even sensible women like Alfstanna were starry-eyed in his presence.

His little sisters, too, seemed to adore Kane. Loghain viewed that more tolerantly. In fact, the girls did not seem to be grieving over their stern elder brother at all. Instead, young Kane was whispering plans for treats and amusements, for ponies and puppies, while the flames crackled higher and higher. Carefully, properly, he watered their wine for them like a good brother. Silly women cooed over the sight of so much family affection. Some others, keeping their heads a little better, eyed the girls speculatively, assessing their future value on the marriage market.

Loghain thought them pretty enough, though it was hard to believe that they would ever be as peacock-gorgeous as their brother. One of the Amaranthine banns was discreetly pointing out the older girl to Nathaniel Howe, who looked pained and faintly horrified. She was a grave, grey-eyed, fair-haired child, and would be marriageable in three or four years. As most people reckoned it, it would be a perfectly suitable match. And after all, he thought, with a pang of guilt, the age gap between him-

self and Bronwyn was far greater than the one between Nathaniel and the child Faline.

Habren appeared annoyed at the attention her newest suitor was paying his sisters. She kept a death-grip on his right hand, forcing the girls to remain on his left. The older girl let the little one have Kane's left hand and kept the child between herself and her brother, already showing more sensitivity and kindness than was in Habren's nature. Loghain wondered how well keeping the girls with him would work out, knowing how jealous Habren was likely to be. Bronwyn noticed it, too, giving him a nudge, and a faint, amused smile.

The following morning was devoted to wedding planning: first with Fergus, and then with a dressmaker. Bronwyn's wedding gown weighed as much as her dragon armor.

Well, perhaps not quite as much, but it was embroidered with countless seed pearls, gold beads, and crystals, and thus the silk and velvet did not rustle, but rather clanked a little as she walked.

Fereldan women typically wore their best clothes to their wedding. Unlike Orlais, where noblewomen were customarily married in white, silver, or gold, Fereldan women chose the colors that suited them best, as their wedding gown would generally henceforth be their best gown until it fell to rags. Bronwyn need never wear rags, but not even she could afford an infinite number of gowns.

This was quite a gown, indeed. Since Loghain had expressed his opinion that Bronwyn looked well in red – and since Bronwyn agreed with him – the asymmetrical draped overskirt was red velvet, its border rich and glittering. The closely-fitted underdress was heavy white satin with long embroidered golden vines rising up from the hem like soldiers at attention. The bodice was red brocade, spangled with jeweled flowers, and the white satin sleeves were cuffed and embroidered to the elbow, coming down in points over the top of her hands. The high collar was a complex matrix of beading and gold thread. Her boned corset of cloth-of-gold actually fit properly, fastening almost invisibly with tiny hooks down the back. A pair of red leather ankleboots had been made to match.

It was altogether an amazing gown, and would serve to receive dignitaries for some time. She felt rather like a bird of paradise in it. However, she was determined not to wear it to her possible coronation. That would make her look, once again, insufferably overconfident. The coronation would require another very elaborate gown, which could not be ordered until she was actually elected by the Landsmeet. Two gowns of the best quality should suffice for some time.

For her wedding she had decided to wear her hair down, falling almost to her waist, and braided back from her face. Her ruby hair ornament would be her only jewelry, aside from her betrothal ring.

Knowing Loghain, he would probably wear black, but

she was determined not to care. While she felt that he would look splendid in crimson velvet, she was not going to nag him about trifles. There would be plenty of disagreements in their future, Maker knew.

He was still somewhat annoyed that she had run off on her adventure at the blood mage compound, but Bronwyn gloated over what a lot of glorious loot they'd won. Even the foodstuffs were a gift of the Maker, considering how much Wardens ate. The splendid carpets and silken bedding had been taken away, and some of them were now decorating Bronwyn's own private chamber. The herb cabinet had been installed in the Warden's study, where it would prove useful for their mages. Perhaps they would ultimately take it to Soldier's Peak, where the mages could work in complete privacy.

She had been thinking about Soldier's Peak quite a bit in the past few days. Jowan had performed splendidly during the battle with the Tevinters. Clearly, Avernus' improved potion was all the old geezer claimed. Bronwyn wanted her own dose as soon as possible. Not only did it offer greater strength and stamina, but freedom from the inconveniences of infertility and the horrors of the Calling. What was there not to like about it?

As soon as her dress fitting was complete, she summoned Jowan. He, Morrigan, and Anders had been very busy, attempting to translate the letters, notes, and memoranda found in the Tevinter base. At last report, they had

not got through a third of it.

He arrived quickly, but not alone. The runt of the rescued litter, a little black female, had taken to him and imprinted. Bronwyn was glad for him, though she was concerned about such young puppies being exposed to the regular dangers Wardens faced. A mabari did not reach its full adult size and weight until it was two years old. The puppies could be trained, but until they were bigger, they were not fellow warriors, but children, requiring care and protection.

When they had time, leisure, and safety, Bronwyn thought that breeding mabarais to fight beside the Wardens would be feasible and advantageous. At the moment, it seemed too great an investment in time and resources to undertake. Still, the serendipitous puppies were here, and no one could control with whom they imprinted. So far, all her predictions had been proved wrong.

First of all, she had not expected Loghain to carry off one of the puppies. She could hardly begrudge him the kind of companionship that was so dear to her, and it had somewhat mellowed him for the moment. Then, too, while she knew that Anders was a cat person, and that Morrigan disapproved of domesticated wolves on principle, she had thought that Leliana or Aveline might prove attractive to a mabari.

Wrong. Carver Hawke was celebrating his great good fortune, and now this little one had taken to following Jowan about, much to the mage's delighted astonishment.

"Jowan, I need to talk to you." She gestured to him to sit,

and he did, his puppy at his feet.

He looked both nervous and anxious to please, reminding her, as always, of a dog who had been kicked too often. No matter what the Circle had done to him, Jowan had many good qualities, and more power than he admitted, even to himself.

"As you know, I promised to send a relief party up to Avernus at Soldier's Peak before First Day. I want to put you in charge of that party."

"Me?" squeaked Jowan. He blushed, and lowered his voice to a baritone far below his natural pitch. "Me?"

She smiled at him, amused. "Yes, you. I need someone to act as liaison between Avernus and the rest of us. He may need assistance with the quantities of Joining potion that we require. Furthermore, he has much to teach. I thought you might find it interesting."

"I would!" Jowan agreed, rather intrigued at the prospect. Avernus was an intimidating old man, but he was also a powerful mage.

"I'm glad to hear it. I want you to leave in a few days. I was thinking on the sixteenth, two days after my wedding. There is some darkspawn blood stored here at the Compound, and you will take it to him, along with foodstuffs and brewing equipment.

"You will not go alone, of course. I have decided that Leliana will go with you. She will have the duty of making the Peak habitable once more. I do not want her, however, included in discussion of magical matters, nor in the

history of the improved potion. Leliana's devotion to the Chantry might cause her to speak of secret matters. That cannot be permitted." She gave him a very stern look, so he would understand that she was not in jest. She added, to make herself perfectly clear. "I do not want priests or Templars permitted into Soldier's Peak, nor do I want them given the information that would allow them to make their way through the tunnels."

"Will anyone else go?" he asked.

"Yes. Hakan and Soren. As dwarves with some knowledge of stone working, they can give an assessment of how much actual reconstruction is required, and help Leliana put together a plan. I'm sorry to send you up to such a remote location by yourselves, possibly for months, but I feel it's very important to secure the Peak and Avernus' discoveries. I'll send some more people up to you if weather and events permit."

"I think it will be really interesting," Jowan said meekly.

"Good," she said, pleased with him. "I'll call in Leliana a bit later, and tell her what I have in mind for her. Remember: you will be in command, and you will not share details of the Joining potion improvements with her. It's enough that she will be administered the potion, and be told that it's a refined formula. Other details are not to be shared with her. Speaking of secret matters: I want you to examine the library for books containing Warden secrets. They are to be put in a locked bookcase. While Wardens can read them, I

do not want them available to anyone else."

"I understand."

"Another matter that I would like you to look into: I have not been able to determine the extent of the lands originally granted to the Wardens. There is nothing about them in the books here. Very likely Avernus would know. Please find something in writing that I can present to the Landsmeet, so that the Warden rights can be confirmed at that time. I'll make sure that your party is large enough that you can spare a messenger. Perhaps such a messenger might also bring us more of the improved potion."

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door. Mistress Rannelly was there, and rather excited.

"Warden Danith has arrived, Warden-Commander! And all over mud, she and the rest, too. I served them all bowls of good hot broth, and bread to dip."

Bronwyn was pleased to hear about the arrivals, and thought that hot broth sounded good. A chilly rain had pounded the city since just before dawn. She pitied Kane Kendells, who would have to mess about in sodden ashes and soaked wood to retrieve something for his brother's urn.

"They're in the Hall?"

"That they are, and worn out, poor lambs."

Tired as they were, they all rose to greet Bronwyn, and were surprised and interested in Jowan's little black puppy. Everyone had had some exposure to war dogs at Ostagar, because of the kennels. A puppy, seen close to, was far

more endearing.

"This is Lily," Jowan told them shyly. Bronwyn did not quite see that 'Lily' suited a puppy that was black as a moonless night, but she was Jowan's puppy, after all.

Danith's hair was growing out, Bronwyn noticed. It was still wet, and so darker than she remembered. She was immediately concerned to see that the number at the table was one short. She searched her memory for the name.

"Good day to you all," she said. "I'm glad to see you well. Where is Ketil?" she asked Danith.

"Sleeping in his quarters. He was badly wounded a few days ago, and it slowed us down. Niall thinks at this point he only needs rest."

Niall confirmed this. "I managed to save his left arm, but he shouldn't use it for another few days."

"Well done. Sit down and eat before your soup is cold," Bronwyn ordered. "I think I'll have some myself. How was your journey?"

They all looked to Danith to reply, which Bronwyn thought a good sign. There seemed to be no tensions within the group. A maid brought two more bowls of broth. Jowan attacked his with thanks. Bronwyn spooned hers up slowly, watching the newcomers. No, there was no hostility within the group, but neither did any of them seem particularly elated. Relieved mostly, and glad to be in a safe and comfortable place.

"A success of sorts, Commander," Danith answered. "We

found no darkspawn east of the White River, nor any in the Deep Roads near Gwaren. The seal had not been touched from the inside."

Gwaren was safe from darkspawn, at least for the moment. That was plain good news. That the darkspawn had not succeeded in crossing the White River — also good news.

"What about west of the river?"

Danith and the rest looked at each other grimly. Quinn burst out, "It wasn't our fault!"

Danith held up her hand, and he subsided, angrily slurping his broth.

She told Bronwyn, "We found no darkspawn north of South Reach. When we swung down into the Southron Hills, however, we came upon a large party that had attacked a farmhold. The people and animals were killed, and the darkspawn had made themselves at home. It was necessary not only to kill them all, but also to burn the house and all the buildings and to put the Tainted fields to the torch. Seeing the smoke, more shemlen came, and were displeased. Some, I think, wanted to loot, and roused others against us. Rocks were thrown... and some blows were exchanged."

In fact, it had turned into a serious incident, and they had been in considerable danger. Even after the dead darkspawn were pointed out to the mob, some had blamed the Grey Wardens. Danith would never forget the shemlens' insults.

"We never had darkspawn until you Grey Wardens came skulking around here!"



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"Aye! They're a devious lot!"

"If you hadn't brought the darkspawn here, Ottis and his family wouldn't be dead!"

"Maybe they're not even Grey Wardens! Them over there are nothing but knife ears! Reckon they're in league with the darkspawn!"

Jowan said, "That's a shame. How could they be so stupid?"

Bronwyn said, "There will always be fools. You did right, even if the locals were too idiotic to realize it. After you're done with your meal, you might enjoy hot baths. Mistress Rannelly will arrange it. Then get some rest yourselves. We can talk more after dinner, Danith. You all look done in."

Quinn spoke up, "Begging your pardon, Commander, but I think you should know about those Qunari."

Everyone groaned. Maeve said, "That's where Ketil was wounded."

Bronwyn raised her brows.

Danith told her, "We did not come to Denerim by the West Road. Instead we took the country lanes along the foothills by Dragon's Peak as we approached the city. We stumbled on a camp of armed Qunari who attacked us."

"And?" Bronwyn asked, read to groan herself. *More foreign invaders?*

"Well," Quinn grinned slowly, and then leaned over to give the puppy a pat. "We killed 'em all, didn't we? But we got pretty bashed. Good thing we had old Niall here."

Niall turned red, and tried to shrug off the praise.



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Danith was not having that.

"A very good thing indeed. The power of magic saved us then and at other times, too. The Qunari were formidable."

"How many of them?"

"Fourteen. It was unclear if they were a strong scouting party or if they had... how did you put it, Maeve?"

Maeve said, "I thought it was more likely they'd gone into business for themselves."

"Mercenaries?" Bronwyn considered this. That would be a less worrying explanation. "We might want to ride out and have a look at the camp. We'll talk more about that too. Anyway, finish your meal and rest."

Yes, definitely something to think about. She left them, and went to find Leliana.

The bard was in her room, playing her lute. Bronwyn came in and told her that Danith and her party had returned, and then about her plans for Soldier's Peak. She relieved when Leliana glowed with excitement.

"There is so much that one can do!" the red-haired Warden burst out. "So much potential in that fine old place. Even if one only disposed of the trash and broken furniture! And then... some fresh plaster and paint.. yes? A carpenter and a mason could enclose part of the second floor and create a series of fine bedchambers..."

"I was thinking about giving you a set sum. Say...three hundred sovereigns?" Bronwyn smiled at Leliana's enthusiasm. "I would like you to start very prudently. See what



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can be done with simply cleaning and removing rubbish first. Move on from there. Why don't you start noting down some ideas, and before you go we can talk them over."

"When would we leave?"


"Soon. Perhaps two days after the wedding, or as soon as we can get all the necessary supplies together. We'll send a great deal of what we seized from the Tevinters with you. Jowan will be in command, as he will be working with Senior Mage Avernus. You will have help, of course. Levi Dryden is readying some his family to come up to the Peak and work, and there are the Wolfs at Highever House. They might be agreeable to working for the Wardens..."

"Working for you," Leliana corrected her, dimpling.

"Be as that may," Bronwyn went on. "You will be in charge of the renovations, and will have people to do the labor. You may have to order in materials. Dryden will be your teamster. What you cannot find in Amaranthine, you may obtain later in Denerim, but Amaranthine has many shops and sound craftsmen. The Coast Road, I fear, is not in sufficient repair to bear cartage from Highever."

"I shall begin working on my plans at once!" Leliana said, fire in her eyes. "Our castle will be a wonder of the world!"

"Let's start with 'livable,'" Bronwyn suggested, "and move on from there."



Dinner was a little early that night, since everyone wanted to talk to Danith and her newly-arrived patrol.



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Ketil joined them, his arm in a sling, looking a bit tired.

The Dalish Warden had come by earlier to give her more particulars of the patrol, and the news that Danith's old clan was occupying and repairing the ancient elven temple. Probably, it would be best to give the Dalish the territory at the upcoming Landsmeet, rather than stringing them along.

She passed along Danith's news to Loghain, too. He was relieved to hear that the darkspawn had no presence under his own city. Hearing about the Qunari camp and its location, he immediately sent out a patrol to reconnoiter and bring back anything they could find indicating the band's purpose and allegiance.

Dinner was festive and plentiful. Carver swaggered in, proudly carrying his puppy. The little fellow attracted a great deal of attention.

"What are you calling him, Carver?" Maeve asked, turned to pudding by big brown eyes.

"Hmmm... I was thinking maybe... Magister."

Bronwyn half-laughed, half-groaned. "Holy Maker, Carver!"

"Well, that's where we found him: in a nest of magisters. It's not as sissy as Jowan calling his dog 'Lily.'"

There was more laughter, and then Carver told the newcomers about their adventures under Denerim. Bronwyn told everyone that they were not to talk about it with anyone else, since they hoped to capture more Tevinters. Since no one at the table liked Tevinters, they were all quite happy to keep the secret.



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Jowan arrived with little black-furred Lily, and there was more "ooing" and "aaawing." Trailing behind was the other, yet-unnamed puppy, a tall, tawny pup with a brisk trot. Bronwyn had decided not to sequester the pup. As long as he imprinted in the Compound, his choice was his own. It was never wise to force a partner on a mabari. If he took to Mistress Rannelly and guarded the Compound, that was fine with Bronwyn, too.

"As you all know," she said, after they were mostly done with dinner, and only filling up the corners, "I'm getting married the day after tomorrow."

"To Bronwyn!" cheered Anders, lifting his goblet, and shouts echoed around the table. Most seemed pleased with it, aside from Morrigan, who only rolled her eyes.

Bronwyn inclined her head, grinning. "Thank you. All of you are invited to celebrate with me, first at the Cathedral where the wedding will be held, and then at the feast at Highever House. Wear your dancing shoes."

Idunn asked, "Can we go into the Cathedral if we don't worship your goddess?"

"Andraste is not a goddess..." murmured Leliana.

"Yes," Bronwyn said, her voice overriding Leliana's. "Of course. No one expects you to do anything, and no one will do anything to you. Just enjoy the spectacle and the music. There will a special place for the Wardens and their allies, roped off with grey cording. Leliana will lead you there. The Grand Cleric will give a sermon – which is just a speech –



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and the choir will sing. Then she'll declare the union binding and we'll all go to Highever House for the party."

"There is more to it than that," Leliana insisted. "If you have no fine clothes, wear your Warden tabards. We cannot leave until Bronwyn and Loghain do. I will give a sign when we are supposed to leave. We should form up by twos in the central aisle."

People looked blank, so she shrugged and said, "Just do what I do."

Soren grunted, still suspicious. "As long as it doesn't involve *singing*."

The Wardens murmured amongst themselves, wondering what to wear and if they would have to pay admission. Anders solemnly told them 'yes' to that, and Leliana kicked him under the table and denied it.

"Then," Bronwyn said, taking command of the conversation once more, "two days after the wedding, I'm sending a relief party north to Soldier's Peak." She told the newcomers, "When we were in Amaranthine, ascertaining that the darkspawn had not made inroads there, we took the time to visit the Warden fortress of Soldier's Peak. Rumor said that it had been abandoned for two hundred years and was a ruin, but we found that to be untrue. It's essentially sound, and we found an elderly Warden there, working on research. I am sending Jowan up there with Leliana. Hakan and Soren, you will also be of the party. I want you to examine the castle for structural damage



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and consider whether we need to hire some good dwarven masons. You will be accompanied by some other people I have engaged, and begin work on renovating the castle for our use. Duncan never had time to see to it, but I think it would be of great value to us."

Everyone was interested in this mysterious castle, and some expressed a desire to see it for themselves. Bronwyn told them most of the story, and then those who had been there added bits and pieces.

"This old mage has been there for years?" Danith said, frowning in thought. "I did not know that Grey Wardens could live to be so old."

"Well..." Bronwyn said, deciding to prevaricate a little. Morrigan and Zevran were not Wardens, after all. "There are exceptions to every rule."



The next morning, the first snowflakes of the season sifted down from a leaden sky. It was extremely unlikely that they would be seeing any ships from sunny northern climes until spring. It put to rest one of the many fears that plagued Bronwyn. They would not have to deal with either an Orlesian invasion or a Tevinter infiltration for at least a few months. If only she knew what the darkspawn were up to...

She went to Highever House, to look over the final arrangements for the wedding feast, admire the growing mound of gifts, and talk to the Wolfs. She found them more than amenable to her wishes.



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"We wish to serve you, Lady. We owe you a debt that can never be repaid."

"Excellent. You could do much by guarding and maintaining the Warden's fortress. Some other people will be there as well: the Dryden family. They too have my trust. There should be room for you all there at the Peak. Warden Jowan will be in command. Obey him as you would me."

Fergus was told that the Wolfs would be leaving with a party of Wardens two days after the wedding. He raised his brows, but certainly did not object.

"They're your people, pup. And a fairly mysterious lot. Have you ever learned why they all have yellow eyes?"

She smirked at him. "Yes."

"And?"

"A secret."

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"No," she admitted cheerfully. Then more gravely, she added, "Their past is past, Fergus. Let it stay there." She gave him a quick hug. "And now I've really got to get back to the Palace."


Loghain had scheduled some sparring with her that afternoon. Bronwyn almost groaned at the prospect. He was a formidable opponent, and was insistent that she learn the proper way to use her splendid new shield. The Fade Wall was light, due to the enchantments on it, but it was still heavier than the dagger she was accustomed to wielding with her left hand. And then there was the whole



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issue of walking about with a shield clanking against her back. She could hardly imagine how Loghain had put up with it all these years.



After a bruising training session, a long, hot bath, and a good dinner, Bronwyn put the finishing touches on her new quarters in the Palace. Admittedly, Fionn had done all the real work, but Bronwyn liked to do some things for herself. She organized her few books on the bookshelf, and arranged her keepsakes on her newly-claimed spice-wood desk. She frowned and pulled the desk a little closer to the window, then remembered to lock her correspondence box. She sensed a presence, and looked up to see Loghain watching her from the doorway.

"The rooms suit you?"

She smiled. "They're very nice. I love the entire process of making loot my own, and what better way than furnishing my private quarters?"

He snorted at that, and came in, his new puppy trailing at his heels. Bronwyn could hardly imagine a more adorable sight: the tall, grim warrior and the wide-eyed, wobble-tailed little mabari. Scout whuffed at them sleepily.

Bronwyn bent to stroke the puppy's silky head, and asked, "What name have you chosen?"

"Amber. I was considering 'Brandy,' but I suppose if I went about calling for 'Brandy' all day long, I'd soon be known as a hopeless drunkard."



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She laughed. "Amber's a lovely name and very suitable. "You're a very pretty girl, Amber!"

Loghain waved his hand at her shelves. "You're not going to leave that out in plain sight, I hope!"

He obviously was referring to her golden bowl, which was gleaming effulgently, in pride of place.

Bronwyn shrugged. "I suppose I should lock it away when I'm not here, but I do like to look at it. And it's... magical. Or at least the Templars said it was. It might have somehow absorbed some of the power of the Ashes."

Loghain grunted, "Then you should definitely lock it away. The Chantry's likely to send agents to steal it!" He scowled. "That rug there was in the Tevinters' place, wasn't it? How are your mages doing on their translating?"

"Almost done," she said. "They're trying to get everything in some sort of chronological order now, so it makes sense. Anders told me that it's clear that Tevinters have been here for a long time. They weren't much interested in our politics until recently, though."

"I suppose we can thank the Maker for small favors!"

Amber grew interested in Scout and clambered over him, finding the corner of his blanket a wonderful chew-toy. She was very fierce with it, pulling and growling. Scout remained tolerant but unimpressed.

Loghain pulled up a chair and watched the dogs, smiling faintly, Bronwyn kicked over a footstool and sat beside him, leaning comfortably against his knee. Loghain's big

hand stroked her hair, and she leaned into the caress, at peace for the moment.

"So, you've seen mine," she remarked. "When do I get to see yours?"

"My dear girl," he chuckled, "You've *seen* mine."

"How droll. I meant your private apartments here at the Palace. They're supposedly very close."

"Come." He rose and took her by the hand, leading her away and down the hall. The dogs looked up, hurt to find themselves no longer the center of attention, and scrambled after.

Loghain's quarters were very nice. There was a study full of books and bows, swords and armor. An arched, mullioned window was set in a deep embrasure, leaving plenty of room to sit. A big chair was clearly made to fit Loghain's proportions exactly, and a battered leather footstool stood in front of it, bearing the marks of spurs and steel-shod boots. The fireplace had an attractively carved mantel, and on the wall were framed maps and a striking portrait of Queen Rowan in armor. Her dark hair was blowing in the wind, and under one arm she held her green-plumed helmet. She was looking away from the viewer, gazing into the distance. Bronwyn had not realized what a pretty woman she had been.

"That's a wonderful portrait," she said, a little surprised to find a picture of the late queen in Loghain's private study, given what her parents had led her to believe.

"I like it," Loghain shrugged.

The study led to a simple but comfortable bedroom. Off that was a private bathing room with an enameled tin tub. The bed looked very nice. One thing led to another, and Loghain did not try to resist her advances. The dogs, left behind a closed door in the study, responded in their individual ways. Scout, accepting that his people were mating, grew bored and curled up by the fire. Amber whimpered and pawed at the door, worried that her Loghain might be harmed by the alpha female's unprovoked attack. After some time, her protests had an effect.

"Oh, for *Maker's* sake," Loghain growled, opening the door. "Come on in."

In blithe innocence, the dogs trotted in, nosing about. Bronwyn, wonderfully relaxed and happy, smiled drowsily up at Loghain from the bed. He shook his head.

"You couldn't wait another day?"

"No. Why should we?"

"Don't go to sleep, I don't want to have to lug you all the way back to the Wardens' Compound."

"I won't." She bounded up, gathering her scattered garments. "Do you have any wine?"

"Maker's Breath, you're demanding," he muttered. "You're be the end of me yet."

She smiled at him archly. "If you're lucky. Where's the wine?"

"The table near the desk. Pour me some, while you're ransacking my belongings."

It was very good wine. Bronwyn decided that she, too,



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needed a decanter and goblets in her apartments. She moved around the room, sipping, examining all his personal treasures, which included a huge codex of maps. On his desk, the edge of another map was barely visible under a pile of books. Curious, Bronwyn pulled it out. At first glance it was an ordinary map of Ferelden. On closer scrutiny, one saw the changes.

"What's this?" she asked, as he came into the study, tying his laces.

"Don't pry, or I won't invite you here again," he told her. He grunted his thanks when she handed him a full wine goblet, and with his left hand, he smoothed out the map she was examining. "This is just something I've been working on in my copious spare time."

"*Borders yet to be.*" Bronwyn read off the scribbled legend at the bottom of the parchment. There were dots and circles to the south and in the foothills of the Frostbacks, and notes indicating that settlements should be established in those places. A red x here and there along the coast, according to the legend, marked a likely spot for a watchtower. More red was spilled on the islands of the Amaranthine Archipelago: watchtowers and settlements proposed, and roads drawn in to facilitate trade and troop movements.

She could barely read the notes next to West Hill, the vast and dilapidated fortress to the west that faced the islands of the Waking Sea bannorn. She squinted, seeing Loghain's exasperation with Bann Frandarel's reclusive-



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ness and sloth in the number of exclamation points there.

Her smile faded as her eyes traveled west to Gherlen's Pass. Roc des Chevaliers was circled in red. She almost snorted. *Good luck with cracking that nut.*

And then...

"Jader?" She asked, disbelieving. "You want *Jader*, too?"

He was unfazed by her skepticism. He traced the red dotted line down from the Orlesian port city to the Frostbacks.

"It makes perfect sense," he said quietly. "The northern tip of the Frostbacks end only a short distance south of the Imperial Highway, some forty leagues west of the city. The Frostbacks are ours... or should be. Our relations with the Avvar tribesmen living there are certainly far better than those they have with Orlais. The chevaliers hunt them like game. It's a natural boundary that would be far better and more defensible than anything we now have. That fortress —" he pointed to the small dot by the Imperial Highway, "— Solidor, that would be our western limit. We don't want too much of Orlais. That would water down Ferelden, after all. But this...*this* much we could swallow. We could use a proper city to the west. This whole area —" his broad index finger swept over the territory northwest of Lake Calenhad "— would be something a buffer zone, safer for Ferelden than a precariously held border crossing. Besides, don't they say that Jader is the most Fereldan of Orlesian cities?"

Bronwyn refrained from repeating Leliana's dismissal of that, saying, "I've been told it's a fine city — beautiful,

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even. It's certainly known for its craftsmen." She laughed. "And after all, why make anything but great plans? Small plans have no power to stir men's blood."

"Well said." He smiled, his eyes fixed on the map of his imagination.

END OF VOLUME THREE



DRAGON SLAYER

The VICTORY AT OSTAGAR teams as of Satinalia:
Dragon 9:30.

KEY: H=human, D=dwarf, E=elf; m=mage, a=archer, ss=sword and shield, sd=sword and dagger, dd=double daggers, gs=greatsword, ax=double-bladed axe, 2x=double axes.

Bronwyn: sd/ss Anders (Hm), Aveline (Hss), Leliana (Hsd), Jowan, (Hm), Carver (Hgs), Toliver (Hss), Cathair (Ea), Hakan (Dss), Soren (Dax), Morrigan (Hm), Zevran (Esd), Scout (dog!)

Alistair: ss Petra (Hm), Emrys (Hss), Nevin (Ha), Asa (Da), Uifa (Dss), Oghren (Dax), Sten (Qunari gs), Siofranni (Ea) Adaia (Edd).

Astrid: ss Velanna (Em), Ailill (Ea), Liam (Hgs), Catriona (Ha), Aeron (Hsd), Askil (Dss), Falkor (Dss)

Tara: m Brozca (Ddd), Sigrun (D2x), Jukka (Dax), Darach (Ea), Walther (Hss), Griffith (Ha)

Danith: a Niall (Hm), Maeve (Hss), Quinn (Hgs), Idunn (Dss), Nuala (Ea), Steren (Ea), Ketil (D2x)

ON THE STORIES:

Andraste's story is adapted from various codices. However, canon often contradicts itself, and I have tried to make sense of it. For example, one codex says that Andraste came from Denerim;



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another says a fishing village on the Waking Sea. Denerim is on the Amaranthine Ocean. It could be that the story about the village on the Waking Sea is the basis for the claim by the Orlesian city of Jader that it is the birthplace of Andraste.

The chantry sister's story is derived from *The Prioress's Tale* by Chaucer. In her version the villains are Jews. Accusing despised groups of ritual child murder has a long and shameful history. I'm absolutely certain the chantry would promulgate stories like this to inculcate fear and suspicion of mages. I added my own twist of a "virtuous informer." I'm willing to bet that there is a standard bounty for information on secret mages.

Carver's story is from Andrew Lang's *YELLOW FAIRY BOOK*, from a Turkish original.

The bit of "*Black Fox*" read by Demelza is adapted from Howard Pyle's *THE MERRY ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD*.

And on to chapter notes.

CHAPTER 1:

Loghain's words at the funeral paraphrase those of Alexander the Great.

CHAPTER 2:

The Crown Matrimonial is a legal concept used to describe a person's right to co-reign equally with his or her spouse. It's not at all the same thing as being a King-consort, Queen-consort, prince-consort, princess-consort,



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etc. Those titles simply indicate that the person is the spouse of the monarch. They have no power of their own, and when their spouse dies, they have no right to rule. Francis II of France, who was married to Mary, Queen of Scots, was offered the Crown Matrimonial of Scotland, which would have in effect made Scotland part of France. However, he predeceased her anyway.

Someone granted the Crown Matrimonial would continue to rule after the death of a spouse. They could even marry anew and have children who would be heirs to the kingdom, even though the king/queen had originally taken the throne as a spouse of someone with a superior claim by blood.

I don't think that the Anora was granted the Crown Matrimonial. If she had, there would have been no question about who was ruling the kingdom. Furthermore, it would have been impossible for Cailan to set her aside and marry someone else, because Anora would have been his equal.

Because parchment is far more durable than paper, it was possible to scrape the words off and reuse it. The overwritten parchment is called a palimpsest. Archaeologists are sometimes able to decipher lost texts under the more recent writing.

Lowan is canon: the author of the codex entitled "A LETTER TO RENDON HOWE." He was one of the officers who led the attack on Highever.



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CHAPTER 3:

I think a goat would be a big deal in the Alienage. I would think the elves could keep a few goats and some chickens, at least. That they do not in canon suggests that it's either forbidden, or that it's become impracticable due to human theft.

CHAPTER 5:

Perry is an alcoholic drink made from pears. Cider comes from apples, perry from pears. They're both good.

CHAPTER 7:

The US girls' high school record for the running long jump is over twenty feet, so I have no doubt that Bronwyn, even in less than ideal conditions, can manage ten!

CHAPTER 8:

If you don't know the song, I really suggest you listen to a version of "She Moves Through the Fair." It's a haunting piece of music. I like Celtic Woman's version.

CHAPTER 9:

Yes, the gown is THAT gown of Rowan's, worn in a critical scene in THE STOLEN THRONE. Yes, Loghain is pretty sure to recognize it.

CHAPTER 10:

The song has many variants. I modernized the spelling of one of the English versions, "Binnorie."

Quel dommage: What a pity



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Comme il faut: In accordance with convention or accepted standards.

CHAPTER 16:

Syringes have been used medically since Roman times. I don't think it's impossible that they would exist in Thedas.

As for the disposition of the mages: they have to go somewhere. Cremation, no matter what some people would like to think, does not reduce bodies to fine ash. Some bones remain, and today machinery is used to crush them. I think if your soil had a lot of clay in it, the bone meal would help quite a bit. I presume that the remains of dead mages at the Circle are dumped in Lake Calenhad. However, I'm quite sure that the Chantry retrieves possessions and anything of value before disposal. If my depiction resembles the warehouses of Dachau or Auschwitz, stuffed with clothing and suitcases and pitiful rag dolls, that's inevitable. Yes, mages are dangerous, but the Templars do not, in many cases, treat them in a humane manner, and the Chantry clearly exploits them. I've been trying to determine just what their legal status is: are they criminals? Are they slaves? I suppose they're just... mages.

CHAPTER 20:

I do think that the Dalish would find the Rite of Tranquility revolting, alien, and a crime against nature. It's yet another reason for them never to let the Templars



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take their magical children.

CHAPTER 21:

Bronwyn and company did not have the chance to read Avernus' notes. Thus they do not know about the Wardens he killed in his experiments. Avernus prudently tidied up before they came for their chat. Nor did they find Asturian's cache. Someone might find that later.

CHAPTER 22:

In reply to one of the Guest reviews: While Avernus does not fight using blood magic, he would certainly be considered a blood mage and a malificarum by the Chantry. All his research is based on blood, and the powers he grants each category of player with his new formula are all blood-based.

Hey, Leandra is only about 42 at this point, and is a beautiful woman with a terrific figure. So her hair is grey? So what? People often went grey earlier than they do today, since we now have effective hair dye.

The Architect might have established his laboratory in the Wending Wood mine by now, but has not built up his army of Awakened yet: I have decided that he did not dare do that until the Archdemon was gone. Nor has the Mother been turned. That will happen sometime in the next six months.

CHAPTER 28:

Bronwyn paraphrases the great Chicago architect,



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Daniel Burnham. There are many reported variations, but I like this one:

"Make no small plans; they have no power to stir men's blood."

The "Borders Yet to Be" map is canon. If you recruit Loghain, it's part of his equipment. He's not exactly planning war, but he has a picture in his mind of what Ferelden ought to be, and he'd be quite opportunistic about making it a reality. If you look at the map of Thedas, the fact that Jader seems to be geographically a part of Ferelden is very apparent. Based on what we know about Orlesian history, I suspect that Jader – since it's so remote – was an independent territory until around the times that the Dales fell. The nearest large city to the west is Halamshiral, which was the elven capital. I believe that Jader was in fact an Alamarri settlement, and the Orlesians extended their border to include it only after they had conquered the elves. I find it interesting that one of the DA wiki's maps of the Orlesian Empire does not even extend far enough to include Jader.



COLOPHON

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